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The Law of Witnesses in 2 Nephi

Bruce A. Van Orden

The Lord has always utilized witnesses when he has established his word and his power upon the earth. Since one of his designs is to test us, that is to see whether we will believe in him and obey his laws when we no longer dwell in his presence, he has, according to Elder Bruce R. McConkie, “ordained the law of witnesses, the law whereby he reveals himself to prophets and righteous men and sends them forth to teach his laws and bear testimony of their truth and divinity” (*Promised Messiah* 84). This law is succinctly stated by Paul: “In the mouth of two or three witnesses shall every word be established” (2 Cor. 13:1). It is also taught in many other places in the scriptures (see Deut. 17:6; 19:15; Matthew 18:15-16; John 8:12-19; Ether 5:4; D&C 6:28, and 128:3).

Joseph Fielding Smith insists that

the Lord has *always* followed [the law of witnesses] in granting new revelation to the people. All down through the ages this law has been a fixed and definite one. If we had perfect records of all ages, we would find that *whenever the Lord has established a dispensation, there has been more than one witness to testify for him* (1:203; emphasis in original).

The need for the law of witnesses in every dispensation is explained by Elder McConkie: “Witnesses, testifying of the truth and divinity of any given gospel verity, prepare the way for others to gain the same sure knowledge possessed by the one who bears the original testimony” (*New Witness* 446). He noted in *Mormon Doctrine* that “In every dispensation, from Adam to the present, two or more witnesses have always joined their testimonies, thus leaving their hearers without excuse in the day of judgment should the testimony be rejected” (436).

While the prophet Nephi’s application of the law of witnesses in 2 Nephi has not gone unnoticed by Book of Mormon scholars, no one as yet has thoroughly demonstrated that application (see McConkie, *New Witness* 446-48; Ludlow 140; Pearson and Bankhead 31-32; J. F. McConkie 271-72). This paper will illustrate how Nephi used the law of witnesses to fulfill his purpose in writing the book of 2 Nephi: “Behold, my soul delighteth in proving unto my people the truth of the coming of Christ. . . . And my soul delighteth in proving unto my people that save Christ should come all men must perish” (11:4, 6). Nephi fulfilled this purpose by employing more witnesses than one (11:1-3).

When Nephi wrote, “And we talk of Christ, we rejoice in Christ, we preach of Christ, we prophesy of Christ, and we write according to our prophecies, that our children may know to what source they may look for a remission of their sins” (2 Nephi 25:26), the pronoun “we” seems to refer to other additional witnesses according to the divine law of witnesses, to testify to his future readers of the verity of the coming of the Redeemer to the world. We must remember that Nephi was not writing to his own people when he composed his two books on the small plates of Nephi, but rather to the inhabitants of the world in the latter days. Obviously he wanted to marshal as many witnesses as he could to establish his main point. We should also remember that the book of 2 Nephi does not contain any history, with the minor exception of the account of the death of Lehi and the subsequent

dividing of the Lamanites from the Nephites briefly referred to in chapter 5. Rather it is a carefully crafted work designed to bring latter-day readers to a testimony of Christ: “For the fullness of mine intent is that I may persuade men to come unto the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, and be saved” (1 Nephi 6:4).

Chapter 11 of 2 Nephi serves to connect the witnesses of Jacob, Nephi, and Isaiah, and it is here that Nephi explicitly applied the law of witnesses. First, he stated that he was going to include the words of Isaiah in his book because “[Isaiah] verily saw my Redeemer, even as I have seen him” (v. 2). Thus he has two witnesses, Isaiah and himself. In the next verse he added a third witness; “And my brother, Jacob, also has seen him as I have seen him” (v. 3). Nephi continued, “Wherefore, I will send their [Isaiah’s and Jacob’s] words forth unto my children [why?] to prove unto them that my words are true. Wherefore, by the words of three [in this case Isaiah, Jacob, and Nephi] God hath said, I will establish my word. Nevertheless, God sendeth more witnesses, and he proveth all his words” (v. 3).

From what Nephi wrote in the rest of chapter 11, he was applying the divine law of witnesses to prove “unto [his] people [presumably Israel of the latter days] that save Christ should come all men must perish” (v. 6). Above all other reasons, Nephi desired to prove “unto my people the truth of the coming of Christ” (v. 4). Reasons that Jacob, Isaiah, and Nephi could serve as outstanding witnesses for the Savior include the following: (1) each had seen the Redeemer, (2) each had received revelations regarding the Lord’s ministry, and (3) each had recorded or would record many of these insights for future generations (see 1 Nephi 2:16; 12:6; Isaiah 6:1; and 2 Nephi 2:3-4).

Whether Nephi included his father, Lehi, as a fourth witness of the Redeemer in 2 Nephi is not clear. Perhaps his statement, “God sendeth more witnesses” (2 Nephi 11:3), refers to Lehi’s witness as well as to those of others in holy writ. In any event, 2 Nephi contains more than three chapters of sacred

instructions from Lehi, of which many pertain directly to the mission of the Redeemer. Chapters 6 through 10 contain instructions from Jacob about the atonement of Christ and his ministry. Two of those chapters, 7 and 8, are actually quotations from Isaiah. Additionally, in chapters 12 through 24 Nephi quotes from the writings of the prophet Isaiah. In chapter 25, Nephi comments on the importance of Isaiah's writings and again states his purposes for writing the book. Chapters 26 to 30 contain his own prophecies, based on Isaiah's, concerning the future work of the Lord. In chapters 31-32, Nephi gives us the "doctrine of Christ," thus clearly adding his own witness to Lehi's, Jacob's and Isaiah's. In chapter 33 we find Nephi's farewell testimonial of Jesus Christ.

The paramount message of 2 Nephi is that mankind, individually and collectively, can be saved only by the Messiah, the Holy One of Israel, and this is attested to by four eye-witnesses—Lehi, Nephi, Isaiah, and Jacob. It testifies that the Messiah, identified for the first time as Christ in 10:3, would (1) work out his atoning sacrifice during his earthly ministry and (2) "set his hand again the second time [in the latter days] to restore his people from their lost and fallen state" (25:17; see also Isaiah 11:11 and 2 Nephi 21:11).

I will now demonstrate how Nephi utilized, in turn, the teachings of Lehi, Jacob, Isaiah, and finally himself to prove unto his people that "save Christ should come all men must perish" (2 Nephi 11:6).

The "Messiah theme" is prevalent in the teachings of Lehi to his children (see 2 Nephi 1-4). First, father Lehi warned his posterity that if they eventually rejected "the Holy One of Israel, the true Messiah, their Redeemer and their God, behold, the judgments of him that is just shall rest upon them" (1:10). Then, in his specific instructions to Jacob (chapter 2), Lehi reviewed for his spiritually alert son the process of redemption that "cometh in and through the Holy Messiah [who] is full of grace and truth" (v. 6). These instructions about the nature of sin, the Fall,

opposition in all things, the Law, righteousness, happiness, and agency comprise one of the greatest discourses on the calling of the Messiah in holy writ. Indeed, Lehi's sermon is surpassed only by Jacob's own discourse in 2 Nephi 9. Lehi's testimony to Jacob, and all others who would receive these instructions, climaxes with these words:

Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy.

And the Messiah cometh in the fulness of time, that he may redeem the children of men from the fall. And because that they are redeemed from the fall they have become free forever, knowing good from evil; to act for themselves and not to be acted upon, save it be by the punishment of the law at the great and last day, according to the commandments which God hath given.

Wherefore, men are free according to the flesh; and all things are given them which are expedient unto man. And they are free to choose liberty and eternal life, through the great Mediator of all men, or to choose captivity and death, according to the captivity and power of the devil (2 Nephi 2:25-27).

In teaching his last-born, Joseph, Lehi spoke of the Messiah's redemptive work in the last days. He cited the prophecies of their forebear Joseph, he who was sold into Egypt. The Lord spoke thus unto this ancient Joseph:

A choice seer will I raise up out of the fruit of thy loins. . . . And unto him will I give commandment that he shall do a work for the fruit of thy loins [the latter-day descendants of Joseph], his brethren, which shall be of great worth unto them, even to the bringing of them to the knowledge of the covenants which I have made with thy fathers (2 Nephi 3:7).

Joseph indicated that this latter-day seer would also bear the name of Joseph, and we know him, of course, to be Joseph Smith, Jr., the latter-day Prophet and Seer. Joseph further testified, "And he [referring to Joseph Smith] shall be like unto me; for the thing, which the Lord shall bring forth by his hand, by the power of the Lord shall bring my people unto salvation" (v. 15). Earlier, Joseph made clear part of what this great work would be—the writings of the fruit of the loins of Joseph, which Ezekiel referred to as the "stick of Joseph" (37:15-17), which

we know as the Book of Mormon, Another Testament of Christ. In other words, the Book of Mormon was brought forth by the power of God in the last days, to bring latter-day Israel, particularly the descendants of Joseph, unto salvation or unto Christ.

The idea of bringing the chosen people unto Christ through the Book of Mormon is abundantly attested to by our living prophet, President Ezra Taft Benson. As the Lord's spokesman, President Benson has repeatedly urged the Latter-day Saints to draw unto Christ by studying the Book of Mormon. "Let us turn again to the Book of Mormon," he charged, "to learn some principles about coming unto Christ, being committed to Him, centered in Him and consumed in Him" (84).

Lehi's parting testimony to that part of his descendants he was most concerned about, the children of his wayward sons Laman and Lemuel, was "the Lord God will not suffer that ye shall perish [spiritually in the final sense]; wherefore, he will be merciful unto you and unto your seed forever" (2 Nephi 4:7, 9). This promise, that ultimately the seed of Laman and Lemuel (the Lamanites) would be amply blessed and redeemed by the Lord, is being fulfilled in the present generation.

Surely Nephi inserted the teachings of his brother Jacob into his holy record as a specific witness of the Redeemer. Shortly after Nephi led his people away into the land of Nephi to protect them from his older brothers and their followers, he consecrated Jacob and his brother Joseph as priests and teachers over the people (2 Nephi 5:26; 6:2). Even though we have a relatively meager sample of Jacob's public teachings (2 Nephi 6-10 and Jacob 1-3), we can conclude that he was "one of the greatest teachers and prophets of ancient times" (J. F. McConkie 227). His teachings underscore the concept that the Nephites are members of the house of Israel (2 Nephi 6:5) and that the real "people of the Lord are they who wait for . . . the Messiah" (v. 13). His pattern was to teach from the scriptures, and he made ample use of the words of Isaiah (2 Nephi 6:4-7, 16-18; all of chapters 7 and 8).

Jacob promised that eventually all members of the house of Israel will have the chance to gather to the lands of their inheritance as they “come to the knowledge of their Redeemer” (6:11). This Redeemer “will manifest himself unto them in power and great glory, unto the destruction of their enemies, when that day cometh when they shall believe in him; and none will he destroy that believe in him” (v. 14). At that day, as promised by the Lord to Isaiah, “all flesh shall know that I the Lord am thy [the Israelites’] Savior and thy Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob” (v. 18). Jacob also cited the Lord’s words to Isaiah: “O house of Israel, is my hand shortened at all that it cannot redeem, or have I no power to deliver?” (7:2; Isaiah 50:2). Of course the answer was “no” and the promise was made that “the redeemed of the Lord shall return, and come singing unto Zion; and everlasting joy and holiness shall be upon their heads” (8:11; Isaiah 51:11). As Jacob explained, the words of Isaiah testify that the covenant people of Israel will “be restored to the true church and fold of God” (9:2).

There is no greater discourse in holy writ bearing witness of the mission of our Lord and Redeemer, Jesus Christ, than Jacob’s recorded in 2 Nephi 9. To his listeners in the land of Nephi, he exclaimed, “Lift up your heads forever, because of the blessings which the Lord God shall bestow upon your children [members of the house of Israel]. . . . Our flesh must waste away and die; nevertheless, in our bodies we shall see God” (vv. 3-4). Jacob then proceeded to explain that if mankind had no Redeemer, our “flesh must have laid down to rot and to crumble to its mother earth, to rise no more” and “our spirits must have become like unto [the devil] . . . to be shut out from the presence of our God” (vv. 7, 9). Then he testified: “O how great the goodness of our God, who prepareth a way for our escape from the grasp of this awful monster; yea, that monster, death and hell, which I call the death of the body, and also the death of the spirit” (v. 10).

We all recognize how Jacob in 2 Nephi 9 carefully explained both the justice and mercy of the Lord, that God commanded “all men that they must repent, and be baptized in his name, having perfect faith in the Holy One of Israel, or they cannot be saved in the kingdom of God” (v. 23; see vv.17-26). Toward the end of this marvelous sermon, using Isaiah’s metaphor, Jacob extended this invitation:

Come, my brethren, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters; and he that hath no money, come buy and eat; yea, come buy wine and milk without money and without price.

Wherefore, do not spend money for that which is of no worth, nor your labor for that which cannot satisfy. Hearken diligently unto me, and remember the words which I have spoken; and come unto the Holy One of Israel, and feast upon that which perisheth not, neither can be corrupted, and let your soul delight in fatness (vv. 50-51; see also Isaiah 55:1-2).

On his second day of speaking, Jacob once again witnessed that in later times God would be merciful unto those members of the house of Israel who would “come to that which will give them the true knowledge of their Redeemer” (2 Nephi 10:2). That which would give the latter-day Israelites the knowledge of their Redeemer, more than any single source, is, of course, the Book of Mormon. Jacob’s last recorded words in 2 Nephi are this petition, “May God raise you from death by the power of the resurrection, and also from everlasting death by the power of the atonement, that ye may be received into the eternal kingdom of God, that ye may praise him through grace divine” (v. 25). Thus Jacob’s testimony clearly fits Nephi’s stated purpose and also constitutes a glorious witness within the application of the divine law of witnesses.

Isaiah is Nephi’s next witness. Complying with his purpose, Nephi cited chapters from the prophet Isaiah that testify of the coming of the Messiah and the redemption of Israel in the last days. He explained that he frequently drew upon the words of Isaiah, “that I might more fully persuade them to believe in the Lord their Redeemer . . .” (1 Nephi 19:23). Professor

Monte S. Nyman has observed that of the 425 verses quoted from Isaiah in the Book of Mormon, 391 deal in some way with the ministry or attributes of the Savior (7).

Isaiah's witness of the Lord Jesus Christ was as sure and certain as were the testimonies of Lehi and Jacob. Perhaps his most popular messianic prophecy is the following:

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.

Of the increase of government and peace there is no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth, even forever (2 Nephi 19:6-7; see also Isaiah 9:6-7).

Another certain messianic prophecy by Isaiah states: "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). "Immanuel," as we learn from Matthew, means "God with us" (1:23).

Isaiah also foretold of the latter-day redemption of the chosen people by the Holy One of Israel:

And it shall come to pass in that day that the Lord shall set his hand again the second time to recover the remnant of his people which shall be left. . . . He shall set up an ensign for the nations, and shall assemble the outcasts of Israel, and gather together the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth (2 Nephi 21:11-12; Isaiah 11:11-12).

In the same chapter (Isaiah 11) Isaiah testified of Christ as both the "stem of Jesse" (v. 1, the mortal Messiah) and the righteous judge (v. 4, the millennial Messiah; cf. JS-H 1:40). He further referred to a rod and root of Jesse (v. 1), whom we know to be Joseph Smith, "a servant in the hands of Christ, who is partly a descendant of Jesse as well as of Ephraim, or of the house of Joseph, on whom there is laid much power" (D&C 113:4), a man "unto whom rightly belongs the priesthood, and the keys of the kingdom, for an ensign, and for the gathering of my [the Lord's] people in the last days" (v. 6).

Nephi was his own final witness in his application of the law of witnesses. As he discussed his interpretation of his Isaiah passages, Nephi wrote, “I proceed with mine own prophecy, according to my plainness; in the which I know that no man can err” (2 Nephi 25:7). His prophecies were all connected with Isaiah’s. Nephi first prophesied of the earthly ministry of the Savior and that he would be rejected and then crucified. “After he is laid in a sepulchre,” Nephi proceeded, “he shall rise from the dead, with healing in his wings; and all those who shall believe on his name shall be saved in the kingdom of God. Wherefore, my soul delighteth to prophesy concerning him, for I have seen his day, and my heart doth magnify his holy name” (v. 13).

Nephi also foresaw in vision the latter-day redemption of Israel by the same Messiah who came to the Jews in the flesh, and he expanded upon this doctrine in his typically plain manner:

And the Lord will set his hand again the second time to restore his people from their lost and fallen state. Wherefore, he will proceed to do a marvelous work and a wonder among the children of men.

Based on his next statements, this must refer to the restoration of the gospel in general and the coming forth of the Book of Mormon specifically.

Wherefore, he shall bring forth *his words* unto them, which words shall judge them at the last day, for they shall be given them for the purpose of convincing them of the *true Messiah*, who was rejected by them; and unto the convincing of them that they need not look forward any more for a Messiah to come . . . for there is save one Messiah spoken of by the prophets, and that Messiah is he who should be rejected of the Jews.

. . . according to the words of the prophets, and also the words of the angel of God, his *name* shall be Jesus Christ, the Son of God (2 Nephi 25:17-19; emphasis added).

Nephi prophesied that this same Messiah would minister unto his seed in the promised land: “The Son of righteousness shall appear unto them; and he shall heal them, and they shall have peace with him, until three generations shall have passed

away” (26:9). Finally, he testified that Jesus Christ would reveal himself to the world’s inhabitants of the last days: “It must needs be that the Gentiles be convinced also that Jesus is the Christ, the Eternal God; And that he manifesteth himself unto all those who believe in him, *by the power of the Holy Ghost; yea, unto every nation, kindred, tongue, and people*, working mighty miracles, signs, and wonders, among the children of men according to their faith” (vv. 12-13; emphasis added). In this same context, Nephi added, “He inviteth them all to come unto him and partake of his goodness; and he denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female; and he remembereth the heathen; and all are alike unto God, both Jew and Gentile” (v. 33).

As he continued with his prophecies, Nephi recorded two additional applications of the law of witnesses. The first pertains to the coming forth of the Book of Mormon:

Wherefore, at that day when the book shall be delivered unto the man of whom I have spoken [Joseph Smith, Jr.], the book shall be hid from the eyes of the world, that the eyes of none shall behold it save it be that *three witnesses* shall behold it, by the power of God, besides him to whom the book shall be delivered; and they shall testify to the truth of the book and the things therein (2 Nephi 27:12; emphasis added).

The last Book of Mormon prophet, Moroni, knowing what Nephi knew, similarly testified,

And unto *three* shall they be shown by the power of God; wherefore they shall know of a surety that these things are true. And in the mouth of *three witnesses* shall these things be established; and the testimony of three, and this work, in the which shall be shown forth the power of God and also his word, of which the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost bear record—and all this shall stand as a *testimony* against the world at the last day (Ether 5:3-4; emphasis added).

Thus there would now be three additional witnesses to Joseph Smith himself. In a revelation to the Prophet while he was translating the Book of Mormon, the Lord declared, “And in addition to your testimony, the testimony of three of my servants, whom I shall call and ordain, unto whom I will show

these things, and they shall go forth with my words that are given through you. Yea, *they shall know of a surety that these things are true, for from heaven will I declare it unto them*" (D&C 5:11-12; emphasis added).

Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris were called of the Lord to be witnesses to the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon (see D&C 17). They were commanded to bear record of what they had both seen and heard, and their testimony is published to the world in every copy of the Book of Mormon. Elder Bruce R. McConkie has commented on the importance of the testimony of these witnesses: "The witnesses and the word: together they bear a testimony that will condemn all who do not believe" (*A New Witness* 447).

Nephi included another application of the law of witnesses in 2 Nephi 29, when he wrote of at least three sets of scriptures that the Lord will bring forth: the record of the Jews (the Bible), the record of the Nephites (the Book of Mormon) and the record he commanded the Lost Tribes to keep (yet to come forth) (2 Nephi 29:12-13). In concluding this point, the Lord declared, "And it shall come to pass that my people, which are of the house of Israel, shall be gathered home unto the lands of their possessions; and *my word also shall be gathered into one*" (2 Nephi 29:14; emphasis added).

The beautiful thing about these three scriptural witnesses is that each will bear clear witness of the messiahship of Jesus of Nazareth. As Elder Neal A. Maxwell has stated, "These records [of the lost tribes of Israel] will focus, as do all the others, on the centrality of Christ, His atonement and resurrection, and God's unfolding purposes for man" (13). The future appearance of this third scriptural witness, Elder Maxwell added, will give evidence of "the latticework of the Lord, revelations coming from the same Divine Source. To [those who believe in the Bible and the Book of Mormon] it is no surprise, therefore, to see such multiple interweavings and such abundant cross-support among the various books of scripture" (13).

In 2 Nephi 31:1-2, Nephi indicated that he was making an end to his prophesying and was turning to the all-important topic of “the doctrine of Christ.” This doctrine teaches that man, being unholy, should follow the example of the Son of God and enter the waters of baptism with real intent, having repented of his sins, and being willing to take the name of Christ upon himself. Then comes the reception of the Holy Ghost and the baptism of fire, and that is followed by a lifetime of service and devotion:

Wherefore, ye must press forward with a steadfastness in Christ, having a perfect brightness of hope and love of God and of all men. Wherefore, if ye shall press forward, feasting upon the word of Christ, and endure to the end, behold, thus saith the Father: Ye shall have eternal life (v. 20).

Nephi’s final chapter contains his farewell testimonial, which naturally focuses on the Messiah. First, he gives his personal witness of his redemption from the fall through the Messiah: “I glory in plainness; I glory in truth; I glory in my Jesus, for he hath redeemed my soul from hell” (2 Nephi 33:6). Second, he challenged all readers of the Book of Mormon to believe in Christ:

All ye ends of the earth, hearken unto these words and believe in Christ; and if ye believe not in these words believe in Christ. And if ye shall believe in Christ ye will believe in these words, for they are the words of Christ, and he hath given them unto me; and they teach all men that they should do good (v. 10).

Because of Nephi’s application of the divine law of witnesses, we are all held accountable for how we apply the Book of Mormon and the Bible to our personal lives as we struggle to leave off being natural and fallen and become saints (see Mosiah 3:19). “In the mouth of as many witnesses as seemeth him good will he establish his word; and wo be unto him that rejecteth the word of God!” (2 Nephi 27:14).

I bear my own witness of the truthfulness of the witnesses of Lehi, Jacob, Isaiah, and Nephi. Through the still small voice the Lord has revealed to me on many occasions that their words are true, and that if I heed their counsels, I can obtain salvation

from sin and death through the atonement and resurrection of my Redeemer. I endorse the words of my colleagues Joseph F. McConkie and Robert L. Millet: "We are not left without proof of spiritual things. The justice of eternal law demands that the gospel be properly taught if men are going to be damned for refusing to accept and live it. Evidence of the truthfulness of the gospel must be such that there could be no justification for unbelief upon the day of judgment" (272).

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