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## The Three Nephites and the Doctrine of Translation

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Clyde J. Williams

In September of 1842 the Prophet Joseph Smith declared that there were many “things which never have been revealed from the foundation of the world, but have been kept hid from the wise and prudent, [that] shall be revealed unto babes and sucklings in this, the dispensation of the fulness of times” (D&C 128:18). The doctrine of translation is one of those mysteries that has eluded humankind. The Prophet Joseph Smith taught that “the doctrine of translation is a power which belongs to this [the Melchizedek] Priesthood. There are many things which belong to the powers of the Priesthood and the keys thereof, that have been kept hid from before the foundation of the world; they are hid from the wise and prudent to be revealed in the last times” (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* 170; hereafter *TPJS*).

Most protestant theologians make no specific reference to the doctrine of translation or translated beings in their Bible dictionaries. For example, neither the *New Bible Dictionary*, *Harper’s Bible Dictionary*, nor *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* makes any specific heading for translated beings or the doctrine of translation. The extent to which the idea of translation is referred to is typified by one simple sentence found under the heading of Enoch in the *New Bible Dictionary*: “Like Elijah (2 Kings 2:11), he [Enoch] was received into the

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presence of God without dying (Gen 5:24)” (333). It appears to be a commonly held belief by many theologians that to be translated is to be taken into God’s kingdom without experiencing death. Concerning this belief the Prophet Joseph Smith declared, “Many have supposed that the doctrine of translation was a doctrine whereby men were taken immediately into the presence of God, and into an eternal fullness, but this is a mistaken idea. Their place of habitation is that of the terrestrial order, and a place prepared for such characters He [God] held in reserve to be ministering angels” (*TPJS* 170).

One significant reason for the misunderstanding by most scholars is the lack of scriptural information which they have. With the exception of the account of Elijah (2 Kings 2:11) and Enoch (Gen 5:24; also Heb 11:5), there are no other biblical passages which are generally interpreted as describing those who have been translated or that explain their circumstances after being translated. Some scholars acknowledge the possibility that the phrase in John 21:22—“If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee?”—has reference to John being translated (see *A Commentary on the Holy Bible* 812).

Early historical and apocryphal writings provide few additional insights on the doctrine of translation or translated beings. There are possible allusions to the translation of Moses and others who may have been translated (see Josephus 2:285 and Wintermute 1:512). Ultimately, the message which has come through to me is that the understanding and role of translated beings is one of the plain and precious truths which has been kept from the world until this the dispensation of the fulness of times.

## Unfolding the Doctrine

One of the first indications we have in Latter-day Saint Church history that the Prophet Joseph Smith was aware and interested in the concept of translated beings was in April 1829. We learn from the *History of the Church* that the Prophet and

Oliver Cowdery had a difference of opinion as to whether John the Beloved remained in the flesh upon the earth or had died (1:35–36). While it is uncertain what led Joseph and Oliver to depart from translating the Book of Mormon and seek understanding about the status of John, the two determined to resolve the question by inquiring of the Lord through the Urim and Thummim. The result was the Lord revealed to them a record made on parchment and hidden up by John (see D&C 7). From this revelation the Prophet learned that John the Beloved had been permitted to remain on the earth to do “a greater work yet among men than what he [had] before done” (v 5).

Sometime during the late spring of 1829, the Prophet Joseph Smith would have come across accounts in the Book of Mormon that relate to the doctrine of translation. His curiosity must have been aroused as he translated the narrative of the mysterious disappearance of the prophet Alma the Younger and the suggestion that “he was taken up by the Spirit . . . even as Moses” (Alma 45:18–19). Once again, Joseph and his scribe must have pondered the similar disappearance of Nephi, son of Helaman as they continued the work of translating the book (see 3 Nephi 1:2–3; 2:9). It is unlikely that they could have anticipated the flood of knowledge they would shortly receive on the doctrine of translated beings.

One of the most intriguing and compelling accounts in the Book of Mormon is recorded in 3 Nephi 28. The setting is the final day of the Savior’s formal three-day ministry among the more righteous part of the people, who had been spared. Mormon informs us that he could not even record a “hundredth part of the things” which Jesus taught unto those people (3 Nephi 26:6). We are told that what we have is the “lesser part” and that “greater things” would be made known to those who believe the things the Lord has given us (see vv 8–10). In light of these restrictions, it is even more remarkable that the Lord permitted Mormon to record such a wonderful event as is found in chapter 28 (see 26:12).

## What Is It That Ye Desire?

Among the Nephites, only the twelve disciples were granted the same privilege as that afforded the twelve Apostles in Jerusalem. It stimulates one's mind to consider the prospect of having the Son of God grant unto us whatever we might desire. The possibilities seem overwhelming. The condition of our heart would be manifest by the gift or blessing we desire. Ultimately, the choices are more limited than we might at first assume. The Savior offered this great blessing to those whom he knew would not ask amiss. We know he knew the thoughts of three of the Nephite twelve even before they expressed their desire, and thus he likely knew the desires of the other nine as well (see 3 Nephi 28:6).

Even at this righteous level of decision-making there are choices which are better than others. The request of the nine, to come immediately into the kingdom of God upon death, is a worthy and proper one. But the desire of the three to remain on the earth that they "might bring the souls of men unto [Christ], while the world shall stand" is a "greater work" (see 3 Nephi 28:9; D&C 7:5). The Lord can and will grant unto us righteous requests if they are right and timely in his eyes (see 2 Nephi 4:35).

At one point Mormon was about to write the names of the Three Disciples, but the Lord forbade it (3 Nephi 28:24–25). We have the names of the twelve Nephite Disciples recorded in 3 Nephi 19:4, but as to the identity of the specific three, the Lord has yet to make them known.

## Characteristics of the Three Nephites

The events which follow and the instruction given in 3 Nephi 28 are unparalleled. The Lord unfolds for us in a clear and precise manner the circumstances and the capabilities of the Three Nephite Apostles who have been given such a grand and

glorious promise. I have identified ten major characteristics which Mormon records concerning these translated Nephites.

**1. They, like John the Revelator, will “never taste of death” (3 Nephi 28:7).** This is not to say that they can escape the process of death, but they will not experience the “pains of death” (v 8). In the words of the Prophet Joseph Smith, “Translated bodies cannot enter into rest until they have undergone a change equivalent to death” (*TPJS* 191). They will be spared the agony, the lingering suffering, the exquisite pain so often associated with death. It should be noted that the scriptures record that the Three Disciples “obtained not [this] promise until *after* their faith” had been shown (Ether 12:17; emphasis added).

**2. They will “be changed in the twinkling of an eye from mortality to immortality” (3 Nephi 28:8).** All must die, for “as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive” (1 Cor 15:22). However, for translated beings death is particularly sweet: “This change from mortality to immortality, though almost instantaneous, is both a death and a resurrection” (McConkie, *Mortal Messiah* 4:390). There is no funeral, no mourning, no grave. For translated beings, their death is more like an ordinance than a time of parting and separation. The Lord’s words describing millennial conditions seem appropriate here:

There shall be no sorrow because there is no death. In that day an infant shall not die until he is old; and his life shall be as the age of a tree; and when he dies he shall not sleep, that is to say in the earth, but shall be changed in the twinkling of an eye, and shall be caught up, and his rest shall be glorious. (D&C 101:29–31)

For clarification, it should be noted that there are at least three major differences between the translated state of the Three Nephites and the translated-like condition of those who live during the Millennium. Elder Bruce R. McConkie has written:

Millennial man will live in a state akin to translation. . . . He will, however, *have children*, and mortal life of a millennial kind will

continue. . . . There will be those who are on probation, for whom earth *life is a probationary estate*, and who are thus working out their own salvation. . . . Isaiah's description of life and death during the Millennium seems to preserve the concept that even then—even in that blessed day when Satan is bound and righteousness overflows—even then men are *free to come out in open rebellion* and, as sinners, suffer the fate reserved for the sons of perdition. Manifestly they, being accursed, would die the death with which we are familiar. (*Millennial Messiah* 644, 646; emphasis added; see also Isa 65:20)

**3. The Three Nephites were told they would experience no pain while they dwelt in the flesh.** They are not subject to disease or suffering that commonly afflict man. However, like God, they do experience sorrow “for the sins of the world” (3 Nephi 28:9). Theirs is not a life devoid of feeling or understanding, but neither are they hindered by the frailties of the human body. Unfortunately, because of the wickedness which covers the land, there must be numerous times when their souls are full of sorrow because of the course so many of humankind have chosen to take. Sometime between AD 245 and 300 the wickedness among the Lamanites and Nephites became so widespread that “the disciples began to sorrow for the sins of the world” (4 Nephi 1:44). By AD 326 the wickedness had become so prevalent that the Lord took the Three Nephites away from openly ministering among the people (Mormon 1:13; 8:10).

**4. For the twelve Nephite disciples, the glorious final day the Savior spent among the Nephites was in effect a Judgment Day.** They were given the promise of entering with the Savior into his kingdom. For the Three however, the recorded promise was more specific. Theirs was to receive a fulness of joy as the Father had given to the Savior. They were promised that they would be even as the Savior is. The Lord reminded them that he and his Father are one. This means that to be like the Savior is also to be like the Father (3 Nephi 28:10). It was a sure promise to mortal men that they could become gods. In short, these Nephite Apostles had their callings and

election made sure. Such is the case with all who have been found worthy to be translated.

**5. Translated beings have knowledge and wisdom given unto them that exceed human perspective.** The Three Nephites were “caught up into heaven, and saw and heard unspeakable things” (3 Nephi 28:13; see also 13:36). We do not know what wisdom and glory they received, what future visions they beheld, as they were forbidden to speak of what they saw and heard, even being denied the “*power* that they could utter the things which they saw and heard” (28:14; emphasis added). It may well be that the things they saw and heard were so far beyond our mortal comprehension that “no tongue can speak, neither can there be written by any man, neither can the hearts of men conceive so great and marvelous things as [they] both saw and heard” (17:17).

Contrasting the level of our understanding with that of chosen prophets, Elder McConkie declared:

Mortal man—shackled as it were in a tabernacle of clay; imprisoned on a single planet that is itself but a speck of dust in an endless universe; bound by time and space, and living for only a few brief moments—mortal man, a spirit son of God, dwells in the depths of ignorance, away from his Father, without a knowledge of eternal things. We are born, we live, we die, and in the process we are privileged—some of us—to receive a few little glimmerings of eternal truth by revelation. And there are few among us, even in sober moments, who ponder the wonders of eternity and seek to know what lies beyond the ken of humankind. What of creation itself, of worlds without number, all inhabited, all crowned with an infinite variety of life? How did Gods begin to be, and whence came the order and system in a universe whose outer limits we shall never see? How little we know of premortal existence, both ours and that of all forms of life; or of death and the world of waiting spirits; or of the resurrection which raises sleeping dust to glorious life. What are Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob doing today? How can Moroni hie to Kolob in the twinkling of an eye? Where are Annas and Caiaphas and Pilate, and what kind of a life are they living? How little we know about creation, about redemption, about immortal glory.

And yet there are those—a favored few—who break the time-bound bands, who see beyond the veil, who come to know the things of



eternity. Portions of what they learn they are permitted to reveal to the rest of us. . . . [They] have seen and heard and felt and known far more than has come to us in any of our scriptures. Among these are the Three Nephite Disciples. (*Mortal Messiah* 4:392–93)

Perhaps one additional idea is worth our consideration at this point. The Lord entrusted this sacred knowledge with the Three Nephites because he knew they could be trusted. He knew they would keep confidential those things revealed to them. Mormon was careful to let us know that while these three began to minister upon the face of the earth, “they did not minister of the things which they had heard and seen because of the commandment which was given them in heaven” (3 Nephi 28:16).

This principle is important to all who would desire to know about the mysteries of God. President Brigham Young elaborated:

If a person understands God and godliness, the principles of heaven, the principle of integrity, and the Lord reveals anything to that individual no matter what, unless He gives permission to disclose it, it is locked up in eternal silence. And when persons have proven to their messengers that their bosoms are like the lock-ups of eternity, then the Lord says, I can reveal anything to them, because they never will disclose it until I tell them to. Take persons of any other character, and they sap the foundation of the confidence they ought to have in themselves and in their God. (*Journal of Discourses* 4:288)

**6. As Mormon began writing and editing this portion of the Nephite history, he was uncertain as to the actual condition or state of the Three Nephites.** Were they mortal or immortal (3 Nephi 28:15, 17)? Only after inquiring of the Lord did he come to the knowledge that they had experienced a change in their bodies. While they were no longer subject to pain and sickness, “this change was not equal to that which shall take place at the last day [the resurrection]” (vv 38–39).

Mormon uses the word *transfiguration* to describe the condition the Three were in while beholding the glorious things of God (3 Nephi 28:15, 17). The scriptures are not clear on the exact differences between transfigured beings and translated

beings. However, the scriptural use of these terms seems to indicate “that transfiguration is more temporary, as in Matthew 17:1–9 and Moses 1:11, occurring primarily to permit one to behold spiritual things not possible in the mortal condition” (Mark McConkie 4:1486). Conversely, “translated beings experience a long-term change” that culminates at the time of their resurrection (Mouritsen 4:1485). It appears that these Nephite disciples were first transfigured and then translated.

**7. Another blessing enjoyed by translated beings is that wicked or evil men and women have no power over them.** During the third century AD, while the Three Nephites still ministered openly among their people, increased wickedness led to the establishment of many false Christian churches and then “another church which denied the Christ” and persecuted the true church (4 Nephi 1:26–29). It was apparently this false church which imprisoned the Three Disciples and cast them into deep pits. Furthermore, these apostate children of Lehi continued to harden their hearts and eventually sought to kill the disciples just as “the Jews at Jerusalem sought to kill Jesus” (4 Nephi 1:31). Three times they cast these chosen servants into fiery furnaces and twice into dens of wild beasts. However, as with the young Hebrews, Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego, and Daniel, the Lord delivered them each time without harm (see 3 Nephi 28:21–22; 4 Nephi 1:32–33; Dan 3:25–27; 6:16–27).

The scriptures indicate that these three disciples were able to use “the power of the word of God” to destroy the prison walls and to deliver themselves out of the depths of the earth (4 Nephi 1:30). Like Enoch of old and Nephi, the son of Helaman, these translated Nephites had such power that all things were done according to their word (see Hel 10:5–10; Moses 7:13).

It can be troubling to contemplate how a people so blessed could have become so hardened as to reject such mighty miracles and witnesses as were provided through the lives of these Three Nephites. One thing that helps is the teaching in the book

of Alma: “After a people have been once enlightened by the Spirit of God, and have had great knowledge of things pertaining to righteousness, and then have fallen away into sin and transgression, they become more hardened, and thus their state becomes worse than though they had never known these things” (Alma 24:30; see also 47:36).

**8. They have the power to show themselves to whomsoever they desire.** And the converse is true. They can keep themselves from being seen by anyone they do not want to see them. The only stipulation required for them to show themselves is that they must pray to the Father in the name of Jesus for that power.

Mormon declares, “They are as the angels of God” (3 Nephi 28:30). This would seem to mean that travel and distances are of no consequence to them. We would suppose that walls and other mortal barriers are also insignificant. Because of their extraordinary powers and the prophetic words of the Savior himself, which we do not yet possess, Mormon prophesied that “great and marvelous works shall be wrought by them, before the great and coming day” of the Lord (v 31).

**9. One of the most significant characteristics of the Three Nephites is that Satan can “have no power over them” (3 Nephi 28:39).** This blessing was not given by drawing them out of the mire of sin and wickedness and placing them beyond Satan’s reach. Rather, these Nephite faithful had already bound Satan in their lives or they could not have received their request. Like some in king Benjamin’s day, they had “no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually” (Mosiah 5:2). Their disposition is to do good continually, and that surely would have led them to request to remain on the earth and continue to labor to bring souls unto Christ.

The fact that Satan could no longer tempt these three is further evidence that for them the day of judgment had been moved up. Their calling and election was made sure.

**10. Mormon concluded his revealing treatise on the Three Nephites by reminding us that they were to remain in this translated state until the “judgment day of Christ,” or in the words of the Savior until “I shall come in my glory with the powers of heaven” (3 Nephi 28:7, 40). At the second coming of Christ, they will receive a glorious resurrection and enter celestial glory to dwell with God and Christ eternally.**

### The Ministry of the Three Nephites

We now turn from an examination of the characteristics of the Three Nephite disciples to a discussion of their ministry. From the Doctrine and Covenants we learn that “there are no angels who minister to this earth but those who do belong or have belonged to it” (D&C 130:5). “Translated bodies are designed for future missions,” taught the Prophet Joseph Smith (*TPJS* 191). Thus, all who minister on this earth have been or will be mortals here. This certainly applies to John the Beloved and the Three Nephites.

Mormon identifies five major groups these Three Nephites would minister to. First, they would labor among the faithful Nephites and Lamanites who remained after the appearance of Christ on the American continent. To these people, they were Apostles just as the Twelve at Jerusalem were to the Jews. Elder Joseph Fielding Smith declared: “While in every instance the Nephite Twelve are spoken of *as disciples*, the fact remains that *they had been endowed with divine authority to be special witnesses for Christ among their own people*. Therefore, they were *virtually apostles to the Nephite race*, although their jurisdiction was, as revealed to Nephi, eventually to be subject to the authority and jurisdiction of Peter and the Twelve chosen in Palestine” (*Doctrines of Salvation* 3:158; italics in original).

Among these descendants of Lehi, the Three Nephites experienced the spiritual high of seeing the conversion of all who survived the destruction at Christ’s coming to this continent (see 4 Nephi 1:2, 14). Unfortunately, it was among the

descendants of these same people that the Three experienced so much sorrow and had to be withdrawn because of the wickedness of the people (see 4 Nephi 1:30–33, 44; Mormon 1:13). Following their formal withdrawal in about AD 326, we know the Three still continued to minister to Mormon and Moroni from time to time. Moroni revealed, “My father and I have seen them, and they have ministered unto us” (Mormon 8:11; see also 3 Nephi 28:26).

The four other groups that the Three Nephites would minister to are the Gentiles, the Jews, the scattered tribes of Israel, and all nations kindreds, tongues, and people (3 Nephi 28:27–29). We do not know the specifics of their labors among these groups, but we do know that those among whom they labor will not know them (vv 27–28). We know they have performed and will yet perform many great and marvelous works among these nations and people (vv 31–32). We know that these Three Disciples will bring many souls unto Christ “because of the convincing power of God which is in them” (v 29). We also know, from latter-day prophets, that one of their purposes for remaining upon the earth has been to help hold Satan and his followers in check. “The Lord has never withdrawn or permitted his authority to be withdrawn absolutely from this earth,” President Joseph Fielding Smith affirmed. He continued,

And so down through the years and through the great apostasy, which developed until the so-called Christian era, there have been individuals on the face of the earth holding divine authority. . . . We understand that John the Revelator asked for the privilege of remaining on earth until the coming of Christ, and that was granted to him. Three Nephites asked for the same privilege and it was granted. They have been here on the face of the earth—advocates of righteousness and contending against Satan and his adversaries. (*Seek Ye Earnestly* 419–20; see also Lee 161–62)

For nearly two thousand years the Three Nephite disciples and John have been ministering upon this earth. The record of their labors would fill volumes. Surely, this will be one of the most interesting sagas unfolded by the Savior when he reveals

the mighty works of God for the fifth and sixth thousand year periods of earth's history (see D&C 88:108–110).<sup>1</sup>

What then can we say concerning the mission of the Three Nephites? We can say, with faith, as Elder John W. Taylor did:

You will find that many districts where the Elders of Israel cannot reach will be penetrated by these men who have power over death; . . . My testimony is that these men are going abroad in the nations of the earth before the face of your sons, and they are preparing the hearts of the children of men to receive the Gospel. They are administering to those who are heirs of salvation, and preparing their hearts to receive the truth, just as the farmer prepares the soil to receive the seed. The Lord has promised that He would send His angels before the face of His servants, and He does so. (75)

## Conclusion

People often wonder whether there are people being translated today, and if not, why? This same question may have come to the mind of Joseph Smith as he translated the Book of Mormon. Even more likely, the question could have come as he worked on the inspired revision of the book of Genesis in late 1830 and early 1831. As he read of Enoch and his people being caught up into heaven and later of others who developed the faith of Enoch who were taken up into Zion even down to the days of Melchizedek, the question must have come (see Moses 7:21, 27; JST Gen 14:32–35). We have no record of any response by the Prophet as to why people are not translated today, and his silence on the question may be answer enough. However, on this issue Elder McConkie has written:

[After the days of Melchizedek] except in a few isolated instances—those of Moses, Elijah, Alma the son of Alma, John the Beloved, and the Three Nephites are the only ones of which we know—except in

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<sup>1</sup> Thousands of stories abound concerning possible encounters with the Three Nephites. Although many of these accounts are true, a great many are not. We can safely assume that translated beings are not interested in making national headlines or in contributing to a collection of apocryphal faith-promoting stories. Mormon says that the people they will be among “shall know them not” and that their specific mission is to bring souls to Jesus (3 Nephi 28:27, 29; see also Wilson 1477–78).

these cases, each involving a *special purpose*, the Lord ceased translating faithful people. Rather, they were permitted to die and go into the spirit world, there to perform the ever-increasing work needed in that sphere. (*Millennial Messiah* 285; emphasis added)

There is much yet which we do not know, but for that which we do understand we should be most grateful. What personal lesson can we learn from the lives the Nephite Disciples? Of the many ideas that could be given, I list only two. First, it should be our desire and design to strive to bind Satan in our lives, for “when Satan is bound in a single home—when Satan is bound in a single life—the Millennium has already begun in that home, in that life” (Kimball 172). Second, we can and must do all that we can to help bring souls unto Christ. This is the work of the translated Nephites, and it is our work too.

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