

LOOKING BACK TO SEE THE FUTURE THE SCRIPTURES

BRUCE H. PORTER

I would to God that every citizen of this land might read the Book of Mormon prayerfully and learn something of the prophecies made regarding this land—the promises made and the conditions upon which they are made—that we might, as an American people, so live that these great promises could be fully realized; that we might come to know that the Constitution of this land has been established by men whom the God of heaven raised up unto that very purpose.¹

—Ezra Taft Benson

The opening chapters of the Bible record a message about the creation of the “heaven and earth” (Genesis 1:1). The same standard work ends in the last chapters of the book of Revelation with the creation of a “new heaven and a new earth” (Revelation 21:1). Everything between the first few chapters and last two chapters of the Bible—between these two creations, between the beginning and the end—exists to teach mankind how to make it through the creation of a temporal world of mortality and obtain the second creation of a new celestial heaven and earth. This world is a probationary state created to provide a place to choose between good and evil. Life is a gift of *time* and *agency* for the purpose of changing character. Time is needed to gain a sufficient knowledge of the gospel plan necessary to put off the natural man and gain the required change of heart and character through individual choice and agency. This change of character is necessary to reside in both a “new heaven and new earth” and in the presence of God.

A place had to be prepared (within a world governed by the evil designs of conspiring men) to proclaim truth to the world. A place and nation of freedom had to be prepared and protected from the control and compulsion upon the souls of the children of men by the unrighteous. A land prepared and dedicated for the restoration, where no work of man could “hinder the Almighty from pouring down knowledge upon the heads” of the righteous. A land chosen to be above all others, a promised land, a land of promises, a place of the beginning and the ending, the same land where the city of Enoch was; and where a people will be prepared to receive the city of Enoch again. This is the land where Adam stood with his righteous posterity before the Lord three years previous to his death (D&C 107:53–54) and where he will stand again with his righteous posterity, before the Lord, in the “promised land” of Adam-ondi-Ahman (D&C 116; Daniel 7:9–13).

¹ Ezra Taft Benson, “A World Message” *Improvement Era*, June 1961, 64:430–33; also in *Conference Report*, April 1961, 110–14

History and Scripture

A number of years ago I had the opportunity to work on a project designed to separate the ‘doctrine’ from the ‘history’ of the Book of Mormon. After multiple readings of the text and the separation of history from the doctrine (which was no easy task) the work was done. There were a few concepts discovered that changed my view of scripture and scriptural history.

The first insight learned was that history is not always scripture, but scripture always comes from the context of history. For many years “Church History and Doctrine” has been taught as a course in the Church Educational System and in Gospel Doctrine classes. However, church history can change with the finding of another diary, a letter, or any historical research that might change conclusions about the events surrounding any historical event. The revelations contained in the Doctrine and Covenants are scripture. They are revelations and doctrines from the Lord, and have been canonized as scripture. All doctrine and revelations found in the Doctrine and Covenants came out of a setting that is not necessarily “scripture,” but from the history of a people led and taught by a true prophet of God. If the Doctrine and Covenants is to be considered “living scripture” and is applicable for every age, then the historical setting and “church history” that is not canonized is of secondary significance.

Scripture often consists of revelation and human histories that have been canonized as a standard work upon which all should study for righteousness and doctrine. History can and should give insight into the purpose of doctrine. But we cannot “liken *doctrine* unto ourselves.” However, we should liken the *history* and *character* of the people unto ourselves. There exists, as it should be, a recognizable distinction between history and doctrine. Even though prophecy is history in reverse, prophecy is more sure than the history. Prophecy and doctrine are given within a historical setting because of the actions of those who live within that historical setting. That which we can “liken unto ourselves” are the attitudes, character traits, concerns, and sins of the people that live in the historical setting of scripture. There are many uncomfortable, yet specific, reasons why Latter-day Saints need a history and record of a “fallen people.” This is one of the three most important messages of the Book of Mormon.

General and Specific Orders

The second concept learned had to do with the importance of the “historical” part of scripture. This was such a profound insight that it completely changed my outlook on the purpose of history within scripture. The “inspired history” (like that found in the Book of Mormon) might address the actions of the “Lord’s people” within the historical as well as a present-day setting. For this reason scriptural history may be considered “living scripture” because the inspired choice of revelation and history included in the text would not necessarily be limited to a given time in history. However, some commandments and restrictions like the Law of Moses anciently, or the Word of Wisdom in our day, may be revealed for a specific time period or dispensation. Generally speaking though, the scriptures, revelations, and doctrines contained in them are for every generation.

In military engagements there exist what is called “orders of battle.” There are always “general orders” and “specific orders.” General orders are those pertaining of the overall goal, while specific orders are the detailed orders needed to accomplish the general goal. The *general* orders in scripture are issued for the good of all mankind, in all times. The *specific* orders, rules, laws, and commandments are given for a particular time and or place. Scripture contains both general and specific orders. The Ten Commandments could be considered “general orders” as they are for the benefit of mankind in every time period and every dispensation, just as is the timeless

benefit of developing charity toward our fellow beings. These Ten Commandments are general orders upon which all moral societies should be built. Specific orders or commandments might be dietary laws given for a specific time in history. Or, as seen in the case of the children of Israel and their rejection of the higher law, they were given a lesser law “*until John*” (D&C 84:19–27) or the coming of Christ in the flesh. In 3 Nephi the Savior restores a higher law as he stated many times in his first sermon that, “Ye have heard that it hath been said by them of old time, and it is also written before you...But I say unto you...” then declaring that “old things are done away, and all things have become new” (3 Nephi 12:21–47).

The words of living prophets are for the time in which they live and should be carried forward in time, unless modified by a later prophet under the inspiration of the Lord (like the declarations in the Doctrine and Covenants on plural marriage and granting the priesthood to all worthy males). These living prophets will also stress those general and specific commandments and scriptures given in a former time, and add the inspired words that will benefit the people of the present.

Standard Works

Changes that have taken place in doctrine or policy (and they are different) by prophets of God teach us that there are both “general” (all time periods) and “specific” (selective time periods) orders and commandments. Policies such as meeting times, lengths of missions, and other church programs will often change to address the needs of the growing membership in the church as those needs change. However, “doctrine” seldom changes and, if it does, it can only come through the prophet and president of the Church. President Lee declared:

We have the standard Church works. Why do we call them standard? If there is any teacher who teaches a doctrine that can't be substantiated from the standard church works—and I make one qualification, and that is unless that one be the President of the Church, who alone has the right to declare new doctrine—then you may know by that same token that such a teacher is but expressing his own opinion. If, on the other hand, you have someone teaching a doctrine that cannot be substantiated by the scriptures, and more than that, if it contradicts what is in the standard Church works, you may know that that person is teaching false doctrine, no matter what his position in this church may be. The President of the Church alone may declare the mind and will of God to His people. No officer nor any other church in the world has this high and lofty prerogative. When the President proclaims any such new doctrine, he will declare it to be a revelation from the Lord.²

“Revelation,” when canonized, becomes scripture and doctrine. A “declaration” is a change in scripture or doctrine, and can be done only by revelation to the Prophet and President of the Church. A “proclamation” is the position, stand, or explanation by the prophet and presiding priesthood leaders on a given issue based on existing revelation and scripture.

Prophetic Responsibility

As individuals, there is an imperative need to become free from the sins of “our” generation; that is, the generation in which we now live—not the generations of past prophets like that Moses, Abraham, or Isaiah—but the very sins of *our* generation. Past prophets declared the sins of their generation, which demonstrates why there must be living prophets to declare what those sins are. To become “free” from the sins that are prevalent and present in the time and world in which *we live* requires that a living prophet to declare repentance unto his generation. As taught by Jacob,

² Harold B. Lee, *Stand Ye In Holy Places*, 109–110.

the people of Nephi came according to the Law of Moses to a gathering at the temple. The words in the text reveal the weight and worry in the prophet's mind of his responsibility to help rid the people from the sins of their generation, and their sins from him.

Now, my beloved brethren, I, Jacob, according to the responsibility which I am under to God, to magnify mine office with soberness, and that *I might rid my garments of your sins, I come up into the temple this day that I might declare unto you the word of God.*

And ye yourselves know that I have hitherto been diligent in the office of my calling; but I this day am weighed down with much more desire and anxiety for the welfare of your souls than I have hitherto been. (Jacob 2:2–3)

This concept can also be seen in the words the Lord communicated to Ezekiel about his responsibility as a prophet or “watchman” to the house of Israel.

Son of man, I have made thee a watchman unto the house of Israel: therefore hear the word at my mouth, and *give them warning from me.*

When I say unto the wicked, Thou shalt surely die; and thou givest him not warning, nor speakest to warn the wicked from his wicked way, to save his life; the same wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood will I require at thine hand.

Yet if thou warn the wicked, and he turn not from his wickedness, nor from his wicked way, he shall die in his iniquity; but thou hast delivered thy soul.

Again, when a righteous *man* doth turn from his righteousness, and commit iniquity, and I lay a stumbling block before him, he shall die: because thou hast not given him warning, he shall die in his sin, and his righteousness which he hath done shall not be remembered; but his blood will I require at thine hand.

Nevertheless if thou warn the righteous *man*, that the righteous sin not, and he doth not sin, he shall surely live, because he is warned; also thou hast delivered thy soul. (Ezekiel 3:17–21)

Even in this dispensation the Lord has warned that this same responsibility remains with the prophets of God—to declare in their time the sins of that generation. This is done for the sake of the remnant who will listen, who will repent, who will change, and for the prophet to rid himself of the sins of those in his generation for whom he is responsible, as taught in scripture.

Why History

The third concept realized with reference to ‘doctrine and history’ actually made the scriptures come alive in their historical context. The realization of “why history?” assisted in understanding the words of Nephi as he taught that we should “liken all scripture unto us” for our profit and learning (1 Nephi 19:23). First, it must be recognized who reads the Book of Mormon?

When Mormon took the Nephite wagonloads of records, then abridged and edited those volumes into one condensed and concise record, there was no one left to read it. The normal question to ask would be, “so who did he write it for?”

The answer is simple: he wrote it for those who *would* read it in *our day*. However, it is not found on the *New York Times* bestseller list, nor is this book a “must read” on Oprah. The answer to whom was it written for, often goes unseen because of the “beam” that blocks the view of the mirror. The Book of Mormon was not written for the unbeliever or non-members. Because of

inspiration, and for a “wise purpose,” it is written for those who *are* reading it, or who should be reading it. Why did Mormon and Moroni choose the history of a fallen people to take up the valuable and limited space on the plates of gold? Because they knew who would read it.

As Moroni stated when he takes over the record, “Behold, I speak unto you as if ye were present, and yet ye are not. But behold, Jesus Christ hath *shown you unto me, and I know your doing*” (Mormon 8:35). Moroni is speaking to those who will read the record, those who have the desire to come unto Christ and be numbered with his people. He is speaking to those who will have accepted the Book of Mormon as scripture and will “feast upon the words” of this book, speaking to those who will “ponder in their hearts” the words that are written therein. Mormon and Moroni have written for those “who know from whence their blessings come” (Mormon 5:10). The Book of Mormon was written for Israel, the children of Abraham, those who know and have the Gospel of Jesus Christ, those who seek more light and knowledge, who are coming to an understanding of the necessity of the Atonement and have the hope of a better resurrection. It was written to the members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and those who desire to come to the understanding that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the Living God (see the Title Page of the Book of Mormon). The Book of Mormon was written to Latter-day Saints because it came from the history of the former “saints” of the Church of Jesus Christ. The former and latter-day “saints” have had and do have the same sins. Moroni wrote that he spoke to us “as if we were present” (Mormon 8:35). For this reason Mormon and Moroni chose to record the history of a “fallen people” to save *us* from the same sins and consequently from the same results. Those who read this book of scripture are the members of the Church or those who are investigating membership. Therefore the inspired inclusion of history in the Book of Mormon is principally and perhaps specifically written for the Latter-day Saint reader.

Since doctrine does not change and cannot be likened unto ourselves, the character, attitudes, and sins of the people are what we can “liken unto ourselves.” The purpose of scriptural history is simple and revelatory—and the shortest way to express it (though uncomfortable) is—the sins of Israel are the sins of Israel in *every* age and in *every* dispensation. The sins of the children of Israel throughout the Old Testament are the same sins revealed by Christ to the Pharisees and Jewish leaders of his day. These are the same sins that beset the early members of the Church and were written about by the apostles in the New Testament. The sins are the same for the Nephites and those who knew and understood the gospel and the laws and commandments of God in the Book of Mormon. Even those sins at the time of Enoch and of Noah are the same sins described in all scripture. So how do we “liken the scriptures unto us”? We must understand that the sins that beset and plague the world and members of the church in this dispensation are the same sins of character that have existed in all dispensations that have gone before. The failure of all dispensations in the establishment of Zion (excepting Enoch and Melchizedek [JST Genesis 14:30–34]) is the reason that Zion has not been redeemed even now.

Because the sins of Israel are the same in every generation, we must “liken all scripture unto ourselves” as the sins of the true church in scriptural history are the sins of the true church even now. If the readers of scripture do not view and discuss scriptural history seriously, recognizing and likening the sins of Israel anciently to those of Israel today, we will fail to understand a key purpose of scripture. This is especially true of the Book of Mormon. Nephi taught that the sure sign of apostasy in the last days would be for those who may call themselves Zion—those who have the truth and the scriptures—to declare that “all is well in Zion, yea, Zion prospereth” (2 Nephi 28:21) in both the community and the heart of the individual. If we cannot discover ourselves within the history of scripture, we cannot fully liken the scriptures unto ourselves.

History is included in scripture for a reason, and that reason is connected to the doctrines and commandments contained within the revelations of that scripture. The “work and glory” of God is the same in all generations, and the character of mankind has not changed from the time of Cain and Abel until the present. Even the Prophet Joseph Smith taught, “...there has been no change in the constitution of man since he fell.”³ Only when we liken the scriptural history unto ourselves can we see the need for the revelatory doctrines and commandments found within the history. It is for the “work and glory of God to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man” (Moses 1:39). In scripture many—like the Pharisees and Zoramites—want to project the wickedness discussed in scripture onto others who they consider sinners. Even as members of the church, we often project the sins in scripture to those outside our affiliations, outside our church, outside our homes, outside our own hearts. The value of the history of scripture is the likening the sins of the people found in that history to ourselves, to recognize the signs of wickedness, and realize the cause of destruction—spiritually and physically—of previous individuals and nations. The revelations of the prophets of God within history can provide an escape from the temporal and spiritual judgments that will come in time and in eternity.

Empty are the annals of a happy people. It is common for people to write most often in their personal journals when things are not going so well. Similarly, the Book of Mormon is a “record of a fallen people” (D&C 20:9). There is only part of one chapter in the Book of Mormon that described a time of perfect happiness, a time when there are no “ites” and the people had all things in common (4 Nephi 1:3, 15–17). This millennial type and time of life is found in the single chapter of 4 Nephi. The rest of the book contains the struggles, frustrations, and sins of a people who knew and understood the gospel at one time in their lives. Over and over again, Mormon described the “cycle of prosperity,” the sin of pride, and the manifestation of that sin as inequality. This book described what caused the suffering of this people and their ultimate rejection of God, and then by God. We often read and wonder why the Nephites couldn’t see the cause or consequence of sin as the text describes the Lord’s judgments upon Israel from beginning to end. The question begs to be asked: “why was Mormon inspired and directed by God to include the stories and events that fill the pages of a fallen people?”

For only one reason the events described in this record are contained in this scripture. And that is because Mormon and Moroni saw and understood the people who would read the book (Mormon 8:35). They realized *first* and foremost that the sins of the Nephites were going to be the sins of those Gentiles who accept the gospel and read and consider the book as scripture. *Second*, that there was going to be a Gentile nation that would be raised up to inhabit the same land; a nation on the same land that would be governed by the same promises of freedom and prophecies of destruction. The Book of Mormon was not written for those who would never turn its pages in ponderous study. It was written specifically for a culture and church blessed with the knowledge of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the divinity of the Book of Mormon.

As is shown time and time again in the Book of Mormon and throughout history, the culture itself is the greatest threat to the culture. It is not what exists on the outside that constitutes the greatest danger, but what becomes the accepted way of life within the culture. “...For the Lord hath said: This is my church, and I will establish it; *and nothing shall overthrow it, save it is the transgression of my people*” (Mosiah 27:13). The phrase “And thus we see” in Mormon’s editorial comments always has the conclusion “that wickedness never was happiness” (Alma 41:10). It becomes obvious that there is a great spiritual benefit and purpose of scriptural history. The Book of Mormon begins with a small group of people leaving Jerusalem because of the

³ Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, selected and arranged by Joseph Fielding Smith [Salt Lake City:Deseret Book Co., 1976], 59. Hereafter cited as “TPJS.”

threat of the kingdom of Babylon. This small family was led by the hand of the Lord to a land of a promised “New Jerusalem.” Their once blessed existence comes to a violent end centuries later, as described in the final chapters of the Book of Mormon. Portrayed in the text is the spiritual and temporal destruction of the Nephite nation and culture. This physical end of that culture was a self-induced destruction because of their great desires to attach themselves to the spiritual “Babylon” from which their wise and inspired father Lehi had so quickly fled. All of world history and all of scriptural history contain details of the constant battle that rages between Babylon and Zion.