

A PROMISE AND CHOSEN LAND

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May we be worthy of the freedoms that have been provided us in our Constitution, and equal to the trials and tests that shall surely come. We truly have special and individual responsibilities to befriend and to defend that “glorious standard,” our Constitution.

Our Heavenly Father raised up the men who founded this government (see D&C 101:80), thereby fulfilling the prophecy of His Beloved Son that the people “should be established in this land and be set up as a free people by the power of the Father” (3 Nephi 21:4).¹

—Ezra Taft Benson

It is true that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has no position on the geographical setting of the Book of Mormon. This is a wise position for the Church to take amid the tumult of opinion. However, an understanding of the responsibilities of those who dwell on the ‘land of Lehi’ becomes paramount to the temporal and spiritual salvation of the occupants of the promised land. This is especially true if it is realized that the “Gentiles” that came out of captivity, and are specifically addressed within the text, came to the same land to which Lehi was led.

Three Messages

There are three important messages found within the Book of Mormon for three groups of people. The first is the Gospel of Jesus Christ that is found within the text of the Book of Mormon and restores the plain and precious truths that were lost for centuries. This message is for the world at large, to believer and non-believer alike.

The second message to be taken from the Book of Mormon is that it is a history and record of a fallen people. This book records the personal attitudes, character traits, desires, appetites, and passions as well as the sins, faults, and failings of a people who once knew the Lord and His law. This is the message that can be likened unto one’s self. Doctrine itself cannot be “likened unto us”; however, that which may be “likened” to us individually and collectively are the attitudes, the characters, and the sins or righteousness of the people found within the text. This message is written for those who know and understand the gospel, as Jacob warned: “But wo unto him that has the law given, yea, that has all the commandments of God, like unto us, and that transgresseth them, and that wasteth the days of his probation, for awful is his state!” (2 Nephi 9:27). This social history of the Nephites was recorded for the Latter-day Saints (Israel) who “know from whence their blessings come” (Mormon 5:10). The sins of Israel are the sins of Israel in every age and every dispensation. Hence the second purpose.

¹ Ezra Taft Benson, *The Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson* [Salt Lake City:Bookcraft, 1988], 594.

The third message which this book addresses is targeted directly to those who live on the “land of promise.” There are prophecies and promises specifically about the promised land to which the Jaredites, Mulekites, and Lehites were led, which are attached to the land itself. The land of promise is definite and specific, just as the promises and prophecies are specific about the land and those who dwell on it. The blessings connected to the land are seen throughout the Book of Mormon as the divine promise of freedom and prosperity and are issued by prophetic statements—even by Christ Himself. This promise of freedom upon the land of promise is connected to a responsibility that rests upon those who live upon that land—member and non-member alike. This is a non-denominational message and a “Title of Liberty” that must be raised again upon the promised land. This essential concept irrevocably coupled to the land of promise is a primary principle and purpose of the Book of Mormon, included by many ancient prophets under the direction of the Lord, yet this purpose is often overlooked by the casual reader. These three messages will be discussed in depth following this paper.

The Promised Land

Many may question, “what difference does it really make to know where the setting of the land of Lehi might be?” This question is often followed by the statement that ‘knowing the setting will make no difference because it will not affect my spiritual well being.’ This point of view can only be made by those who do not understand the messages and purposes of the Book of Mormon. According to the scriptural text, having a knowledge of the promised land of Lehi can have an effect on the freedoms that allow a worship of God according to individual agency.

The Book of Mormon is a history of three migrations: those of the Jaredites, the Mulekites, and the Lehites. However, this same Book of Mormon is a prophetic record and history of four migrations led by the Lord to the same promised land: the Jaredites, the Mulekites, the Lehites, and the future Gentiles. It is to this fourth group that the record was compiled and written by the last prophets of the Nephite civilization. When Mormon and his son Moroni finished the abridgment and record, there was no one left from their time and society to read it. It was written and hidden up specifically for the remnant who would remain and for the “Gentiles” who would come out of captivity to the promised land as prophesied by the authors and compilers of the record. Within this record are the restrictions and stipulations placed upon those who live upon the land of promise, as well as the promised blessings of freedom and liberty connected to the land itself.

If the “promised land” cannot be identified, then the restrictions, blessings, and responsibilities cannot be realized, nor can the prophecies and promises in the text become a moving force, as hoped by the prophets of the Book of Mormon. It would be significant if the location of the promised land was made known for the spiritual security and temporal preservation of those who might dwell in that land of freedom. The prophecies and promises about the Gentile nation that will exist there are included for a reason. Religious freedom is dependent on the freedoms guaranteed by the governments of that land, and the protection promised by God. These freedoms and promises found in this text of scripture are to be understood and recognized, and are connected to a responsibility placed upon the reader by God through the words of inspired prophets.

It is the author’s belief that the prophecies and promises contained within the Book of Mormon, if studied and coupled with the statements of the Prophet Joseph Smith, contain enough information to identify the specific Promised Land to the individual who seeks such knowledge. If this is not possible, the Gentile prophecies and instructions are meaningless. Reading and studying the Book of Mormon with this knowledge will produce an overwhelming sense of responsibility and commitment in the hearts and minds of those who know that they live in the place which the Book of Mormon identifies as the promised land—and that land is known today as the United States.

To begin a discussion that establishes a connection between the United States and the Book of Mormon, a setting for the history of this scripture is of fundamental importance. Traditions and theories, past and present, have been proclaimed as truth and doctrine without consideration for the prophetic and textual evidence that exists, within and without the Book of Mormon itself. The numerous theoretical settings espoused by many scholars, and the overwhelming number of theoretical maps (over 150 thus far) is sufficient evidence that the use of geographical passages found within the text are inadequate to use for the determination of a setting for this book of scripture. Over the years these many geographical settings and theories have been used in an apologetic way, hoping to provide some sort of physical proof of the Book of Mormon. This monumental effort to find archaeological proof in Mesoamerica has created a black hole that has resulted in the rejection of specific statements of Joseph Smith about Book of Mormon geography. So strong is the pull of traditional thought about Mayan ruins in Mesoamerica, that genetic research and even anthropological and archaeological findings from non-members that substantiate the prophets' words have been ignored because of the traditions and egos of academia. The 150 different maps, it is claimed, are based in scripture (the number of maps alone identifies there is a problem). Yet, the conclusions reached by Mesoamerican theorists are the result of intellectual endeavors connected to the weakest evidence, rather than one founded on the textual information found in the Book of Mormon that takes the form of prophecy. For some reason, the desire of physical 'proof' for the Book of Mormon cultures have led many into a boxed canyon of scholastic blindness to the real messages and meanings of the prophecies of the land of promise to which Lehi was led.

A nontraditional model is presented here with sufficient scriptural sources to make a relationship and connection between the Book of Mormon and the United States plausible. This will be done by the use of the statements of the Prophet Joseph Smith, the translator of the text, and the textual evidences within the Book of Mormon itself. That is, the inspired words of the prophets who authored and abridged the sacred record and the prophet and translator of that book will be the source.

To facilitate an objective analysis, the reader should put aside the traditional teachings, mindsets, and theories of a particular setting outside of North America and review the evidence found within the Book of Mormon without preconceived notions of a geographical setting. The prophetic evidence within the Book of Mormon is clear and concise, and needs no intellectual commentary or theory presented for persuasion. The prophetic text and the prophet translator should be allowed to speak for themselves without private theories about geographical passages and "monumental ruins" encumbering the mind and forcing conclusions. The scriptures have their own voice and message, and present their own evidence, if viewed with an open mind. Because this message of a land connected to the prophecies and promises about the Gentiles is found within the text, the setting must be clear, and that land must be identifiable and conclusive from the record itself. An open mind, and a serious look at the words of the prophets who wrote the text and the words of Joseph Smith, will make reading this book less of a task and much more enjoyable.

It doesn't matter where one might want to believe the geographical setting of the Book of Mormon took place. It does, however, matter what we think of scripture and the truths taught there. I would hope that this discussion might generate a renewed desire to look beyond the popular theories and thoughts forced by tradition, and view the statements of Joseph Smith and those truths found in scripture and allow the Standard Works to speak in such a way that might give new meaning to the term "the promised land."

Commentary and Scripture

When studying the scriptures, many have been trained to rely on someone else for the interpretation of scripture. Many teachers in the Church often seek the aid of discussions, blogs, websites, and commentaries to understand a given passage in their study or in the preparation for a lesson. But the scriptures themselves can be the best commentary on the scriptures, if allowed to be such. For the

scriptures to be their own commentary means that one should not only read them, but study them also. We should “search them diligently” as counseled by King Benjamin:

O my sons, I would that ye should remember that these sayings are true, and also that these records are true. And behold, also the plates of Nephi, which contain the records and the sayings of our fathers from the time they left Jerusalem until now, and they are true; and we can know of their surety because we have them before our eyes.

And now, my sons, I would that ye should remember to search them diligently, that ye may profit thereby; and I would that ye should keep the commandments of God, that ye may prosper in the land according to the promises which the Lord made unto our fathers. (Mosiah 1:6–7)

The requirement to ‘study’ or, as the scriptures describe, “clinging” to and then “holding fast to the Iron Rod” (1 Nephi 8:19–30) is an action necessary to reach the Tree of Life. Other scriptures counsel to “feast upon the words of Christ” (2 Nephi 32:3) and to “ponder” them in your hearts (Moroni 10:3) and to “study my word” (D&C 11:22). Seldom do the scriptures advocate to just read them. Too often the personal time that one spends in the scriptures is a regimented reading schedule with goals of time limits, chapters, or pages. Seldom is time actually spent in the “study” of scripture, discovering what the scriptures themselves might have to say on a given subject or topic. It is common to rely on the preparations of men and manuals for the sake of time and energy. The scriptures are ‘living’ because, with each search, something new can be learned. Like a restoration, the light of truth will begin to break through the words and pages of the scriptures without the confusing arm of flesh. The scriptures should be read consecutively and studied topically.

Personal study is often considered a project of searching commentaries rather than searching the words of scriptures and the Topical Guide and Dictionary that have been prepared for that purpose. It is not that the commentaries are necessarily wrong or bad; they have their place as aids in the search for answers. But serious personal study will unlock the windows and doors of revelation and understanding that cannot be opened otherwise. Only the scriptures can be totally objective as many discussions by others on internet sites, blogs, and commentaries are limited by filters, such as experience, training, and pet topics and theories. Some individuals do not want the scriptures to speak for themselves because when they do, personal agendas, pre-existing beliefs, and theories are difficult to maintain. One cannot be any smarter than the person they choose to believe.

Letting the Scriptures Speak for Themselves

As this book continues, it would be suggested that the reader allow the scriptures to speak for themselves. View what the Book of Mormon has to say without the influence, the filters and lenses of others that might have an agenda. View the scriptures as they were written. Try and understand the reasons why they were written for the Latter-day Saints. Every verse quoted will have a reference, and it would be suggested that if there are questions that arise, that the verse be read within the context of the scriptures themselves. It is almost impossible for one to be completely objective because of training or education; however, the sources are available to all. The printed words in the Book of Mormon are scripture. Commentary often requires the commentator to look beyond the ink, as reading between the lines is sometimes inevitable. The author recognizes that this book is also one of commentary. It is said that a “scholar’s” greatest ambition is to become a footnote; however, this author’s personal commentary is not to be considered a source. The scriptures are used in this text to the extreme because the scriptures should be the source and standard on which to rely. The scriptures are the best commentary on the scriptures, and for that to be true, they must be allowed to speak for themselves.

This book may seem off task as it begins; however, the protracted endeavor centers on the importance of the United States and the freedoms and protections guaranteed in the Declaration of Independence, the

Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. These important political documents are inseparably connected with the phrases of the “promised land,” the “land of promise,” the “chosen land,” and the “land choice above all others” that are found in the Book of Mormon. These statements about the promised land are also inseparably connected to the Gentile nation that will be established on this same land.

The Constitution and Scripture

Constitutional freedom, religion, and inspired scripture are used in conjunction in the words of inspired leaders. As President Ezra Taft Benson has stated, “I reverence the Constitution of the United States as a sacred document. To me its words are akin to the revelations of God, for God has placed His stamp of approval on the Constitution of this land.”² A statement made by President George Albert Smith in this dispensation concluded, “The Constitution of the United States of America is just as much from my Heavenly Father as the Ten Commandments.”³ President J. Reuben Clark, Jr. proclaimed that “the Constitution of the United States is to me and to my people as much a part of our religion as the Decalogue...or the Beatitudes.”⁴ Modern scripture and in particular, the prophecies in the Book of Mormon, are connected to the Constitution and the establishment of this nation called the United States.

As discussed in the Book of Mormon by Christ and other prophetic authors, it was not by chance but by design that religious freedom appends the promised land. It was not for economics or politics but for religion, reformation, and restoration that this great “Gentile nation” exists. The United States was established for the ‘rebirth’ of Zion in this dispensation, and the location and place for the return of the city called Zion established by Enoch. This promised land was set apart and protected for the righteous by scriptural proclamation, and this land—and those who live there—have a mission to provide a protection of the freedom promised for the essential spiritual revival that will eventually cause the fall of spiritual Babylon. The founding of this nation provided a setting and a vehicle for the religious freedom necessary for the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, the restoration of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the organization of the Church, and the eventual establishment of Zion.

² Ezra Taft Benson, *The Constitution—A Heavenly Banner* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1986], 31.

³ *Conference Report*, April 1948, 182.

⁴ *Vital Speeches of the Day*, January 1, 1939, Vol. 5, No. 6, 177.