“Words, words, words”: Hugh Nibley on the Book of Mormon
MARILYN ARNOLD

Hugh Nibley appears to have employed nearly every existing rhetorical device when writing on the Book of Mormon. Nibley’s vast store of knowledge, along with his love of the Book of Mormon, allows him to defend it with single-minded determination and in a variety of formats.

Baptism for the Dead in Early Christianity
DAVID L. PAULSEN AND BROCK M. MASON

Since baptism is required for entrance into heaven, it is not surprising to find evidence of the practice of baptism for the dead in the early Christian church. The Corinthian saints practiced vicarious baptism for the dead, and several New Testament passages and numerous apocryphal and gnostic writings support such a procedure.
The Great and Marvelous Change: An Alternate Interpretation

CLIFFORD P. JONES

It is possible to understand the great and marvelous change described in 3 Nephi 11:1 as a reference to the infinite change wrought by the Atonement. This interpretation is supported by the timing and nature of the gathering at the temple.
Marilyn Arnold, emeritus professor of English at Brigham Young University, also served in the administration of the university. A leading scholar on Willa Cather, she has published nonfiction works, eight novels, and works on the Book of Mormon (including hymn texts). The Utah governor’s office honored her as a Woman of Achievement in 2003.

Clifford P. Jones earned a BS in accounting from Brigham Young University and a JD with honors from J. Reuben Clark Law School. He is president of AvidLaw, LLC, a software development firm. His understanding of and love for the scriptures have come primarily through personal and family scripture study. He and his wife, Sharon, have four children and three grandchildren.

Brock M. Mason is a student at Brigham Young University studying philosophy and ancient Near Eastern studies. Originally from Colorado Springs, his interests vary from ancient history, religious philosophy, meta-ethics, epistemology, and jazz piano. Upon graduation, he plans to attend graduate school and pursue a career as a professor.

Hugh Nibley (1910–2005) graduated summa cum laude from the University of California at Los Angeles and completed his PhD as a University Fellow at the University of California at Berkeley. He joined the faculty of Brigham Young University in 1946 as a professor of history and religion and devoted much time to research and writing.

David L. Paulsen is a professor of philosophy at Brigham Young University. He earned a BS degree in political science from BYU, a JD from the University of Chicago Law School, and a PhD in philosophy from the University of Michigan. He has published in the areas of philosophy of religion and Mormon studies.
With this issue we continue our Worthy of Another Look series. As with the last issue, we wanted to honor the 100th anniversary of Hugh Nibley’s birthday with another seminal article from him, one that exemplifies his erudition, his attention to detail, his perspicacity, and his sensitivity to sacred ordinances. Because it is a “another look,” you will have to turn to the back of this issue to find this somewhat long but fascinating foray into gospel aspects which were once hotly debated and quite controversial but which are now largely forgotten, except among Latter-day Saints. When you take in Another Look, notice the close tie-ins with David Paulsen’s article on post-apostolic work for the dead.

Speaking of work for the dead, we continue the series by BYU Professor David Paulsen and company. In the last issue of the *Journal*, his article, entitled “The Harrowing of Hell,” discussed early Christian accounts of Christ’s postmortem mission to save the dead. In this issue he continues this theme of salvation for those who have passed on without receiving the opportunity to accept Christ here in mortality, particularly baptism for the dead. The evidence is admittedly sparse, often tangential, and is at its most interesting when viewed through the lenses of the Restoration. Latter-day Saints have always realized that Restoration doctrine does not spring out of historical sources, but rather through the opening of the heavens in these latter days. Nevertheless, we seem to take particular delight in finding historical snippets of Restoration doctrine scattered near and far in historical sources. We hope you enjoy this hunt for treasure.

From time to time I find it profitable to reexamine many of the ideas and assumed bits of knowledge that have accumulated, like trusted old artifacts, in places of honor above the fireplace, as a centerpiece on the cadenza, or tucked away with dusty tomes on a library shelf of my mind. Occasionally, newer ideas have caused me to clean out a few of these older, trusted perceptions. We offer you just such a challenge in the piece by Clifford Jones. His discussion of a great and marvelous Book of Mormon event may cause you to rethink some old ideas. Then again, maybe it won’t.

Finally, the first shall be last, at least as I write about them, in this editor’s notebook. The refined and well-spoken lecture given by Marilyn Arnold, retired BYU English teacher, as part of the lecture series to celebrate the 100th anniversary of Hugh Nibley’s birth, appears here for the first time in print. I must confess, having been in attendance at her presentation, that her written words have even more depth and ken than I was able to take in from the spoken words. She has given us a learned discourse on the joys and thrills of reading Nibley that is worthy of her subject.

Also in this issue, we present what I hope will be a continuing feature: a letter to the editor. If you find something to write about after reading this or any issue, please pass it on to us at jbmrs@byu.edu.

**Notes**


**Letter to the Editor**

Friends:

I received and greatly enjoyed the *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 19/1 (2010) last week. I can’t remember any number which was more interesting. Of course I’m 82 and don’t have the best memory ever.

Thank you for the strength that the Maxwell Institute is adding to Zion. I used to know Sidney Sperry and his family well, and my first year at BYU coincided with the arrival of Hugh Nibley. I filled every empty hour in my class schedule by sitting in on his classes and after a while came to enjoy a personal acquaintance with him and his wife.

I am, respectfully, your servant,

William L. Knecht
Flannery O’Connor, a southern writer of no small reputation, was once asked how she saw her own work in relation to the writings of William Faulkner. She replied that no one wanted her horse and buggy stalled on the tracks the Dixie Limited was coming down. That describes my position today. If ever there was a Dixie Limited in Mormondom, it is Hugh Nibley. And here I am, sitting on the tracks. But I don’t intend to stay here long—that I can promise. I remember hearing Ray Bradbury describe his experience in writing the screenplay for Melville’s great novel, Moby Dick. Joking that he hadn’t been able to read the thing with any comprehension until he was thirty, he found that to do the screenplay he had to immerse himself completely in that very long book. He got up one morning, looked in the mirror, and said aloud, “I am Herman Melville.” Today I can stand before you and say, “I am Hugh Nibley.”
It is one thing to read the Book of Mormon in six or seven weeks, which I have done a few times. It is quite another to read virtually all of Hugh Nibley’s multitudinous writings on the Book of Mormon in nine or ten weeks. I would have brought my pages and pages of notes along to impress you, but they were too heavy to carry. In any event, here I am, up from that lesser-known Dixie. Lesser-known except in Utah. Having recently been educated by our man to the fact that the expression land of—whether it be land of Jerusalem or land of Zarahemla—can, by historical precedent, refer to both the city and the surrounding territory, I can in all honesty claim to be from the land of St. George, even though technically I live in the town of Washington. And that last convoluted sentence, incidentally, would scarcely exceed some of Nibley’s rhetorical exercises. And, incidentally, he employs the word incidentally freely to introduce countless side excursions into anything semi-pertinent that comes to his mind. And believe me, if you know Nibley, you know that a great deal comes to his mind, regardless of his announced subject.

Some of you are aware that I am an English teacher, in spite of a couple of side excursions into the Smoot Administration Building. Those of you familiar with Shakespeare’s Hamlet will have recognized my title allusion. And those of you familiar with the writings and speakings of Hugh Nibley will recognize its appropriateness. When that old blunderbuss Polonius approaches Hamlet and asks what he is reading, Hamlet, book in hand, replies, “Words, words, words.” It is the same answer I would have given anyone who had asked me Polonius’s question in those months of inundation in Nibley’s writings. It was glorious. And it was maddening. I fell utterly in love with the man, and I wanted to shoot him.

Hugh Nibley is not kind to English professors in his writings, nor is he kind to college professors in a good many other fields. But he has a special disregard for English teachers. They rank right up there with sociologists and anthropologists. Much as he sometimes sneers at what he deems rhetorical flourishes in writing—scorning the “mealy rhetoric” of early nineteenth-century romanticism—he is a man highly conscious of style. He deftly employs nearly every rhetorical device in the book. I confess that I adore him for his inconsistencies. It was Emerson, after all—one of my guys—who pronounced “a foolish consistency” to be “the hobgoblin of little minds.” For example, Nibley delivers one of his attacks on “professorhood” in the form of an ironic parable, scorching several academic fields in one fell swoop. (Yes, I know that “one fell swoop” is a colloquialism and a cliché, both of which Nibley uses frequently and happily. I insert them here and elsewhere in his honor.)

He uses his “little parable,” as he calls it, as a device for “explain[ing] the new trend in Book of Mormon criticism” practiced by “up-to-date intellectuals” in a variety of disciplines. I quote it because no paraphrase can do it justice:

A young man once long ago claimed he had found a large diamond in his field as he was ploughing. He put the stone on display to the public free of charge, and everyone took sides. A psychologist showed, by citing some famous case studies, that the young man was suffering from a well-known form of delusion. An historian showed that other men have also claimed to have found diamonds in fields and been deceived. A geologist proved that there were no diamonds in the area but only quartz: the young man had been fooled by a quartz. When asked to inspect the stone itself, the geologist declined with a weary, tolerant smile and a kindly shake of the head. An English professor showed that the young man in describing his stone used the very same language that others had used in describing uncut diamonds: he was, therefore, simply speaking the common language of his time. A sociologist showed that only three out of 177 florists’ assistants in four major cities believed the stone was genuine. A clergyman wrote a book to show that it was not the young man but someone else who had found the stone.

It is only “an indigent jeweler named Snite” who points out that the stone is available for examining, and the matter of its authenticity has nothing to do with all these speculative assessments. Guess who “Snite” is? No mystery there.

When Nibley lines them all up, however, the historians are clearly superior to the biologists, the sociologists, and the “oracles of the English department.” (Note the irony, which in Nibley is nearly always in the service of sarcasm unless he
is speaking of himself, and then it is in the service of mock humility or mock ignorance.) He adds that “even English majors should know” that a poignant motif or idea “does not have to come from Shakespeare” to be valid. His specific reference here is to the “land of no return” motif found in Helaman 3, in the midst of admittedly “jumbled” though effective imagery.5 (“Imagery,” I must remind him, is definitely an English major term, though we permit others to use it.)

Nibley admiringly and rightly praises the Book of Mormon as “a colossal structure,” a book that if “considered purely as fiction, . . . is a performance without parallel.” At the same time, he can’t resist contrasting it with the clearly inferior corpus of American literature—my specialty. Note the list of pejorative participles (I use alliteration in true Nibley fashion) and other adjectives with which he characterizes the literature of my field. He delights in describing it as “full of big, bumbling, rambling, brooding, preaching, mouthing books, spinning out a writer’s personal (usually adolescent) reminiscences and impressions at great and unoriginal lengths.” I myself stand convicted of being a writer of such books (eight novels to date and, worse still, a memoir in the works). But as my tennis partner says, she doesn’t get sore at a bad call; she gets even. I was tempted to call this lecture “The Revenge of the English Professor,” but thought better of it.

Despite his seeming disdain for English teachers and their subject matter, Nibley is well versed in classical literature and a good deal of British literature. He even cites Mark Twain on occasion, and this in his writings about the Book of Mormon. Very likely, however, he was not familiar with Twain’s version of the diaries of Adam and Eve, set mainly in the Garden of Eden. As Twain tells it, in Adam’s voice, Adam’s life changes markedly when Eve is introduced into the garden because talking is the thing she likes best, and talking is the thing he likes least. Adam says it is quite a relief to him when she takes up with a snake and has someone else’s ear to bend. He confesses that he doesn’t dare ask her anything because she has “such a rage for explaining.”

If anything defines Hugh Nibley for me, outside his convictions regarding the Book of Mormon and his impatience with our money- and power-driven society, it is his “rage for explaining.” Those of you who have read very much of Hugh Nibley, or heard very much of Hugh Nibley, know what I mean. This is a man who is compelled by some inner demon (or angel) to tell all he knows if he can possibly get away with it. And he knows a great deal. He is simply overwhelming, and I am still panting. If you think I exaggerate, take a look at copies or transcripts of talks he delivered at the BYU Law School, or the Alumni House, or a couple of Sunstone symposia. There is no way that a person speaking at a normal rate of speed could deliver those in fifty minutes or an hour. Of course, Nibley didn’t exactly speak at a normal rate of speed, but
still, I sense that his mind was going a hundred miles an hour. One of those talks runs to 58 printed pages. You have possibly heard of the book Men to Match My Mountains. Well, Nibley could have written of his lifelong journey of learning, and his passion for sharing what he learned, under the title Tongue to Match My Thoughts.

Actually, Hugh Nibley and I see eye to eye on a lot of things—our mutual hatred of war, of posturing, of showy intellectualism, of ostentatious wealth, of celebrity, of self-serving divisions into “good guys” and “bad guys,” to name a few of the subjects that fill his Book of Mormon volumes. And all these he speaks of endlessly—and I do mean endlessly—in his writings and speeches on the Book of Mormon because that book teaches us the danger and folly of such things. Closer to home, but related to his descriptions of Nephite society gone awry, is the matter of BYU society. One of his favorite targets, you may remember, was the infamous campus dress code of yesteryear. He saw clearly the contradictions in our culture, and he didn’t hesitate to point them out. I happened to be sitting on the stand behind him at the commencement exercises in August 1983 when he received an honorary doctorate. He spoke of the invocation he had offered twenty-three years earlier, also at commencement exercises. On that earlier occasion, his opening words in addressing the Father—or was he informing him?—were: “We have met here today clothed in the black robes of a false priesthood. . . .” I felt the shock waves that went through the audience even then. Myself, I confess that I had to suppress a snicker.

But the thing that welds Hugh Nibley to my mind and heart is our mutual love of the Book of Mormon. He alludes to it ironically as “the Book Nobody Wants,” allowing as how the world acts “as if the Book of Mormon were being forced on [it] against its will.” Then he adds an ironic comment that is pure Nibley: “Only the practiced skill and single-minded determination of the learned has to date enabled them to escape the toils of a serious involvement with [the Book of Mormon].” He is never more eloquent or serious than when he is defending that book. When it comes to matters of his own faith, he writes with great feeling. Hear statements like this, for example, in the midst of his defense of the absolute truth and historical accuracy of the Jaredite account in the book of Ether:

Ether shows us human society divided into two groups, not the good and the bad as such, but those who have faith and those who do not. They live in totally different worlds, the one group in a real heaven, the other in a real hell. In no uncertain terms we are shown just what kind of world the faithless make for themselves to live in.

Shortly before this he had written,

Those without faith live in a world of their own which to them seems logical and final; they take the very unscientific stand that beyond the realm of their own very limited experience nothing whatever exists!

And then, after quoting the Lord’s assurances to Moroni that He gives “men weakness that they may be humble” (Ether 12:27), Nibley adds,

What man of the world or posturing Ph.D. is ever going to ask for weakness? The men of the world seek for the things of the world, the realities they know—and the greatest of these are “power and gain.”

Did you notice the alliteration as well as the barb in “posturing Ph.D.”? Pure Nibley. I mention such things because an important aspect of my assignment is to discuss Hugh Nibley’s use of language in his writings on the Book of Mormon.

After pointing out that “in the Book of Mormon, specifically in Ether, . . . we read about things beyond the veil, of other worlds than this . . . and of men who talk with Jesus Christ face to face in visions,” he regrets that some of his “intellectual friends” are “knocking themselves out” to discredit it all. They, in fact, argue that the idea for Joseph Smith’s “first vision was first worked out by a committee in Nauvoo in 1843.” Then Nibley adds, in a statement both clear and strong—and, I notice, ending in alliteration—“There is nothing like the story of the Jaredites to show us that the gospel is as timeless as it is true.”

As he amasses evidence in The World of the Jaredites, to prove the book of Ether authentic, Nibley borrows a trick from the English teacher’s trade. He presents his mountains of evidence as a series of letters to an imaginary correspondent.
named “Professor F.” Perhaps the “letter” format gives Nibley a legitimate excuse for experimenting freely with language and style, though, really, he needs no excuse. He would do it anyway. He even plies the good Professor F. with figures of speech such as this one:

As with the Lehi story, if this is fiction, it is fiction by one thoroughly familiar with a field of history that nobody in the world knew anything about in 1830. . . . So if Ether is a forgery, where did its author get the solid knowledge necessary to do a job that could stand up to five minutes of investigation? I have merely skimmed the surface in these hasty letters, but if my skates are clumsy, the ice is never thin.13

“If my skates are clumsy, the ice is never thin.” He uses metaphor to make his point, here and again at the end of the next and final letter to F:

The book of Ether, like First Nephi, rings the bell much too often to represent the marksmanship of a man shooting at random in the dark.14

Nibley’s writings are laced with such figures of speech—very apt figures, I might add. Some years ago I inherited the small office in the Harold B. Lee Library that Hugh Nibley had just vacated. In the hurriedly emptied desk I found a few handwritten 3 x 5 note cards. They were obviously his, but I didn’t try to track him down. They were a clue to his method of research and writing. It was the old method we learned in our freshman course on the research paper, and obviously it served him well. He had an amazing ability to weave bits and pieces, from sometimes dozens of sources, into a smooth discussion of a single limited topic. How on earth did he keep track of and organize these disparate pieces—which must have run into the thousands—into seamless, flowing narratives? In my mind’s eye I picture him at a desk, surrounded by stacks of cards, typing away on an old Underwood or Royal typewriter. When we read Hugh Nibley we are in the presence of genius.

Just as we share a love of, and gratitude for, the Book of Mormon, Hugh Nibley and I share a fascination with language, with words in action. These kinds of things link us, no matter our differences. And yet, we look at the Book of Mormon with different eyes. He sees the book in a broad context, historically and culturally. He sees it validated, not only by the Spirit speaking to his
soul, as it most certainly does, but also by all he has learned through his study of ancient languages, literatures, cultures, artifacts, geography, history, documents, and manuscripts. And by his travels in the Old World, and his reading of those rare and valuable scholars who have earned his respect. Nibley’s most important contribution to Book of Mormon studies may well be in his examining that remarkable book and proving it indisputably on the world’s terms, even though he himself needs no such proofs.

I, on the other hand, have examined the Book of Mormon almost exclusively in the isolated world it creates on the page. And I have long argued, and still believe, that anyone who can read, and is willing to be guided by the Spirit, can access and understand this book, as Moroni promised, and arrive at a new and deeper testimony of its truth with each reading. Mine is the more limited view, Nibley’s the more expansive, actual world, view. He has the knowledge and experience to broaden our understanding of the world of the Book of Mormon as an absolutely real world, based in the political, religious, and social culture of Old World desert and city from which it comes.

In every detail, from desert winds and bows and arrows to sticks and oaths and shining stones, Nibley documents and verifies the Book of Mormon. He argues, and I’m sure he is right, that “the test of an historical document lies . . . not in the story it tells, but in the casual details that only an eyewitness can have seen. It is in such incidental
and inconspicuous details that the Book of Mormon shines.” It is the small details that expose a fraudulent work and prove a genuine one.

After all, no perpetrator of a fraud, least of all (and note the alliteration, which Nibley loves to employ to enhance his sarcasm) “the fabulous forger”—Joseph Smith, according to the critics—could possibly invent all the myriad of tiny details that are woven into the Book of Mormon. No one could do that, in Joseph Smith’s day or any day who inhabit it—especially those in tweed jackets with leather patches on the elbows.

Sometimes Hugh Nibley’s approach is so heavy with information and so encumbered with documentation that he wears me out. (He forgets that some of his readers are only English teachers and labor under limitations foreign to him.) I confess that I like Nibley best when he is explicating the Book of Mormon itself, when his touch is lighter, when he reduces the mountains of external evidence, informative though they are, and carries me with him into the language and power of the book itself. We then explore the text together, and oh, this is a man who knows how to read a text closely when he wants to. At those times, he literally soars.

since, really, and be right every single time. And all these little details, Nibley proves, are seated firmly in the everyday lives of ancient contemporaries of the Lehites and Jaredites. His point? It is absolutely ridiculous to think an uneducated farm boy, the alleged perpetrator of a fraud in the early nineteenth century, could have invented details that have only come to light in the mid-twentieth century.

Nibley’s mind is full of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Lachish papers, and many other documents and artifacts—and everything anyone else has said about them. He handily pours it all out on paper, drowning me in names I can’t pronounce and documentation I can scarcely wade through. What’s more, he has tracked down virtually every written criticism of the Book of Mormon, from the beginning, and soundly discredited it. This is a man who has no qualms about exhibiting his own thorough and impressive, even exhausting, scholarship. Yet, I remind you, this is also the man who joyfully takes potshots at academia and those

Lachish letter II. © The Trustees of the British Museum.
telling all he knows. Ah, the burden of knowing so much. Would that I carried such a burden!

Professor F. of the letters, “a purely fictitious anthropologist in an eastern university,” 18 turns up again in Nibley’s second book on the Jaredites where he becomes a player in Nibley’s drama patterned after Plato’s famous Dialogues. (Anthropologist he may be, but F.’s library looks suspiciously like that of an English professor.) Naturally, Professor F. is a pretender to intelligence, and he is equipped with the tweed coat and pipe “required” by “his profession and institution.” 19 The other players are the intelligent Professor Schwulst, a rare breed with a name to match, and “Mr. Blank,” the self-effacing Nibley character.

Surely, one key to Nibley’s method is in the statement which he puts into the mouth of Professor Schwulst: “The only way we can be sure [a thing has been proved] is by overproving it.” 20 And overprove Nibley does at times, maybe most times, especially in establishing that the book of Ether fits the true epic form, that it is written in “the best heroic manner” and describes “a real world.” 21 I am convinced. But then, I was already convinced, long ago. As Mark Twain remarked in his tongue-in-cheek assessment of the veracity of Book of Mormon, “I could not feel more satisfied and at rest if the entire Whitmer family had testified.” 22 Four of the eight witnesses, you might remember, were Whitmers.

Schwulst is obviously a device for giving Hugh Nibley another voice, supposedly an objective one, whereas Mr. Blank is just as obviously out to prove something. Schwulst can thus corroborate Blank’s (Nibley’s) arguments from a seemingly unbiased and well-informed point of view. To give Schwulst credibility, Nibley even has him occasionally “amend” Blank—on a minor detail, of course. 23

At times, though, the burden of information Nibley carries ceases to be mere facts in his hands, and he actually recreates a world I can see and touch. I rejoice when he describes events and people as though he were there and knows them personally. When that happens, he takes us into the world of the Book of Mormon in a new and fresh way, sharing incredible insights. Even some of the seemingly small details, such as those I alluded to earlier, take on new meaning and expand my appreciation for things I have simply passed over in my reading of the Book of Mormon. He explains things I wouldn’t have noticed or understood if I hadn’t read his works. For example, he reminds us that there are virtually no domestic scenes in the book of Ether. Rather, “as in all true epics, every scene . . . takes place either on the battlefield (as in chapters 13 to 15), in the court (as in the tales of intrigue in chapters 7 to 12), or in the wilderness, where hunting and hiding play almost as conspicuous a part as fighting (Ether 2:6–7; 3:3; 14:4, 7; 10:21).” 24

One of the most interesting new insights for me was Nibley’s explanation of the sworn verbal oath, which was absolutely binding in the ancient Arab world and in the Book of Mormon. In fact, it appears to represent the only honor to be had among murderers and thieves, whether they be Gadiantons or apostate Nephite commanders of Lamanite armies. As a child of our time, I had puzzled over the seeming naivete in Book of Mormon leaders who took captive enemies at their word and released them on the sworn promise that they would cease their hostilities. And I remember, too, that at one point Zerahemnah refused to swear such an oath because he feared it could not be kept and his word would be broken (see Alma 44:8). I wondered why a scumbag like him would even think twice about breaking his word.
As I have suggested, in his works on the Book of Mormon Hugh Nibley gives new meaning to the term *creative writing*. It seems there is scarcely a form of written discourse he won’t experiment with—and most of them are literary, though he might not own up to it. I have already spoken of his use of the parable, the epistolary form, and the Platonic dialogue (drama). Well, there are more. For an old *Instructor* magazine he even writes a little story in which he imagines Nephi as a boy in Jerusalem. Nephi, as Nibley portrays him, was a bright boy, but deservedly subjected to “extra disciplining” because his mind had a tendency to wander in the classroom. This is how he describes Nephi in his eagerness to meet the arriving caravan of his uncle Ishmael:

> Once released [from school], he raced down the winding, narrow streets like a skillful quarterback carrying the ball, barely missing dirty children playing tag or King-of-the-Mountain, servant girls with huge jugs of water, poor peasants peddling loads of firewood, donkeys burdened with dried fish from Galilee or cheese from Bethlehem.

What Nibley is doing, of course, is recreating the world of Jerusalem as it very likely was six hundred years before the birth of Christ.

Hugh Nibley has other devices up his sleeve, too. In *Lehi in the Desert* he frames his response to Book of Mormon detractors in the form of a little narrative describing a mock trial in which Lehi, “the old patriarch[,] is put] on the stand as a witness.” On the court docket is “the case of Joseph Smith versus the World. Smith has been accused (and how!) of fraudulent practices, and Lehi is a witness for the defense. He claims to have spent years in certain parts of the Near East about 2550 years ago. Is he telling the truth?” In other words, is the record accurate in its representation of Old World settings for events related in 1 Nephi? Nibley opens the scene with a disclaimer stating that “we have never been very much interested in ‘proving’ the Book of Mormon.” I can’t really buy that statement since he spends hundreds and hundreds of pages doing just that, but he adds an important qualifier: “for us its divine provenance has always been an article of faith, and its historical aspects by far the least important thing about it.”

In this same chapter of *Lehi in the Desert*—one of many in which Nibley goes after Book of Mormon debunkers—he pretends a playful ignorance: “It was all too easy for the present author, lacking the unfair advantage of either wit or learning, to show where Mrs. Brodie in composing a history of events but a hundred years old contradicted herself again and again.” Ironic modesty followed by the poisoned dart. Pure Nibley. In the service of humor, he also wants to assure his audience that even he has had his blind spots. Let one example serve here, this for the entertainment of his fellow high priests in the manual *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*:

> Years ago the author of these lessons in the ignorance of youth wrote a “doctoral dissertation” on the religious background and origin of the great Roman games. . . . He has developed this theme through the years in a number of articles and papers read to yawning societies. And all the time it never occurred to him for a moment that the subject had any bearing whatsoever on the Book of Mormon!

But back to the trial narrative where Nibley imagines Lehi on the witness stand. Nibley points out that “generations of shrewd and determined prosecutors have failed to shake Lehi’s testimony or catch him contradicting himself.” Moreover, “behold, out of the East come new witnesses[,] . . . a host of sunburned explorers returned from Lehi’s deserts to tell us what life there is like.” And all of them —“ancient poets of the Arabs, crates and crates of exhibits A to Z, seals, inscriptions, letters, artifacts from Lehi’s own homeland”—confirm Lehi’s account. “In the light of all this new evidence,” Nibley says, “the defense asks that the
case be reopened.” I’m with him. He then goes on for a page and a half with a volley of short rapid-fire questions the prosecution uses in cross-examining “Lehi and the new-found witnesses.” These, Nibley says, are only some of the “well over a hundred possibilities” he has uncovered, “most of them such questions as no one on earth could have answered correctly 120 years ago.” Then he asks and answers the anticipated rhetorical question: “But haven’t we been decidedly partial in dealing with Lehi? Of course we have. We are the counsel for the defense.”

In 1964 Hugh Nibley updated his 1957 manual for Melchizedek Priesthood lessons, titled An Approach to the Book of Mormon. I have to say that Nibley’s choice of subject matter for a Sunday morning priesthood course would have surprised me if An Approach to the Book of Mormon had been the first of his writings on the Book of Mormon I had read or reread. His rage for explaining is evident here, too. And, true to form, many of the lessons are less about the Book of Mormon itself than about how the book fits into its larger context, ancient Jerusalem and the Arabian desert—setting, governance, inhabitants, culture, challenges, habits, and so on. Thus the book becomes a highly selective “approach to the Book of Mormon,” with no intent to be a commentary on sacred text itself. It is learned, it is crammed with pages and pages of facts, and it can be difficult to digest.

In my mind’s eye I picture a class of high priests in Koosharem nodding off while a struggling teacher faithfully tries to present volumes of material he himself cannot fathom. For example, in just five pages of the second lesson, we get references to the tablets of Darius, the Jewish colony at Elephantine, the Palace of Assurnasirpal, Sumerian Umma, King Nu’man of Hira, Eusebius, the Bertiz valley, the Orphic mysteries, places called Thurii, Sippur, and Assur, the groves of Persephone, Plato’s description of Minos, the Isles of the Blest, Tartarus (hell), the Demotic Chronicle of Egypt, the Kalawan copper plate, the Taxila silver scroll, the Qumran Cave, the Sanskrit writing of India, the Phoenician alphabet, Sumatra, the Hittites, the Karen plate, the Ugaritic library, the cuneiform tablets, Ahijah the Shilonite, and the Kasia plate. (Granted, I have seen some of these written before, but most of them I have never heard pronounced.) I concede, too, that as the final lessons move more solidly into the Book of Mormon itself, they become more accessible to average (i.e., normal) folks. But Hugh Nibley has to tell us what he knows, and what he knows is ancient history.

Nonetheless, at times he can be downright mesmerizing, and even understandable, especially for a reader sensitive to the way he works with words and sentences. This is not a man interested in facts and ideas alone. As I have suggested, this is a man who loves writing for its own sake, a man emotionally involved in his subject, and a man with the rhetorical gifts to do his subject justice. I could cite countless examples, but let’s look at just one small section from lesson three in the priesthood manual. Nibley is speaking of the “astoundingly cosmopolitan world in which Lehi lived,” and I think his high priests would understand this perfectly:

It was an unsettled age of big ideas and big projects, a time of individual enterprise and great private fortunes flourishing precariously under the protection of great rival world powers, everlastingly intriguing and competing for markets and bases. A strange, tense, exciting and very brief moment of history when everything was “big with the future.” No other moment of history was so favorable for the transplanting of civilization, so heavily burdened with the heritage of the past, or so rich in promise. For a brief moment the world was wide open. . . . There was nothing on the political or economic horizon to indicate that the peace and prosperity achieved by the shrewd and experienced leaders of Egypt and Babylon could not be permanent, or that the undreamed-of riches that were being amassed on all sides actually represented the burst and glitter of a rocket that would in an instant vanish into utter darkness.
Beautifully written, but a bit frightening isn’t it? Change the names of the countries and move the passage into the twenty-first century and we see his—
tory repeating itself. And remember, Nibley wrote those words more than fifty years ago.

One of my favorite lessons in the manual is the chapter that paints a “Portrait of Laban.” Nibley insists that “everything about him is authentic,” that he “epitomizes the seamy side of the world of 600 B.C.,” and that “Nephi resurrects the pompous Laban with photographic perfection—as only one who actually knew the man could have done.” Then Nibley goes on to enhance Nephi’s description with a string of adjectives that few English professors could top. Laban, he says, “was a large man, short-tempered, crafty, and dangerous, and to the bargain cruel, greedy, unscrupulous, weak, vainglorious, and given to drink.” Later, with mock admiration, Nibley concedes “in all fairness that Laban was a successful man by the standards of his decadent society. He was not an unqualified villain by any means.” Furthermore, “he was shrewd and quick, . . . not a man to be intimidated, outsmarted, worn down, or trifled with.” Then Nibley adds the punch line: “. . . he was every inch an executive.” The high priests in Koosharem would love that last line. Nibley had no kind words for wealthy power mongers.

In one of the lessons Nibley takes the opportunity to discuss what he calls “The Way of the ‘Intellectuals,’” those for whom “the search for knowledge is only a pretext.” Indicating that “Lehi’s people inherited a tradition of intellectual arrogance from their forebears,” Nibley goes on to list and discuss the intellectuals of the Book of Mormon—Sherem, Nehor, Amlici, Korihor, Gadianton. Against them he sets “the great Alma,” who started out as one of their stripe. “It took an angel to convert him,” says Nibley, “yet he was made of the right stuff!”

Maybe Nibley uses slang expressions, colloquialisms, modern phrases, and the like at least partly because he does not want to be taken for one of those intellectuals who pretend to more knowledge and ability than they have. If Hugh Nibley sometimes buries us in his scholarship, perhaps it is because in his enthusiasm for his subject, he forgets that we Mormons are his principal audience—much of the time his only audience. Like his lessons in the priesthood manual and his series in the Improvement Era, Nibley’s writings and talks vindicating the sacred record are rarely delivered to the external world. Perhaps some of them should have been delivered to that world as well as to us.

Many of you have heard Hugh Nibley speak. I am reminded of a comment James Russell Lowell made about Ralph Waldo Emerson’s lectures. He said something like this: “We do not go to hear what Emerson says, we go to hear Emerson.” In his discourse, that is, Emerson could be difficult if not impossible to follow. But he was nonetheless spellbinding. Nibley’s addresses at the BYU Law School, the Alumni House, and two Sunstone symposia are cases in point. I mentioned their length earlier, but said little about his method in those settings.

In speaking at the Sunstone symposia, Nibley adopts a no-holds-barred form of rhetoric. Modernisms abound in both addresses. Twice he describes the iniquities that permeated Nephite society prior to the cataclysm as a “rich mix of our prime-time TV.” Moreover, “organized crime” runs rampant when Kishkumen hires Gadianton, “a fast-talking professional hit man, . . . to organize his mafia.” Nibley observes that when “business boom[s],” people are corrupted. “The prosperity in the time of good king Mosiah produced a spoiled generation of smart-alecks”; and while Alma’s people later became “an ideal community (Alma 1:26–28), . . . the rest of society” went to an assortment of immoral and criminal activity. In fact, they offered “all the excitement of a highly competitive society, a night of prime-time TV.”
And I suspect that 1988 prime-time television was tamer than 2010 prime time.

Throughout his writings Nibley occasionally proceeds by asking questions which he then answers. Some of his questions are rhetorical, with the answer implied in the question. In the 1981 law school address, however, Nibley adopts the question-and-answer format for nearly the entire speech. He sets up a straw man as questioner, raising points Nibley wishes to address. That goes on for forty-five pages. After that, he shifts to “Comparative Notes on Ancient Mesoamerica.” He titles the speech “Freemen and King-men in the Book of Mormon.” That is an apt title, yes, but the speech could just as accurately have been titled “Lessons from the Book of Mormon for Our Day, and Especially for Aspiring Attorneys.” Nibley has the pulpit and he uses it to good advantage. Predictably, the address is laced with platitudes and themes which he deems especially appropriate for law students.

Actually, he begins this speech rather matter-of-factly and almost harmlessly—for him. But in time he warms to his subject and really heats things up. I picture his audience squirming as he lectures to them from the book of Alma, his weapon of choice on this occasion for teaching what I have come to call the “Nibley doctrine.” At the heart of this doctrine is the injunction to free ourselves from worldliness and the inequality it breeds. Repeatedly Nibley demonstrates a central Book of Mormon teaching: that peace and harmony abound only when people adopt and promote the principle of equality—of goods, position, and opportunity. Nibley says that the danger lies not in “riches as such, . . . but in the unequal distribution” of them, which he calls “an abomination to God.” He sneers at “careerism” and “the game of status and prestige,” and asserts in one of his hundreds of quotable quotes, that “where wealth guarantees respectability, principles melt away.”

I suspect the ROTC knew better than to invite the pacificistic Hugh Nibley to speak to their students, even though he sees Captain Moroni as the ideal for all military personnel. (He notes in addressing a Sunstone symposium in 1988 that Moroni has been wrongfully “held up as the model of military macho to LDS youth.”) For models Nibley would give us, as he does the law students, men who chose to teach the gospel of Jesus Christ to their enemies rather than fight them—men like Ammon and his brothers, and Alma, who “knew that the gospel was the only solution.” They absorbed abuse without retaliating, and touched hearts by serving and teaching. And then there were the converted people of Ammon, who buried their swords and chose to be slaughtered themselves rather than to slay another human being.

Captain Moroni, Nibley reminds us, was a man who hated war and bloodshed. He averted it whenever and wherever he could. And when he couldn’t, his “wars were all defensive,” never preemptive. For Moroni, “peace and freedom were as inseparable from each other as both were from equality,” which Nibley calls Moroni’s “grand passion, . . . a positive mania with him.” Nibley points out, too, that “some of the most
valiant warriors and seasoned fighters” were “very conspicuous pacifists and war-objectors in the Book of Mormon.” I can hear the regret in his voice and the grateful sighs in his audience as he concedes that “we cannot go into their stories here.”

Since equality, freedom, and peace—inseparable in Nibley’s mind—were his grand passions, too, one wonders if he came to these great notions through his reading of the Book of Mormon, or if he found in that book confirmation of already deeply held beliefs. Moroni, whom Nibley describes as “the greatest champion of equality,” loved peace, and he knew peace and freedom could be gained and maintained only through equality.

Nibley insists repeatedly that the Book of Mormon teaches this principle: without equality “there can be no freedom.” It is the king-men in the Book of Mormon who love war, he says, and the freemen who hate it. In typical Nibley fashion, he injects phrases from the modern era. King-man Amalickiah, in the true spirit of “the postwar boom,” made “masterful use of the media” as “he saturated the airwaves” with “his propaganda.” Does any of this sound familiar?

Nibley really loads the language when addressing the law school. Just as he had done in the priesthood manual, he talks of how the Gadiantons took over the legal system in Nephite society, gaining “complete control of the lawcourts,” and doing “whatever they pleased under color of legality.” He gets very specific with these law students. Contending that wealth corrupts with great speed, he allows as how “at once the happy recipient of a big promotion is expected to change his lifestyle, move to a better part of town, join different clubs, send his children to different schools, even change his church affiliation for a more fashionable one.” A warning, surely, to his young audience whom he clearly deems to be committed to “education for success.”

By the way, in the priesthood manual, no less, Nibley speaks of the “Gadianton Protective Association,” which “soon became the biggest business in America.” Sly dog, he capitalizes the three initial letters, giving us GPA. We all know what GPA is. Later in the same lesson he calls up the reference again, taking specific aim at the legal trade. He speaks of “judges who happened to be card-holding members of the Protective Association.” And in a similar vein, remember the hapless professor in Nibley’s Platonic dialogue? There and in previous fictional correspondence, there and in previous fictional correspondence,

Since equality, freedom, and peace—inseparable in Nibley’s mind—were his grand passions, too, one wonders if he came to these great notions through his reading of the Book of Mormon, or if he found in that book confirmation of already deeply held beliefs.
our grandfathers, became by decree carnal, sensual, and devilish.”

But back to the law school address. On the subject of the pursuit of worldly success Nibley is relentless. He describes some of the king-men as “a self-styled aristocracy, social climbers ‘lifted up in their hearts’ by their new wealth (Alma 45:24), haughty and aspiring judges, power-hungry local officials—including ‘almost all the lawyers and the high priests’—men taking advantage of church positions (3 Nephi 6:27).” But the freemen are a very different story. Unlike the king-men,

they made war with heavy reluctance and without rancor. . . . They were peace-loving, noncompetitive, and friendly, appealing to the power of the word above that of the sword. . . . [They were] quick to spare and forgive. They were not class-conscious, but prized equality among the greatest of blessings. In their personal lives they placed no great value on the accumulation of wealth and abhorred displays of status and prestige, e.g., the wearing of fashionable and expensive clothes. Escewing ambition, they were not desirous or envious of power and authority. . . . They sought the solution to all their problems in fervid prayer and repentance.

Nibley’s fictitious questioner is not convinced. “It sounds rather boring to me—too idealistic and unrealistic,” he or she says. Nibley answers that it seems that way to us because “we have disqualified ourselves for that kind of life; nothing short of a fix moves our jaded and over-stimulated appetites anymore.” And this, remember, was 1981, nearly three decades ago. Imagine the rhetoric with which he would characterize (and blast!) our society today. Even as he warns law students against the speedy and corrupting power of wealth, and the deceitfulness of the self-image, Nibley can’t resist sarcastically crediting the Zoramites with “unswerving adherence to proper dress standards!” (Again, the contradiction he saw in the old BYU dress code takes a hit.) He reminds us, too, that at one point Nephi asked the Lord for a “horrendous” famine to stop the people from plummeting to destruction. “So finally,” Nibley says, “the people were willing to give up their stocks and bonds and settle for just their lives.”

Hugh Nibley’s message to those gathered at the BYU Alumni House in September 1981 is tailored to them as pointedly as is his message to the law school. (1981 was a very good year for promoting the Nibley doctrine via the Book of Mormon.) I won’t go into a lot of detail here, but I can sense his emotion as he now declares the Book of Mormon to have one dominant theme, “the polarizing syndrome.” (The book’s central themes can shift with Nibley’s audiences.) He defines this polarization as drawing lines and separating into sides, into the so-called “Good Guys” and “Bad Guys,” and he declares that the Book of Mormon teaches such divisions to be oversimplifications and often wrong. Furthermore, he reminds us that many times a good share of the Nephites become bad guys while many Lamanites become good guys. I recall that in Helaman the converted Lamanites won’t tolerate the criminal Gadiantons, while the Nephites embrace them (Helaman 6:37–38).

In language conspicuously aimed at enthusiastic (rabid?) alumni fans, Nibley derides competitions designed to eliminate opponents until we prove who is “Numero Uno.” Moroni, Nibley says, uses the “dismal tale” of the Jaredites to illustrate the utter “insanity” of “the polarizing mania that destroyed his own people.” In jockeying for the “Number One” spot, people are killed right and left, and finally a whole civilization is wiped out. As “the world polarizes around over-rated individuals,” only Shiz and Coriantumr are left. And then only Coriantumr remains, “all alone, the undisputed Number One.” Pristine Nibley irony.
Nibley’s lengthy discussion of the dangers of polarization, which destroyed Nephites, Jaredites, and Romans alike, is clearly issued as a warning to us. We, too, he implies, are “champions of one-package loyalty,” and participants in a government and society bent on “widening the gulf” between ourselves and the currently identified opponent or enemy. Nibley calls it “Planned Polarization” and declares that it is fabricated by the power seekers. (You might remember that Nibley attacked Richard Nixon ruthlessly in that speech.) He pricks our collective conscience with President Spencer W. Kimball’s “great bicentennial address.” In that address, President Kimball spoke of our unfortunate dependence on every kind of military weapon and fortification to deliver us from the enemy, and added, “When threatened, we become anti-enemy instead of pro-kingdom of God. . . . We must leave off the worship of modern-day idols and a reliance on the ‘arm of flesh.’”

Nibley turns to the evil of polarization again in his 1988 Sunstone address, making his point with heavy irony: “War settles everything by a neat polarization: everything evil on one side and everything good on the other. No problem remains for anybody on either side but to kill people on the other side.”

In *Since Cumorah* Nibley devotes an entire chapter to the problem of polarization. He titles it “Good People and Bad People,” and delivers this stunning insight: “The Book of Mormon offers striking illustrations of the psychological principle that impatience with the wickedness of others (even when it is real wickedness and not merely imagined) is a sure measure of one’s own wickedness.” The second edition of this volume was published in 1981, the same year as the Alumni House and law school lectures. Perhaps the subject struck Nibley with new importance as he possibly revisited *Since Cumorah*, first published in 1967.

Whether it is Satan or a mortal foe, Nibley asserts, “Nothing is more crippling to creative thinking than obsession with an enemy.” Pause on that statement a moment. “Nothing is more crippling to creative thinking than obsession with an enemy.” Nibley goes on: “The person who can think of only one solution to a given problem is mentally bankrupt; the person who can think of only one solution to every problem is doomed.” He says that “there is no mention [in the Book of Mormon] of God’s being an enemy to the devil, or of fighting against him.” The “only invitation” to God’s followers is “to love God and to serve him by doing good continually.” (No need to refight the war in heaven, I suppose.)

As he works toward the end of the alumni address, Nibley brings his discussion even closer to home. He sees LDS people in Utah associating one political party with “The Way of Light” and the other with “The Way of Darkness.” The logic of that polarization leads one to conclude that “since there are only two sides, one totally evil and the other absolutely good, and I am not totally evil, I must be on God’s side, and that puts you on the other side.” Like the Book of Mormon, Nibley’s words

Hugh Nibley is the Book of Mormon’s impassioned defender. And as such, he is also the gospel’s impassioned defender. Moreover, like the prophets he revered, he lived what he taught.
seem to apply to almost any age, including ours today. Food for thought, indeed.

There are many things about Hugh Nibley that simply amaze me, and none more than his eloquence. As I have said, he is a man who knows how to use language to accomplish his purposes; and his purposes, like those of the writers and editors of the Book of Mormon, have much to do with us. Let me share a few of his more quotable quotes and irresistible phrases with you:

Admission of ignorance . . . is really no substitute for knowledge.84

None may commit his decision to the judgment of a faction, a party, a leader, or a nation; none can delegate his free agency to another.85

Only those who are aware of their lost and fallen state can take the mission of the Savior seriously.86

The devil does not care who is fighting or why, as long as there is fighting. . . . The moral is that wherever there is a battle, both sides are guilty.87

To discover that one is nothing is the first step to breaking loose [as per King Benjamin’s address].88

God has given us our gifts and talents to be placed freely at the disposal of our fellowmen (Jacob 2:19), and not as a means of placing our fellowmen at our disposal.89

The only place we can confront [evil] and overcome it is in our own hearts.90

Hugh Nibley is not just informing us, he is chastising us and calling us to repentance. His writings on the Book of Mormon confirm that he became something of a self-appointed conscience for people of the last dispensation, in the same way that Socrates has been spoken of as the gadfly of Athens. In personality as well as in lifestyle it would seem that Nibley resembles Socrates, whose concern for right conduct and whose ready wit and ironic pretense of ignorance were legendary. And if our fellow countrymen can plead ignorance and go their merry way in pursuit of pleasure, wealth, status, and power, we who have the Book of Mormon—and with it prophets and the restored gospel of Jesus Christ—cannot plead ignorance or go our merry way. Nibley is dead serious about this, and it may well be the central message of all his writings on the Book of Mormon.

Hugh Nibley is the Book of Mormon’s impassioned defender. And as such, he is also the gospel’s impassioned defender. Moreover, like the prophets he revered, he lived what he taught. And he feared for us. The whole corpus of his Book of Mormon writings is his testimony, but let me conclude with three short statements. In the first he says, in effect, that any mortal writings, including his own, pale in comparison with the ancient record given to us:

Nothing can do justice to the power and impact of the Book of Mormon account itself. And still there are those who maintain that a flippant and ignorant youth (so regarded) of
twelve-three composed this vast and intricate history, this deep and searching epic of the past, this chastening and sobering tract on the ways of the wicked.\textsuperscript{91}

The second is simple and to the point. As I have said, Nibley could construct highly complex sentences. But he also knew the power of the short declarative sentence. “The whole force and meaning of the Book of Mormon,” he says, “rests on one proposition: that it is true. It was written and published to be believed.” Then he says it again. “It was written to be believed. Its one and only merit is truth.”\textsuperscript{92} I know, just as Hugh Nibley knows, with my whole heart and soul, that the book is true. That mutual conviction binds us in a very lovely way, and I am grateful for it.

The last example I will cite is a statement that has also become a lasting truth for me. It explains my decision to take an early retirement and flee, like Lehi’s family and others in generations that preceded and succeeded him, to the desert. For this one statement I can forgive Hugh Nibley everything: “...in the desert we lose ourselves to find ourselves.”\textsuperscript{93}

Notes
To listen to Marilyn Arnold’s presentation, see maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/video/nibleyplayer/?id=43

2. Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance.”
15. Nibley, Prophetic Book of Mormon, 58. See also Nibley, Lehi in the Desert, 114–23.
17. See Nibley, Prophetic Book of Mormon, 60–72.
23. For example, see Nibley, There Were Jaredites, 414.
29. Nibley, Lehi in the Desert, 120.
33. Nibley, Lehi in the Desert, 120.
34. See Nibley, Approach to the Book of Mormon, 23–27.
36. Nibley, Approach to the Book of Mormon, 120.
42. Nibley, Prophetic Book of Mormon, 552, 555.
43. Nibley, Prophetic Book of Mormon, 552.
44. Nibley, Prophetic Book of Mormon, 513.
47. Nibley, Prophetic Book of Mormon, 522.
49. Nibley, Prophetic Book of Mormon, 354.
50. Nibley, Prophetic Book of Mormon, 351.
51. Nibley, Prophetic Book of Mormon, 346.
53. Nibley, Prophetic Book of Mormon, 351.
54. Nibley, Prophetic Book of Mormon, 346.
56. Nibley, Prophetic Book of Mormon, 332–33.
57. Nibley, Prophetic Book of Mormon, 360.
59. See Nibley, Approach to the Book of Mormon, 6.
60. Nibley, Approach to the Book of Mormon, 383.
64. Nibley, Prophetic Book of Mormon, 456.
65. Nibley, Prophetic Book of Mormon, 370.
68. See Nibley, Prophetic Book of Mormon, 365.
69. Nibley, Prophetic Book of Mormon, 344.
70. Nibley, Prophetic Book of Mormon, 345.
71. Nibley, Prophetic Book of Mormon, 362.
82. Nibley, *Prophetic Book of Mormon*, 459. But see Mormon’s second epistle to his son where he says the two of them must continue to “labor diligently . . . that we may conquer the enemy of all righteousness” (Moroni 9:6).
84. Nibley, *Prophetic Book of Mormon*, 266.
I
n the first part of this series,1 we established that apocalyptic Christian writers were deeply concerned about the fate of those who had no chance to receive the gospel in this life. They felt that an eternal condemnation meted out to these souls—simply because they had not accepted the inaccessible—was not in keeping with their understanding of a merciful God.

This concern is the crux of the soteriological problem of evil, which is best stated as a logically inconsistent triad: (1) God is perfectly loving and just, desiring that all his children be saved; (2) salvation comes only through an individual’s acceptance of Christ’s salvific gifts in this life; and (3) countless numbers of God’s children have died without having a chance to hear about, much less accept, Christ’s salvific gifts.2 Surely, the God of mercy would offer salvation to all; according to some early apocalyptic Jewish and Christian writers, he has. Apocalyptic Jews taught that eternal damnation was a punishment reserved for fallen archangels and wicked men,3 while righteous Gentiles would be spared such tortures.4 However, this solution did not fully mitigate the soteriological problem of evil;
righteous Gentiles, although escaping endless punishment, would not share in the exaltation of the covenant people.

Some early Christians, on the other hand, provided a more thorough solution than the said Jewish predecessors. They taught that righteous individuals could receive the gospel in the next life through postmortem evangelization, a work initiated by Jesus’s descent into hell “to save those who had not known him on earth.” However, some did not believe that postmortem acceptance of the gospel was sufficient to ensure the salvation of the deceased but that it must also be accompanied by vicarious ordinance work, a belief implicit in their involvement in baptisms for the dead.

In this paper we will provide evidence that the practice of baptism for the dead existed in some early Christian communities. We do not attempt to prove that baptism for the dead is a true teaching. This cannot be demonstrated by historical research. We intend only to trace the history of proxy baptism in early Christianity and the theological rationale for its practice. To support our thesis, we will show that early Christians, including New Testament writers, taught that baptism is essential for salvation. Because of this belief, vicarious baptisms were performed to ensure that the unbaptized dead would not be denied access to salvation. Next, we examine 1 Corinthians 15:29, arguing that metaphorical interpretations of this passage are ultimately unconvincing. Instead, we support what some modern scholars refer to as the “majority reading,” which understands 15:29 as a reference to vicarious baptism. Third, we explore the possible origins of the practice by examining the texts that teach doctrines closely related to baptism for the dead. And, finally, we detail the historical practice of proxy baptisms by early Christian communities now labeled “heretical.” We argue, however, that retroactively measuring ancient Christian practices by later standards of orthodoxy is misguided and that we must, therefore, independently reexamine practices traditionally considered heretical.

Before setting out and assessing historical evidence for early Christian practice of proxy baptisms for the dead, an important caveat is in order: though Joseph Smith believed that first-century Christians performed proxy baptisms, the modern Latter-day Saint practice is not grounded on historical precedent. Rather, as we will detail in the last part of this series, it is based on modern revelation.

Baptismal Theology of the New Testament and Patristic Literature

Proxy baptisms are based on the conviction that the sacrament of baptism is necessary for salvation. Accordingly, we will look at the teachings of New Testament and patristic writers regarding the necessity of this sacred ordinance. These writers taught that baptism was essential for forgiveness of sins and for entrance into the church and into heaven. Indeed, according to Everett Ferguson in his highly respected study of early Christian liturgy, Christians through the first five centuries believed that baptism “effects salvation, forgiveness of sins, freedom from the rule of sin and death, purification, and washing.”

Three main arguments from the New Testament support the essential nature of baptism. First, Christ himself is baptized, signifying the necessity for Christians to receive the same. Second, there are pivotal verses of scripture, such as John 3:5, Mark 16:14–16, and Matthew 28:19, which, according to some scholars, affirm the necessity of baptism for salvation. Third, throughout the book of Acts, baptism is the rite of initiation that all converts must undergo. According to Acts, this rite assures the convert a remission of sins and links them to Christ.

The synoptic Gospels all attest to the fact that Christ was baptized by John in order to “fulfill all righteousness” (Matthew 3:13–17; cf. Mark 1:9; Luke 3:21). W. F. Albright and C. S. Mann explain Christ’s baptism in relation to Matthew’s goal of showing Christ’s fulfillment of ancient scriptural prophecies. These scholars explain the term fulfill all righteousness as a reference to the “fulfillment of those Scriptures in which those demands are set out—law, prophets, writings. In any event, the baptism administered by John was a direct response to the will of God, and so the Messiah must submit to it.” Thus Christ’s baptism, for Matthew, fulfilled both divine commands and ancient scripture (naturally Isaiah 43:2 and Psalm 2:7). The Oxford Bible Commentary suggests that Matthew’s account demonstrates this fulfillment of both commands and scripture by focusing on the apocalyptic vision that Christ receives upon baptism, in which God affirms
Jesus as his Son and the Holy Ghost descends as a dove. A few Christian authors such as Hilary, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Chromatius, and Cyril of Alexandria declare Christ’s baptism as the example for Christians to follow, that they may receive salvation and remission of sins. Although no New Testament text explicitly confirms the point, Jesus’s baptism likely became the foundation for later Christian baptism.

Christ’s example of baptism is not alone in signaling the necessity of the ordinance. Mark 16:15–16 declares a similar sentiment: “And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned.” It is quite certain that this passage was added to the text by a later author. Nonetheless, it still corroborates the doctrine of baptism, as it was added by a Christian who obviously believed baptism was salvifically requisite. This addition was added before AD 185, as it is quoted by Irenaeus and perhaps may be referenced earlier by Justin. Regardless, a Christian of the first or second century inserted these verses, and they were taken as canon by many Christians following thereafter.

Matthew’s Gospel records that the risen Christ instructs the apostles: “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen” (Matthew 28:19). According to Matthew, then, one of the duties of the apostles was to teach and baptize all nations.

Professor Ulrich Luz notes in his commentary on these verses that “the task of ‘making disciples’ of the nations involves first of all the command to baptize. Since baptism is the sign that all Christians have in common, the command to baptize is a confession of the whole church.” He further explains, “It is certain that with their baptism the newly won disciples of Jesus follow the example of Jesus who also submitted to baptism (3:15–17). Just as in so doing he ‘fulfilled all righteousness,’ they too follow him onto the way of righteousness.” Matthew’s account of Christ’s ministry thus begins and ends with a call to baptism—first with the example of Christ’s own baptism in the third chapter of the work and finally with the risen Lord’s dramatic commission to go to “all nations” and baptize those who will believe and follow. Ferguson notes that “early Christians commonly based their practice of baptism on the dominical command of Matthew 28:19 and on the Lord’s example.”

John 3:5, when read straightforwardly, explicitly indicates that baptism by water is essential for “entrance into the kingdom of heaven.” Many Christian authors and writings from the early centuries—including Tertullian, Justin Martyr, Ambrose, Irenaeus, Cyprian, and the Seventh Council of Carthage—cite John 3:5 as evidence for the necessity of baptism for salvation. Tertullian, for example, boldly declares: “The prescript is laid down that ‘without baptism, salvation is attainable by none’ (chiefly on the ground of that declaration of the Lord, who says, ‘Unless one be born of water, he hath not life’).” Modern scholars may disagree about the proper interpretation of John 3:5, but many prominent early church writers unequivocally read 3:5 as affirming that baptism is necessary for salvation.
Finally, Christian history lends support to our claim that baptism was considered necessary. Throughout the book of Acts and the writings of the church fathers, baptism is viewed as the mandatory initiation rite for converts into Christendom. Acts 2:38; 8:12, 38; 9:18; 10:48; 16:14–15, 30–34; 18:8; and 22:16 all present historical evidence that whenever a group of people were converted to Christianity baptism was the ordinance that initiated them into the faith. Lars Hartman, in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, notes, “It [Baptism] is treated as the undisputed initiation rite of the Church . . . baptism is mentioned as a natural step in connection with people’s acceptance of the message about Christ, i.e., becoming believers; . . . baptism was practised from the very beginning in the early church.” It further explains that, in Acts, “entering the Christian community through faith and baptism means to be ‘saved’ (2:40; 11:14; 16:30–31).” Acts 2:38 is quite explicit in tying baptism with forgiveness of sins: “then Peter said unto them, repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins.” This verse illustrates the Lukan understanding of what it means to convert to Christianity: “Those who receive the apostolic message, recognize Jesus as Lord and Messiah, repent, and are baptized in his name receive forgiveness, the Holy Spirit, and salvation.”

The *Shepherd of Hermas* reiterates that baptism is essential for a Christian. It says, “some teachers maintain that there is no other repentance than that which takes place, when we descended into the water and received remission of our former sins . . . that [is] sound doctrine which you heard; for that is really the case.” In addition to the patristic fathers mentioned above in relation with John 3:5, Clement of Alexandria, Firmilian, Victorinus, Cyril of Jerusalem, John Chrysostom, Augustine, and Barnabas affirm the necessity of baptism for salvation, repentance, remission of sins, begetting sons of God, or some other purpose which Christians must receive.

Other writings by Christian gnostics show a similar viewpoint. The *Tripartite Tractate* indicates that “there is no other baptism apart from this one alone, which is the redemption into God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.” The *Gospel of Philip* teaches that “when speaking of baptism they say, ‘Baptism is a great thing,’ because if people receive it, they will live.” Marcion and his followers, who were not properly gnostics, seem to have viewed baptism similarly and did not deviate much from what became the orthodox view on this issue.

The New Testament, early Christian literature, and Christian history all affirm that many early Christians viewed baptism as essential for entrance into the kingdom of God. Everett Ferguson concludes, “Although in developing the doctrine of baptism different authors had their particular favorite descriptions, there is a remarkable agreement on the benefits received in baptism. And these are present already in the New Testament texts. Two fundamental blessings are often repeated: the person baptized received forgiveness of sins and the gift of...
the Holy Spirit.” From such belief, the doctrine of vicarious baptism was a natural corollary. Apparently, the earliest group mentioned to perform this sacrament for the dead is the Christian community at Corinth.

Exegesis of 1 Corinthians 15:29

Ἐπεὶ τί ποιήσουσιν οἱ βαπτιζόμενοι υπὲρ τῶν νεκρῶν; εἰ δὲ νεκροὶ οὐκ εἰσέρχονται, τί καί βαπτίζονται υπὲρ τῶν νεκρῶν.

Else what shall they do which are baptized for the dead? If the dead rise not at all, why are they then baptized for the dead?

Paul’s mention of the Corinthian practice of baptism for the dead has long troubled many Christians. A plain, matter-of-fact reading of 15:29 clearly speaks of vicarious baptism, but many scholars are unconvinced that such a reading is best. Indeed, scholarly consideration of this verse has produced more than two hundred variant readings. However, if the simplest reading were not so much at variance with modern baptismal theology, we would not expect the abundance of interpretations that attempt to remove this teaching from the New Testament or to portray it as an anomaly. We will review those interpretations of 15:29 which scholarly consensus judges most credible. Significantly, of this subset, vicarious baptism is the reading supported by the majority of scholars.

We will focus on three main words in the verse while interpreting its meaning: βαπτίζω (baptizō / baptized), ὑπὲρ (hyper / for), and νεκρῶν (nekrōn / dead). Those who do not view the baptism of 15:29 as referring to a vicarious ordinance provide alternative readings for each of the aforementioned words. Following the analysis of these words, we will turn our attention to variant punctuations that seek to make 15:29 read as ordi-
nary, as opposed to vicarious, baptism. This task is especially pertinent in that there is no punctuation in extant copies of New Testament documents.

Baptizō spoken metaphorically. Scholars who treat the baptism spoken of in 1 Corinthians 15:29 as figurative have largely based their interpretation on the meaning of baptizō. For example, St. Robert Bellarmine (1542–1621) writes:

> It is therefore the true and genuine explanation that the Apostle speak concerning the baptism of tears and penance which one receives by praying, fasting, and giving alms, etc. And the sense is “What will those who are baptized for the dead do if the dead do not rise?” That is, what will they do who pray, fast, grieve, and afflict themselves for the dead if the dead do not rise? In this way Ephraem in his book “Testamentum,” Peter the Venerable in his “Contra Petrobrusianos,” Dionysius, and others explain this passage.

Bellarmine understands baptizō not as a reference to the Christian baptismal sacrament, but as other works done for the dead. This is a significant interpretation for adherents of Catholicism since this understanding lends scriptural support to their concept of purgatory and the works of penance that release the souls bound there. Interestingly, though, such a reading does not discredit the ideas upon which baptism for the dead rest. Even if the verse is taken metaphorically, the works of penance and the release of souls from purgatory are literal. There is common ground between the LDS and Catholic views of vicarious works. Both imply that the living can perform acts to help the deceased in their post-mortem advancement.

However, any metaphorical interpretation of baptizō seems inconsistent with the body of Pauline literature and with the New Testament as a whole. T. J. Conant, after conducting a thorough analysis of the use of the word baptism in biblical and patristic literature, concludes that baptism almost always refers to the Christian sacrament of immersion, the only exceptions being Mark 10:38–39 and Luke 12:50. Conant also notes that many commentators have viewed 1 Corinthians 15:29 in reference to the baptismal rite, which reading he neither condones nor condemns. So, while a figurative reading has some precedence, the literal reading is much more common.

When viewed in the context of Pauline literature as a whole, baptizō is consistently used in a literal sense (that is, to refer to sacramental immersion). Paul makes reference to baptism in Colossians 2:12; Hebrews 6:2; Romans 6:3, 4; Galatians 3:27; 1 Corinthians 1:13, 14, 15, 16 (twice), 17; 10:2; 12:13; and 15:29 (twice), for a total of fifteen times. In each of the other thirteen usages (excluding 15:29) baptizō is used literally. Michael F. Hull points out that “in all, each and every one of these eight instances of βαπτίζω in 1 Corinthians is to be read literally.” Hull concludes, “What of the two instances of baptizō in 15:29? Given Paul’s other uses of the term, and especially his use thereof in 1 Corinthians, we can read them only in like manner. There is no compelling reason to do otherwise.”

It seems difficult to interpret baptizō in any way other than literally in 15:29. If taken literally, the Corinthian community was practicing actual baptism. However, this alone is not sufficient evidence to conclude that these baptisms were being performed vicariously for the dead. Instead, we must
view the meaning of ὑπὲρ in context with νεκρῶν to fully comprehend the meaning of the verse.

1 Corinthians 15:29 as ordinary baptism, an alternative reading of ὑπὲρ and νεκρῶν: A frequent interpretation of 15:29 among scholars is that of baptism in its literal sense but not performed on behalf of the dead. To maintain such a reading, the standard usage of the Greek preposition ὑπὲρ (hyper) or of the adjective νεκρῶν (nekron) must be altered.

John D. Reaume, who championed an alternative reading of hyper, stated that “the understanding of the preposition ὑπὲρ and the resulting theological implications are the decisive issues in this crux interpretum.”58 The way the preposition is read determines whether vicarious or ordinary baptism is meant. Most scholars who subscribe to such an approach feel that 15:29 is a reference to “baptism by example.”

Maria Raeder believes that in 15:29 Paul refers to Corinthians who desired to undergo ordinary baptism for themselves so they could join with their deceased loved ones in the hereafter. She believed that such a practice was motivated not by faith in Christ, but by a hope to inherit heaven, a less than fully honorable observance of the Christian sacrament.59 Central to Raeder’s position is to render hyper in a final sense,60 giving the verse a sense of finality or, rather, for what goal or for what purpose some action is being performed. In this light, the verse now refers to a “baptism by example” in which the catechumen is compelled to baptism by the example of the dead.

In reference to Raeder’s translation of ὑπὲρ in its final sense, Joel R. White characterizes Raeder’s concept as “pure conjecture; there is no historical or biblical evidence for any such practice anywhere in the ancient world.”61 Second, he regards her reading as “unrelated to the context” of Paul’s letter as a whole.62

White, in opposition to Raeder, feels that hyper should be read in its causal sense.63 He interprets nekrôn as a figurative reference to the apostles and their persecution unto death. Consequently, he translates 1 Corinthians 15:29 in the following manner: “Otherwise what will those do who are being baptized on account of the dead (that is, the dead, figuratively speaking; that is, the apostles)? For if truly dead persons are not raised, why at all are people being baptized on account of them (that is, the apostles)?”64 White suggests that Paul considers himself as one of the “dead,” due to the persecutions that accompany apostleship.

However, such a reading seems arbitrary. In order to understand why, it is important to spell out the entire Greek of 15:29:

Ἐπεὶ τί ποιήσουσιν οἱ βαπτιζόμενοι ὑπὲρ τῶν νεκρῶν; εἰ ὅλως νεκροὶ οὐκ ἐγείρονται, τί καὶ βαπτίζονται ὑπὲρ τῶν νεκρῶν.

According to Hull, “White . . . propounds a metaphorical reading for τῶν νεκρῶν in 15:29a and claims that ὅλως functions attributively to modify νεκροὶ in 15:29b. The former ‘dead’ he equates with the apostles; the latter ‘dead’ are the actually dead”—in other words, “White contends that the same word is used in the same sentence to mean entirely different things.”65 So, without further criterion as to why White uses this modifier in distinct and varied ways within the same context, his usage certainly appears arbitrary, and we cannot be persuaded to accept his translation.

Furthermore, as with baptizō, hyper and nekrôn are used in a consistent manner in Pauline literature; hyper is almost always used by Paul in its genitive sense—that is, “on behalf of.”66 The final and causal senses previously discussed seldom occur in Pauline literature.67 Additionally, “In Paul’s letters, νεκρῶς [nekros] is always used as a noun in the literal sense.”68 Thus, a straightforward reading of the three words in question appears to be the most
sound interpretation and consistent with Paul’s writings as a whole.

_1 Corinthians 15:29 with variant punctuation._ Some biblical scholars have taken still another approach toward reading 15:29 as ordinary baptism. This approach does not try to give alternative translations to any of the words in question, but instead punctuates 15:29 in a way that makes the verse read like a reference to ordinary baptism, something proponents of this reading find more in line with Pauline theology. Since the original Greek manuscripts of the New Testament contain no punctuation at all, we must consider the methods of punctuation used by translators of the KJV and comparable versions of the Bible.

In explaining why he opted for a variation in the punctuation of the text, Bernard M. Foschini states that he considers the approach “more simple and more probable than any other, because it seems most consonant with manuscript, with Pauline style, with the nature of Baptism, with the signification of the preposition hyper and with the words ὑπὲρ τῶν νεκρῶν.” Foschini further claims that the word “baptizesthai has nothing to do with the phrase, ὑπὲρ τῶν νεκρῶν, and is to be separated from it by a question mark,” rendering the following translation of 15:29: “Otherwise what shall they do who are baptized? For the dead? (that is, are they baptized to belong to, to be numbered among the dead, who are never to rise again? Indeed, if the dead do not rise again at all, why are people baptized? For them? (that is, are they baptized to be numbered among the dead who are never to rise again?).”

Foschini takes his analysis from Dürselen, a German scholar, and his punctuation is therefore very similar to Dürselen’s. Yet, Foschini diverges from Dürselen’s approach by positing that while Dürselen was right to separate “to be baptized” and “for the dead,” Dürselen breaks the rhetorical parallel Paul was building between verses 29 and 30 by punctuating them in such a way as to improperly link “on behalf of” with verse 30.

However, as Reaume points out, there is an “insurmountable difficulty” with such an interpretation. Foschini’s reading, which preserves the parallel between verses 29 and 30, leans heavily on a skewed interpretation of hyper. According to Reaume, Foschini seeks to give an interpretation to hyper that makes it synonymous with εἰς “into.” Reaume asserts that such a reading is doubtful, as the nuance upon which it depends is evident only in classical Greek, whereas the New Testament was written in Koine Greek, which flourished between 300 BC and AD 300. Consequently, Foschini has to appeal to extrabiblical texts of a different time period to establish his case. Due to these considerations, Hull concludes that “such a desperate attempt to read ἑπέρ [hyper] as εἰς diminishes Foschini’s argument to the point of facile refutation.”

Hull also presented an interpretation of 15:29 that appeals to variant punctuation. Hull’s undertaking is no small enterprise. He examines 15:29 not only from a historical standpoint but from a literary standpoint, giving a lengthy treatment of Paul’s theology and his manner of writing as a guide toward a greater understanding of how the apostle intended the difficult passage in question. In the opening pages of his work, Hull states his case: “In our rereading, we see that 1 Cor 15:29 is a reference to ordinary baptism. . . . Baptism ‘on account of the dead’ is baptism into eternal life; it is a rite for the living, and undergoing it expresses faith in the resurrection of Christ and of Christians.”

Hull’s coverage of the literary issues regarding 15:29 is, in our opinion, one of the best treatments on the subject. However, we are not compelled to accept his interpretation for two reasons. First, Hull recognizes that 15:29 is a _crux interpretum_. Of the over two hundred interpretations, only a few remain as “legitimate possibilities.”

John D Reaume
ordinary baptism any more than it necessitates the majority reading of vicarious baptism, the literary context does not, in fact, demand a reading one way or the other." 77 So, even with all textual information considered, there is no objective way of deciding between ordinary and vicarious baptism. Secondly, in agreement with David Kuck, we conclude that while “Hull’s causal reading of the preposition is possible,” its viability is not strong, since “on account of the dead” must be read as “on account of faith in the resurrection of the dead,” 78 a reading which the text itself does not need in order to function in the larger literary context. Once again, it appears to us that a straightforward reading of 15:29 avoids the most difficulties.

I Corinthians 15:29 as vicarious baptism. As has been shown, 1 Corinthians 15:29 is a crux interpretum. Of the over two hundred interpretations, only a few remain as “legitimate possibilities.” 79 The aforementioned analysis was not meant to resolve these interpretive issues; instead, it was intended to familiarize the reader with some of the textual difficulties and interpretations associated with this verse.

Latter-day Saints affirm without reservation that a straightforward, literal reading is best. And we are not alone in this approach. It has previously been shown that the reading of 15:29 as a reference to vicarious baptism is in fact the majority reading among modern biblical scholars. These scholars have recognized that a literal reading is best, as it avoids many of the aforementioned difficulties. Any alteration, either in semantics or in syntax, generally creates more problems than it solves. William F. Orr and James A. Walther conclude that:

The allusion to the idea and/or practice of baptism on behalf of the dead is unique in the New Testament in this passage. . . . Close inspection of the language of the reference makes all attempts to soften or eliminate its literal meaning unsuccessful. An endeavor to understand the dead as persons who are “dead in sin” does not really help; for the condition offered, if the dead are not being raised at all, makes it clear that the apostle is writing about persons who are physically dead. It appears that under the pressure of concern for the eternal destiny of dead relatives or friends some people in the church were undergoing baptism on their behalf in the belief that this would enable the dead to receive the benefits of Christ’s salvation. Paul remarks about the practice without specifying who or how many are involved and without identifying himself with them. He attaches neither praise nor blame to the custom. He does take it as an illustration of faith in a future destiny of the dead. 80

New Testament scholar Leon L. Morris, in the Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, expresses a similar sentiment:

This reference to baptism for (hyper) the dead is a notorious difficulty. The most natural meaning of the expression is that some early believers got themselves baptized on behalf of friends of theirs who had died without receiving that sacrament. Thus Parry says: “The plain and necessary sense of the words implies the existence of a practice of vicarious baptism at Corinth, presumably on behalf of believers who died before they were baptized.” He stigmatizes all other interpretations as “evasions . . . wholly due to the unwillingness to admit such a practice, and still more to a reference to it by S. Paul without condemnation.” 81

Yet, there are those who affirm this reading, qualified with the explanation that the Corinthian Saints were engaging in a heretical practice. Those who hold such a position often assert that Paul was merely referencing vicarious baptism to demonstrate the inconsistencies of denying the resurrection and yet baptizing the deceased: “Else what shall they do which are baptized by the dead, if the dead rise not at all?” Arthur Carr asserts that ordinarily Paul would have strongly discouraged such a disreputable practice; however, he did not want to offend the tender new converts of Corinth. Consequently, Paul neither condemns nor approves such a practice; he merely points out the inconsistency. 82

Readings such as Carr’s seem fairly common among biblical scholars. Richard E. DeMaris is one such scholar who attempts to justify his position with modern archaeological findings in connection with first-century Corinthian culture. He points out that archaeological excavations show that Corinthian citizens of the time were vested in cults of the dead. DeMaris asserts that what was happening in Corinth was simply a “phenomenon” that was catalyzed by the aforementioned cultic practices. He
insists, however, that vicarious baptism was “neither widespread nor long-lived.”

DeMaris’s claim cannot be reasonably maintained. After all, Christian communities that were very widespread and endured for a significant amount of time engaged in this practice. DeMaris seems to take for granted that there is no connection between these groups and Corinth, but lack of textual evidence establishing such a connection is not sufficient to conclude that there was none. That would be an argument from silence.

Additionally, many sects within the Judeo-Christian tradition have espoused some form of vicarious work for the deceased, from the Catholics and their ancient doctrine of penitence for souls bound in purgatory, to the ancient Israelites’ concern with proper burial. Religions unrelated to the Judeo-Christian tradition also have variations of vicarious work for the dead.

Granted, none of these examples compare exactly with vicarious baptisms for the dead. However, the general principle is the same: the living can perform some rite or act whereby the deceased may progress in a postmortal sphere. Without these vicarious efforts, the dead do not advance. So DeMaris’s claims that the Christian practice of baptisms for the dead was a “phenomenon” that was not “widespread” gives us reason to pause.

Yet, even given DeMaris’s critique, we still contend that Paul’s failure to openly condemn the practice was in effect an endorsement of the same. It has been asserted that Paul’s lack of condemnation on the subject has a parallel to Paul’s initial unwillingness to condemn the practice of eating meat sacrificed to idols (1 Corinthians 8:10). But the parallel is weak, since Paul does state explicitly later in the same epistle that such a practice is inherently wrong (1 Corinthians 10:21). We do not find that in respect to baptisms for the dead.

An additional point also needs to be made on this topic. As previously pointed out, Carr believes that Paul did not openly condemn the practice of vicarious baptism because he did not want to offend new converts. But reflecting on the greater part of Pauline writings, including his epistle to the Corinthians, leaves one to wonder if there can be an example found of Paul holding back condemnation for fear of offense. Throughout 1 Corinthians Paul unabashedly condemns instances when the Corinthian community has strayed; one hardly gets the sense that Paul is ever concerned about wounding the tender Corinthian heart. Carr’s statement seems to be out of harmony with the whole tenor of 1 Corinthians and based on pure speculation. H. V. Martin reads the verse in question just as Carr does. He feels that Paul is pointing out the inconsistency of the Corinthian practice, with their skewed belief on the resurrection. Yet, Martin disagrees with Carr. He feels that by abstaining from condemnation Paul is actually giving his approval to such a practice.

The theologian Fernand Prat does not take the case quite as far as Martin, but he does lend considerable support to the concept of work for the deceased. Prat feels that Paul neither condemns or approves of the practice. Instead, he insists that Paul sees in it a profession of faith in the resurrection of the dead. . . . [the] practice was . . . a solemn protestation that the deceased belonged to Jesus Christ and that he had lacked the requisite time, but not the desire, to become an effective member of the visible Church. Nor were they mistaken in thinking that through the communion of saints an act of faith and piety on their part could be profitable to the deceased.

As can clearly be discerned, many scholars see vicarious baptism as the most plausible interpretation of 15:29, simply due to its immunity from the perplexities generated by all other readings.

Ancient support for 1 Corinthians 15:29 as vicarious baptism. Two early Christian theologians also affirm that first century Corinthian saints practiced vicarious baptisms, the first being Tertullian. Writing sometime in the late second to early third century, Tertullian took it upon himself to define the Christian faith (in effect, delineating a standard
In one of his earliest works, *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, Tertullian discusses baptism for the dead and the community at Corinth. After quoting 1 Corinthians 15:29 he states: "Now it is certain that they adopted this (practice) with such a presumption as made them suppose that the vicarious baptism (in question) would be beneficial to the flesh of another in anticipation of the resurrection." Tertullian, using the phrases *vicarious baptism* and *flesh of another* frankly acknowledges that the Corinthians engaged in the practice under the belief that it would benefit their dead.

However, in a later work, *Against Marcion*, he reinterprets the verse, explaining that to be baptized "for the dead" was really only to be "baptized for the body" because "it is the body which becomes dead." It seems that he is attempting to recant his earlier statements about Corinth and deny that "vicarious baptism . . . for the flesh of another" ever occurred. Jeffrey Trumbower argues persuasively that Tertullian, while combating Marcion in *Against Marcion*, goes at length to ensure that 15:29 is not construed to legitimize baptism for the dead presumably because Marcion himself has endorsed the practice. Trumbower concludes, "It is significant that Tertullian only makes these moves when combating the Marcionites, leading me to conclude that between the writing of *De Resurrectione* and *Adversus Marcionem* he had learned of their (Marcionites) practice based on 1 Corinthians, some 200 years before it received a full reporting in John Chrysostom." Tertullian’s remarks thus provide good evidence that the Marcionites were practicing baptism for the dead as early as the late second or early third century AD—a rite that continued until at least the early fifth century.
Apart from Tertullian’s change in language with regard to baptism for the dead, he also mentions while attacking Marcion, the “Februarian lustrations” and prayer for the dead as a parallel to the rite. Although ambiguous, Tertullian seems to connect baptism (either the Marcionite practice of baptism for the dead or the Corinthian one) with these Roman forms of vicarious offerings and prayers for the deceased. It seems that the baptismal rite was in existence at the time and was not simply baptism “for the body” for every Christian of the time.

Further, the writer now known as Ambrosiaster, writing in the latter half of the fourth century, substantiates Tertullian’s initial confirmation of Corinthian proxy baptisms. In his famous commentaries on the Epistles of Paul, he notes “that some people were at that time (of 1st Corinthians construction) being baptized for the dead because they were afraid that someone who was not baptized would either not rise at all or else rise merely in order to be condemned.” He clearly affirms the practice and argues that Paul refers to such work in his epistle. Although scholars have difficulties ascertaining the identity of “Ambrosiaster,” his remarks provide further evidence that some Christians in the early centuries continued to read 15:29 as reference to vicarious ordinance work.

**Origins of the Lost Practice**

The New Testament and other early Christian literature give some important insights as to how the earliest Saints viewed posthumous salvation and vicarious ordinance work for the dead. Many apocryphal, gnostic, and even New Testament writings present themes that are reasonably connected with baptism for the dead. Perhaps these texts are merely echoes of the true origin of the work, or they mirrored an existing practice. We will look at a number of different texts, some from the New Testament, others apocryphal, some purporting to be forty-day literature, others from the gnostics, to examine the teachings that seem to provide a way for accepting baptism for the dead under Christian theology, searching for their origin in Christian thought.

In the case of Paul, it is not far removed from his general theology to assume that vicarious ordinance work, particularly proxy baptisms for the dead, was plausibly a part of his own beliefs and teachings. Unquestionably, vicarious work—in the figure of Jesus Christ—was the central theme of Christian belief in Pauline theology; Christianity, for Paul, hinges on the salvific gifts of Christ. Christ is a “propitiation . . . for the remission of sins” (Romans 3:25). Paul even recounts his own “sufferings for you,” where, by his own exertion, he fills up “that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body’s sake, which is the church” (Colossians 1:24). In this context Paul is performing vicarious work to make up for the shortcomings of the church as a whole. With the emphasis Paul places on baptism elsewhere in his writings (Romans 6:1–5; Galatians 3:26–27), “it is not a stretch to imagine a Pauline community practicing vicarious baptism for those who had died ‘in the faith,’ but without baptism.”
Another interesting New Testament writing is the epistle of Peter, specifically 1 Peter 3:19–22 and 4:6, which speaks of Christ’s evangelization of the dead, a belief that relates directly to the doctrine of vicarious ordinance work, where Christ is preaching to the “spirits” or to the “dead” (3:19; 4:6). Verse 4:6 is more direct in its wording that those being taught are the “dead” (νεκροὶς), meaning those who are physically dead rather than the vague term spirits (πνεύματι), and states that the gospel is being preached to the deceased so that “they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit.” Scholars are divided over the relation of these two passages of scripture and whether or not they refer to the same event in which “spirits” and “dead” are equivalent, with Christ being the subject of both verbs (ἐκηρύχθη and εὐαγγελίσθη, both usually translated as “preached”).

Referring to 1 Peter 4:6, Ernest Best notes that “the Gospel is now offered to those who never had the opportunity of hearing it when alive.” However, he observes that a likely objection to this assertion is the implication that a “second chance” remains for the dead. This, he states, is incompatible with other verses within 1 Peter that affirm that death is the final judgment for men. Later scholars have concurred with his objection, arguing that the dead referred to must be those who have died among the group addressed in the epistle, who accepted the gospel while in mortality. But these scholars fail to explain why those who have already received the gospel need it preached to them again upon death. It is far more reasonable that the “dead” referred to are those who did not have the opportunity to receive Christ while in mortality. None of the verses of 1 Peter that they cite explicitly state that there is no “second chance” for the dead. Peter’s warnings appear more precisely to discourage procrastination of repentance.

If the dead were indeed given an opportunity to accept the gospel of Christ, then certainly this would open room for the idea of proxy baptisms on their behalf. First Peter suggests baptism as requisite for salvation (3:21), thus providing a basis for a theology that includes vicarious work for those who cannot perform rites for themselves.

The Apocalypse of Peter shows a different theme, in which the righteous can affect the salvation of the condemned dead. It presents scenes from the final judgment of the world, with the wicked receiving their eternal punishment. In chapter 14, some of the damned are saved at the behest of those who are with God. The Greek text, purported by Dennis D. Buchholz and Montague R. James to be closest to the original writings, explains, “I will give to my called and my elect whomsoever they request of me from out of punishment. And I will give them a beautiful baptism in salvation from the Acherousian Lake which is said to be in the Elysian Field, a share in righteousness with my saints.”

Apparently, the righteous are able to choose certain damned souls, who are then released from eternal punishment and receive baptism (literal or figurative) that they might be saved with their counterparts. Buchholz concludes that this scene “teaches a form of universal salvation, that is, if any who are saved request pardon for any wicked, . . . the latter will be released from punishment.” These same lines are paraphrased in the Sibylline Oracles, and the doctrine therein is the same, whereby some of the damned souls are given salvation at the hands of God through intervention by righteous people. Interestingly, the later Ethiopic translation of the Apocalypse of Peter changes the wording of these lines so that no second chance could be interpreted from the text. This was likely done because “someone had theological objections to it.” Further, the Sibylline Oracles, when paraphrasing this scene from the Apocalypse of Peter,
contains a small interjectory note written by a later author declaring that the doctrine taught concerning damned souls was “plainly false: for the fire will never cease to torment the damned. I indeed could pray that it might be so, who am branded with the deepest scars of transgressions which stand in need of utmost mercy. But let Origen be ashamed of his lying words, who saith that there is a term set to the torments.” The idea that righteous people could intervene on behalf of the condemned and that their punishment would see an end was apparently held by the authors of these two texts and by Origen. According to such beliefs, which are related to other writings of the era about affecting the salvation of the dead, baptism on their behalf certainly seems plausible. Another important area of research in relation to the doctrine of salvation for the dead is Christ’s three-day descent into Sheol or Hades. Early Christians believed that after Christ died on the cross, he descended into hell to evangelize the dead. To those who accepted him, he placed his “name upon their head(s)” and made them “free.” This rite was called Chrismation, which would almost always be linked with baptism in later church practice. After preaching to the unevangelized dead, Christ returned to the earth for his Forty-Day ministry, in which he was continually “speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3).

A common form of symbolism to express Christ’s descent is breaking the gates of hell or unlocking them with his key, as discussed in the “Harrowing of Hell,” the first article in this series, Christ’s mention of his descensus to Sheol to preach the gospel and free the captives there is certainly linked with the idea that the dead therefore need baptism. If they need the gospel preached to them, why not the saving rite of baptism? The Epistula Apostolorum, a composition dating roughly to AD 140–150, describes the purpose for Christ’s descent. In the text, the Savior speaks of the resurrection and the ultimate redemption and judgment of the souls on earth, in which all men will be judged “in regard of that that they have done, whether it be good or evil.” He then continues with this important statement:

For to that end went I down unto the place of Lazarus, and preached unto the righteous and the prophets, that they might come out of the rest which is below and come up into that which is above; and I poured out upon them with my right hand the water (baptism, Eth.) of life and forgiveness and salvation from all evil, as I have done unto you and unto them that believe on me.

The Savior indicates that his descent and preaching to the righteous dead and the former prophets are tied to the resurrection. Further, the righteous dead, the former prophets, and those who are unevangelized, receive the “water of life,” or baptism—the very thing that brings “salvation from all evil.” Apparently, this was a central reason for his descent into the underworld—to provide baptism for the righteous souls there that they might be judged correctly and “come up into that which is above.”

The gnostic writing the Apocryphon of John (which is a conversation between the risen Lord and the apostle John written around AD 150) discusses further the purpose of Christ’s descent. Within the text the divine Forethought reveals to John:

I entered the midst of darkness and the bowels of the underworld, turning to my task. The foundations of chaos shook as though to fall upon those who dwell in chaos and destroy them. . . . I hurried back to the root of my light so they might not be destroyed before their time. . . . I brightened my face with light from the consummation of their realm and entered the midst of their prison, which is the prison of the body. I said, Let whoever hears arise from deep sleep.

The text concludes with Christ meeting a certain person in the depths, someone who is repentant and ready to be released. Christ then notes, “I raised and sealed the person in luminous water with Five Seals that death might not prevail over the person from that moment on.” In a number of separate Sethian writings (the gnostic Christian community or classification to which the Apocryphon of John is attributed), the Five Seals referred to are thought to be the “final act of deliverance” or “a baptismal rite.” Thus the final saving ordinance that instills life and awakens those who are dead from their “deep sleep” is the rite of baptism.

The theme of the Five Seals is discussed further in a number of other texts. The Trimorphic Protennoia (NHC XIII) uses the symbolism in a way that confirms the interpretation of the Five Seals as some form of baptismal rite or liturgy. Composed
sometime in the early to middle second century AD—and possibly even included “in a codex that originally contained the long version of the Apocryphon of John” and On the Origin of the World—it recounts the three descents of the gnostic savior called Protennoia (interpreted to be Christ by the gnostic Christians using the work). During one of the descents, Protennoia describes cleansing a person and providing him with certain salvific initiations. The text recounts:

[I gave to him] from the Water [of Life, which strips] him of the Chaos [that is in the] uttermost [darkness] that exists [inside] the entire [abyss], that is, the thought of [the corporeal] and the psychic. All these I put on. And I stripped him of it and I put upon him a shining Light, that is, the knowledge of the Thought of the Fatherhood. And I delivered him to those who give robes—Yammon, Elasso, Amenai—and they [covered] him with a robe from the robes of the Light; and I delivered him to the Baptists and they baptized him—Micheus, Michar, Mn[e]s[i]ous—and they immersed him in the spring of the [Water] of Life. . . . And I delivered him to those who glorify—Ariom, Elien, Phariel—and they glorified him with the glory of the Fatherhood. And those who snatch away snatched away—Kamaliel anen, Samblo, the servants of <the> great holy Luminaries—and they took him into the light—[place] of his Fatherhood. And [he received] the Five Seals from [the Light] of the Mother, Protennoia, and it was [granted] him [to] partake of [the mystery] of knowledge, and [he became] a Light in Light.123

In the text, the Five Seals are taken in conjunction with other ceremonial practices that together provide the culminating salvation for the recipient. Salvation is hence described through “stripping, investing in a garment of light, robing, spring baptism, enthroning, glorifying and rapture, followed by reception of the five seals from the Light of the Mother so that (the recipient) partakes of the mystery of knowledge and becomes a light in light.”124 Baptism and the Five Seals intertwine with other saving rituals to provide salvation for those who are recipients; one is incomplete without the other. The ordinances mentioned in the text are reminiscent of temple themes encountered in apocalyptic Jewish texts centered on themes of ascent and ethereal ritual, where the recipient of such blessings is normally taken to heaven.125

While introducing the Trimorphic Protennoia, the translator/commentator declares that “the baptismal rite of the Five Seals is a mystery of celestial ascent which strips off the psychic and somatic garments of ignorance, transforming and purifying Protennoia’s members and clothing them with radiant light.”126 Further, “the author’s [of the gnostic texts in question] reference to the recipients of this rite in the first-person plural and as ‘brethren’ suggests a [Sethian] community with a well-established tradition of water baptism which has been spiritualized into a mystery of ascent.”127

These Sethian gnostics appear to elicit an elaborate liturgy and doctrine by viewing baptism and celestial ascent as two sides of the same coin. Indeed, their writings indicate a near obsession with receiving the saving gnosis and ultimately removing themselves from this world through liturgical rites. In these texts, then, the celestial ascent appears inseparable from baptism and the Five Seals.128 Each provides a connecting link and an escape from the shackles of mortality, allowing the recipient to be reborn. Interestingly, they extend this doctrine to cover the dead as well, as already noted in the Apocryphon of John. Thus, the dead who receive the gnostic salvation will be baptized and receive the accompanying rites and all things surrounding the Five Seals.

In the Apocryphon of John, immediately prior to the scene that speaks of the Five Seals and saving the dead, John poses a question that elicits a curious response from the risen Lord. John asks, “Lord, how can the soul become younger and return into its mother’s womb, or into the human?” The commentator notes, “Returning to the mother’s womb is also a theme encountered in John 3:4,” in which a similar inquiry is made by Nicodemus, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter the second time into his mother’s womb, and be born?” In responding to the query of Nicodemus, Christ teaches him, “Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God” (John 3:5). In his response to John in the gnostic text, the Savior recounts, “You are truly blessed, for you have understood. This soul will be made to follow another soul in whom the spirit of life dwells, and she is saved through that one.”130
The Lord’s phrasing appears to suggest vicarious or proxy salvation in which the living provide those who are “dead” in some sense with access to saving grace. The soul, when being reborn, must follow one who is already living, in whom “life” dwells. To save those souls who need the opportunity to be reborn, the act must become operative through a living agent. What could the living do to assist the dead to gain salvation—taking into account the close parallel between the question asked by Nicodemus and the question posed in the gnostic text? Given the Lord’s answer to Nicodemus (to be born of water and of the spirit), it seems the answer would be baptism for the dead.

Another gnostic text, the *Pistis Sophia*, a discursive writing purporting to contain the instructions of the risen Lord to his apostles, hints at vicarious baptism for those who die without the ordinance. In one particularly notable scene, Maria (Mary) poses the question to Jesus:

My Lord, if a good man has fulfilled all the mysteries, and he has a relative, in a word, he has a man and that man is an impious one who has committed all the sins which are worthy of the outer darkness; and he has not repented; or he has completed his number of cycles in the changes of the body, and that man has done nothing profitable and has come forth from the body; and we have known of him certainly that he has sinned and is worthy of the outer darkness; what should we do to him so that we save him from the punishments of the dragon of the outer darkness, so that he is returned to a righteous body which will find the mysteries of the Kingdom of the Light, and become good and go to the height, and inherit the Kingdom of the Light?

Maria is wondering about the status of condemned souls, or those who have sinned and also lacked the “mysteries” that are given to the elect. The condemned souls are deceased, for to reach the Kingdom of Light they must be “returned to a righteous body.” The “mysteries” to which Maria refers are of great importance in understanding the Lord’s response. Upon hearing the question, Christ responds:

If you want to return them from the punishments of the outer darkness and all the judgments, and return them to a righteous body which will find the mysteries of the light, and go to the height and inherit the Kingdom of Light—perform the one mystery of the Ineffable which forgives sins at all times. And when you
have finished performing the mystery, say: "The soul of such and such a man on whom I think in my heart, when it comes to the place of the punishments of the chambers of the outer darkness; or when it is in the rest of the punishments of the chambers of the outer darkness and the rest of the punishments of the dragon: may it be returned from them all. And when it finishes its number of cycles in the changes, may it be taken to the presence of the Virgin of Light; and may the Virgin of the Light seal it with the seal of the Ineffable, and cast it in that very month into a righteous body which will find the mysteries of the light in it, and become good, and go to the height and inherit the Kingdom of the Light. And furthermore, when it has completed the cycles of the changes, may that soul be taken to the presence of the seven virgins of the light which are in charge of (lit. over) the baptism. And may they place it (the baptism) upon that soul, and seal it with the sign of the Kingdom of the Ineffable, and may they take it to the ranks of the light." . . . Truly, I say to you: the soul for which you shall pray, if indeed it is in the dragon of the outer darkness, it will withdraw its tail out of its mouth, and release that soul.\textsuperscript{133}

The gnostic Christ tells Maria that the soul of an unrepentant man may reach the Kingdom of Light and be released from the place of punishments if certain procedures are undertaken in his name, mainly the "mystery of the Ineffable which forgives sins at all times." A person on earth is to perform this mystery as a proxy for the deceased relative or friend; the living proxy merely thinks of that person while performing the rite and it will serve to release the person from outer darkness. The significance of this passage is that a living soul undergoes a certain rite, the mystery of the Ineffable (perhaps baptism as this rite is connected with forgiveness of sins), combined with prayer, which directly influences the salvation of a deceased soul; it is a proxy rite of the clearest nature.

The \textit{Shepherd of Hermas} teaches that the dead will receive baptism and hints at proxy work in a manner similar to the \textit{Pistis Sophia}. In the apocalyptic visions, Hermas sees the apostles preaching to the spirits in the underworld. The text states, "They had to rise through water. . . in order to be made alive. In no other way could they enter the reign of God, unless they put off the deadliness of their [first] life. So too, those who had fallen asleep received the seal and [entered the reign of God]. Before
bearing the name of [the Son of] God . . . a person is dead. But upon receiving the seal, the person puts aside deadliness and takes on life. So the seal is the water. Into the water they go down dead and come up alive. The seal was proclaimed to them, and they profited from it to enter into the reign of God.” 134

In her commentary on this specific verse, Professor Carolyn Osiek declares that “the association of passing through water with entering the kingdom of God (v. 2) and receiving the seal is unmistakably a reference to baptism; . . . the absolute necessity of baptism is implicit here [the dead included].” 135

However the Shepherd of Hermas is not finished. Having learned this, he then asks, “Why, sir . . . did the forty stones rise with them from the depth already having the seal?” He is answered thus,

These are the apostles and teachers who proclaimed the name of the Son of God, who, having fallen asleep in power and faith of the Son of God, even proclaimed to those who had previously fallen asleep and gave them the seal of the proclamation. They descended with them into the water and came up again, except that these descended alive and came up alive. Because of them, these others were enlivened and came to know the name of the Son of God. . . . They [those being baptized] fell asleep in justice and great purity, except they did not have this seal.136

The dead are given baptism at the hands of the apostles and teachers. Yet for some reason, the dead who are baptized and receive life have some forty people rise with them who already have the seal, or baptism. The wording “descended alive and came up alive” appears to indicate that these are souls who are already baptized. Could this be a reference to proxy baptisms? Osiek concludes: “These verses, without saying so, present a good argument in favor of baptism in the name of the dead, apparently already an act of piety in first-century Corinth. . . . here with the pre-Christian dead, the problem is . . . they practiced virtue in their lives, but had not received baptism. Through the apostles and teachers, this problem is solved.” 137

The text is certainly vague enough to allow for the interpretation, and it seems interesting that the Shepherd of Hermas, a widely used text for early Christians, would contain such language. This is not conclusive evidence for vicarious baptisms, yet the texts reviewed indicate that some form of proxy work is possible and that it is related to the “rebirth” provided through baptism.

One thing is quite certain, however—nearly all the texts purporting to contain teachings of Christ concerning salvation for the dead emphasize that his teachings were closely guarded, reserved only for those whom the Lord deemed worthy to hear them. 138 Indeed, of all the major themes presented in the texts, this one is quite pervasive. Because of this discretion, much remains unknown regarding the circulation and general understanding of these doctrines. Likely, few people had access to the texts that claim to contain the “hidden” teachings of the resurrected Lord. Hugh Nibley pointed out that much of Christ’s recorded teachings on important doctrinal topics—though only a fraction of what he taught—remain shrouded in mystery, particularly Christ’s teachings concerning salvation for the dead. 141 Given this point, we should be appreciative of what evidence still exists.

From the texts mentioned it seems clear that a belief among some early Christian communities was that the dead could be saved, perhaps through vicarious work, and that many of them would receive baptism. The ultimate question regards form: Were the baptisms to be performed vicariously by the living on behalf of the dead, as was done historically by the groups previously mentioned (and as hinted at in some texts)? Or do these texts purport that baptism is received by the dead only in the afterlife, with no proxy or living agent involved?

It appears, ultimately, that the Corinthians, or at least the reference to them in 1 Corinthians 15:29, inspired following generations of Christians to engage in vicarious ordinance work. In the remaining section we will set forth evidence showing that such a practice was performed in ancient Christianity and was more common than one might suppose.

Marcionite and Gnostic Baptisms for the Dead

A favorite tactic of proxy nihilists is to associate the practice of vicarious baptism with later heretical groups and by so doing infer that the Corinthian practice was likewise heretical. One of the most oft-cited heretical groups is the Marcionites. Born
around AD 100, Marcion was raised as a proto-orthodox Christian by his father. Around AD 140, he entered Rome and converted many people to his own Christian theology, now quite distinct from other teachers of the time. It anticipated the teachings of Gnosticism, with ideas of strict dualism within the universe and that Yahweh from the Old Testament was a demiurge. Because of Marcion’s success, he became a marked target for heresiologists (i.e., heretic hunters) of the orthodox faith, both contemporary and those far removed (such as Epiphanius).

The Marcionite sect was completely estranged from proto-orthodox believers and met in their own communities rather than worship alongside other believers (as did the gnostics). According to Epiphanius (late fourth century), Marcion and his followers had stretched into the vast majority of the Christian world: “the sect is still to be found even now, in Rome and Italy, Egypt and Palestine, Arabia and Syria, Cyprus and the Thebaid—in Persia too moreover, and in other places.” Because of the widespread presence of the Marcionites, far more information about Marcion’s own teachings and practices has survived than that of relatively minor heretics.

One practice that sources attribute to Marcion and his followers is proxy baptism for the dead. John Chrysostom, in a homily concerning 1 Corinthians 15:29, states with amusement that the Marcionites had perverted the expression “baptized for the dead”:

Will ye that I should first mention how they who are infected with the Marcionite heresy pervert this expression? And I know indeed that I shall excite much laughter; nevertheless, even on this account most of all I will mention it that you may the more completely avoid this disease: viz., when any Catechumen departs among them, having concealed the living man under the couch of the dead, they approach the corpse and talk with him, and ask him if he wishes to receive baptism; then when he makes no answer, he that is concealed underneath saith in his stead that of course he should wish to be baptized; and so they baptize him instead of the departed, like men jesting upon the stage. So great power hath the devil over the souls of careless sinners.

It appears that as late as the time of Chrysostom (hence the present tense in his explanation of the Marcionite heresy), perhaps even in the early fifth century, followers of Marcion were practicing a form of proxy baptism for the dead. Chrysostom suggests that they would only do baptisms for deceased catechumens, or those who were interested in baptism but died before receiving that ordinance. It was thus reserved only for those who were intent on becoming baptized within the Marcionite community.

Didymus the Blind (writing in the mid-fourth century) further substantiates this fact but with a slight difference in his description of the practice, saying, “The Marcionites baptized the living on behalf of dead unbelievers, not knowing that baptism saves only the person who receives it.” Didymus writes that Marcionites baptized for the souls of all unbelievers who had died without baptism, not just for those who were catechumens while yet alive. These textual discrepancies leave room for interpretation as to the exact nature of the practice,
yet clearly the Marcionites were practicing such an act as late as the fourth century AD.

If the practice of proxy baptism was fairly widespread in the Marcionite communities throughout their history, then it would extend throughout the Near East and into nearly every area where Christian communities stretched during the first four centuries. Unlike other Christian sects that would normally worship right along with more “orthodox” believers, the Marcionites had such a large following that they began to meet outside the confines of the “proto-orthodox” church, establishing their own religious communities or congregations. Marcion had so much success with his teachings that in many areas of Asia Minor they were the “original form of Christianity and continued for many years to comprise the greatest number of persons claiming to be Christian (in those areas).”

In his work Panarion, Epiphanius of Salamis, bishop of Cyprus in the late fourth century, mentions baptism for the dead performed vicariously in parts of Asia and Galatia. In a section entitled Against Cerinthians, he diverts from his main writing to provide information about proxy baptisms:

For their school (Cerinthians) reached its height in this country, I mean Asia, and in Galatia as well. And in these countries I also heard of a tradition which said that when some of their people died too soon, without baptism, others would be baptized for them in their names, so that they would not be punished for rising unbaptized at the resurrection and become the subjects of the authority that made the world. And the tradition I heard of says that this is why the same holy apostle said, “if the dead rise not at all, why are they baptized for them?”

It is unclear whether Epiphanius meant the Cerinthian practice when speaking of baptisms for the dead, without baptism, others would be baptized for them in their names, so that they would not be punished for rising unbaptized at the resurrection and become the subjects of the authority that made the world. And the tradition I heard of says that this is why the same holy apostle said, “if the dead rise not at all, why are they baptized for them?”

Another interesting doctrine is that of proxy baptism by angels, a doctrine taught by Theodotus, a gnostic teacher who wrote in the later second to early third centuries AD. He is quoted by Clement of Alexandria as teaching that angels would be baptized for the souls of dead men. Apparently for Theodotus and the Valentinian tradition of Gnosticism, “Baptism (played) a key role in the salvation of the elect.” Clement quotes Theodotus as saying, “And, they say, those who are baptized for the dead, these are the Angels who are baptized for us, so that, as we also possess the NAME, we are not bound by the Limit and the Cross, and prevented from entering Pleroma.”

Too often Christian commentaries will dismiss baptism for the dead, specifically 1 Corinthians 15:29, because those who practiced the work were judged long after the fact to be “heretics.”

Most commentators, though recognizing the fact that the Marcionites, as well as gnostic Christians, performed the rite of baptism for the dead, dismiss the practice because such groups are considered heretical sects of Christianity. However, the term heretical is used by the enemies of these early branches of Christianity: in scholarly work the term...
should hold no bearing on the legitimacy of the beliefs of the group nor upon the historical relevance of their practices. The Marcionite, Cerinthian, and gnostic beliefs have just as much of a claim on Christian doctrine as do orthodox views; the only difference between the two is that one lasted far longer than the other. Simply because later church fathers rejected the practice in no way indicates that the primitive church or Christ himself rejected the beliefs concerning proxy ordinances. Too often Christian commentaries will dismiss baptism for the dead, specifically 1 Corinthians 15:29, because those who practiced the work were judged long after the fact to be “heretics.” This, according to their reasoning, is sound evidence that the early Christian church rejected the doctrine. By this same logic one could surmise that because the Marcionites, and all other “heretical” sects, practiced faith in Christ, then certainly the primitive church did not practice such foolish things.

To understand early Christian doctrines, one must analyze the teachings of Jesus, the apostles, and early Christian literature. Early Christians didn’t always agree on doctrine. Orthodoxy is the Christian interpretation that eventually won out. On this basis, orthodoxy cannot claim to possess Christ’s original teachings:

It is widely thought today that proto-orthodoxy was simply one of many competing interpretations of Christianity in the early church. It was neither a self-evident interpretation nor an original apostolic view. The apostles, for example, did not teach the Nicene Creed or anything like it. Indeed, as far back as we can trace it, Christianity was remarkably varied in its theological expressions.153

Whether groups are gnostic, orthodox, Marcionite, or whatever, one cannot use the term heretical to infer that all their teachings are incorrect. Rather, if one judges whether a doctrine is plausibly connected with the teachings of Christ, the apostles, and early Christian theology, it must be based on historical evidence without reference to antagonistic terms. Such callous proclamations do nothing to help us understand why certain groups accepted proxy ordinances, or whether it was reasonable for them to do so under Christian theology of the time.

If, for instance, the Marcionite sect, or some other gnostic heresy, had outlasted the proto-orthodox religion, then the current view of Christianity would be quite different. Our view of history, particularly of Christianity, is tainted by the categories of orthodoxy and heresy. On what basis do scholars or theologians judge which sects reflect the earliest teachings of Christ and his apostles concerning posthumous salvation and proxy ordinances? If it is based solely on the view of the sect that has outlasted the others, the so-called orthodox view, then methodologically their views are no more reputable than those of an untrained layperson. Instead, if modern methodology is to be observed, then it can be quite plausibly asserted that (1) Corinthian Saints practiced proxy baptisms on behalf of the dead, as did the Marcionites, and perhaps the Cerinthians and other gnostics, all of whom belong to Christian groups with claims of Christian doctrines; and that (2) given the historical nature of the practice, especially its early appearance, proxy baptisms originated in the first century alongside the Christian faith. Whether the practice was widespread across the Christian world, or even among the apostles, is in no way clear. Mormons and non-Mormons alike must affirm that the scant amount of evidence and writings concerning the practice leaves a gap of information concerning its origin. Perhaps it did originate in Corinth, and later with Marcion. Yet perhaps the origin of the practice stems from Christ himself and the teachings of his apostles. If this were true, then proxy baptism may hold more weight than ever assumed in determining Christian doctrine of the earliest form.

Conclusions

As has been shown, vicarious work for the deceased was a relatively common practice across a broad swath of the ancient Roman Empire. Diverse religious groups practiced various forms of proxy rites intended to improve the eternal condition of their deceased loved ones in their postmortal advancement. Given this background, it was quite natural for some first-century Christians to practice baptisms for the dead, as they faced the quandary of reconciling the infinite mercy of a loving God with the clearly stated and universally accepted Christian requirement of baptism for entrance into heaven, in light of the fact that many of their loved ones had not met this requirement.
As historical evidence of the practice of baptism for the dead in the early Christian church, we submit the following, presented in detail throughout this article:

1. Both the New Testament and patristic literature apparently identify baptism as an absolute requisite of any soul desiring entrance into heaven. The Gospels, the book of Acts, and the Epistles all demonstrate that the Lord and his apostles actively extended baptism to every repentant soul and called upon every soul to repent and be baptized.

2. The most common reading of 1 Corinthians 15:29 among modern biblical scholars is that it, in fact, refers to vicarious baptism for the dead among the Corinthian saints circa AD 56/57.

3. Early Christian writers, including Tertullian and Ambrosiaster, acknowledge that 1 Corinthians 15:29 described vicarious baptism for the dead. Various Christian writers of the next few centuries thereafter also recognized this as fact, even though some of them denounced it as heresy.

4. Several New Testament passages and a plethora of apocryphal and gnostic writings support various themes related to vicarious baptism for the dead, including Christ’s descent into Sheol to preach to the dead, the need for baptism for the souls in Sheol, the efficacy of proxy work for the dead, and various forms of vicarious baptism for the dead, both by the living and by angels.

5. The Marcionites, a Christian sect that had a large following throughout much of the Roman Empire, practiced baptism for the dead from the late second or early third to the fourth century and possibly into the early fifth century AD. Some gnostic groups likewise practiced vicarious baptisms for the dead during the same period (but of shorter duration). They believed their practice continued a rite original to Christian belief.

6. These groups are labeled heretical today. While the victor writes the history book, which is true of both Christian and secular history, the victor is only the strongest combatant, not necessarily the most deserving. The modern methodology of historical research requires us to examine the historicity of the practices without the prejudice inherent in labels from one’s enemies.

Granted, the evidence is not watertight, just as there is a lack of incontrovertible evidence regarding the origins of many Christian doctrines. The simple fact is that few Christian documents survive from the first century, and so we should be appreciative and perhaps even surprised at the amount of attention given to vicarious baptism and related themes by the ancient writers.

But just as the lack of historical evidence is used by proxy nihilists to question the validity of the doctrine of baptism for the dead, the lack of historical records could just as well hide the fact that Christ himself taught this doctrine during his Forty-Day mission, or that baptisms for the dead were performed in numerous Christian communities, not just Corinth, under the auspices of the apostles. The fact is that we simply lack the historical evidence to determine these matters definitively.

Ultimately, every reader must ask: How can I reconcile the infinite mercy of a loving Heavenly Father with the Lord’s declaration that one cannot enter heaven without baptism, in light of the fact that millions upon millions of good, honest individuals have lived their entire lives in various regions of the world without the opportunity to hear the good news of the atonement of our Lord Jesus Christ?

Latter-day Saints practice baptism for the dead out of love for the deceased as they seek to extend to them the salvific gifts of Christ’s atonement. We recognize that vicarious ordinances can only be efficacious if the spirit on the other side of the veil accepts the ordinance performed on his or her behalf. This approach to the salvation of the dead, though not acceptable to many, demonstrates a selfless dedication of time and effort to perform potentially saving acts on behalf of the deceased.

In the last part of this series, we will trace and explore the revelations that restored the doctrine of the redemption of the dead, including the resumption of vicarious ordinances for deceased loved ones.

Notes

David L. Paulsen is a professor of philosophy at BYU. Brock M. Mason is an undergraduate at BYU and is double majoring in philosophy and ancient Near Eastern studies. The authors gratefully thank Laura Rawlins, Shirley Ricks, Aaron Tress, George Scott, and James Siebach for their skillful editing and the College of Humanities and the Maxwell Institute.
for their generous funding. The authors would also like to thank Judson Burton who was largely responsible for the exegetical section of this paper. Thanks also to at least three unnamed reviewers for their careful critiques of earlier drafts of this paper. The paper is stronger for their inputs.


3. 1 Enoch 90:20–27, where the seventy angels, along with the “seventy shepherds” (likely wicked kings) are thrown into the “fiery abyss . . . in the middle of the earth.” Taken from George W. E. Nickelsburg and James C. VanderKam, 1 Enoch: A New Translation (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 134–35.

4. 1 Enoch 90:28–32; the Gentiles are subservient to the exalted Jews, “worshiping [them] and making petition to them and obeying them in everything.” However, unlike the fallen angels and the “seventy shepherds,” they are not cast into the abyss. See further Paulsen, Cook, and Christensen, “Harrowing of Hell,” 60.

5. Gardiner M. Day, The Apostles’ Creed: An Interpretation for Today (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1963), 81. The Apostles Creed, “next to the Constantinopolitan Creed, [is] the most important confessional formulary in Christendom.” The specific phrase included in the creed concerning Christ’s descent into hell “was a commonplace of Christian teaching from the earliest times. . . . Two broad, often intermingling streams of interpretation [about the descent] can be distinguished. According to one, Christ was active during the mysterious three days preaching salvation, or else administering baptism, to the righteous of the old Covenant, according to the other, He performed a triumphant act of liberation on their behalf.” J. N. D. Kelly, Early Christian Creeds (New York: McKay, 1972), 368, 379, 380, emphasis added. The descent of Christ was an early teaching of Christianity, and it was viewed, by some, as bringing salvation and baptism to those unable to achieve it in their own lifetime.

6. By “early Christians” we mean Christians from the first through the fifth centuries.

7. “Majority reading,” as these scholars use it, does not mean more than half of scholars support it but that more scholars support it than any single alternative reading.

8. History of the Church, 4:231.


14. Joel Marcus, Mark 8–16 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 1088–89. “Most scholars agree that 16:9–20 is non-Markan. . . . These verses are found in the overwhelming majority of manuscripts and in all major manuscript families and are attested already by Irenaeus (Against Heresies 3.10.5) in 185 c.e. and perhaps, even earlier, by Justin (1 Apology 45, around 155 c.e.). But they were almost certainly not penned by Mark, nor were they the original ending of the Gospel. Matthew and Luke follow Mark’s narrative closely up to 16:8, whereas beyond it they diverge radically, suggesting that


37. Referencing John 3:5 and baptism: "What he declares is this: 'Thou sayest that it is impossible, I say that it is so absolutely possible as to be necessary, and that it is not even possible otherwise to be saved.'" *Homilies on St. John* 25, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, series 1, ed. Philip Schaff (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 14:87.

38. "In three ways then sins are remitted in the Church; by Baptism, by prayer, by the greater humility of penance; yet God doth not remit sins but to the baptized." Augustine, *Sermons to Catechumens on the Creed* 7:16, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, series 1, 3:375. Further, "[According to] apostolic tradition, . . . the Churches of Christ hold inherently that without Baptism and participation at the table of the Lord it is impossible for any man to attain either to the kingdom of God or to salvation and life eternal." This is the witness of Scripture too." Augustine, *Forgiveness and the Just Deserts of Sin, and the Baptism of Infants* 1.24.34, in *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, vol. 3, trans. William A. Jurgens (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1979), 91.

39. "Thus are they who, placing their trust in the cross, have gone down into the water. . . . We indeed descend into the water full of sins and defilement, but come up, bearing fruit in our heart, having the fear [of God] and trust in Jesus in our spirit." *Epistle of Barnabas* 11, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:144, brackets in original.


44. The Textus Receptus, which stems from Erasmus's 1516 Greek version of the New Testament (and ultimately from Theodore Beza's 1598 Greek New Testament), is considered by many to be an inferior text and underlies the King James Version quoted below.

45. This is roughly the translation given by the King James Version of the text. As noted above, many scholars consider the text underlying the KJV to be inferior. However, owing to the fact that our general readership is most acquainted with the King James translation we felt it appropriate to use this translation. Translations which scholars hold to be more authoritative vary in the way in which they refer to "the dead" in its final occurrence in the verse. For example, The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, which uses a standard scholarly Greek text and not the Textus Receptus of the King James Version, translates the passage thus: "Otherwise, what will those people do who receive baptism on behalf of the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized on their behalf?"


46. "1. Over, Beyond; . . . 2. on behalf of; . . . 3. In the Place of; . . . 4. With Reference to; . . . 5. On Account of; . . . In all probability the word has the representative sense in Paul's saying about baptism for the dead. . . . None of the attempts to escape the theory of a vicarious baptism in primitive Christianity seems to be wholly successful. If one thus presupposes that there may be baptism 'for the dead,' this implies that the dead, probably relatives, were un-baptised at death. We thus have a kind of substitution even if, as one may suppose, the candidate was baptised for himself as well as with respect to someone who had died unbaptised." Harald Riesenfeld, "ὑπὲρ," in Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament, 8:507–14, last quotation on 512–13.

49. "In the NT ἱκανότης is used as both noun and adj. As adj., in the sense 'dead,' it is used of men, as of Jesus Christ. "But the dead shall be raised incorruptible; and there shall be a crop of incorruptibles," 1 Corinthians 15:52. ἱκανότης (mostly as adj.) is also used fig." Rudolf Bultmann, "ἰκανός," in Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, 4:893. Both ἱκανός and ἱκανός appear in 15:29. ἱκανός is used in a genitive sense while ἱκανός "are often the dead in the underworld of whom Christ is the πρωτότοκος" (4:893).

50. St. Bellarmine, De Purgatorio, c. 6, in Disputationes, vol. 2 (Naples, 1857), 366. Quoted by Bernard M. Foschini in "Those Who Are Baptized for the Dead," 1 Cor. 15:29: An Exegetical Historical Dissertation (Worcester, MA: Heffernan, 1951), 7. Bellarmine cites authors who translate 15:29 in a similar way. Peter the Venerable (1092–1156) was born in France and was the abbot of the Benedictine abbey of Cluny. Bellarmine's remaining two references are not as clear. However, it seems that in speaking of Dionysius he is referring to Pope Dionysius, who presided over the church from 259 to 268. Additionally, in referring to Ephrem, it is most likely that he is speaking of Ephrem the Syrian (306–373), the venerated theologian of the Syrian Orthodox Church.

51. However, it is important to note that the commonality is not convincing for Catholic theologians. They see a precedent in praying for other living individuals, while they see no precedent in being baptized for another living individual. To them, this is a common-sense extension of a practical and conditioned practice, while baptism finds no such precedence.


54. Hull, Baptism on Account of the Dead, 97. Importantly, 1 Corinthians 10:2 and 12:13 appear to have a metaphorical meaning. However, Michael Hull and John D. Reaume affirm that the only way that these uses can be read is in a literal sense.

55. Hull, Baptism on Account of the Dead, 97.

56. While this analysis essentially refutes any reading which rests upon a metaphorical reading of βαπτίζω, it will be beneficial to include another interpretation. We do this merely to portray the ingenuity which has gone into avoiding a vicarious baptism reading. According to the interpretation of this verse, βαπτίζω may refer to the martyrdom of the faithful Christians of Corinth under persecutions. In this way an appeal is made to a metaphorical reading to indicate a baptism of blood. Importantly though, our refutation of Bellarmine's thesis is sufficient to address all variant readings that rely on a metaphorical reading of βαπτίζω, for any such readings cannot come into proper conformity with Pauline literature as a whole.

57. As we will demonstrate, many scholars give an analysis to 15:29 which causes it to read as ordinary baptism.

58. John D. Reaume, "Another Look at 1 Corinthians 15:29: 'Baptized for the Dead,'" Bibliotheca Sacra 152 (1995): 467. The term crux interpretum is Latin for "crossroads of the interpreters." The term is used in biblical scholarship for a passage which is nigh unto impossible to arrive at a consensus as to its proper translation and meaning.


60. In regards to the final sense Riesenfeld has said that "with various verbs and expressions ὑπὲρ is used with the gen. of an abstract noun in a final sense: with reference to, 'as concerns' . . . 'for,'" Riesenfeld, "ὑπὲρ," 8:513.

61. White gives this additional remark in his footnote: "This lack of empirical confirmation is particularly detrimental to Raeder's hypothesis since it involves a phenomenon that, on the face of it, seems intuitively unlikely. Neither she nor those who share her view provide adequate sociological or theological justification as to why unbelievers would seek baptism or why the Corinthian church would allow them to receive it." Joel R. White, "'Baptized on Account of the Dead': The Meaning of 1 Corinthians 15:29 in Its Context," Journal of Biblical Literature 116/3 (1997): 492 n. 29.


64. White, "Baptized on Account of the Dead," 493.


66. Hull, Baptism on Account of the Dead, 47.


70. Foschini, "Those Who Are Baptized for the Dead," 93.


74. Reaume, "Another Look at 1 Corinthians 15:29," 466 n. 46.

75. Hull, Baptism on Account of the Dead, 44. Furthermore, Foschini's translation also assumed that the sole purpose of baptism has to do with the afterlife. But Paul also understands baptism as producing great benefits during one's mortal life. We live for Christ, whether it is in this mortal life or in the hereafter. We do not have to wait for death to become new through baptism.

76. Hull, Baptism on Account of the Dead, 5.

77. Hull, Baptism on Account of the Dead, 230. Importantly, Hull goes on to claim that when the historical context is taken into consideration, 15:29 becomes a "reference to ordinary baptism, albeit an extraordinary one" (p. 230).


83. Richard E. DeMaris, "Corinthian Religion and Baptism for the Dead (1 Corinthians 15:29): Insights from Archaeology and Anthropology," Journal of Biblical Literature 114 (1995): 661–62, 673. However, it is important to point out, that if DeMaris is referring to the fact that the practice at Corinth was an anomaly, and so was not widespread during that time period, then we agree with him. There is nothing that resembles such a practice in the mid-first century.

84. See Arnold Van Gennep, The Rites of Passage (London: Routledge, 2004), 146–65. In Gennep's chapter on funeral
rites, he sets forth many rites which the living must perform on behalf of the dead in order to aid them in their postmortem journey. He cites from a host of non-Judeo-Christian sources.

86. Fernand Prat, The Theology of Saint Paul, vol. 1, trans. John L. Stoddard (Westminster, MD: Newman Bookshop, 1927), 137. Prat explains that “there was danger of believing that in having themselves baptized for the dead—that is to say, for their advantage—they had had themselves baptized in the place of the dead, so as to procure for them the effects of baptism; as if death were not the terminus of the test, and as if the dead could be aided otherwise than by means of prayer” (p. 137). Prat in this passage gives voice to an important point, that in the “orthodox” tradition, there is no precedence of baptisms being performed on behalf of the dead. Furthermore, the concept of baptisms for the dead is not as easily translatable as prayers for the dead (since we are capable of praying for another who is living, and we are not able to be baptized for another that is living). However, such a defense is based upon the precedence of the “orthodox” tradition. Those who have rightly or wrongly been branded as heretics in later centuries, do indeed have a precedence of such a practice, and in light of the full viability of reading 15:29 as vicarious baptism, their practice does have possible scriptural support.

88. Against Marcion has been tentatively dated to AD 207–208, and certainly after On the Resurrection of the Flesh, due to the fact that the latter work is referenced by Tertullian in Against Marcion. See further Timothy David Barnes, Tertullian: A Historical and Literary Study (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 55.
91. The Februarian lustrations was a Roman celebration where the resurrected Lord appears after his crucifixion and the dead would be provided and prayed for, to benefit them beyond the grave.

92. Ambrosiaster, Commentary on Paul’s Epistles, Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum 81.175; see Gerald Bray, ed., Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999), 166.
93. The term apocryphal generally refers to the early Christian writings that are of questionable authorship or were left out of the New Testament canon for one reason or another. The term itself means “hidden” or “secret” writings, though modern scholarship generally uses the term for noncanonical Christian writings.
94. Forty-day literature here is meant to include all writings where the resurrected Lord appears after his crucifixion and provides instruction to certain select people.
95. Hartman, “Baptism,” while commenting on Galatians 3:26–27, mentions that for Paul, “there is no tension or contradiction to be seen between the two (faith and baptism). . . . One may say that faith is the subjective side of the receiving of the gift of salvation, baptism the objective side” (p. 587).

For Paul, it appears, baptism is linked with faith to be saved, whereas baptism is an outward expression of the inward faith of the believer.

98. Buchholz, Your Eyes Will Be Opened, 348.
101. J. N. D. Kelly, Early Christian Doctrines (London: Continuum, 2000), 207. Kelly remarks how the rites of Chrismation became increasingly important and were used more and more in conjunction with baptism at the beginning of the third century—although the rite itself existed much earlier. In Chrismation, the initiate is anointed with sacred oil, known as chrism, while a priest speaks certain words and performs the sign of the cross. The words repeated indicate that the initiate will have sealed upon him the gifts of the Holy Spirit. It is often, though not always, performed with the rite of baptism. It is still practiced today in orthodox churches, particularly of the East.
102. See Revelation 1:18; Christ has the “keys of hell and of death.
103. Notes Odes of Solomon 42:11, 14, 17–20, in which Christ descends to Sheol and creates a “congregation of living (people) . . . and (1, Christ) placed My name upon their head. Because they are free, and they are mine.” Though the odes are mainly hymns and poetic in nature, they purport to be the revelations and teachings of the risen Lord to the odist, hence the conversational nature.
106. The divine Forethought that descends into darkness in the
extended ending of the *Apocryphon of John* is generally understood to refer to Jesus. The corresponding footnote by Meyer in *Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, 131 n. 138, reads that the "hymn of heavenly Forethought, the divine Mother," depicts her "as Savior." However, "in the present Christianized version of the Secret Book of John readers may understand the Savior to be Jesus."

117. Michael Waltenstein and Frederik Wisse, eds., *The Apocryphon of John: Synopsis of Nag Hammadi Codices II, III, and IV1 With BG 8502.2* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 171. The translation appears thus: "I entered into the midst of darkness and the inside of Hades. . . . And I entered into the midst of their prison which is the prison of the body. And I said, 'He who hears, let him get up from the deep sleep.' Note the translators rendering the Coptic word for "underworld" as "Hades," signifying this is indeed the resting place of the dead.

118. Selections from *Apocryphon of John—Hymn of the Savior* 30:11–31:25, in Meyer, *Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, 131–32. Further, Meyer explains that the phrase to "arise from deep sleep" is in fact, "the call to awaken" that "addresses a prototypical sleeper—any person who may awaken to knowledge and salvation." In other words, Christ's descent is a call to those who are residing in the underworld to receive knowledge (gnosis) and ultimately salvation—posthumous salvation.

119. Meyer, *Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, 132: In some sense, the person, after receiving the Savior and the "Five Seals," receives new life and awakens from "deep sleep," or receives salvation.

120. Turner, introduction to the text, in Meyer, *Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, 106. He notes, "Several Sethian treatises present this final act of deliverance as a baptismal rite (the Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit, Three Forms of First Thought, Melchizedek, the Revelation of Adam, Zostrianos, and perhaps Marsanes), usually called the Five Seals (Three Forms of First Thought; the longer versions of the Secret Book of John; the Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit; and the unitled text of the Bruce Codex)."


122. This is the contention of Yvonne Janssens in the translation/commentary of the text, contained in *La Prôtennoia Trimorphè* (Québec: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 1978), 2–5.


124. Logan, "Mystery of the Five Seals," 188.

125. Martha Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven in Jewish and Christian Apocalypses* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 9–46; this chapter examines the mythic ascent of Enoch in Enochic literature, his investment with priestly garments, and his ultimate transfiguration. The entire book focuses on such ascents, where ritualistic notions are accompanied by transcendent visions into heaven.

126. *Nag Hammadi Codices* XI, XII, XIII, 379.


130. Some scholars have interpreted this verse as an indication that the souls of these men will have some form of reincarnation. Although this is true in one sense, those who are "saved" through "another soul in whom life dwells" will no longer receive this reincarnation. Trumbower, in his rework *Rescue for the Dead*, 111–12, mentions that these verses (and some preceding it) speak of a "reincarnation for some souls." He cites as a source Michael A. Williams, who likewise claims this verse is speaking of reincarnation. Michael A. Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism": An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 197. Once John poses the question concerning reentering the womb, a new group (of saved-souls) is meant. The Lord responds: "This soul will be made to follow another soul in whom the spirit of life dwells, and she is saved through that one. Then she will not be thrust into flesh again." Thus, reincarnation may only apply to those spirits who are not saved, according to the gnostic text.

131. The text is roughly dated to AD 250–300 and penned by a gnostic Christian. It is also likely that each of the four books that comprise the *Pistis Sophia* were composed by different people, given the textual variance found in the different texts.


138. The Gospel of Thomas records in the prologue, "These are the hidden sayings that the living Jesus spoke and Judas Thomas the Twin recorded." Likewise, the *Apocryphon of John* expresses a similar sentiment in its opening lines: "the teaching of the Savior, and [the revelation] of the mysteries [and the things] hidden in silence, things he taught his disciple John." Meyer, *Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, 139, 107. These sayings were considered highly sacred, and as such were likely not widely circulated in the ancient world. The teachings contained therein would have been known only by a select few.

139. See John 21:25: "There are also many other things which Jesus did, the which, if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written. Amen." It is interesting that the apostle John, in composing his own Gospel, notes the scant amount of information provided concerning the historical Jesus.

140. Hugh Nibley, "Baptism for the Dead in Ancient Times," in *Mormonism and Early Christianity* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1987), 103–5. Nibley points out the peculiar dearth of information provided by the apostles for some of the most important of teachings, such as the "keys of the kingdom," which, as he explains, likely refers to salvation for the dead.

141. Hugh Nibley, "Baptism for the Dead," 103–9. On page 102, Nibley points to an important discussion allegedly between Clement and Peter as initial evidence. Clement poses the question, "If the righteous ones whom he finds will participate and delight in the kingdom of Christ, then those who have died beforehand have missed out on his kingdom (referring to those who die before the advent of Christ)."

142. Nibley assures him that such a scandal could not occur and that salvation has been made available to them. He also reminds Clement: these are "hidden matters, CLEMENT. It is not irksome for me to tell you, as far as I am permitted to reveal." *Clementine Recognitions* 1.52, in F. Stanley Jones, *An Ancient Jewish Christian Source on the History of Christianity: Pseudo-Clementine Recognitions* 1.27–71 (Atlanta: Scholars, 1995), 84. It is not clear why these doctrines would require such secrecy. A number of authors such as Nibley include this teaching as an esoteric doctrine of Christianity, one that was principally carried on by word rather than through scripture and one that was preserved only for the most righteous of Saints. It seems quite clear that traditions like this did exist in the early church, and the possibility that proxy
baptism was included among this category is quite plausible.

142. Stuart G. Hall, *Doctrine and Practice in the Early Church* (London: SPCK, 2005), 45–46. Hall lists Valentinus and Basilides as other leaders of heretical sects that spread widely and were the targets of both Eastern and Western criticism of their doctrines.


145. Didymus, *Pauline Commentary from the Greek Church*; see Bray, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: 1 and 2 Corinthians*, 166.


152. It must be kept in mind that in the earliest centuries, there was no great division between gnostic Christians and so-called orthodox believers. Ehrman relates, “One of the striking features of Christian Gnosticism is that it appears to have operated principally from within existing Christian churches, that Gnostics considered themselves to be the spiritually elite of these churches, who could confess the creeds of other Christians, read the Scriptures of other Christians, partake of baptism and Eucharist with other Christians, but who believed that they had a deeper, more spiritual, secret understanding of these creeds, Scriptures, and sacraments. . . Gnostics were not ‘out there’ forming their own communities. The Gnostics were ‘in here,’ with us, in our midst. And you couldn’t tell one simply by looking.” Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, 126.


154. The Mandaeans, a non-Christian group, also practiced baptisms for the dead. The Mandaeans trace their religious history back to the followers of John the Baptist and are strict proponents of religious ritualism and ceremonial cleanliness. They practice not only baptism for the dead, but other saving rites for the deceased. Once a year, at *Panja*, these saving rites, “called the hava ḍ mani, . . . are performed upon a proxy, who in status, sex, personality, and age closely resembles the dead person.” Ethel S. Drower, *The Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran: Their Cults, Customs, Magic Legends, and Folklore* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2002), 214. In the ritual, “the proxy descends into the water, and repeats voicelessly, ‘I, N. son of N. (the name of the dead person) am baptized with the baptism of Bahram the Great, son of the mighty [ones]. My baptism shall protect me and cause me to ascend to the summit.’ He submerges thrice, and on emerging puts on a completely new rasta” (pp. 215–16). It should be noted that their concepts of the effect of such rituals is different than Christians would normally infer. Rather than admitting them solely into the heaven, these rituals are aids in the cosmic venture of the dead across the universe.
There is significant textual evidence to suggest that the phrase *the great and marvelous change* refers not necessarily to the wide variety of physical changes that had occurred, but to the essential, infinite change wrought by the Atonement.

CLIFFORD P. JONES
The first verse of 3 Nephi 11 describes the scene at the temple just before the Lord appeared to the Nephites:

And now it came to pass that there were a great multitude gathered together, of the people of Nephi, round about the temple which was in the land Bountiful; and they were marveling and wondering one with another, and were showing one to another the great and marvelous change which had taken place.

The phrase *the great and marvelous change* has traditionally been read as a reference to changes to the land caused by the destruction at Christ’s death, so this verse is usually interpreted as a description of people who were in awe of these changes and were pointing them out to each other. This common reading is reflected in a footnote to that verse, which cites 3 Nephi 8:11–14, a depiction of how the “whole face of the land was changed” by the destruction.

However, I believe that there is significant textual evidence to suggest that the phrase *the great and marvelous change* refers not necessarily to the wide variety of physical changes that had occurred, but to the essential, infinite change wrought by the Atonement. If the phrase *the great and marvelous change* is more likely a reference to the Atonement, the most “great and marvelous change” ever to occur in the history of the world, then this verse may describe a multitude that purposefully gathered to the temple for a spiritual purpose and not a random group that came to a public place to share the common experience of surviving the changes to the land.

Interpreting the phrase *the great and marvelous change* as a reference to the Atonement suggests a shift in the meaning of this verse: prior to the Savior’s arrival, the multitude was already primarily focused on the Savior and the essential change that fulfilled the law of Moses and defeated death and hell. Several textual evidences support the idea that the phrase *the great and marvelous change* could well refer to the Atonement.

First, this meaning of the phrase fits well into the context of 3 Nephi 11:1 and provides a better contextual fit with several words in the passage than an interpretation linking the phrase to discussions of destruction. Second, a multitude that met to contemplate the Atonement would likely have planned the gathering in advance, and such a planned gathering is better supported by the text than a spontaneous gathering in response to destruction. Third, a gathering that occurred months after the destruction is better supported by the text than one immediately after. Fourth, and to my mind most important, revelation from God has usually been preceded by diligent, faithful effort on the part of the person or persons receiving the revelation. The appearance of the Savior at the temple may be the greatest theophany described in the Book of Mormon. If the people convened for the specific purpose of gaining a better understanding of the change wrought by the recently completed Atonement, their effort in gathering themselves together to seek understanding about this amazing change was a clear indication of faith and diligence, and thus an appropriate precursor to the Lord’s appearance and the glorious spiritual manifestations accompanying it.

A short analogy can illustrate the nature of the difference this alternate interpretation causes to our “picture” of the setting for Christ’s visit to ancient America. Some time ago, my wife and I were assembling a large jigsaw puzzle with many pieces, some of which were extremely similar in color and shape. One specific piece of the puzzle had been in place, surrounded by other pieces, for some time. We both had assumed that this piece belonged where we’d placed it. However, as we continued to work on the puzzle, my wife found another piece that she felt might fit better in that same location. Since the original piece appeared to fit so well, I was reluctant to even consider whether another piece might better complete the puzzle. The original piece did not look out of place. Nevertheless, when she removed the original piece and snapped in the replacement, we
The idea that the people at the temple were less likely considering the changes to the land than the change occasioned by the Atonement fits much better into the “picture” of the Book of Mormon.

A Better Contextual Fit

“Great” and “marvelous” describe the Atonement. Because the phrase the great and marvelous change refers to a change that “had taken place,” one would suppose that an earlier passage has already introduced the reader to the accomplishment of this “change.” Therefore, we should be able to identify it by searching earlier passages for a completed change that was “great and marvelous.” The changes caused by the destruction are mentioned three chapters earlier in the Book of Mormon (see 3 Nephi 8:11–14), but never are the words great and marvelous used to describe the destruction. However, another change that had “taken place,” one that the people at the temple clearly considered to be marvelous, is mentioned in an even closer proximity. Just one chapter before Mormon mentions “the great and marvelous change,” he tells us that the Lord’s announcement of the Atonement (see 3 Nephi 9:15–22) aroused so much “astonishment” among the people that “there was silence in all the land for the space of many hours” (3 Nephi 10:2).

The word marvelous means “such as to excite wonder or astonishment.” Marvelous and astonished are, at times, used in the Book of Mormon synonymously. For instance, when King Lamoni is described as being “astonished exceedingly,” Ammon does not ask him what caused his “astonishment.” Rather, Ammon asks the king what caused his “marvelings” (Alma 18:2, 10, 16). After King Lamoni’s conversion, a multitude was “astonished” to find him and others lying “as though they were dead.” This same group, when they also learned that Ammon could not be killed, began to marvel—not for the first time—but to “marvel again” (Alma 19:18–24). In other words, their marveling was a resumption of their astonishment.

Recognizing that the Book of Mormon repeatedly makes this connection between the astonishing and the marvelous, it seems reasonable to conclude...
that the multitude at the temple, who were among those who earlier had been “astonished” at the Lord’s announcement of the Atonement, were now, once again, “marveling and wondering” at the same “great and marvelous change” (3 Nephi 11:1).

The word marvelous does not seem to fit quite as well when describing the changes caused by the destruction. Neither Mormon nor Christ ever uses any synonym of marvelous to describe those changes (see 3 Nephi 8:5–25 and 9:3–12). The destruction was prophesied by Nephi, by Zenos, and by Samuel the Lamanite, but their prophecies never call it marvelous, wonderful, or astonishing (see 1 Nephi 12:4–5; 1 Nephi 19:11–12; 2 Nephi 26:3–8; and Helaman 14:20–27). Instead, these changes are described consistently as terrible (see 1 Nephi 12:5; 2 Nephi 26:3; and 3 Nephi 8:5–6, 11–12, 19, 24, 25). Since these changes are always called terrible and never marvelous, one could argue that it would be unusual at this point in the narrative for Mormon to introduce a new adjective, marvelous, solely to refer to changes never described as marvelous or astonishing before this point.\(^2\) It is more likely that Mormon is referring to something previously described as marvelous or astonishing, such as the change, announced by the Savior, that fulfilled the law of Moses and opened the door to immortality and eternal life.

Another point is worth noting. The use of the definite article the implies only one change. The Atonement, the most pivotal change in all eternity, can appropriately be called the great and marvelous change. If so, then the Atonement, the infinite change that culminated in the Savior’s resurrection and ascension into heaven, would have been an appropriate topic for the multitude at the temple.

“Showing” the Atonement “one to another.” The description of the multitude in 3 Nephi 11:1 says that they “were showing one to another the great and marvelous change.” The Oxford English Dictionary groups the numerous meanings of the verb to show into several classes. One such class is “to make known by statement or argument,” including, more specifically, “to make evident or clear, explain, expound.”\(^5\) If the phrase the great and marvelous change refers to the infinite change caused by the Atonement, the fact that the people were “showing” this change one to another would mean that they were explaining it one to another—making it known to each other by statement or argument. Rendering this phrase to mean that the people were explaining the Atonement to each other is at least as sound as rendering it to mean that they were pointing out to each other the changes to the land. In other words, the word showing fits just as comfortably with the phrase the great and marvelous change under this alternate interpretation as it does under the more common interpretation. The verb to show means “to make evident or clear” in many Book of Mormon passages (see, for example, 1 Nephi 1:20; 2 Nephi 32:3–5; Mosiah 23:23; Alma 40:3; Alma 57:8; 3 Nephi 7:1 and 10:18; Ether 12:6; and Moroni 7:16). Therefore, it could easily have this meaning in this passage.

“Marveling” and “wondering” about the Atonement. The verb to marvel means “to be filled with wonder or astonishment.”\(^4\) The verb to wonder

The use of the definite article the implies only one change. The Atonement, the most pivotal change in all eternity, can appropriately be called the great and marvelous change.
has several connotations, including “to feel or be affected with wonder,” “to ask oneself in wonder-ment,”\(^5\) and to “be desirous to know or learn.”\(^6\) These dictionary definitions are not presented in the language of the scriptures, but they describe quite well three aspects of the process of preparing to receive revelation. For example, they aptly match up with Joseph Smith’s description of the contemplative process that led to the First Vision.

One likely indication that this was a planned meeting of the faithful rather than a spontaneous gathering is the fact that the multitude included every person that Christ would call as his twelve Nephite disciples.

After Joseph Smith read James 1:5, he felt wonder. He says, "Never did any passage of scripture come with more power to the heart of man than this did at this time to mine. It seemed to enter with great force into every feeling of my heart." This caused him to reflect "on it again and again." As he contemplated this scripture, young Joseph became very desirous to know or learn. He says, "If any person needed wisdom from God, I did" (Joseph Smith—History 1:12). Heavenly Father and Jesus waited to appear to young Joseph until after he had thus "marveled and wondered."

This parallel pattern is significant if the great and marvelous change contemplated by the multitude was the change effected by the Atonement because then, in the case of both Joseph Smith and the multitude at the temple, the Father and the Son chose to reveal themselves after a similar process of spiritual preparation and faithful action. In both cases, revelation followed marveling and wondering about spiritual things. If, however, the phrase the great and marvelous change refers solely to changes caused by the destruction, no such parallel presents itself.

In addition to 3 Nephi 11:1, there are only three scriptural passages that use forms of both of these verbs—marvel and wonder. Each of these three passages also describes a reverent, spiritual process that preceded divine revelation. Section 138 of the Doctrine and Covenants relates that on 3 October 1918, while President Joseph F. Smith sat "pondering over the scriptures" (v. 1) and "reflecting upon" (v. 2) the Atonement, he was "greatly impressed, more than I had ever been before" (v. 6) with the things written in 1 Peter 3:18–20. As he “pondered” (v. 11), he received a vision of the visit of Christ to the righteous spirits. He then “marveled” (v. 25) at the effectiveness of the Savior’s ministry to them, and he “wondered” (v. 28) about how the wicked also received the gospel. “And as I wondered, my eyes were opened, and my understanding quickened” (v. 29). He then learned how the gospel was preached to the wicked (see D&C 138:29–34).

The prophet Moses had a somewhat similar experience after he had been “caught up into an exceedingly high mountain, . . . he saw God face to face, and he talked with him” (Moses 1:1–2). As the vision closed, Moses “greatly marveled and wondered” (Moses 1:8) at these things, which led to another great revelation (see Moses 1:24–41).

The third scriptural passage that discusses marveling and wondering is 3 Nephi 15:2, which,
like 3 Nephi 11:1, describes the multitude at the temple in Bountiful. Here we read that, after the Lord had explained the fulfillment of the law of Moses, some of the people marveled and wondered about it. It would seem then that 3 Nephi 15:2 forms a semantic and thematic parallel with 3 Nephi 11:1, where in both instances the people were marveling and wondering about the portion of God’s word they had previously received but did not yet fully understand. Similarly, in both cases, the Lord responded with love, teaching more about the things they pondered. In the first case, the Savior descended from heaven to explain the Atonement and the higher law of the gospel. In the second case, he revealed more about the fulfillment of the law of Moses.

If “the great and marvelous change” mentioned in 3 Nephi 11:1 is the change wrought by the Atonement, the use of the words marveling and wondering reveals a harmony with all similarly worded passages. Each describes a meditative setting that leads to revelation from God. This pattern, of course, is not evident in the more traditional reading.

All the words in 3 Nephi 11:1 could be construed to mean the Atonement or the destruction. However, some of these words, particularly the word marvelous, the singular word change, and the words marveling and wondering appear to be better suited to a multitude focused on the Atonement than to a multitude focused on the destruction. The topic of the Atonement also fits hand in glove with the other topic being discussed at the time: “And they were also conversing about this Jesus Christ, of whom the sign had been given concerning his death” (3 Nephi 11:2).

A Planned Religious Gathering

A multitude that gathered specifically to contemplate the Atonement would likely have been planned in advance. The text of the Book of Mormon never specifically states whether the multitude of 2,500 people (see 3 Nephi 17:25) were gathered together in a prearranged religious meeting or whether they were a huge assemblage of neighbors who poured onto the temple grounds spontaneously. It simply states that “there were a great multitude gathered together, of the people of Nephi, round about the temple” (3 Nephi 11:1). The term gathered together is often used in the Book of Mormon to describe planned meetings called to discuss religious matters (see, for example, Jacob 7:17; Mosiah 1:10; 7:18; 18:7; 25:1, 4; and 27:21), but it is also used to describe more extemporaneous gatherings of people in a given vicinity (see, for example, Alma 19:28 and Helaman 7:12). Thus this term taken alone does not tell us whether this gathering was planned or spontaneous.

One likely indication that this was a planned meeting of the faithful rather than a spontaneous gathering is the fact that the multitude included...
every person that Christ would call as his twelve Nephite disciples (see 3 Nephi 12:1).  

We know that one of these men was Nephi, the son of Nephi. He had ordained other men to assist him in the ministry at least a year earlier (see 3 Nephi 7:25). Assuming that the Lord acted then as he does now, we would expect those chosen as the twelve Nephite disciples to include several of those the Lord had chosen earlier to serve in priesthood capacities. If the people had come together for a religious meeting, we would expect that their priesthood leaders and other men of an apostolic caliber would have helped to organize the event and would have attended (much like the apostles of our day normally attend general conference). The fact that all the future disciples were among the multitude suggests that this was not a random group who had gathered spontaneously, but that it was a planned meeting held under priesthood direction. It seems more likely that they were all among the faithful multitude that planned in advance to be there.

The multitude also included a number of people who were sick, lame, dumb, and blind (see 3 Nephi 17:9). When Jesus healed the sick, at least some of them “were brought forth unto him” (3 Nephi 17:9). In other words, they had to be taken to him by others. It is unlikely that these sick and afflicted, some of whom were dependent on others to get around, would have been present at a chance meeting of curious survivors. It is more likely that they were brought by loving relatives to an announced religious gathering at the temple.  

When the Savior invited the little children to come to him, the people “set them down upon the ground round about him.” There were enough children present that the multitude had to “[give] way till they had all been brought unto him” (3 Nephi 17:12). After Jesus ascended into heaven, the people went home as families. “Every man did take his wife and his children and did return to his own home” (3 Nephi 19:1). The reference to “every man” returning home with “his wife and his children” suggests that most of those present had come to the temple as families, an unlikely scenario if those present were simply gathered to converse about the destruction.

A multitude that included all the potential twelve disciples, many of the infirm, and many children would more likely have gathered at the temple for a religious purpose. This is the setting one would expect for a multitude that convened to consider the Atonement.

A Gathering Several Months after the Destruction

The timing of the Savior’s visit has long been an issue among students of the Book of Mormon. Three principal theories have been advanced about the time that passed between the destruction and his visit. The first theory holds that he visited them almost immediately after the destruction and his visit. The first theory holds that he visited them almost immediately after the destruction. According to the second, several weeks passed between the destruction and his visit. The third theory maintains that at least five months passed between the destruction and his visit.  

The meaning of the phrase the great and marvelous change figures prominently in these theories. In fact, the idea that the multitude was in awe of changes to the land is essential to the first two theories. The main reason each of these theories presumes an earlier visit is because awe about such changes is relatively short-lived. A proponent of the first theory explained,

It seems perfectly clear that this great gathering was immediately after the close of the dreadful period of darkness. We read that the people were “marveling and wondering one with another,” and “were showing one to another the great and marvelous change which had taken place” (3 Nephi 11:1). . . . The fact that the multitude had gathered at the temple and were pointing out to each other the great changes that had occurred is evidence that this was an event immediately following the resurrection of our Lord. If this event had occurred one year later, they would not have been so awed by them. It was in great astonishment and wonder that they had gathered and were pointing out to each other what had occurred.  

Another proponent of this theory similarly suggests that “the people would not have been pointing out changes that had taken place” a year or so after the destruction. A proponent of the second theory suggests the presence of awe about the destruction as “probably the most convincing” factor for inferring that the gathering occurred within weeks after the destruction.
If, however, the phrase the great and marvelous change refers to the change brought on by the Atonement, then no passage in the Book of Mormon implies that the multitude at the temple expressed any awe of the changes to the land. Instead, the more likely reading of the text is that they were contemplating the Atonement. Therefore, this “most convincing” evidence of an early appearance (awe about the destruction) would be absent, and the issue of the timing of the Lord’s visit would depend entirely on other factors. I will review those factors to see what timing they suggest.

The scriptural record. During the Savior’s second day among the Book of Mormon people, he asked Nephi to bring forth their scriptural record. The Lord noted that the record was missing information about Samuel the Lamanite’s prophecy that after Christ’s resurrection many saints would rise from the dead, appear to many, and minister to them. After the Lord pointed out the error, “Nephi remembered that this thing had not been written” (3 Nephi 23:12). The missing information was then added to the record (see 3 Nephi 23:7–13). This incident shows that the gathering at the temple took place after the signs of the Lord’s death were entered into the scriptural record and that Nephi had to “remember” (3 Nephi 23:12) that nothing had been written about those who rose from the dead.

The original record of all the destruction and the other events that fulfilled Samuel’s prophecies was likely compiled and written over the course of weeks or months as the person writing the history received details of the destruction and other events from more distant lands. By the time the Savior appeared at the temple, the record of the fulfillment of many of Samuel’s prophecies had been completed long enough that Nephi had to recall that it was missing important information. This suggests that the Savior appeared quite some time after the destruction.

Need for relief from the disaster. Even more significantly, the first clear morning after the great and terrible destruction would have been a time for disaster relief. The loss of life and destruction at Christ’s crucifixion were immense. The destruction was caused by the convergence of a powerful storm, tempests, and whirlwinds (see 3 Nephi 8:5–6, 12, 16), fires (see 3 Nephi 8:8, 14; 9:3, 9–11), a prolonged quaking and shaking of the earth (see 3 Nephi 8:6, 12, 17, 19), the covering of cities and their inhabitants with earth (see 3 Nephi 8:10; 9:6, 8), and the covering of cities and their inhabitants with water (see 3 Nephi 8:9; 9:4, 7). Any one of these phenomena would have called for a significant relief effort. All of them together would have caused an immense calamity affecting thousands of people, their homes, their crops and their animals.

While “the more righteous part of the people” were saved (3 Nephi 10:12), those who survived were not untouched by the destruction. They knew, even in the darkness, that many of their kindred had died (3 Nephi 10:2). The destruction was pervasive across the land. It included both “a great and terrible destruction in the land southward” (3 Nephi 8:11) and “a more great and terrible destruction in the land northward” (3 Nephi 8:12). “And thus the face of the whole earth became deformed, because of the tempests, and the thunderings, and the lightnings, and the quaking of the earth” (3 Nephi 8:17). While there was greater destruction in the land northward, the destruction in the land southward is described as “great and terrible.”

As soon as there was light to see, the all-consuming concern of Nephi and other survivors would have been to give or receive urgent disaster assistance. It is likely that many survivors were injured, many of their homes and crops destroyed, and many of their flocks and herds killed or scattered. Those who were not killed needed to bury their dead, care for their wounded, rebuild their homes, secure food for their families, and otherwise bring order to a vast area devastated by a great and terrible destruction. It would have been both uncharitable and illogical for true saints to idly mill about during the urgent hours at the height of their distress. These survivors had heard the voice
of Christ just hours earlier inviting them to return to him and be converted (3 Nephi 9:13). Those who are converted “are willing to mourn with those that mourn; yea, and comfort those that stand in need of comfort” (Mosiah 18:9). Even if those near Bountiful somehow fared better than those in other parts of the land, we would expect them to do all they could to alleviate suffering. This is what their righteous ancestors had done when outlying lands were under attack (see, for example, Alma 60 and 61.)

Indeed, we have direct evidence that the people who gathered around the temple had a passionate interest in the welfare of those in neighboring areas. After the Savior’s visit, as soon as they returned to their homes, “it was noised abroad among the people immediately, before it was yet dark, that the multitude had seen Jesus, and that he had ministered unto them, and that he would also show himself on the morrow unto the multitude” (3 Nephi 19:2). These saints were anxious to share their blessings with their brethren in outlying regions. On the first clear day, a more likely scenario is that they rushed to assist the people in those same regions (or elsewhere) with no thought of congregating near the temple.

**A calm atmosphere.** Sufficient time passed between the destruction and the gathering at the temple for Nephi to have written the scriptural record of the destruction and other prophesied signs (and to forget some aspects of what had been foretold). It had also been long enough that the brunt of the crisis had passed, so the people could gather together around the temple.

This passage of time would have been more than sufficient to plan and announce a gathering at the temple and for the people to make preparations to be there at the chosen time. The calm atmosphere that prevailed among the multitude suggests that by the time they gathered around the temple, they had attended to the urgencies brought on by the destruction and were now able to focus on the Atonement and other things of eternity.

**Understanding Mormon’s words.** A time marker placed by Mormon between the first clear day...
and the gathering at the temple provides the most straightforward evidence of the amount of time that passed between these two events. To understand the time marker, we must first review the chronology of the destruction and darkness. The destruction began “in the thirty and fourth year, in the first month, on the fourth day of the month” (3 Nephi 8:5) and lasted about three hours (see 3 Nephi 8:19). Then there was darkness “for the space of three days” (3 Nephi 8:23), followed by a clear day, which Mormon describes in some detail (see 3 Nephi 10:9–10). All of this happened near the beginning of the thirty-fourth year.

Several verses later, Mormon tells us that he is about to share with us one of the most important events in the history of his people and he tells us when it occurred:

And it came to pass that in the ending of the thirty and fourth year, behold, I will show unto you that the people . . . did have great favors shown unto them, and great blessings poured out upon their heads, insomuch that soon after the ascension of Christ into heaven he did truly manifest himself unto them—Showing his body unto them, and ministering unto them; and an account of his ministry shall be given hereafter. Therefore for this time I make an end of my sayings. (3 Nephi 10:18–19)

This passage can be interpreted to mean that the Lord appeared “in the ending of the thirty and fourth year,” which was “soon after the ascension of Christ into heaven.” Since the destruction took place near the beginning of that year, this time marker, which strongly suggests that Christ appeared in the ending of the year, specifies that months passed between the first clear day and the Savior’s appearance. This interval fits well with the other evidences of the passage of time.18

The word ending, as used in the phrase the ending of the . . . year, refers to “the concluding part of . . . a space of time.”19 Applied as broadly as possible, the term in the ending of the . . . year, would refer to the second half of the year—the largest part of the year that can reasonably be called “the concluding part.” Because the destruction, the three days of darkness, and the first clear day all took place near the beginning of the year, this time marker indicates that Christ appeared roughly six months to a year after that first clear day. Not all authorities, however, concur with this interpretation. One scholar has suggested that the term in the ending of the . . . year may mean “by the end of” the year, and another suggests that it may mean in the “remainder of the year.”20 However, had Mormon completely left out this time marker, readers would be aware that the Lord appeared “by the end of” the year and sometime “in the remainder of” the year because they would expect his appearance to follow the previously mentioned time marker (3 Nephi 8:5) and to precede the next time marker, when “the thirty and fourth year passed away” (4 Nephi 1:1). Therefore, applying either of these meanings to the term in the ending of effectively renders the term meaningless because it would then cover a period already delineated by other time markers. Applying the plain meaning of the term, on the other hand, provides more information. It tells us that the Savior appeared in the “concluding part” of the thirty-fourth year, which means, at the very least, that he appeared after midyear, months after that first clear day.

Nephi, the prophet at the time of Christ’s appearance, knew that faith precedes miracles. It is possible that he went to the temple together with a group of about 2,500 faithful men, women, and children.

The Book of Mormon uses the term in the ending of the . . . year only two other times (see Alma 52:14 and Helaman 3:1). In all three cases, it is used between a time marker for that same year and another for the following year. So in each case we may safely assume, without the use of an additional time marker, that the events or situations delineated by those two other markers occurred by the end of and during that year. Consequently every single time marker that refers to the ending of the year
only adds meaning if it denotes a specific segment of the year—the ending of the year as opposed to the beginning of the year.

The Savior’s appearance at the temple happened not only in the ending of the thirty-fourth year but also soon after his ascension into heaven. What should we infer from the use of the term soon after? Does it require us to place the Savior’s appearance within moments of his ascension? Within weeks? Months? Years? The word soon means “within a short time, . . . before long.” Both short and long are relative terms, so the word soon can imply a brief moment or a period of years, depending on context. Because the word soon is so relative, it provides little chronological certainty. For instance, Helaman tells Captain Moroni that Helaman “soon accomplished” his desire to take the city Cummi, but he clarifies that it actually took “many nights” followed by an additional “not many days” (Alma 57:8–9, 12).

Therefore it would appear that soon after is a relative term used to link related events. Since Mormon says that Christ’s appearance was soon after his ascension, we know Mormon considered the time that passed between them to be relatively short, but these words alone do not tell us whether Christ’s appearance followed his ascension by moments or by months. However, since we can infer from the context that Mormon intended the relative term soon after to allow for a sufficient period of time to reach the more specific ending of the year, we can conclude that the term soon after must refer, in this case, to a period of between roughly six months and a year.

Revelation Follows Diligent, Faithful Effort

Revelation from God is normally preceded by a diligent effort to obtain greater light and knowledge. Alma described this principle to Zeezrom, explaining that the Lord gives us more of his word “according to the heed and diligence” (Alma 12:9) that we give to the words we have already received. A gathering convened to gain a better understanding of the Atonement evidences the heed and diligence that must have been present among the multitude prior to Christ’s appearance, perhaps the greatest revelation in the entire Book of Mormon. Such heed and diligence are not readily apparent in a gathering where people are discussing changes to the land.

A similar example of heed and diligence is obvious in the account of Joseph F. Smith’s vision of the redemption of the dead. As President Smith diligently pondered the scriptures with a keen desire to know more, the Lord responded with a glorious vision (see D&C 138). Elder Scott D. Whiting explains that President Smith, like the Prophet Joseph Smith, understood “the powerful connection between the study of the scriptures and then pondering them as essential precursors to receiving personal revelation.” These essential precursors are also present in other scriptures. It is true that Enos received revelations while hunting, but only after the teachings of his father “sunk deep into” his heart and his soul “hungered” such that he prayed fervently to the Lord (Enos 1:3–5).

Moroni also teaches that “ye receive no witness until after the trial of your faith” (Ether 12:6). Interestingly, his very first example of this principle describes the multitude gathered at the temple in Bountiful. “For it was by faith that Christ showed himself unto our fathers, after he had risen from the dead; and he showed not himself unto them until after they had faith in him” (Ether 12:7).

When we assume that the phrase the great and marvelous change was more likely intended to refer to the Atonement, we learn new lessons from this passage. Nephi, the prophet at the time of Christ’s appearance, knew that faith precedes miracles. It is possible that he went to the temple together with a group of about 2,500 faithful men, women, and children (3 Nephi 17:25). Only these faithful people were blessed to hear the voice of Heavenly Father, to witness the Savior descending from heaven, to personally touch his resurrected body, to hear his words, and to receive his blessings that day. That the gathering at the temple was a meeting of the faithful, and not just a spontaneous (or even planned) discussion of the destruction seems to be the point that Moroni is making when he uses this account as his very first example of the principle that faith precedes the miracle.

In summary, the “great and marvelous change” mentioned in 3 Nephi 11:1 could refer to the destructions that had taken place or to the Atonement, with the concurrent change in the law that had happened at the same time as the destructions. There are however good reasons to prefer the latter meaning over the former one. The phrase great and marvelous occurs 25 times in the Book of Mormon.
In virtually every instance it is used to describe positive words, power, or events.26

The idea of the Atonement was powerful enough to temporarily capture the attention of the survivors of the destructions. In close proximity to chapter 11, 3 Nephi 9 contains Jesus’s explanation of the destructions, of the change from the law of Moses to the new law, and of the Atonement. The reaction of the people to Jesus’s words, as recorded in 3 Nephi 10:2, is astonishment, so much so that the people stopped “lamenting and howling for the loss” of their loved ones. In other words, during the three days of darkness the idea of the Atonement and the change of law apparently was enough to have momentarily stopped the people from mourning for their loved ones.27

Enough time had elapsed between the destructions at the beginning of the thirty-fourth year and the appearance of the Savior for the survivors to have ceased being impressed by the destructions and to have been more concerned with other issues. A plain reading of 3 Nephi 10:18 strongly suggests that the Savior appeared to the faithful Nephites in the second half of the thirty-fourth year, not near the beginning of the year when the destruction took place. Thus, the gathering at the temple would have been at least five months or even more after the destructions, a long enough time to have concluded the major rescue operations and initial consolidation of the infrastructures. In fact, the only reason to place the Savior’s appearance earlier in the year is to allow the “great and marvelous change” that the people were “showing one to another” to be the changes caused by the destructions.

The text mentions the “great and marvelous change” in the singular. If the discussion agenda of the people were the many destructions, then it might be expected that the plural changes would have been used. The use of the singular is more compatible with a discussion of the most singular event of all history, the Atonement, than with the multiple types of devastation that had occurred at the beginning of the year.

The nature of the gathering does not seem to have been spontaneous, as one would expect if the discussion were focused on the destructions. The fact that Nephi and all the brethren who would be called as disciples were present at the gathering suggests that the gathering was a planned meeting of the righteous survivors. That they had gathered at the temple in Bountiful suggests that the meeting was of a religious nature, though some temporal concerns may also have been discussed.

Most great theophanies occur only after considerable spiritual preparation and not during meetings, planned or otherwise, to discuss natural disasters. Moroni suggests that the theophany at the temple followed an exercise of faith. “It was by faith that Christ showed himself unto our fathers, after he had risen from the dead; and he showed not himself unto them until after they had faith in him” (Ether 12:7). Mormon’s description of the multitude “marveling and wondering” prior to the Savior’s appearance may describe their faithful thought, prayer, and pondering, not about the devastations, but about the things of eternity.

In short, on the one hand there is nothing in the text to suggest that the “great and marvelous change” had to refer to the destructions, other than that the disasters had happened at the beginning of that year. On the other hand, there is a lot of indirect evidence that the Atonement (and possibly the concurrent change in the law) was the topic of discussion months after the earlier destructions.

Notes
1. Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd ed., s.v. “marvelous.” A similar definition (“wonderful; strange; exciting wonder or some degree of surprise”) is found in the online version of Webster’s 1828 American Dictionary of the English Language at www.1828-dictionary.com (accessed 13 April 2010).
2. Swift destructions of the wicked are described twice in the Book of Mormon as “great and marvelous” (Alma 9:6 and Mormon 8:7), so it clearly can be appropriate to refer to destruction as great and marvelous. However, the word marvelous is never used to describe the destruction at the death of Christ, so it would be more likely that marvelous is used here to tie the phrase the great and marvelous change to the Atonement, a more recently mentioned change that caused great astonishment among the people than to tie it to a more distant set of changes that are never described as marvelous, but are consistently described as terrible.
3. Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd ed., s.v. “show.” Webster’s 1828 American Dictionary of the English Language indicates by order of appearance that the definition “to make to know; to cause to understand; to make known; to teach or inform” was slightly more common in America at the time the Book of Mormon was translated than the definition “to point out”, see www.1828-dictionary.com (accessed 13 April 2010).
5. Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd ed., s.v. “wonder.” Another definition says, “to feel some doubt or curiosity.” The connotation of doubt does not fit here, but does fit elsewhere. God tells those without faith, “wonder marvellously: for I will work a work in your days, which ye will not believe, though it be told you” (Habakkuk 1:5). Other passages that describe the marveling of those without faith include Helaman 7:15;
Mosiah 13:8; and Mormon 9:26–27.

6. *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v., “wonder.” A very abbreviated definition of the verb to wonder (“to be affected by surprise or admiration”) is found in the online version of Webster’s 1828 *American Dictionary of the English Language* at www.1828-dictionary.com (accessed 13 April 2010). Variants of the other nuances found in the modern dictionary were added in the next edition, published in 1913.


8. It could be argued that since nobody expected the Savior to arrive, the infirm would not have planned to attend. However, there are two significant reasons for the faithful who were lame, blind, or otherwise afflicted to have gathered to the temple that day. In the first place, the faithful infirm, upon hearing that there would be a religious gathering at the temple, may well have made a special effort to attend if they expected the prophet Nephi, who had healed others in the past (see 3 Nephi 7:19–22), to be there. Also, if a gathering were announced to discuss the Atonement, the faithful infirm would have been just as anxious to attend as anyone else and their faithful loved ones would have assisted them.


14. The author became aware of the concept that this conversation suggests the passage of time by reading John W. Welch, introduction to S. Kent Brown and John A. Tvedtnes, *“When Did Jesus Appear to the Nephites in Bountiful?”* FARMS Paper (1989), 5.

15. “The diversity of phenomena and locales mentioned in the account in 3 Nephi is considerable, indicating that the event probably affected a fairly large area and that the writer must have waited and accumulated information from around the land before making his record.” Bart J. Kowallis, “In the Thirty and Fourth Year,” 137–90.


17. The eighth chapter of 3 Nephi . . . documents the destruction of entire cities and the deaths of, in all likelihood, tens of thousands of people during a terrible storm and accompanying earthquakes. . . . Recovery from such events would most likely have taken months, if not years.” Benjamin R. Jordan, “Volcanic Destruction in the Book of Mormon: Possible Evidence from Ice Cores,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 12/1 (2003): 80.

18. There has been considerable discussion about the final sentence “Therefore for this time I make an end of my sayings” (3 Nephi 10:19), and its bearings on Mormon’s timestamp. But for the purposes of this paper, we will take it as it is written. See Smith, *Answers to Gospel Questions*, 4:27, and Tvedtnes, *Most Correct Book*, 235.


21. Christ ascended into heaven on more than one occasion. The Bible mentions at least two ascensions. The resurrected Lord told Mary Magdalene, “touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father” (John 20:17). The first ascension occurred later that morning. About forty days later, after talking with his apostles, “he was taken up; and a cloud received him out of their sight” (Acts 1:9) in a second ascension. The reference in 3 Nephi 10:18 might apply to either of these events, but is probably to the first. Book of Mormon ascension prophecies always mention the resurrection and ascension together (see Mosiah 15:8–9; 18:2; and Alma 40:20). The Lord’s voice during the darkness declared that he was resurrected (see 3 Nephi 9:22). The logical assumption would have been that he spoke from heaven after his resurrection and ascension. Mormon likely referred to the one ascension his people were aware of—the one that took place during the three days of darkness. It should be noted, however, that both James E. Talmage and Bruce R. McConkie have suggested that Mormon meant the later ascension. James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ* (Salt Lake City, Deseret Book, 1997), 724; Bruce R. McConkie, *The Mortal Messiah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981), 4307. In any event, even if Mormon were referring to the later ascension, Christ’s appearance “in the ending” of the year was also “soon after” that ascension.


23. Since the term soon after does not provide chronological precision, why did Mormon mention that the Savior’s appearance was soon after his ascension? Perhaps Mormon wanted to emphasize that the appearance fulfilled a prophesy that “Christ should show himself unto them after his ascension into heaven” (3 Nephi 11:12).

24. Although spiritual preparation is not obvious in the context of a discussion of changes to the land, Elder James E. Talmage wrote that “the prevailing spirit of the assembly was that of contrition and reverence” (Talmage, *Jesus the Christ*, 725). Similarly, President Spencer W. Kimball, who was, at the time, meditating and praying fervently for prophecies to be fulfilled (see D&C Official Declaration 2), taught that those who gathered at the temple were “people who had read the scriptures and realized they were about to be fulfilled.” Spencer W. Kimball, “Jesus the Christ,” *Ensign*, November 1977, 74. It appears that these men recognized that the meeting at the temple must have had a spiritual purpose.


26. The references are, excluding the verse under discussion, 1 Nephi 1:14 (twice), 2 Nephi 1:10; 4:17; Jacob 4:8; Alma 9:6; 26:15; Helaman 16:16 and 20; 3 Nephi 3:16; 5:8; 17:16 and 17; 19:34; 26:14; 28:31 and 32; 4 Nephi 1:5; Mormon 8:7 and 34; Ether 4:15; 11:20; 12:5; and 13:13. A few references are vague but only two, Alma 9:6 and Mormon 8:7, appear to refer to negative events.

27. In 3 Nephi 10:8 the survivors return to mourning the death “of their kindred and friends” during the remaining three days of darkness.

28. Some people read the verse to mean that the author, sometime at the end of the thirty-fourth year, will demonstrate that Christ did appear to the survivors. If the author of this verse is Mormon, as seems most likely, then this interpretation is impossible.
The nature of the early Christian prayer circle may be described by letting the oldest documents speak for themselves, beginning with the latest and moving backwards to the earliest. The rite was depicted for the last time in a document read to the assembled churchmen of the Second Council of Nicaea in AD 787 and condemned by them to the flames. Their objection was to parts of the text that proclaimed the gnostic doctrine of the total immateriality of Christ; on the subject of the prayer circle, which was strange to them, they preserved a discreet silence (see sidebar on facing page).1 Actually that part of it was an excerpt taken from a much older writing, the Acts of John, being the earliest apocryphal Christian Acta, dating at least to the early third century.

In reading this and other accounts of the prayer circles, we seem to enter, as Max Pulver expressed
Tarasius, the most holy Patriarch, said: Let us view the document as a whole as contrary to the Gospel.

The Holy Synod said: Aye, sir: and it says that the human nature was only an appearance.

Constantine the most holy bishop of Constantia in Cyprus said: This book is the basis of their unauthorized assemblies.

Tarasius the m. h. Patriarch said: These things are simply ridiculous.

Theodore the most God-beloved Bishop of Catana said: Yes, but this book has been undermining the authority [lit. wenching the vestments] of the Holy Church of God!

Euthymius the most holy Bishop of Sardis said: Their false sects [parasynagogai] had to have this book to back them up [lit. as witnesses].

The Entire Synod declared: All heresy depends on this book.

Tarasius the most honorable Bishop said: Alas, how many heretical books support their false teachings!

Gregory the most holy bishop of Neocaesarea said: But this book is worthy of all vile infection [miasma] and a disgrace.

[On a motion by Tarasius] the Holy Synod said: Let it be condemned [anathema] from the first letter to the last.

John a most revered monk and vicar to the Eastern Patriarchs said: Behold, blessed Fathers, it is most clearly demonstrated herewith that the leaders of the heresy which criticizes true Christianity are really the companions and fellow travelers of Nebuchadnezzar and the Samaritans, to say nothing of the Jews and Gentiles (Greeks), and also of those cursed atheists the Manichaeans, whose testimony they cite. . . . Let them all be anathemized along with their writings!

The Holy Synod said: Anathema! . . .

John the Reverend Monk . . . then made a motion: May it please the Most Holy and Oecumenical Synod to vote that no further copies be made of this pestilential book.

The Holy Synod voted: Let no copies of it be made; furthermore we herewith declare it worthy to be consigned to the flames.

[Here Peter, the secretary of the meeting, signs his name to the minutes.]

Then he began a hymn, saying,

“Praise (glory, doxa) to thee, Father,” and we standing in the circle, followed him with the Amen.

“Glory to thee Logos, glory to thee grace (charis, love). Amen.

Glory to thee spirit, glory to thee Holy One; praise to thy glory. Amen (or be praised [doxasou] with glory. Amen).

We praise thee Father; we thank thee Light in which there is no darkness. Amen.

And while we (all) give thanks, I say (explain):

I wish to be saved and I wish to save. Amen.

I wish to be delivered, and I wish to deliver. Amen.

I wish to bear wounds (titröskō) and I wish to inflict them. Amen.

MINUTES OF THE SECOND COUNCIL OF NICAEA IN AD 787

it, into “a strange space, a strange world—unlike ours—a world above the world that opens before us when we enter into the round dance of the disciples, led by Christ.” 2 The passage from the Acts of John reads as follows, after a notice on the extreme secrecy in which these things were guarded:

Before he was seized by wicked men and by the wicked serpent of the Jewish authorities (lawgivers, nomothetoumenoi), he called us all together and said: “Before I am given over to those men, let us sing a hymn (of praise) to the Father and so go forth ready to face whatever lies ahead.” Then he commanded us to form a circle, taking hold of each other’s hand; And he himself taking up a position in the middle uttered the Amen (formula) and “pay attention to me (epakouete mou—follow my instructions),”
I wish to be born and I wish to bring forth (bear). Amen.
I wish to eat and I wish to be eaten. Amen.
I want to hear and I want to be heard. Amen.
I want to comprehend (know), being all intelligence (nous). Amen.
I want to be washed, and I want to wash. Amen.
Charis (grace) (leads) dances in the chorus: I wish to pipe (Play the flute)—dance all of you! Amen.
And after having led us in other things in the circle (chorus), beloved, the Lord went out. And we went forth like lost wanderers or like people in a dream, fleeing our several ways.3
Augustine in his 237th Epistle quotes a slightly different version, calling it “a hymn . . . commonly found in the apocryphal writings,” which he gets from the Priscillians, who believed it to be “the hymn of the Lord which he recited in secret to his disciples, the holy apostles, according as is written in the Gospel: After he recited a hymn, he ascended the mountain” (see Matthew 26:30; Mark 14:26). Its absence from the New Testament, which was Augustine’s argument for rejecting it as spurious, was explained by the sectaries by quoting Tobit 12:7: “The ordinances of the King it is well to conceal, though it is praiseworthy to reveal the works of God.” Augustine labors to show line by line that the hymn is not heretical (as the Bishops of Nicaea found it 350 years later) but that each statement can be duplicated somewhere in the scriptures.4 The further back we go the more prominent becomes the rite in the church. The actual performance of such a rite is described in a very old text attributed to Clement of Rome and preserved in a seventh-century Syriac translation entitled “The Testament of Our Lord Jesus Christ as delivered orally by him to us the apostles after his resurrection following his death.”5 In celebrating the sacrificial death of the Lord (Pulver calls his study “The Round Dance and the Crucifixion”), the bishop would make the sacrifice, the veil of the gate being drawn aside as a sign of the straying of the former people; he would make the offering within the veil along with priests, deacons, authorized widows, subdeacons, deaconesses, readers and such as were endowed with spiritual gifts. As leader the bishop stands in the middle . . . [the men and women are assigned their places, north, south, east and west, around him]. Then all give each other the sign of peace. Next, when absolute silence is established, the deacon says: “Let your hearts be to heaven. If anyone has any ill feeling towards his neighbor, let him be reconciled. If anyone has any hesitation or mental reservations [doubts] let him make it known; if anyone finds any of the teachings incongenial, let him withdraw [etc.]. For the Father of Lights is our witness with the Son and visiting angels. Take care lest you have aught against your neighbor . . . . Lift up your hearts for the sacrifice of redemption and eternal life. Let us be grateful for the knowledge which God is giving us.” The bishop . . . says in an awesome voice: “Our Lord be [or is] with you!” And all the people respond: “And with thy spirit.”6
A sort of antiphonal follows with the people in the ring responding to the words of the bishop. Then the bishop begins the prayer proper, the people repeating these same things, praying. He thanks God for the plan of salvation, by which “thou hast fulfilled thy purposes by preparing a holy people, hast stretched forth thy hands in suffering, that they
who have faith in thee might be freed from such suffering and from the corruption of death.”

The identical idea is expressed in the prayer circle so fully described by Bishop Cyril of Jerusalem (ca. AD 350) which we have discussed elsewhere:

O strange and paradoxical thing! We did not die in reality . . . after having been actually crucified. Rather it was an imitation by a token. . . . O love of men overflowing! Christ really received the nails in his blameless hands and feet and suffered pain; while I, without any pain or struggle, by his sharing of suffering the pain enjoy the fruits of salvation!

Also in a long passage in the *Acts of John*:

You who dance, consider what I do, for yours is this passion of Man which I am to suffer. For you could by no means have understood what you suffer unless to you as Logos I had been sent by the Father. . . . If you knew how to suffer you would be able not to suffer. Learn how to suffer and you shall be able not to suffer.

Plainly the rite is intimately involved with the suffering of the crucifixion.

The Syriac prayer ends: “Grant, therefore, O God, that all those be united with thee who participate in these sacred ordinances,” And the people say Amen. Bishop: “Give us unity of mind in the Holy Ghost, and heal our spirits . . . that we may live in thee throughout all eternity!” Then certain ordinances are explained to those in the circle: “It is he who gave Adam . . . a garment and the promise that after death he might live again and return to heaven.” It is explained how Christ by the crucifixion reversed the blows of death, “according to the Plan of the Eternal Father laid down before the foundations of the earth.”

Still older are some documents designated as the *Gospel of Bartholomew*, belonging to that growing corpus of very early writings believed to contain instructions and teachings given to the apostles in secret by the Lord after his resurrection. On one occasion when the apostles were met together, “Bartholomew . . . said to Peter, Andrew, and John, ‘Let us ask [Mary] the favored one how she conceived the Lord and bore him.’” This was an embarrassing question, and no one was willing to approach Mary on the subject. “And Bartholomew said to Peter, ‘You are the President and my teacher, you go and ask her!’” But Peter says Bartholomew himself should ask, and after much hesitation he approaches Mary on behalf of the other apostles, and she agrees to enlighten them.

They form a prayer circle, “and Mary, standing before them, raised her hands to heaven” and began to call upon the Father in an unknown language, a number of versions of which are given.

When she finished the prayer, she said, “Let us sit on the ground [or stand quietly, *kathismen*, at the prepared place, *edaphos*—since it is plain that they remain standing]; come Peter, you are in charge. Stand at my right hand and place your left hand under my forearm; and you, Andrew, you do the same thing on my left side.”

John and Bartholomew are instructed to support or catch Mary if she faints, “lest my bones fail me when I start to speak.” This mutual support in the circle is necessary where some may be caught away in the Spirit and pass out.

In a variant version, when the brethren are met together on the Mount of Olives, “Peter said to Mary, ‘Blessed one, please ask the Lord to tell us about the things that are in heaven.’” But Mary reminds Peter that as Adam has precedence over Eve, so it is his business to take the lead in such things. Having taken position in the circle, Mary begins to speak:

When I was in the temple of God [a number of early sources report that Mary served in the temple, like Samuel, as a child] . . . there appeared to me one day a manifestation like an angel of unfamiliar aspect. . . . And suddenly the veil of the temple was rent and there was a great earthquake and I fell on my face unable to bear the sight of him. But he stretched forth his hand and raised me up, and I looked up to heaven and a dewy cloud came and [lacuna] moistened me from head to foot; and he wiped me off with his stole (robe, shawl) and said to me, “Greetings, thou favored one, chosen vessel!” and he grasped my right hand. And there was bread in abundance and he set it out on the altar of the temple [cf. the shewbread], and
he ate first and then gave to me. And he put forth his hand from his garment and there was wine in abundance, and he drank first and then gave to me, and I beheld and saw a full cup and bread. And he said to me, "In three years' time I shall send to you my Logos and you will bear a son, and through him all the creation will be saved. . . . Peace to thee, my beloved, forever and ever." And suddenly he was gone from me, and the temple was as it was before.

At this point the Lord himself appeared and commanded Mary "to utter no more of this mystery," while "the apostles were sore afraid that the Lord would be angry with them." The sacramental episode is close to the holy wedding in the temple described in the *Story of Joseph and Asenath*, giving some indication of the great age and wide ramifications of the motif. The account continues with Jesus giving the apostles further instructions in the ordinances, but the text is badly damaged. In one version Andrew accuses Mary of teaching false doctrine (an authentic human touch is the occasional reference in the early documents to a slight but uncomfortable tension between Mary and some of the apostles), but Peter reminds him that the Lord confided in Mary more than in any other, while Mary, upset, weeps and says, "Peter, do you think I am making all this up?"

In the book of *2 Jeu*, considered by Carl Schmidt to be the most instructive of all early Christian texts, the apostles and their wives all form a circle around the Lord, who says he will lead them through all the secret ordinances that shall give them eternal progression. Then "all the apostles, clothed in their garments, . . . placing foot to foot, made a circle facing the four directions of the cosmos," and Jesus standing at the altar [shoure] proceeded to instruct them in all the signs and ordinances in which the Sons of Light must be perfect.

Snatched at the last moment from the rising waters of the Aswan Dam in 1966 was the Kasr al-Wazz fragment, where we read,

We made a circle and surrounded him and he said, "I am in your midst in the manner of these little children." When we finished the hymn they all said Amen. Then he said other things and each time they must all answer Amen.

"Gather to me, O holy members of my body, and when I recite the hymn, you say Amen!"

The *Acts of John* describes the circle as being in motion, a sort of dance, and earlier texts than the Nicaean version add a cosmic touch to the formula:

"I would pipe: Dance all of you. I would mourn: mourn all of you!"

One Ogdoad sings praises with us. Amen. The number 12 dances on high. Amen. All that which is above participates in the circle. Amen." [Or—(alternate version)] "He that danceth not knoweth not what is being done. Amen. . . ."

"Now if you follow my dance See yourself in Me who am speaking, and when you have seen what I do, keep silence about my mysteries."

It is doubtless to this rite that Clement of Alexandria refers in the second century when he writes, "Come to our mysteries and you shall dance with the angels around the Unbegotten and Eternal one and only true God, while Logos of God sings along with us . . . the great High Priest of God, who prays for men and instructs them."

Clergymen of every denomination have vied in fervor in condemning all dancing as of the devil, yet strangely the only passages they can find to

Many of the diagrams in *2 Jeu* are circular, such as this twelve-sided one.
use from early Christian writings never condemn it outright. The favorites are Augustine's dictum: “Melius est enim arare quam saltare” (“It is better to plow than to dance”), and Chrysostom's, “Where there is dancing, there is the devil also,” but the churchmen who quote it never finish what Chrysostom has to say, as he continues, “God gave us feet . . . not to cavort shamefully . . . but that we may some day join in the dance of the angels!” To which angelic dancing the great Basil also refers as part of the Christian tradition: “What is more blessed than to imitate the dance of the angels here on earth?” Ritual dancing was condemned by the fathers not because it was new, but because it was old in the church—it smacked of the old Jewish heritage. Both Augustine and Chrysostom condemn the old Jewish dancing as part of the Sabbath rejoicing.

Were it not for a violent prejudice against dancing, the long debates of the scholars as to whether the participants in the prayer circle really danced or not would be pointless, since the earliest texts clearly say they did dance. But what kind of a dance? In the classic work on the Therapeutae, Philo, writing at the time of Christ, tells how men and women in the circle, following the lead of an exarchos or choral instructor, would chant hymns with antiphonal responses in a manner resembling both the “rapt enthusiasm” and the circular motion of ancient choric dances, “hands and feet keeping time in accompaniment.” The Therapeutae were an Essene group related both to the Egyptian communities of desert sectaries and to the people of the Dead Sea Scrolls—one could hardly accuse them of frivolity.

The Greek and Russian Orthodox churches still preserve the ring dance around the altar in that most conservative of rites, the wedding ceremony, when bride, groom, and priest all join hands and circle the altar three times; Hans Leisegang connects this definitely with the old prayer circle.

About 1860, Gustav Doré created this image from Dante’s Paradiso canto 28, where Dante and his guide Beatrice behold the “sparkling circles of the heavenly hosts.”
the coronation of the Byzantine emperor, everyone danced around the emperor’s table three times. The most common representations of ritual dancing in early Christian art show pious damsels dancing around the throne of King David. And the Jewish apocryphal writings often depict a situation best described at the opening of the Book of Mormon, where Lehi sees God on his throne “surrounded with countless concourses of angels in the attitude of singing and praising their God” (1 Nephi 1:8). Surrounding concourses are concentric circles, and the singing and praising are never static: it is a dynamic picture with everything in motion, as Lehi sees it, and as the cosmic pattern of the thing requires. The prayer circle is often called the chorus of the apostles, and it is the meaning of chorus which can be a choir, but is originally a ring dance, as Pulver designates it in the title of his study. The prayer was a song such as Paul prayed and sang in the darkness of a prison: “About midnight they prayed a hymn to God” (see Acts 16:25). And if they sang in chorus, would they not dance? Philo says that the true initiate during the rites moves “in the circuit of heaven, and is borne around in a circle with the dances of the planets and stars in accordance with the laws of perfect music”—the music of the spheres.

The most puzzling reference to the dance is also the oldest one, that in Matthew 11:16–17: “[This generation] . . . is like unto children sitting in the markets, and calling unto their fellows, and saying, We have piped unto you, and ye have not danced; we have mourned unto you, and ye have not lamented.” It was taking liberties with this strange passage “as a pretext” that the early sectaries justified the dancing in their prayer circles, according to L. Gougaud. In the text read at Nicaea the Lord says to the circle, “Amen! When grace comes I want to pipe and you all dance.” But in a circle where they are already singing, the dancing is only to be expected in view of old Jewish customs—and this episode takes place in the upper room at the Last Supper, the Passover. Why should that playful game be introduced on that most solemn of occasions? In Matthew 11:7, Jesus is speaking about John the Baptist’s followers and begins, “concerning John, What went ye out into the wilderness to see?” This is a challenge to the desert sectaries. They were out
there, as the *Community Rule* so clearly tells us,34 to “prepare the way” (see Matthew 11:10). He speaks of John’s great mission as the herald of a dispensation, an “Elias, which was for to come” (Matthew 11:14), and then addresses the initiates: “He that hath ears to hear, let him hear” (v. 15), describing the present generation as those rejecting John’s message (v. 12)—they would accept neither John nor the Lord (vv. 18–19): they refused to dance to their playing, nor would they mourn with them for the sins of the world (vv. 16–17). The knowledge is properly guarded—“he that hath ears to hear, let him hear” (v. 15), a hint to the initiated that it is meant only for them. In the *Acts of John*, the Lord says, “Grace is dancing. I would pipe: Dance all of you. I would mourn: mourn all of you!” The connection with Matthew is undeniable, and again the limitation of the real meaning to the inner circle: “He that does not move in the circle knows not what is happening. Amen.” An important clue is the likening to little children in Matthew 11:16. The Kasr al-Wazz fragment says, “We made a circle and surrounded him and he said, ‘I am in your midst in the manner of these little children,’ he added, ‘Gather to me, O holy members of my body, and when I recite the hymn, you say Amen.’”35

In both the *Acts of John* and the *Apocryphon of John*, Jesus appears at the same time as a grown man and a little child; and in a famous infancy account when he and John embrace as small children, they fuse into one.36 Is it a mere coincidence that he repeatedly speaks of the little children and the dancing when declaring unity with John? The central act of the prayer circle was prayer, and it was “as he was praying in a certain place, when he ceased, one of his disciples said unto him, Lord, teach us to pray, as John also taught his disci-ple’s” (Luke 11:1, emphasis added). Again in close comparison with John, he teaches them the Lord’s prayer. Joachim Jeremias, in a study of that prayer, notes the significant fact that in it Christ addresses the Father as *Abba*. And that, Jeremias observes, “was something new,” using an Aramaic word “used by a small child when addressing his father. . . . Jesus’ contemporaries,” Jeremias writes, “never addressed God as Abba”37—that was little child’s talk, addressing God as a real, intimate father, as a trusting little child would. Little children do not stand on their dignity when they are happy; their singing and dancing is spontaneous. Some of that spontaneity and simplicity carries over into the later cult of the Christ child, but in the early Christian

---

Around 1520, when Albrecht Altdorfer wanted to express the joy of heaven at the birth of the Virgin Mary, he chose to depict happy, singing children dancing in a circle.
texts it is the clue to an authentic situation. In the Testament of the Twelve Apostles, the Lord, appearing to the people after the resurrection just before producing bread and wine miraculously for the administering of the sacrament, has a conversation with a little child. In exactly the same situation in the Book of Mormon the resurrected Lord blesses the little children “one by one,” but he begins his discourse to the Nephites by telling them three times that no one can approach him except as a little child (see 3 Nephi 9:22, 11:37–38). The prayer circle is the nearest approach to the Lord that men make on earth—and they can approach him only “as little children.”

The prayer spoken in the circle differs every time; it is not strictly prescribed. The one leading the prayer expresses himself as the Spirit moves him, and the others either repeat each line after him (which would not be necessary if they all knew it by heart) or add an Amen at the end of each phrase, which is the equivalent of reciting the prayer for oneself. The most significant example of this freedom of composition is certainly the Lord’s Prayer. “Originally,” wrote Jeremias, “the doxology, ‘For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever,’ was absent,” yet it is found in the oldest church order, the “Teaching of the Twelve Apostles.” Has someone taken liberties with the sacred canon, and its no fixed form est times, the doxology had no fixed form and its precise wording was left to those who prayed. Only later on . . . it was felt necessary to establish the doxology in a fixed form,”39 which explains why the prayer has different forms in Matthew 6:13 and Luke 11:4. Also, the older Aramaic form of the prayer required forgive “our debts,” which the Greek of Luke changes to forgive “our sins.”40 This vindicates both the inclusion of the doxology in the Lord’s prayer in 3 Nephi 13:9–13 and the reading there of “debts” instead of “sins.”

Almost all accounts mention the introduction of the prayer as being in a strange language, a triple formula of words resembling each other. Thus in I Jeu after they form the circle, Jesus begins a hymn which appears to be meaningless, a speaking in tongues, a glossolalia.41 In the Pistis Sophia also, the Lord, having formed the apostles and their wives in a circle around him and “taking the place of Adam at the altar, called upon the Father three times in an unknown tongue.”42 Elsewhere the text explains how while they stood “all in white, each with the cipher of the name of the Father in his hand,” Jesus prayed in a strange language, beginning with the words Iaō, aōi, òia! which, we are told, meant “Hear me Father, the Father of all fatherhood, boundless light!” According to our source, “This is the interpretation: Iota [Ι], because everything came out of (began with) it; Alpha [Α] because everything will return to it; Omega [Ω] because everything is process (lit. the fulfilling of all fulfilling).”43

In another version, when the Lord “ordered the Twelve to make a prayer circle and join him in a triple Amen and hymn to the Father and Creator of all treasure,” he began by saying “iē, iē, iē, [calling upon the Father] . . . to create beings to be the Lords of every treasure, and as such to bear the name of their Father Jeu, who has replenished the treasures with countless spirits and degrees of glory.”44 When Abraham, according to an old and highly respected source, “rebuilt the altar of Adam in order to bring a sacrifice to the Eternal One,” as he had been instructed by an angel, he raised his voice in prayer, saying: “El, El, El! El Jaoel! [the last meaning Jehovah] . . . receive the words of my prayer! Receive the sacrifice which I have made at thy command! Have mercy, show me, teach me, give to thy servant the light and knowledge thou hast promised to send him!”45 Abraham was following the example of Adam, who prayed to God for three days, repeating three times the prayer: “May the words of my mouth be heard! God, do not withdraw thyself from my supplication! . . . Then an angel of the Lord came with a book, and comforted Adam and taught him.”46 When Adam and Eve found themselves cut off from the glory of the Lord, according to the intriguing Combat of Adam, they stood with upstretched hands calling upon the Lord, as “Adam began to pray in a language which is unintelligible to us.”47 The so-called Coptic Gnostic Work purports to give us Adam’s words on the occasion as being composed of the elements lō-i-α and i-oy-ēł, meaning “God is with us forever and ever,” and “through the power of revelation.”48 The Jewish traditions indicate that the story is no gnostic invention, though of course mysterious names and cryptograms are the stuff on which human vanity feeds, and every ambitious sectary would come up
with his own words and interpretations. Yet, though none of these writings may be taken as binding or authentic, taken all together they contain common elements which go back as far as the church of the apostles. When Mary asks the Lord, “Tell me your highest name!” “He, standing in the midst of a cloud of light, said, ‘He, Elohe, Elohe, Elohe; Eran, Eran, Eran; Rafon, Rafon, Rafon; Raqon, Raqon, Raqon,’” etc. Such mysteries are just the sort of thing unqualified persons love to play around with, and various gnostic groups took fullest advantage of them. But again, the Jews are way ahead of them, as we see in the huge catalogues of mysterious angelic names in such works as 3 Enoch.

What Henri Leclercq calls “that magnificent gesture” of raising both hands high above the head with which those in the prayer circle began their prayer was, as he notes, a natural gesture both of supplication and submission. It was specifically a conscious imitation of the crucifixion, and that brings to mind the significant detail, mentioned by the synoptic writers, that the Lord on the cross called upon the Father in a strange tongue: those who were standing by, though Aramaic was supposed to be their native tongue, disagreed as to the meaning (see Mark 15:33–36), and indeed the manuscripts give many variant readings of an utterance which the writers of the Gospels left untranslated, plainly because there was some doubt as to the meaning. It recalls the cry of distress of David in Psalm 54:2: “Hear my prayer, O God; give ear to the words of my mouth,” and in Psalm 55:1–4: “Give ear to my prayer, O God. . . . Attend unto me, and hear me. . . . My heart is sore pained within me: and the terrors of death are fallen upon me.”

Friedrich Preisigke, studying the same gesture among the Egyptians (it is none other than the famous ka-gesture, ),$ notes that it represents submission (the “hands up” position of one surrendering on the battlefield) while at the same time calling the attention of heaven to an offering one has brought in supplication. He also points out that the early Christians used the same gesture in anticipation of a visitation from heaven, to which they added the idea of the upraised arms of the Savior on the cross. We have already mentioned the prayers of Adam and Abraham calling upon God in a strange tongue in the midst of darkness and distress. Abraham, says the Zohar, received no message until he built an altar and brought an offering, “for there is no stirring above until there is a stirring below . . . we do not say grace over an empty table”—or altar.$ Enoch was another who as he prayed “stretched forth his arms, and his heart swelled wide as eternity,” and to comfort him God sent him the vision of Noah’s salvation (see Moses 7:41–67). Noah also cried out in his distress, “calling upon Enoch three times and saying, Hear me! hear me! hear me!” Let us also recall that when Mary led the prayer circle of the apostles “she raised her hands to heaven, and began to call upon the Father in an unknown tongue.”

Suffering is an important theme of the ancient prayer circle. The rite is always related to the crucifixion, according to Pulver, which was anticipated by it in the upper room, for “the core of the Lord’s Supper is the idea of sacrifice.” In the rites “the believer must incur the same sufferings as his god, and therefore he must mourn with him”—hence the peculiar passage in Matthew 11:16–17. Ignatius’s Letter to the Romans shows that “real suffering . . . alone enables one to become a disciple, to learn and gain experience.” For Ignatius, the believer must
repeat the destiny of his God, he must become an imitator of God, *mimētēs tou Theou.* This is done ritually as is plainly stated by Cyril of Jerusalem and the author of the Testament of Jesus Christ, cited above: “and thou hast stretched forth thy hands in suffering, that they might be freed from such suffering” by an act of imitation.60

The clearest expression of the idea is given in that archetype and model of all initiates and suppliants, Adam. As he and Eve were sacrificing on an altar “with arms upraised,” an angel came down to accept the sacrifice, but Satan intervened and smote Adam in the side with the sacrificial weapon. Adam fell upon the altar and would have died were it not that God intervened and healed him on the spot, declaring that what Adam had suffered so far was acceptable to him as a true sacrifice, being in the similitude of his own offering: “Even so will I be wounded!” 61

The prayer asks for light and knowledge as well as other aid, and the answer is a teaching situation. Thus the angels who came down in answer to Adam’s threefold appeal, “May the words of my mouth be heard!” etc., came with a book, and comforted Adam and taught him. 62 Or, in another version, when Adam and Eve prayed at their altar three messengers were sent down to instruct them. 63 The Lord himself appears to teach Abraham as he is studying the heavens, according to Clement, 64 and the valuable Testament of Abraham begins with his receiving instruction at an altar on a holy mountain, surrounded “by men whom I will show you, how they will form a circle around you, being on the mountain of the altars.” 65 Indeed, the main theme of those many ancient writings called Testaments, and attributed to almost every patriarch, prophet, and apostle of old, is the journey of the purported author to heaven, during which he receives lessons in the most advanced theology, history, and astronomy.

Of particular interest is the Testament of Job, whose age has been vindicated by the discovery of fifth-century Coptic fragments of it. 66 "Make a circle around me, my children, form a circle around me that I may show you what the Lord and I did" (lit. what the Lord did *met’ emou*—along with me). Thus he begins with what seems more than an admonition to gather round. But when he begins explaining things to his daughters, strange ordinances emerge. When the famous three daughters of Job complain to him that their seven brothers received a greater inheritance than they, he assures them that he has reserved for them a better heritage. 67 He then tells one of the girls to go to the “celle” and fetch three golden caskets containing their inheritances. In each one is a mysterious article of clothing designated as a *chorda*—a string or thread, but of such cunning design as to defy description, being of no earthly design, but of heaven “giving off lightning-like emissions like sunbeams.” 68 The girls are told to put them on like shawls “so that it would be with them throughout the days of this earthly life.” 69

One of the women asks, disappointed, “Is this the heritage you told us about?” In reply Job tells her that these *chordai* will not only preserve them in this life “but will also lead you into a better world, even the heavens.” 70 He explains that the Lord gave him the three bands “on the day when he decided to show me mercy,” healing him of the afflictions of the flesh, and placing the item before him saying: “Arise, gird up thy loins like a man! I shall ask you certain questions, and you shall give me certain answers!” 71 When Job tied them on, all sickness left him and his body became strong and his mind at ease. 72 “And the Lord spoke to me in power, showing me things past and future.” 73 He tells the girls that they will have nothing to fear in this life from the adversary, because these things they wear are a “power and a protection (*phylaktērion*) of the Lord.” 74 Then he tells them to arise and gird themselves to prepare for heavenly visitants. 75

Thus it was that when one of the three daughters... arose and clothed herself (*periezōsen*)—showing that this was a garment and more than a string) according to her father’s instructions, she received another heart and no longer
thought about earthly things. And she began to utter words (apephthenxato—make a clear and important statement) in the angelic sounds (phône), and sent up a hymn to God using the manner of praising of the angels. And as she recited the hymns, she let the spirit be marked (kecharagmenon) on her garment.76

Here the “string” or chord is definitely called a garment—stolê. The next girl girded herself likewise and recited the hymn of the creation of the heavens speaking “in the dialect of the Archons,” making her a true Muse.77 The third girl “chanted verses in the dialect of those on high . . . and she spoke in the dialect of the Cherubim,” her words being preserved as The Prayers of Amaltheias-Keras—a most significant name.78

In the opening lines of the Testament, Job tells his three daughters and seven sons to form a circle around him (the second son is called Choros). “Make a circle around me (perikyklôsate me—he repeats the word) and I will demonstrate (hypodeixô, a very explicit word) to you the things which the Lord did with me (epoiesen met’ emou, i.e., which we did together. It does not mean what he did to or for me!). For I am your father Job who was faithful in all things (en pasei hypomonei) and you are of the chosen and honored lineage (genos) of the seed of Jacob”; i.e., he gives them a patriarchal blessing—his Testament.79

Then Job recounts an adventure quite like that of Moses in the first chapter of the Book of Moses, after which Job suddenly appears as the humiliated king who regains his glory, the “Job who ruled over all of Egypt,” no less!80 He shows his royal visitors his real throne, which is in heaven,81 and they become upset and angry about his illusive “eternal kingdom,” which he assures them is the only stable state of existence.82 “If you do not understand the functions of the body,” he asks them, “how can you hope to understand heavenly matters?”83 In the midst of his terrible afflictions he calls upon the Lord with upraised hands: “They lifted me up, supporting my arms on each side, and standing thus I first of all gave thanks, and then after a great praying I said to them: Lift up your eyes to the East” and there they saw Job’s dead children crowned in the presence of the Heavenly One84 and his wife who had just joined them: she having died of sorrow and exhaustion. According to an old legend, Satan had appeared to her as a baker, and when she asked for a scrap of bread to feed herself and her ailing husband, reminding him of his former generosity to one and all, Satan coolly replied that he would give her bread when she gave him money, piously assuring her—“You can have anything in this world for money!”85 Eliphaz and the other friends were forgiven by God for resenting Job’s claim (which is also Enoch’s) that God had given him a right “to his own throne in the heavens,”86 and in his joy Eliphaz led another prayer circle: “He began a hymn, the other friends repeating after him along with their supporters (troops) near the altar.” He began by casting out Satan.87 “Behold, the Lord has drawn near, the Saints now stand prepared, their crowns of glory awaiting them in advance (proegoumenôn).”88 “After Eliphaz finished with the hymn, all the others repeating after him (epiphônountôn) while moving in a circle (Kraft: ‘and circling about’), we arose and went into the city to the house where we live and carried on festivities rejoicing in the Lord.”89 Thus the story ends as it were in the upper room where it began (cf. Matthew 26:30 and Mark 14:26).

In 2 Jeu the apostles and their wives form a circle around Jesus specifically “so that he can teach them the ordinances of the treasury of light, they being conducted by him through all the ordinances and thereby learning to progress in the hereafter.”90 At Mary’s request on behalf of the apostles the Lord specifies the progressive order of “all ordinances (mystēria), all knowledge (instructions—sooun), seals (spragidês), tokens (psephoi), supplications (or forms of address—epikal-esthai), degrees (or positions—topoi).”91 And in the Acts of John he tells those in the circle, “What you do not know, I myself will teach you.”92 The
whole situation centers around the Last Supper and belongs to the church from the beginning.93

In a Bartholomew text, the Lord takes the Twelve up into the mountain and standing in their midst gives them certain signs and tokens and then departs.94 The gnostics exploit and distort this situation in their usual way: Thus when an angel comes to rescue Norea in response to her prayer, he says, “I am El-El-Eth . . . who stands before the Holy Ghost (obviously a Hebrew source—the Shekhina). I have been sent to converse with you and to save you from the Adversary. I will instruct you concerning what you should know.”95

Indeed, in various accounts Satan tries to get in on the act. We have seen how he smote Adam, interrupting his lessons at the altar. And when Abraham prayed at his altar, “Have mercy, show me, teach me, give to thy servant light and knowledge thou hast promised to send him!” Satan promptly appears on the scene with an insolent “Here I am!” And as he began to teach Abraham, a true messenger from God arrived and cast Satan out and proceeded with the proper instructions.96 In 2 Jew the Lord warns the men and women in the circle that the ordinances in question are very secret, because Satan wants them distorted and misrepresented, as they surely will be if they go abroad in the world.97 Divulging those very things, it will be recalled, was the sin for which the Watchers in Enoch’s day were destroyed.98 According to Rabbi Eleazer, Abraham built three altars in order to instruct his children and fortify them against apostasy.99

As to the teacher, sometimes it is Jaoel or Jehovah as “the heavenly choirmaster,” and sometimes it is Michael or Gabriel. As often as not it is three Sent Ones.100 But of course all the knowledge is sent down from God. “Abraham . . . would utter prayers on certain occasions while sacrificing, thus invoking the ‘One God.’”101 This was the beginning of Jewish liturgy. Clement, however, takes it back a step farther: “Adam finding he needed help, solicited divine assistance with prayers and sacrifices. . . . That was the beginning of the ordinances of God.”102 According to the Moslem commentators, all creatures form in circles around God to be taught, suggesting the gathering of all the beasts at life-giving water holes in the desert.103 Leisegang finds that throughout the ancient world the prayer circle is for the instruction of initiates.104 We may even go beyond his range to the medicine circles of Indians all over America.105 Among the Plains Indians, as described by Hyemeyohsts Storm,

the people all sit quietly together and learn the four harmonies of balance. Each of the people can now perceive the others, and they realize that they are all Teachers. They put their arms around each other and care for each other. Then they begin to dance towards the Flowering Tree together in a Great Circle.106
The “four harmonies” mentioned in the last quotation appear throughout the world in the ring dance. The number of those forming the circle is, among the pagans, almost always sixteen, as Leisegang shows; with the Christian circle it is twelve, combining the three levels and the four cardinal points. In the Jewish *3 Enoch* the three levels of the twelve produce rings of thirty-six. In *1 Jeu*, “At every station (or step, *topos*) there are twelve springs of reason . . . and in each every father has three faces, so that the fathers that encircle Setheus have 36 faces. . . . At every level (*taxis*) there is a treasure containing 12 heads . . . and in each topos there are always three Watchers to instruct.” As might be expected, the number 360 is constantly mentioned and pedants and mystics had a field day shuffling and rearranging their cosmic circles, as did mathematicians and astronomers—our circles still have 360 degrees. If the gnostic can tell us in a typical text that “the nous of the universe has 12 faces and the prayer of each one is directed solely towards him,” while in the midst stands an altar upon which is the Only Begotten Word, that is not so far from the impeccably orthodox Ignatius of Antioch, for whom the dance of twelve “is in imitation of God.”

Monuments of great age and imposing majesty in many parts of the world suggest the prevalence of the main ideas. Thus when Heliodorus went far up the Nile to Meroë, describing conditions during the Persian occupation of the fourth century bc, he saw a council of holy men sitting in a circle of twelve with three altars in their midst. As an eyewitness to the operation and as a personal friend of the moment of the performances, he was able to believe that, in a circle of twelve he saw a council of holy men sitting in a circle of twelve with three altars in their midst.
to the emperor, Eusebius was able to describe the arrangement of Constantine’s tomb and the mystique behind it. “He built a martyrium in memory of the 12 Apostles in the city bearing his name.” It was a golden superdome, open to the sky and utterly dazzling. A ring of twelve columns with relics of an apostle deposited at the foot of each represented the holy chorus. Then Constantine had a happy afterthought: He had twelve reliquaries in honor and memory of the sacred chorus of the apostles placed in the circle of the rotunda, each at the foot of a column; and in the center of this he put his own casket . . . so that, as he explained it, by a clever calculation any honor shown to an apostle would be automatically focused—as if by a burning glass, on the object in the center—the remains of the emperor. Thus that smart man characteristically “utilized the intercession of the apostles to his own advantage.”

The plan was carried out in the still-surviving mausoleum of Constantine’s daughter Constantia, with its twelve double columns in a circle around the sarcophagus or altar, and from the same period in the Tomb of Diocletian at Split and many other imposing monuments dedicated to harnessing the power of the heavens through the prayer circle. There is a definite cosmic connection here. “What is eternal . . . is circular, and what is circular is eternal,” write Giorgio de Santillana and Hertha von Dechend, quoting Aristotle with the comment, “That was the mature conclusion of human thought over millennia. It was . . . an obsession with circularity.” While Plato bids us behold “immortal souls standing outside of heaven (as) the revolution of the spheres carries them round, and they behold all things beyond,” First Clement, among the oldest and most esteemed of Christian writings, declares that “the sun and the moon and the chorus of stars according to his decree in harmony and without any deviation circle in their appointed orbits.” The life of the soul is related to the motions of the heavenly bodies in the Twelfth Thanksgiving Hymn of the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the remarkable tenth column of the Community Rule is an ecstatic song with instrumental accompaniment and dance in the temple attuned to the circling of the spheres and the revolutions of the times, seasons, and festivals. It begins:

At the beginning of the rule of light in its circling, at the gathering to the appointed place, at the beginning of the watches of darkness, when its treasury is opened and poured out upon the earth, and in its revolving and drawing together from its source of [or for the sake of] light, when the outpouring of the light shines forth from the holy abode[,] . . . I will sing what I learn and all my harping is for the glory of El, and all the sound of my harp shall be attuned to his holiness while the flute of my lips shall strictly conform to [lit. be laid to the line of] his instruction. . . . I will prescribe the limits from which I will not depart. . . . I will gladly receive what he teaches me. . . . As soon as my hand and feet are stretched forth I will call upon (abarekh) his name at the beginning both of the going out and the coming in.

Here the singer compares his solitary song to the strict discipline and instruction of the prayer circle in the temple, for example, “I will make the heave-offering with my lips” (line 6), that being a temple ordinance.

With the fall, according to a Hebrew Enoch fragment, Adam tried his best to behold again the glory of the Shekhina, but had to settle in his fallen state for “the circle of the sun which all behold in glory as the sign of the Shekhina with 6000 prophets circling around it.” In the various ascension texts we are taken again and again through the various levels of concentric rings, “the order [taxis] of holy angels in their ring-dances [chorostasian, lit. standing properly in a ring],” Isaiah is instructed in his ascension not to worship at any of the six central thrones at any of the chorostasias or singing praise-circles, circles he must pass on the way up, since all the others are simply focusing their praise on
“him who sitteth in the Seventh Heaven.” Such a mounting up is described by Philo:

The soul...is borne ever higher to the ether and the circuit of heaven, and is carried around with the dances of the planets and fixed stars in accordance with the laws of perfect music, reaching out after...the patterns of the origins of things of the senses which it saw here (on earth, while) longing to see the Great King himself.

Philo is attempting to combine Jewish lore with the mysteries of Egypt. Pulver notes that the eight-circle is commoner than the twelve and “occurs also in early Christianity whenever it discloses an Egyptian influence.” Certainly what is purportedly the first and oldest shrine in Egypt, the Abaton, tomb of Osiris and first place of settlement with its great ring of 365 altars and its three levels, etc., suggests the circle of 365 aeons that marks the place of the Adam of light with its three sides or directions, and even more does the arrangement of the ideal temple in the newly published Temple Scroll from the Qumran Cave 1. Plutarch explains certain mysteries on the authority of the Egyptians in a combination of earthly and heavenly geography that is typically Egyptian: The worlds are so ordered that “one always touches the other in a circle, moving as it were in a stately ring-dance,” which takes place surprisingly within a triangle, “the foundation and common altar of all these worlds, which is called the Plain of Truth, in which lie the designs, moulds, ideas, and permanent examples or samples of all things that ever were or shall be.” Some have suggested that the three-cornered plain in question is the Nile Delta, and it is not surprising that Plutarch’s image of things was Christianized by an Egyptian, Clement of Alexandria: “That which Christ brings forth (is) transformed into an Ogdoad [eight gods of creation]...and through three names is liberated as a triad. When you bear the image of the terrestrial world then you also bear the image of the celestial.”

It is because each prayer circle is a faithful reproduction of the celestial pattern that impulses can be transmitted from one to the other by all who are in a receptive state; the thoughts of those in the circle are concentrated as in a burning-glass, or, since the thing most emphasized as the indispensable requirement of the circle is the absolute purity of mind, concentration of thought devoid of any reservations or distractions, and since the communication is beamed from one Treasury of Light to others, the analogy of the laser is quite striking. The three who were sent to teach Adam and Eve the order of prayer gave them the pattern “after the manner of what is done above in the Treasury of Light.” If that sounds too gnostic, the same image meets us in the above-mentioned tenth column of the Community Rule. In the Book of Adam, Adam is endowed with the image and likeness of the Lords (above), while Eve is the Queen of this world...I (God) provided [sent] the three visitors (genies) for their protection, and taught them the holy mysteries...and the prayers which they must recite...and I told them further, “I have provided for you this earth, in a dwelling-place fit for eternity. And then sitting near them I taught them the manner of calling upon the Lords to bless them.”

According to the Hasidic teaching, “the order of prayer is in accordance with the emanation of the Worlds,” since through prayer we become “attached...to Him Who is blessed” and rules the worlds. In orthodox Judaism “the Talmud represents the Beth Din or Tribunal of Heaven, as a circle, in the centre of which, God is seated,” and the earthly Sanhedrin as a reflection of it. The sympathetic vibration makes the individual also a microcosm responding to the cosmic forms, as we see in the Odes of Solomon, which echo the Dead Sea Scrolls with the ecstatic declaration, “The Lord is the Crown upon my head, I will not be shaken. Even though the universe is...
shaken, I will remain standing. . . As I strike the chords of the lyre the Spirit of the Lord speaks in my members.”

In forming the prayer circle one excludes the outer world, as families holding the Passover feast form closed circles with their backs all turned on the outer world, or as the true initiates form the inner or “esoteric” circle, leaving all the rest to the outer or “exoteric” world. The Lord explains this to the apostles, telling them of higher prayer circles as he takes each by the hand and introduces him into “the First Mystery,” explaining, “That is why I said to you that you were chosen out of the world.”

It was from such a circle in heaven that God at the creation of this earth chose those who would be his rulers in it, according to 1 Eue, the Apocalypse of Abraham, and the Book of Abraham 3:23: “And God . . . stood in the midst of them, and he said: These I will make my rulers; for he stood among those that were spirits.”

The special object of Leisegang’s study, an alabaster Orphic bowl depicting a prayer circle, bears an inscription beginning with “an invocation of the celestial force which moves the outermost sphere, encompassing all the other spheres of heaven”; the third line reads, “because thou movest in a circle,” and “exhorts the readers to invoke the divine cosmic power, the sun which rules the infinite cosmic space over the heaven of fixed stars . . . [carrying] the reader’s thoughts back to the primordial age before the birth of the cosmos.” For the rites in the circle “take place in the supercelestial space beyond the starry heavens.” Leisegang concludes that the many pagan versions of the thing “all bear witness to the mysteries, to the diverse yet always interrelated forms of the original Orphic-Dionysian cult . . . that extended deep into the Christian world.” His final word is that “all these rites were in some way related, though today the nature of the connection can only be surmised.” They go much farther back than the Orphic-Dionysian tradition, however, since the old Babylonian hymn of creation, the Enuma Elish, tells how at the creation God drew “the universal figure,” the quartered circle, which is repeated at every level of existence, with the idea that whatever is done on one level or world is done in heaven also.

The only proper place for such activities is the temple, since that edifice is expressly designed for taking one’s bearings on the universe in every sense. “The temple is the center from which light goes forth, and which at the same time draws everything to itself and brings all things together.” Its ordinances are those prescribed after the heavenly pattern (see Hebrews 8:5). We have written extensively elsewhere on the “hierocentric” layout of ancient temples, cities, camps, and other ritual complexes—of their universality and antiquity there can be no doubt. Nor is there any shortage of early writings to tell us what they signified to their builders.

In 3 Enoch, the Rabbi Ishmael mounting up to heaven must pass through six hekaloth, “chamber within chamber,” the Halls being arranged in concentric circles. “Arriving at the entrance of the seventh hekal,” Rabbi Ishmael reports, in the opening lines of his epic:

I stood still in prayer before the Holy One, blessed be He, and, lifting up my eyes on high (i.e., toward the Divine Majesty), I said: “Lord of the Universe, I pray thee that the merit of Aaron . . . who received the crown of priesthood from [in the presence of] Thy Glory on the mount of Sinai be valid for me in this hour” [no unclean thing can take this step otherwise].

One thinks of Moses also “clothed upon with glory” on the mountain (Moses 7:3; 1:2, 9). Rabbi Ishmael having reached the door to the presence of God must become a crowned king and a priest before he can enter. He asks for this because, like others who
make this supreme prayer, he seeks to be delivered from his lower condition, that Satan (Qafsiel) “may not get power over me nor throw me down from the heavens”—that is, even as they were, for on meeting Adam in the dark and dreary world, Satan boasts and taunts him, that he has caused him to be cast out of paradise even as Adam had caused his expulsion from heaven at the time of the creation. In short, Ishmael utters the classic prayer of Adam, Moses, Abraham, and others and receives the proper reply when God immediately sends “Metatron, his Servant the angel, the Prince of the Presence” to instruct him and bring him farther on the way.

“Forthwith the Holy One . . . sent to me Metatron, his Servant the angel, the Prince (sar) of the Presence,” who came joyfully to Ishmael, grasped him firmly by the right hand in the sight of all, and said, “Enter in peace before the high and exalted King and behold [comprehend] the picture [likeness] of the Merkabah.” The use of special words (hitsaqel, “comprehend” for “see,” demuth, “likeness” or “picture” instead of simply saying God, and Merkabah [that elaborate circumlocution]) all save the writer from further obligation to say just what it was Rabbi Ishmael saw—since it cannot be described to those mortals who have seen nothing like it. The same caution is expressed in Lehi’s report that “he was carried away in a vision, even that he saw the heavens open, and he thought he saw God sitting upon his throne” (1 Nephi 1:8). Rabbi Ishmael also reports, like Enoch (and he is reporting
all this to explain what it was that *Enoch* experienced), that God had given him a throne “similar to the Throne of Glory [cf. Moses 7:59]. And He spread over me [before me, on my account—*ali*] a curtain [veil] of splendour and brilliant appearance, of beauty, grace and mercy, similar to the curtain of the Throne of Glory; and on it were fixed all kinds of lights in the universe.” 148 “The Curtain,” comments Odeberg on this, “regularly represents the recording of the Divine decrees with regard to the world, the secrets of the world’s creation and sustenance, etc., in short, the innermost Divine Secrets”149—the secrets, that is, of this earth and of all other “lights in the universe.” We pointed out in the *Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri* that ancient temple veils represented the point or act of transition between man’s sublunary life and the vast open reaches of the immensity of space beyond, into which one passes by passing through that veil.150 They were cosmic veils, appropriately adorned, as Rabbi Ishmael reports, with astronomical marks and emblems.
Such a veil was discovered in a cemetery of Astana in central Asia by Sir Aurel Stein and has been hailed by de Santillana and von Dechend as done “in true archaic spirit (which means that only hints are given, and the spectator has to work out for himself the significance of the details).”¹⁵³ It dates from the seventh century, was found in position suspended from pegs on a north wall; it was found near the body of a Chinese man dressed in mixed style, including Sassanian Persian. “Near the head lay also the crown-shaped paper hat.” An accompanying document says “that several sutras were copied and recited by monks” at the funeral of the man’s wife; she was buried on 8 December 667, her husband in 689.¹⁵² A mixture of cultures is apparent—the Buddhist sutras, Sassanian art, and Chinese elements (the Chinese having moved in quite recently, AD 640), and the ritual with which the parties are so much concerned may have been somewhat eclectic, even with influences from Nestorian Christianity. In the veil in question, what first catches the eye are the signs of the square and the compass, boldly drawn as they are held up in the right and left hands respectively of the lady and her husband. To quote the official description: “Silk . . . perhaps originally white. Subject the legendary Emperor Fu-hsi with his consort Nü-wa facing each other” about three-quarters life-size. “The bodies rise from a continuous flounce-like short white skirt, . . . their two inner arms stretched stiffly and horizontally towards each other, . . . the hand of each appearing under the opposite armpit of the other shows that they are embracing . . . Fu-hsi holds in his uplifted left hand a mason’s square; . . . Nü-wa holds in her right hand a pair of compasses. . . . From below issue two intertwined serpentine bodies which coil around each other”—the well-known caduceus of life and death, signifying that all things have their opposites (cf. John 3:14, etc.). The whole design is completely surrounded with diagrams of the constellations, while above the heads of the two figures “is the sun disc, white with red spokes,” surrounded by twelve smaller circles, each connected to the next by a straight line to form an unbroken circle except at the very top where it is left open—plainly the circle of the months of the year.¹⁵¹ Fu-hsi is not only the first king but also the patron of artisans, the creator-god. As de Santillana and von Dechend explain it, “The two characters surrounded by constellations are Fu Hsi and Nu Kua, i.e., this craftsman god and his paredra [consort], who measure the ‘squareness of the earth’ and ‘the roundness of heaven’ with their implements, the square with the plumb bob hanging from it, and the compass,”¹⁵⁴ as they lay the foundations of the world. So the Pharaoh would go out by night with the Lady Seshat to lay out the foundation of a new temple by taking direct bearing on the stars with the proper instruments. The Lady was his one indispensable assistant on the occasion.¹⁵⁵ Let us recollect that in the creation hymn of the Community Rule the singer promises to gauge all his doings and mark the course of his ring dance to the music of the spheres with the plumb bob and line.¹⁵⁶ Among the constellations on the Astana veil is the Great Bear, indicating the center of the universe, the omphalos or umbilicus mundi, the navel of the cosmos.¹⁵⁷ Thus square, compass, and polestar designate the veil as the cosmic gate, curtain, or barrier to worlds beyond.

Rabbi Ishmael recited his prayer just before passing through to the throne which was behind a curtain, and he also informs us that God “made for me a garment of glory,”¹⁵⁸ bearing the same markings as the veil and having the same cosmic significance, which reminds one of the close affinity between robe and veil in the very early Christian Hymn of the Pearl¹⁵⁹ and also recalls how the bishop leading the prayer circle in the Syriac Testament of Our Lord “stands with upraised hands and offers a prayer at the veil,” after which he proceeds “to make the sacrifice, the veil of the gate being drawn aside.”¹⁶⁰ Augustine’s version of the Priscillian prayer circle ends with the apparently incongruous statement, “I am the Gate for whoever knocks on me,” which Augustine explains in terms of Psalm 24:7, referring to the veil of the temple.¹⁶¹ The fullest expression of that altruism by which one saves oneself in saving others is a simple but ingenious device employed in the prayer circle; it was the “diptych,” a sort of loose-leaf notebook or folded parchment placed on the altar during the prayer. It contained the names of persons whom the people in the circle wished to remember. The diptychs are among the oldest treasures preserved in the oldest churches. The name means “folded double,” though the documents could be folded triple or quadruple as well if the list of names was very long.¹⁶² The prayer for the people on the list was never part of the later mass but was always a
litany, a special appeal for certain persons: “By litanies one intercedes for certain classes of persons.”163 The original diptychs were the consular diptychs, carried around by top Roman officials—the mark of the busy pagan executive in high office. According to Leclercq, when bishops became important figures in city politics, high government officials would present them with diptychs “as flattering presents.”164 As notebooks they were convenient and practical—just the thing for keeping and handling important lists of names, and to such a use the Christians gladly put them.165 “In the place of the diptychs properly so designated [those used in government business] there were substituted at an early time notebooks or leaves of parchment which one would place on the altar during the celebration of the Mass. . . . Gradually that practice [the reading of the names (out loud)] was given up, [and] the priest merely referred to all the faithful whose names were written down on the diptychs or the leaves taking the place of diptychs.”166 The names in the diptych show “by this meeting of individuals the close bond of communion and love which united all the members of the church.”167 The practice of laying names on the altar is of unknown origin though it is very old and, it is agreed, may well go back to the days of the apostles.168 Confusion with the old Roman pagan custom of reading off the names of donors from such lists caused it to be repeatedly denounced by the early fathers in the West;169 but the problem never arose in the East since donor lists were unknown there until Constantine introduced them from Rome.170 “The laying of a small tablet containing the names is to this day the practice in the Western Syrian rite.”171 At first the list of names was read aloud before being placed on the altar, but as that took up too much time (one of the surviving lists has over 350 names) the reading was phased out; “the list could be placed on the altar without any vocal reading of the names.”172 The common practice of scratching one’s name on the altar to assure inclusion in the prayers forever after may go back to old Jewish practice, for in 3 Enoch when the ministering angels utter the prayer (the Qaddish) “all the explicit names that are graven with a flaming style on the Throne of Glory fly off. . . . And they surround and compass the Holy One . . . on the four sides of the place of His Shekhina.”173 Since the purpose of the prayer circle was to achieve total unity of minds and hearts, “keeping in mind the absent ones,” it was natural to include the dead as well as the living in remembrance. One prayed for himself “and also for all my relatives (consanguinitate vel familiari-tate) and for all the Saints of the Church of God, as well as for those who died in the faith, who are recorded in my Book of Remembrance.”174 “We pray for ourselves, our brothers and sisters . . . and for those who have paid their due to death, whose names we have written down or whose names appear on the holy altar, and all who stand in the circle whose faith and devotion are known to thee.”175 But in the earliest times the lists of the living and the dead were kept strictly separate “in two separate books.”176 For the work for the dead was something special and apart. “We remember the dead,” wrote Epiphanius in the fourth century, “(1) by performing ritual prayers, (2) by carrying
out certain ordinances, and (3) by making certain special arrangements (oikonomias)." 177 In the Clementine Recognitions when Clement asks Peter, “Shall those be wholly deprived of the kingdom of heaven who died before Christ’s coming?” he receives a cautious answer: “You force me, Clement, to make public things that are not to be discussed. But I see no objection to telling you as much as we are allowed to.” He tells him of the spirits of the dead “retained in good and happy places” but refuses to explain how they are to be redeemed. 178 Likewise when Mary asks the Lord on behalf of the apostles how “a good man who has completed all the ordinances” may save an undeserving relative who has died, she is told that the good man must repeat all the same ordinances again while naming “the soul of such-and-such a person, on whom I am thinking my heart (mind),” whom he thus mentally accompanies through “the proper number of circles (kykloi) in the transformations (metabolai) as he becomes baptized and sealed with the signs (psëphoi) of the kingdom . . . and so advances.” 179 What these circles are the reader may decide for himself. “We remember not only the saints,” writes the Areopagite, “but our parents and friends, rejoicing in their condition living,” while the memento for the dead was some other thing else, requiring, of course, the actual speaking of names on the altar was not a fixed place where you rest for a time, and the famous Stowe Missal says the members pray for all who are remembered in my Book of Remembrance.” 182 In his Confessions, Augustine requests, “Whoever reads this, please remember my mother and father at the altar,” for which purpose he gives their full names. 185

Augustine makes a sharp “distinction between the martyrs to whom one prays and the living for whom one prays.” 186 Typically Roman, Innocent I condemned the old Gallic and Celtic practices of praying “for all the faithful of this place as well as our kinsmen and servants in this place” and limited the prayer to the official dead and recognized saints of the Roman church though the order was not enforced outside of Italy until Charlemagne cracked down. 187 In the Eastern churches the lists and the prayers were always separate; it is specifically for the living, Chrysostom says, “that we pray standing with upraised hands.” 188 As Cyril of Jerusalem explains it, “In the circle we pray for those who are sick and afflicted; in short, we pray for whoever is in need of help.” 189 Cyril does not mention the list of names on the altar in this account, but he does elsewhere, referring to this very custom and specifying separate lists for the living and the dead. 190 In the Eastern churches “they prayed mentally for the living,” while the memento for the dead was something else, requiring, of course, the actual speaking of their names at some time. The prayer uttered for those whose names were on the altar was not a fixed formula, to judge by one old rubric giving instructions: “He (the leader) joins hands and prays for a while (no set limit); then he proceeds with his hands stretched out (extensis, extended): and all those standing in the circle join in.” 191

The physicist Fritjof Capra in his “Reflections on the Cosmic Dance” 192 calls attention to that “system of archetypal symbols, the so-called hexagrams,” formed of trigrams which were “considered to represent all possible cosmic and human situations” in the religious philosophy of the Far East. To convey their message “the eight trigrams [are] grouped around a circle to the natural order,” the circle among other things “associated with the cardinal points and with the seasons of the year.” These rings, based on multiples of six and eight,
he compares with the latest schemes and formulas of advanced physics for interpreting the universe. Not only is the basic circle of eight hexagrams in the *I Ching* (Book of Changes) “vaguely similar” to the way in which “the eight mesons . . . fall into a neat hexagonal pattern known as the ‘meson octet,’” but also the great ring dance, “the sixty-four hexagrams . . . the cosmic arch-types on which the use of the *I Ching* as an oracle book is based,” presents “perhaps the closest analogy to the S-matrix theory in Eastern thought,” both being as near as the mind of man can get to explaining reality and matter.¹⁹³

The various patterns and designs produced by ancient Oriental religion and modern Western science do look a lot alike, and this is no accident, according to Capra, because they both represent the same reality, though why that should be so, and exactly what the reality is, and how the two systems of thought are related is beyond human comprehension at present and may remain so forever. What bids us take both systems seriously, however, is that each is not only perfectly consistent within itself, but that without any collusion both turn up the same series of answers. So there must be something behind it. This reminds us of Leisegang’s discovery that “all these rites were in some way related, though today the nature of the connection can only be surmised.”¹⁹⁴

The many ring dances to which he refers were also cosmic circles and must somehow fit into the same picture.

Yet one closes Capra’s book, and a lot of others, with a feeling of disappointment. Somehow this Mahayana (Great Vehicle) fails to get off the ground. What is wrong?

In giving us a picture of the entire universe, including ourselves, both the Eastern sages and modern physics, covering the same ground in different ways, seem to leave out something very important. They give us the stage without the play. Granted it is a magnificent stage, a universal stage with self-operating scene shifts providing constant display of ever-changing light, color, and sound, filling the beholder with genuine religious awe. Still the more we see of it the more restless and disturbed we become. We are taken on a tour of the studio, but that is all. The sets are overpowering; they include the most dazzling space-science spectaculars, but our tour group becomes restive. Where are the actors, where is the show, what is the play? What is supposed to be going on here? The cosmic dance of particles whose nature we can never hope to grasp is not ultimately satisfying, even after we are
The whole thing rests in the end not on reason or experience, we are repeatedly told; nothing can be described or defined, but all depends on feeling and intuition. But if that is so, must we not have respect for our own deep-seated feelings in the matter? The fact is that we cannot escape that haunting discontent; there is surely more to the play than the properties. The prayer circles, Christian and Jewish, give us assurance of that.

The old Christian prayer circle does not pretend, as the Orientals do, to embrace the whole universe and to sum up all knowledge; it is merely a timid knocking at the door in the hopes of being let into what goes on in the real world. Capra completely ignores the Near Eastern and old European schemes and patterns in his survey, and they are quite as rich and ingenious and probably more ancient than their Far Eastern derivatives. The Jewish and Christian systems are late and confused as we get them; they wander in an apocalyptic mist that cannot distinguish between revelation and speculation, but the dominant idea is that there is more, much more, going on than we have yet dreamed of, but that it is all on the other side of the door. The Oriental shuts his eyes in mystic resignation and with infinite humility makes sure that we are aware of his quiet omniscience. He knows all there is to know, and that is the message.

It is Joseph Smith’s prayer circle that puts it all together. Not only did he produce an awesome mass of purportedly ancient writings of perfect inner consistency, but at every point where his contribution is tested—and since he affects to give us concrete historical material as well as theology and
cosmology it can be tested at countless points—it is found to agree with other ancient records, most of which are now coming to light for the first time. The prayer circle is one example of that; we may not discuss his version too freely, but we have seen enough of the early Christian prayer circle to justify some important conclusions:

1. It always appears as a solemn ordinance, a guarded secret and a “mystery” for initiates only. This does not express a desire to mystify but the complete concentration and unity of the participants that requires the shutting out of the trivial and distractions of the external world.

2. It always takes place in a special setting—the temple. Even in Christian churches of later time there is a conscious attempt to reproduce as nearly as possible the original temple situation.

3. The words and gestures do not always make sense to outsiders—only “he who has ears to hear” may hear, and only “he who joins in the circle knows what is going on.” This is because the prayer circles are integral parts of a longer series of ordinances that proceed and follow them; taken out of that context they necessarily seem puzzling.

4. Though private prayer circles would seem to be out of the question (quackery, magic, and witchcraft made use of them), the members of the circle are never those of a special social rank, family, guild, or profession—they are ordinary men and women of the church, with a high priest presiding (see sidebar on pages 89–94, “Coptic Liturgical Text,” with commentary beginning on page 90).
In the Cairo Museum, written on a huge shard of red pottery, is an ancient Coptic liturgical text which provides a remarkable link between ancient Egyptian and early Christian beliefs. It is a Christian “Book of Breathings” with the name of Osiris (representing the initiate) replaced by that of Adam, as if the “Egyptian Endowment” were organically linked to the Christian. Equally instructive is the predominance of the prayer circle in the text and the cosmic significance given it. As its modern editor, L. Saint-Paul Girard, notes, it has eight main divisions.1

A. Calling upon God
Line 1. (The Tau-Rho sign).2
Hail El! Fathouriel,3 who giveth
2. strength (comfort?), who gives replies [antiphonei] to the angels!4
3. Hail Adonai (My Lord), Hail Eloi (My God), Hail
4. Abrasax! Hail Iothael!5 Hail
5. Mistrael (for Mizrael) who has looked upon
the face of the Father6
6. in the power of Iao!7 KHOK.8

B. Solemn adjurations; Adam as the type of initiate
I adjure you (i.e., put you under covenant).9

Commentary for this sidebar begins on page 90.

Notes to “The Early Christian Prayer Circle”
7. Rahmani, Testamentum Domini Nostri, 38, 40–42.
8. Cyril of Jerusalem, Catechesis XX, Mystagogia II, de Baptismi Caeremoniis (Catechetical Lecture on the Rites of Baptism), in Patrologiae Graecae (hereafter PG) 33:1081; also in Hugh Nibley, The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 2005), 520.
17. The Son uttered on the cross, namely:  
Eloi, Eloi, A-
18. hlebaks atōnē\(^{37}\) That is to say, God, my God, why \(dj\ou\) hast thou forsaken me?
F. The hymn  
19. Holy, Holy, Holy! Hail David the father (ancestor)  
20. of Christ! He who sings praises (psalms) in the Church of the First-born (pl.) of heaven, Hail  
21. David, theopa [tor?] (ancestor of the Lord), of the joyful ten-stringed lyre\(^{18}\) who sings 22. within (the veil of) the altar\(^{19}\)  
23. the joyful one (either David or the altar). Hail Hormiosiel, who sings within the veil

G. Prayer circle  
24. of the Father\(^{20}\) They repeat after him, those who are at the entrances (gates,  
25. doors) and those who are upon the towers (i.e., the watchmen at the gates). And when they hear what he says, namely the tribes (or gates?) who  
26. are within the Twelve Worlds, they joyfully  
27. repeat it after him;\(^{21}\) Holy, Holy, One (or Jesus) Holy Father.\(^{22}\) Amen,  
28. Amen, Amen. Hail Arebrais in heaven and earth!

29. Then you (pl.) bless (praise God, pray), KOK (meaning that at this point certain actions are performed). Hail O Sun! hail ye twelve little children  
30. who overshadow (protect?) the body of the Sun\(^{13}\) Hail ye twelve phials  
31. filled with water. They have filled their hands, they have scattered abroad  
32. the rays of the Sun, lest they burn up the fruits  
33. of the field.\(^{24}\) Fill thy hands, pronounce blessing upon this  
34. cup. KOK [another ordinance]

H. Entering the Presence  
Hail ye four winds of heaven!  
35. Hail ye four corners of the earth! (the inhabited earth, \(oikoumenē\))\(^{25}\)  
36. Hail ye hosts (\(stratia\)) of heaven (i.e., the stars)! Hail  
37. thou earth (land) of the inheritance  
38. Hail O garden (or power, authority) of the Holy Ones (saints)  
39. [of] the Father\(^{26}\) One holy Father  
40. Holy [Son] Holy Ghost  
41. Amen.

Commentary to \textit{“Coptic Liturgical Text”}  
1. L. Saint Paul Girard, \textit{“Un fragment de liturgie magique copée sur ostrakon,” Annales du Service

\begin{itemize}
\item[18.] 2 Jeu 54 (40), text in Carl Schmidt, \textit{Gnostische Schriften in koptischer Sprache aus dem Codex Brucianus} (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1892), 99. Cf. German trans., 193.
\item[19.] 2 Jeu 66–67 (53g), in Schmidt, \textit{Gnostische Schriften in koptischer Sprache}, 114–17, quotation from p. 114; cf. trans., 204. Both 1 and 2 Jeu contain sketches showing various arrangements of prayer circles. Other texts, e.g., the \textit{Gospel of Bartholomew} and \textit{Pistis Sophia}, p. 358, make it clear that the facing in four directions denotes standing in a circle.
\item[20.] Kasr al-Wazz fragment, p. ii–end, from photographs kindly lent to the author by Professor G. A. Hughes at the University of Chicago at the time of their discovery in 1966.
\item[21.] Pulver, \textit{“Jesus’ Round Dance and Crucifixion,”} 186, notes that mourning here denotes that the initiate is expected to suffer after the manner of the leader. The word for “mourn” in Matthew 11:17 is \textit{koptomai}, literally, to inflict wounds upon oneself.
\item[22.] Variants in Montague R. James, \textit{Apocrypha Anecdota}, II (Cambridge: University Press, 1897), 3:10–16.
\item[23.] Clement of Alexandria, \textit{Cohortatio ad Gentes (Exhortation to the Nations)} 12, in PG 8:241.
\item[24.] Augustine, \textit{Enarrationes in Psalmos (Expositions on the Psalms)} 111, 2, in PL 37:1172; quoted differently along with other texts on the same subject, by Gougaud, \textit{“Danse,”} 250.
\item[28.] Philo, \textit{On the Contemplative Life} xi. The passage as rendered by F. H. Colson in the Loeb Classical Library edition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), Philo series, 9:165–69, reads: “After the supper . . . they rise up all together and standing in the middle of the refectory [cf. Qumran!] form themselves first into two choirs [choroi, circles], one of men and one of women, the leader and precentor [\textit{exarchos}] . . . being the most honored amongst them. . . . Then they sing hymns to God . . . sometimes chanting together, sometimes . . . antiphonally . . . Then . . . they mix and both together become a single choir, a copy of the choir set up of old beside the Red Sea.” This is the way Augustine and Chrysostom describe the Sabbath dancing of the Jews (see preceding note), but Philo being himself a Jew found nothing shocking in it.
\item[29.] Gougaud, \“Danse,” 250, giving these and other examples of ancient dances surviving in the Christian church. Hans Leisegang, \“The Mystery of the Serpent,” in Campbell, \textit{Mysteries}, 244.
\item[30.] Constantine Porphyrogenitus, \textit{De Caeremoniis Aulae Byz-}
\end{itemize}
3. Fathouriel for Bathuriel, from Hebrew Bait- uri-el, as such, it also designates the victory of light over darkness as represented in the performance of the mysteries.

2. The earliest signs of the cross were formed by a Greek chi (\(\chi\)) with the vertical shaft of a Greek rho (\(\rho\)) or iota (\(\iota\)) through the middle, or by a rho with a horizontal bar below the loop. They were interchangeable and are found in varying combinations, being closely associated also with the “Crux Ansata,” the famous Egyptian ankh or life symbol: \(\dagger\). For many examples, see Henri Leclercq, “Chrisme,” in DACL 3:1481–534. The classic Latin cross does not appear in the West until the fourth century and like the others seems to have come from Egypt, Leclercq, “Chrisme,” 1485–89, and Leclercq is puzzled “that the Christians adopted a sign which ran a serious risk of being misunderstood,” ibid., 1483. Not to worry: these symbols had conveyed for centuries the very ideas which the Christians wished them to represent in a new context, just as they borrowed current alphabets and other symbols of general acceptance to convey their own peculiar ideas. The symbol prefacing this note is both the monogram of Christ and the earliest symbol of the crucifixion; as such, it also designates the victory of light over darkness as represented in the performance of the mysteries.


4. Girard alters \(\text{eb-}\text{ti}\ \text{phonē}\ \text{nenankelōs}\ (“who gives a voice to the angels”) to \(\text{ef}\ \text{an}\text{tiphoinei}\ \text{nenangelos},\) “whose voice replies to the angels,” because he cannot imagine the meaning of the former. Girard, “Fragment de liturgie,” 66 n. 2. The first suggests the creation hymn, the second the exchange of expressions at the conclusion of the rites (lines 24–27 below).

5. The names of Adonai, Eloi, and Abraxas are the most common found on those carved gnostic gems called “Abraxas” or “Abrasax.” Henri Leclercq, “Anges,” in DACL 1:2087–88. Such gems representing “the world of Alexandria and the Egyptian-Greek magical papyri” consist of “stones which figure in superstition as well.” Reiss, “Abrasax,” in Pauly-Wissowa, Realencyclopädie der classischen antiquae (On the Ritual of the Byzantine Court) 1.65, in PG 112:568; 1:83, in PG 112:689.


34. IQS 8:12–16.

35. See above, notes 20 and 21.


41. Pulver, “Jesus’ Round Dance and Crucifixion,” 175.


KHOK occurs in lines 29 and 32 as KOK. It is introduced by the name of Meithra.

6. Mizrael is the angelic embodiment of divine authority, which enables him to see behind the veil. Girard, “Fragment de liturgie,” 66 n. 5, cit. Schwab, Vocabulaire de l’angelologie.

7. Iao is the common equivalent for Jehovah and God. Leclercq, “Abrasax,” 147, 141.

8. KHOK occurs in lines 29 and 32 as KOK. It introduces a new phase or change of scene and indicates that at this point certain actions take place. Our text, in the manner of a prompting sheet, contains only words recited, without describing acts or rites performed but only the point at which they take place. The Coptic word KOK is the common word for “disrobe” and related concepts, and may indicate changes in costume.

9. Ti-örk erō-tn, the erō- indicating “the person adjudged,” here in the plural, while the n- is the thing sworn by; see W. F. Crum, Coptic Dictionary (Oxford: Clarendon, 1939), 529. To adjure is to place another under solemn obligation by entering a covenant with him.

10. Titarko means literally “give the hand to” in token of covenant. Wilhelm Spiegelberg, Koptisches Handwörterbuch (Heidelberg: Winter, 1921); “make to swear, adjure, entreat.” Crum, Coptic Dictionary, 430.

11. Tōōbe e- as here means to set a mark or stamp upon, to impress upon, to leave a mark on. For vitals the original has t-tōt, meaning size, age, form, which Girard emends to tēlot, meaning “Kidney, also other internal organs” (possibly from the root tēlodh, bend, be interlaced). It is the Hebrew kliyot, “the reins, kidneys, inward parts.” Crum, Coptic Dictionary, 813.

12. P-hēt, heart mind, thought reason; cf. the Greek, stēthos, the breast as the receptacle of principles of thought, and Hebrew lēb, the heart “as the seat of the various feelings, affections and emotions . . . and of the moral sentiments.” Benjamin Davies, ed., A Compendious and Complete Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament (Boston: Bradley, 1875), 315.

64. Recognitiones Clementinae (Clementine Recognitions) 1:32–33, in PG 1:226–27.
65. Apocalypse of Abraham 12; cf. OTP 1:695.
70. Testament of Job 47:3.
73. Testament of Job 47:10–11.
74. Testament of Job 47:11–12.
75. Testament of Job 47:12.
13. The verb for covenant is here *sh(e)p tōre*, vb. intr., “grasp the hand, be surety for, undertake”; Crum, *Coptic Dictionary*, 425; with the object *mmof* (as here) it means “be surety for.” *Hn n-tčid m-pěňōt* Girard renders “entre les mains de son Pere,” i.e., “in his embrace.”

14. *Tahof erat.f* can mean either “set up,” “establish,” “cause to stand,” or “meet with,” “reach another.”

15. The Coptic word *pîtes* Girard reads as Greek *pithos*, vessel, though he finds the idea “bizarre.” Early Christian and Jewish writers, however, speak of the living body (which is the subject of this passage) as a vessel (*angeion*). Barnabas calls the living body “the blessed vessel” (to *kalon skêus*), Barnabas, *Epistola Catholica* (Catholic Epistle) 21, in *PG* 2:727–82. On the other hand, *pithos* is an alternative spelling for *pithanos*, a Greek equivalent for *pithanos*, “obedient,” “receptive,” a fit epithet for an initiate.

16. Girard makes no attempt to translate *sousa*, but since this is a cry for help, one thinks of the Greek imperative *sôz* (mid. *sôzou*, aorist *sôson*) or aorist md. *sōsai*, meaning “to rescue.” Some maintain that the name of *Abrasax* is derived from *Habros* and *Sao*, “gentle Savior” or “le magnifique sauveur.” Leclercq, “Abrasax,” 129.

17. Is the unfamiliar Araic term the subject of mystic speculation or just confusion? Girard restores it to *elemâ sabaktani*. The trouble seems to be the scribe’s insistence on reading the last three syllables as the familiar *Adonai* (atône).

18. Girard alters *thea to theo* and borrows the *pat-* from the next word to get *theopator*, “l’ancêtre du Christ,” an epithet of David in Byzantine liturgy. *Pâti. têťittharašē* is divided into [pa] [ti-kithara [nn] raše *tamēt nkap*, the harp of joy of ten strings. The ten-stringed harp is a cosmic concept, ten being the perfect number of the Pythagoreans.


20. Harmosiel is the exalted angel who sounds the trumpet and shares with Mizrael the privilege of beholding the Lord behind the veil. The Priscillianists were accused of worshiping him.


22. *Is per hakios* for the Greek formula *Heis Pater Hagios*, though *Is* is the common writing for Jesus, and such an identity is monophysite, making Jesus identical with the Father. As it is, Girard must insert another *hagios* to make a proper *trishagion*.

23. Girard: “Salut, o douze petits enfants qui protegez le corps du soleil.” Though this can also be read
“minor servants,” the reference to the little children in our prayer circle situation recommends the former. Also the preposition *mmof* would justify “screen from him the body of the Sun.” Walter Till, *Koptische Grammatik* (Leipzig: VEB Verlag Enzyklopädie, 1970), #258. See the following note.

24. The imagery of the closing passage belongs to the twelve water jugs and reference to the watering of vegetation recall the peculiar arrangements of the prayer circles in 1 and 2 Jeu. According to *Pistis Sophia*, p. 84, the earth must be shielded from the rays of the sun by veils or curtains lest all life be consumed. Today, the filtering of the sun’s rays by layers of atmosphere of various particles is held to be essential to sorting out life-giving rays from deadly ones and thus making vegetation and other life possible upon the earth.

25. The imagery of the closing passage belongs to the coronation rites. The four corners of the earth motif is basic; see Hugh W. Nibley, “Facsimile 1: By the Figures,” in *An Approach to the Book of Abraham* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 2009), 296–313. Paulinus of Nola associated the coronation and universal rule with the types of crosses discussed above, note 1; *Poema* (Poem) 19.638–41, in PL 61:546; a teaching confirmed by Ambrose and Jerome.

26. *P-tōm* means either garden or authority; both are appropriate, the garden as the sanctified inheritance of the Saints, the authority being that with which the exalted “Holy Ones of the Father” are invested. The original text, however, has *p-šōm*, which also makes sense, since it means “summertime,” i.e., “the Summertime of the Just” when the Saints receive their celestial inheritance, e.g., the Shepherd of Hermas.
180. Anonymous (attributed to Origen), Commentarius in Job (Commentary on Job) 3, in PG 17:217.
182. See above, note 171.
188. Chrysostom, Commentary on Matthew 48, in PG 58:491.
193. Capra, Tao of Physics, 270.
The Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship encourages and supports research on the Book of Mormon, the Book of Abraham, the Bible, other ancient scripture, and related subjects. The Maxwell Institute publishes and distributes titles in these areas for the benefit of scholars and interested Latter-day Saint readers.

Primary research interests at the Maxwell Institute include the history, language, literature, culture, geography, politics, and law relevant to ancient scripture. Although such subjects are of secondary importance when compared with the spiritual and eternal messages of scripture, solid research and academic perspectives can supply certain kinds of useful information, even if only tentatively, concerning many significant and interesting questions about scripture.

The Maxwell Institute makes reports about this research available widely, promptly, and economically. These publications are peer-reviewed to ensure that scholarly standards are met. The proceeds from the sale of these materials are used to support further research and publications.
Hugh Nibley explores the use and purpose of the prayer circle in early Christianity.