

# *Study, Faith, and the Book of Mormon*

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President Holland, fellow members and friends of the Brigham Young University community, I am humbled by the invitation to speak to you this morning. And I pray, as we pause for these few minutes, that the Lord will bless our minds and spirits as he has so many times before in devotionals on this great campus.

As I speak today, I consider my two principal credentials to be my testimony of the divine origins of the Book of Mormon and my unrelenting desire to know more about this wonderful and wondrous book. Over the last twenty years, I have made the Book of Mormon a matter of continual study, and the book has rewarded me far beyond anything I fully deserved and far beyond anything I could ever have imagined. That's the way I have always found it with the Lord—you can never fully anticipate his ways or really deserve all his blessings.

My desire this morning is to present a few ideas about current Book of Mormon research, and I hope and pray you will find them interesting and enlightening.

## **A Bounteous Book**

We have heard much about the Book of Mormon in recent years. A person would need

to be both deaf and blind not to have noticed that President Benson has made it a main theme of paramount importance. The significance of the Book of Mormon to us as a people, both individually and collectively, can hardly be overstated. "Take away the Book of Mormon and the revelations," Joseph Smith said, "and where is our religion? We have none" (*HC* 2:52).

This book has given us more than just a name. Far more, it serves us as a spiritual tutor, teaching us to hear and know the voice of our master and to recognize the witness of the Holy Ghost. It serves us as a fountain of wisdom, explaining like no other source the plan of salvation and our present human condition. It stands as a sign of the Restoration in these the latter days and as a witness of Jesus Christ, signaling to all those who have ears to hear and eyes to see that God has been at work here in this world. It is a key to our covenants. For example, few of us think about the fact that the words of the baptismal prayer and of the sacrament prayers we use every week were first

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revealed in this dispensation through the translation of 3 Nephi 11 and Moroni 4–5. The book is also our guide to how we should live and contains a full disclosure statement about how we will be judged.

It is many, many things. It is a wonderful book with endless uses and applications. It is the primary vehicle through which God has chosen to communicate his covenant gospel in our day to all people—the rich, the poor, the old, the young, black, white, married, or single. There are few things in this life more important for us to do than to know, love, and follow the Book of Mormon.

Because it is so full and rich, many of its dimensions remain sealed to all who do not make its study a matter of lifetime pursuit. No matter who you are—a recent convert or a serious scholar, a saint or an unrepentant sinner—the Book of Mormon speaks to your level. It begins where you are and addresses your needs and your interests. In its fullness, we have hardly scratched the surface. There are many lessons, of all kinds, that we have yet to learn from its pages.

The Lord has been after his Saints for a long time to do more with the Book of Mormon. As early as 1832, he chastised the members of the Church in Kirtland, Ohio, for neglecting the Book of Mormon, saying that “the children of Zion, even all . . . shall remain under . . . condemnation until they repent and remember the new covenant, even the Book of Mormon” (D&C 84:56–57). As recently as 1984, President Benson reissued this same stern admonition. In October conference that year, he said, “As I participated in the Mexico City Temple dedication, I received the distinct impression that God is not pleased with our neglect of the Book of Mormon” (“A New Witness for Christ,” *Ensign*, November 1984, p. 6). He made it very clear that we are still languishing under that same condemnation of 150 years ago. Despite all we have done in the past, we still have

miles to go to understand and obey that which we have been given.

Let me give you a few examples of recent studies that illustrate what I mean about how our appreciation for the Book of Mormon is still growing.

### **An Astonishing Achievement**

First, some history—the year 1829. Only recently have I come to appreciate what a staggering achievement it was for Joseph Smith to bring forth the Book of Mormon at all. The mere fact that it exists is more of a miracle than many of us realize. Consider, for example, the simple question of how long it took Joseph to translate the Book of Mormon. Many solid and independent historical documents written by people like Lucy Mack Smith, Joseph Knight, David Whitmer, Oliver Cowdery, and even public records like the mortgage on Martin Harris’ farm, thoroughly corroborate the details and reveal an amazing story. After the setbacks of 1828, the translation of the Book of Mormon finally began on April 7, 1829, two days after Oliver Cowdery arrived in Harmony, Pennsylvania, guided by a personal revelation from the Lord to come and serve as Joseph’s scribe. A short five weeks later, by May 15, they had already reached the account of Christ’s ministry among the Nephites in 3 Nephi 11. By June 11, we know they had translated the last of the plates of Mormon, for Joseph used the words from the title page as the legal description on the copyright application he filed that day. By June 30, the job was finished at the Whitmer farmhouse in Fayette, New York. From start to finish—no more than eighty-five total days. But even from that must be subtracted some time and disruption when Joseph and Oliver moved the first week in June in a buckboard from Harmony to Fayette, some 120 miles away; time for trips to Colesville for supplies (sixty miles round trip); time to receive and record thirteen sections now contained in the Doctrine and Covenants; time to

restore the Aaronic and Melchizedek priest-hoods; time to convert and baptize Samuel and Hyrum Smith and several others; time to experience manifestations with the three and the eight witnesses; and I suppose a little time to eat and sleep. (For a full discussion, see John W. Welch and Tim Rathbone, "The Translation of the Book of Mormon: Basic Historical Information," F.A.R.M.S. W&R-86; John W. Welch, "How Long Did It Take Joseph Smith to Translate the Book of Mormon?" *Ensign*, January 1988, pp. 46-47)

This leaves only about sixty to sixty-five days on which the Prophet could have worked on the translation—that's about the length of this spring term. This works out to a phenomenal average of eight or nine finished pages per day—day in, day out. Only a week to produce 1 Nephi, with all its subtle religious and cultural baggage that Hugh Nibley has taken volumes to unpack! (see Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert, The World of the Jaredites, There Were Jaredites; An Approach to the Book of Mormon; Since Cumorah* [Deseret Book (Salt Lake City, Utah) and F.A.R.M.S. (Provo, Utah), 1988]; volumes 5, 6, and 7 of *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley*)

It took a day and a half to translate King Benjamin's speech, one of the most masterful texts anywhere in religious literature. Besides teaching doctrines about the Atonement, service, humility, conversion, and covenants, the speech also reflects ancient Israelite piety infused with the true gospel of Jesus Christ! Yet there was no time for Joseph to consult at libraries (even if there had been a library in Harmony, Pennsylvania—which there was not). There was no time to study the Mishnah to find out how, in fact, Israelite kings delivered covenant renewal speeches, like Benjamin's, from towers to their people, who gathered by families in tents around their temple (see John W. Welch, "King Benjamin's Speech in the Context of Ancient Israelite Festivals," F.A.R.M.S. Wel-85c). There was no

time to revise and refine, no time to cross-check entangled dates and interwoven details.

Instead, the text came, as Oliver recorded five years later, "day after day . . . , uninterrupted," as the words fell "from his mouth" (see JS—H 1:71n).

Seeing this has brought home to me the magnificence of the text of the Book of Mormon. This was an astonishing achievement. The text came one time through, the final copy was dictated. And thus it has stood, except for minor stylistic editing, to this day. As a lawyer, I know what it is to dictate. After years of practice, I still cannot count on dictating anything perfectly the first time.

#### **Matters of Law**

Take a second case—from antiquity. As a lawyer, I have been fascinated and impressed with the technical sophistication of the Book of Mormon in ancient legal affairs. Whoever wrote the Book of Mormon had intimate familiarity with a completely consistent, operating legal system, grounded in the jurisprudence and legal terminology of ancient Israel. This is especially true of Alma, who after all was the chief judge. The reports on the trials of Abinadi, Nehor, and Korihor turn out to be remarkable legal documents in light of what we know about the ancient laws regarding reviling, false witnessing, blaspheming, murdering, heralding the results of an infamous conviction, and so on.

Law was of great importance to the Nephites, as it was for Israelites in general. It is hard for us to imagine the Israelite commitment to teaching, learning, and living the law. They loved the law. On festival days they venerated the law, parading their law books around the city. By comparison, imagine what would happen if we were to parade a copy of the Internal Revenue Code at one of our celebrations! Thus it is significant that Alma says the Nephites were *strict* in observing the law of Moses (Alma 30:3), which they were, down to

the coming of Christ. Nephi also says that they kept “the judgments, and the statutes, and the commandments of the Lord *in all things, according to the law of Moses*” (2 Nephi 5:10; emphasis added)—“in all things” would mean in their civil and criminal matters as well as religious.

How true this was can be seen by such things as the following. It turns out there was a big difference under the law of Moses, and in ancient Near Eastern criminal law generally, between being a “thief” and being a “robber.” (Discussed in John W. Welch, “Theft and Robbery in the Book of Mormon and Ancient Near Eastern Law,” F.A.R.M.S. Wel-85a; summarized in “New Developments in Book of Mormon Research,” *Ensign*, February 1988, p. 12. See also Bernard Jackson, *Theft in Early Jewish Law* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975].) A thief was an inside member of the community; he usually worked alone, and he stole things like chickens at night. A thief’s criminal offense was not serious, and he was punished lightly, usually being required to return double that which he had stolen. A robber, on the other hand, was an outsider, literally an outlaw, living outside the community and outside the protection and rights of local law. Robbers hid out in the hills in bands, swearing oaths of secrecy and swooping down on villages, openly assassinating and plundering. Robbers were one of the greatest scourges of ancient civilization; sometimes in Egypt they occupied whole cities. Soldiers were sent out after them, and when they were caught, they were put to death on the spot—no trials were necessary.

This kind of information turns out to be significant in understanding the Book of Mormon, for it, too, observes this distinction. The Gadianton robbers are always called robbers, never thieves. They live out in the hills, and the army goes out to battle against them. When the Nephites catch one of the robbers, as in the case of Zemnarahah in 3 Nephi 4, they put him to death on the spot. No trial is mentioned, and

they hang him on a tree and ritually chop the tree down (a form of notorious execution that indeed has a remarkable parallel in another obscure corner of Jewish law that oddly requires that the tree from which the culprit is hung be chopped down). (see Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin VI.6; and Maimonides, Sanhedrin XV.9) Indeed, the Hebrew word for bandit (*gedud*) may even have some connection with the name *Gaddianton*, especially since that name, like the Hebrew *gedud*, was spelled in the original Book of Mormon manuscript with a double *d*.

Now we can also better understand why Laman was so frightened by Laban’s threat. When Laman tried to obtain the plates of brass, you recall, Laban threw him out, saying, “Thou art a robber, and I will slay thee” (1 Nephi 3:13). Indeed, Laban was a military officer. If he chose to characterize Laman as a robber (and although he was not one, he was the son of Lehi, a wanted man who was now living out in the hills), Laban had the power to put some real teeth into his threat! Of course, if the text had said, “Thou art a *thief*, and I will slay thee,” it wouldn’t have sounded quite right. But that too is a telling point, for there is little substantive distinction between “theft” and “robbery” in Anglo-American law; nor could Joseph have learned the ancient distinction from his Bible, for the translators of the King James Version use these two words indiscriminately and interchangeably. For example, in the story of the Good Samaritan, the King James Version says that a man went down from Jerusalem and fell among “thieves” (Luke 10:30)! Of course, you do not fall among “thieves” out in the desert, but among “robbers,” which is how the Greek reads. Unlike the King James Version, however, the Book of Mormon uses these two terms correctly.

### **A Literary Accomplishment**

Third, consider something from the world of literature. I first became aware of the

remarkable precision of the Book of Mormon when I was serving a mission in south Germany. There, twenty years ago, I was introduced at a lecture in a Catholic seminary to the idea of chiasmus in the Bible. Chiasmus is a variety of parallelism that was frequently used in the ancient Near East literature, especially in Hebrew, although not exclusively. Instead of simply saying something twice in direct parallel form (a-b-c—a-b-c), a chiastic text repeats itself the second time in the opposite order (a-b-c—c-b-a). A good example of this is in Leviticus 24, where the three elements “killeth any man,” “killeth a beast,” and “cause a blemish” appear first in that order and then are repeated in reverse order, framing the talionic justice formula “eye for eye, tooth for tooth” (Leviticus 24:17–21).

Since chiasmus is a rather distinctive, recently detected mode of expression that often helps in analyzing biblical texts, I was excited, early one morning to discover that several writers in the Book of Mormon also employed this stylistic device. As it turns out, some of the most meaningful and well-constructed examples of this form of writing found anywhere in the world appear in the pages of the Book of Mormon (John W. Welch, “Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies* [1969]; also in *New Era*, February 1972, and reprinted in Noel Reynolds, *Book of Mormon Authorship* [Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1982]; see also John W. Welch, ed., *Chiasmus in Antiquity* [Hildesheim: Gersterberg, 1981]).

A fine example of chiasmus is in Mosiah 5:10–12, where the six elements “name, called, left hand, remember, blotted out, and transgression” appear first in that order, and then reappear in the opposite order. Another creative example is in Alma 41:13–15. As in Leviticus 24, chiasmus is used brilliantly here to depict the reciprocal aspect of restorative justice. And nothing surpasses the chiastic composition of Alma 36, where Alma places at the pivot point of his intricately balanced

chapter the central spiritual turning point of his entire life—namely, the point at which he called upon Jesus Christ, the Son of God, to atone for his sins. Alma could have drawn on no better literary expression to place Christ more squarely at the middle of things than chiasmus.

### Lessons Yet to be Learned

Finally, consider some more practical and spiritual kinds of lessons we have yet to learn from the Book of Mormon. As bishop of a BYU student ward, I found over and over that answers to spiritual struggles were there to be found in the Book of Mormon, but they did not sink in until we had prayerfully searched the scriptures to obtain an answer to our needs.

For example, I had one member in my ward who could not feel completely forgiven, even though she had sincerely tried. It occurred to us how Benjamin had counseled and commanded his people that they must impart of their substance to the poor in order to *retain* a remission of their sins from day to day (Mosiah 4:26). This turned out to be the answer. Giving offerings to the poor has long been a part of holy Israelite fast days on which they sought atonement for their sins. Perhaps here is a lesson we all should learn, a forgotten step in the repentance process, to remember the poor and the needy.

On other occasions, I counseled members of my ward who were struggling with temptation to pray more effectively by pleading with the Lord to help them overcome what was tempting them. I learned this lesson, too, from the Book of Mormon, for it says that the righteous Nephites offered up a prayer every day “that they might not enter into temptation” (Alma 31:10). When was the last time you asked your Heavenly Father that you not be influenced by such and such a temptation?

Or again, have we really comprehended how the devil operates? Lehi’s vision of the great and spacious building, for example, tells

us graphically that the one main weapon used by the wicked is mocking and derision. I don't think we guard *ourselves* enough against behaving this way. Yet when you know your opponent's playbook, it's a lot easier to plan your defense. No better exposé of the cunning but rakish ways of the devil can be found than in the Book of Mormon.

Or again, have we really noticed what Alma actually says about planting that seed of faith in Alma 32? What is it that he tells us we will know when the seed begins to grow? Do we know that the seed is "true"? Well, for Alma, it says we will begin to know that the seed is "good" (Alma 32:30–33, 36). Now there is an important difference between knowing that something is "true" and knowing that it is "good." Satan, for example, knows much that is true, yet he knows little of the good. We must know both. How great it is to know not only that the gospel and the Book of Mormon are true, but also that they are good!

This list could go on and on, but consider one more. There are lessons yet to be learned about making and keeping our covenants. When Jesus had but a few days to spend with the righteous people at Bountiful, what did he spend his time saying and doing? Just a few months ago, it dawned on me that in 3 Nephi 11 he met them at the temple, where he entered into covenants with them. It began with a great Hosanna Shout (3 Nephi 11:17), with instructions about baptism and priesthood ordinations (11:18–28). He told them how they were to make the covenant. If any of them had hard feelings toward another, Jesus told them they should go and reconcile themselves and then come unto Christ at the altar (12:23–24). There their oaths were to be sworn simply by saying "yes" or "no" (12:37). This was serious, sacred business. If anyone wrongly disclosed these holy things to the unworthy, Jesus told them they would be torn and trampled (14:6).

In 3 Nephi 12 and 13, Christ gave the people a series of commandments that they

then agreed to obey. They were the new laws of sacrifice (the sacrifice of a broken heart and a contrite spirit) and of obedience (12:19–20), of proper conduct toward brethren (no derision, no anger, no ridicule) (12:22), of chastity (12:28), of loving your enemies (12:44), of prayer (13:5–13), and of consecration (for a man cannot serve both God and mammon) (13:19–24).

In the end he promised them that those who know and do these things will be allowed at the last day to enter into the celestial kingdom. But others who have not so known the Lord will not be allowed to enter (14:21–23).

All this was taught as Jesus prepared these people to make covenants at the temple, to keep these commandments, to take upon them his name, and to remember his marked body he had just shown them and that they had received and touched with their own hands. If Jesus had but a short time to spend with these people and chose to spend it with them at the temple, shouldn't we spend a little more of our time there as well?

### **By Study and Also by Faith**

Well, why have I told you these things? There are several reasons. First, because I find them exciting. I never cease to be amazed by the Book of Mormon. The chiasmic passages of the Book of Mormon, for example, are so obvious once they are pointed out, I wonder how Mark Twain could have missed them. Seeing the covenant-making context of Jesus' sermon at the temple is so plain and precious to me, I wonder why I hadn't focused on it before. The Lord has said the Book of Mormon contains the "fulness of the gospel" (D&C 20:9). That statement is truer than we realize. Sealed away in its pages, I know, are many lessons yet to be learned and many things yet to be discovered.

I also tell you these things because I know them to be good and true. One of the stated purposes of the Book of Mormon is to be a *convincing* witness that Jesus is the Christ. Its purpose is to *convince* Jew, Lamanite, and Gentile.

Recognizing that all evidence must be evaluated carefully, I find the accumulation of points like these to be quite persuasive and indeed convincing that this book bears a true witness that Jesus is the Christ.

Does this mean I am trying to *prove* that the Book of Mormon is true? That question is often asked, but not often enough thought about. In this regard, I like what Church historian B. H. Roberts said in 1909:

[The Holy Ghost] *must ever be the chief source of evidence for the truth of the Book of Mormon. All other evidence is secondary to this, the primary and infallible. No arrangement of evidence, however skillfully ordered; no argument, however adroitly made, can ever take [the] place [of the Holy Ghost].*

However, he continued:

*Secondary evidences in support of truth, like secondary causes in natural phenomena, may be of first rate importance, and mighty factors in the achievement of God's purposes. [B. H. Roberts, *New Witnesses for God*, vol. 2 (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1909), pp. vi–viii]*

I believe that historical documents from 1829, legal distinctions between theft and robbery, and other such studies give us just this kind of first-rate secondary evidence. They help us appreciate the miraculous origins of the Book of Mormon, the complexity of the legal and literary systems embedded in the text, and the profundity of its doctrines. This is no simple book dashed off from the top of any young man's head; it reflects the best of a thousand years of civilization and inspiration.

Of course, the Book of Mormon remains a debatable subject—and fortunately the Lord has left it primarily in the realm of faith. Not every question will be answerable to everyone's complete satisfaction, but when has that ever been the case with the Bible, with

mathematics, or with anything else? Still, God has not left us without ample positive reasons that will lead the teachable, inquiring mind to the point of faith.

I have also said these things to show, that many approaches will be necessary to fathom the depths of the Book of Mormon. Historical, doctrinal, theoretical, practical, religious, legal, literary, intellectual, and spiritual approaches are all needed. President Benson has said that not only should we know what history the Book of Mormon contains, but we should understand its teachings. "God expects us to use the Book of Mormon in several ways" (Ezra Taft Benson, "The Book of Mormon Is the Word of God," *Ensign*, January 1988, p. 3).

The book has many stated purposes. They will demand the best of all our faculties.

The approaches I have sampled give only a glimpse of the range of work being done today by many people on our campus: Hugh Nibley, on the book's ancient cultural patterns and their modern implications; John Sorenson, on the limited geography internally required by the book itself; Robert Matthews and Monte Nyman, who have a great interest in the book and contemporary Mormonism; Stephen Ricks, Dan Peterson, and Stephen Robinson, working on Hebraic, Arabic, and early Christian comparisons; Bob Millett and Joseph McConkie, exploring its doctrinal meanings and significance; Noel Reynolds, reading 1 Nephi through a political perspective legitimating Nephi as Lehi's political successor; Roger Keller, adding a second contribution this year to computer-aided authorship analyses; Paul Hoskisson, seeking possible etymologies for Book of Mormon proper names; and many others.

Each approaches the Book of Mormon differently, which helps me see the incompleteness of my own knowledge. As the Apostle Paul said, we only "see through a glass, darkly," our knowledge is incomplete, we only "know in part," and we even prophesy only "in part" (1 Corinthians 13:9, 12). Similarly,

President Benson has said that we must never rest in our study of the Book of Mormon. It will wear us out long before we will ever wear it out.

*Every Latter-day Saint should make the study of this book a lifetime pursuit. Otherwise, he is placing his soul in jeopardy and neglecting that which could give spiritual and intellectual unity to his whole life.* [Benson, “The Book of Mormon Is the Word of God,” p. 5]

Note well what President Benson says here: “Spiritual *and* intellectual unity to your whole life.” Another reason I have told you these things is because I think they are the kinds of things that may help us to achieve the spiritual and intellectual unity President Benson is talking about. There is a verse from the Doctrine and Covenants on a plaque in the Lee Library. It’s in the stairwell going up from the circulation desk to the fourth floor. As a student here in the sixties, I saw it several times every day; it made a deep impression on me. It admonishes us to “seek learning, even by study and also by faith” (D&C 88:118). Spirit and intellect, study and faith, science and religion, testimony and academics—often we see these as opposites, but ultimately they are not. If our eye is single to God and his glory, if in our learning we are always willing to hearken unto the counsels of the Lord, if we are equally rigorous about what we think and how we reason, we shall see how all truth may be circumscribed in one great whole and, that all things shall work together for our good.

Scholarly tools can be used in learning more about the scriptures. Here, too, we must be, as the Greek reads, “as *astute* as serpents but as *pure* as doves” [*phronimoi, akeraioi*] (Matthew 10:16). Any tool can be used for good or for evil. A hammer can be used to build up or to tear down. It can even injure the careless or unskillful person who is trying to use it. But for that reason alone, we do not eschew all

hammers. All tools must be used carefully, with training, and for their intended purposes. Everyone must be cautious not to exceed these bounds. We must all temper enthusiasm with competence and zeal with knowledge, but also we must temper our premises with inspiration and scholarly assertions with humility.

But given the right tools used in the right ways, we can do some great things. The Book of Mormon remains a book sealed by many seals. Proper tools and methods will unlock more and more of them and of its fullness to us. It is sealed to us by our unfaithfulness and lack of prayer. It is sealed to us by our inattention to detail and background information. It is sealed to us in part by its nature because it is an abridgment. It is sealed further by our failure to listen to the Brethren and to apply the teachings of the Book of Mormon to ourselves daily. It is sealed when we take its divine origins and simple elegance lightly. It is sealed when we fail to see the people of the book as they saw themselves. It is sealed when we don’t blank out *our* eyes and when we don’t stop hearing what *we* want to hear. We must sit back and let the Book of Mormon speak to us, instead of us to it. Now the book is supposed to speak from the dust; that doesn’t mean the dust of our bookshelves. All this will take tremendous effort. But the promised rewards are more than worth it.

Sooner or later the Book of Mormon will be unsealed in your life. In the last days, Isaiah says, this book will not be a sealed book. Finally, “in that day shall the deaf hear the words of the book, and the eyes of the blind shall see out of obscurity, and out of darkness” (Isaiah 29:18). Then, he says, shall the meek increase their joy and the scornors shall be consumed (Isaiah 29:19–20). This will happen, Isaiah says, when they that have erred shall come to *understanding*, and they that have murmured shall learn *doctrine* (Isaiah 29:24). Both will be required: correct understanding and devotion to doctrine.



At the final judgment we will also see these words again. The books of life will be unsealed, and all things shall be made manifest, whether they be good or whether they be evil. The words of the Book of Mormon will figure prominently on that day, for they are the words by which you and I will be judged. As God has spoken it, these words will stand as a bright testimony at the judgment (Mosiah 3:23–24, Moroni 10:27). We hope that day will not be the first time the Book of Mormon is truly unsealed and laid opened before us.

I testify that the Lord has given us a truly marvelous blessing in the form of the Book of Mormon. He and his servants, the prophets, have given much so we could have it. I pray the Lord will bless us all to love and to know him and this marvelous book, with all of our hearts and might, minds and strength, that we may thereby come to eternal life. I say this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

