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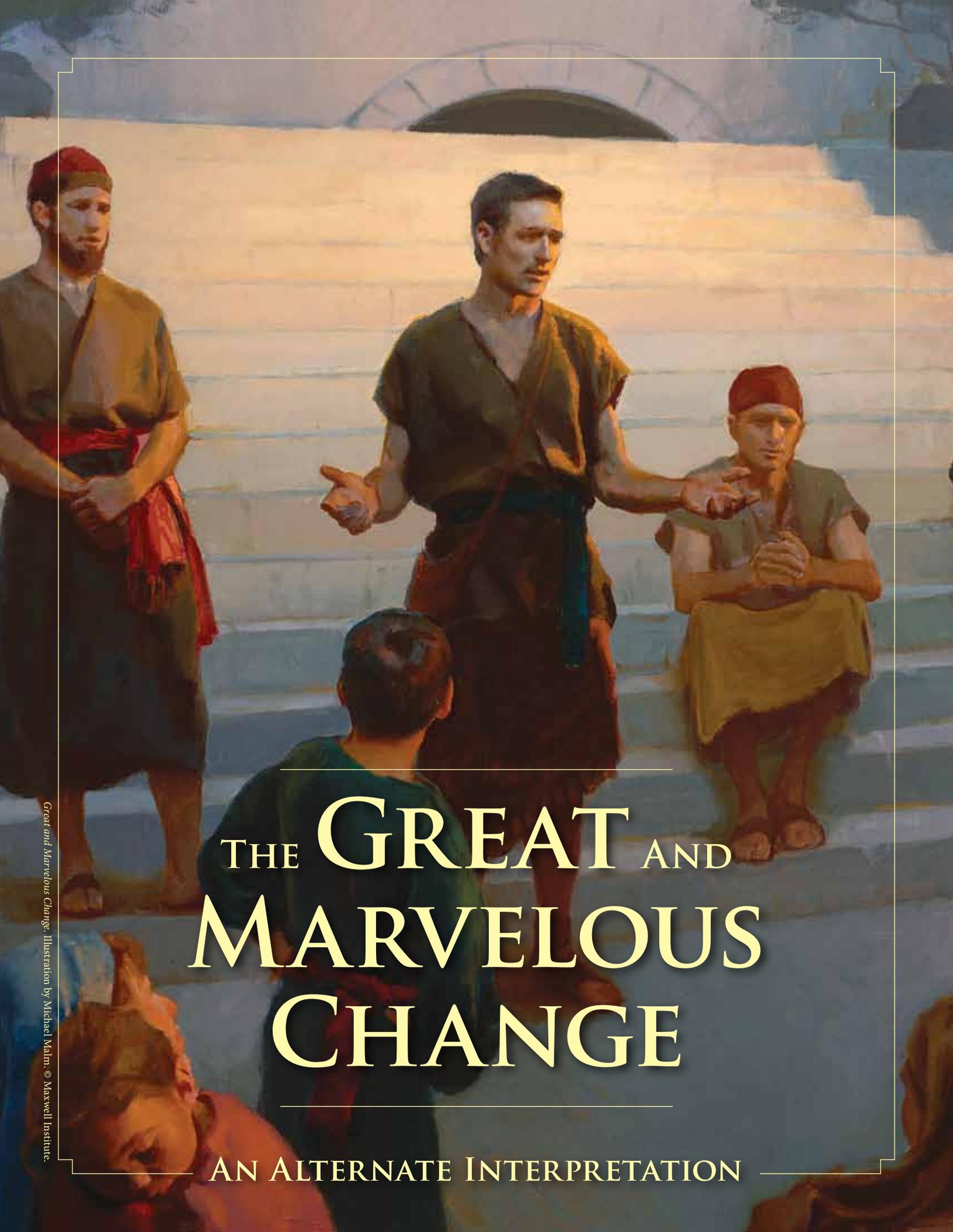
**Title** The Great and Marvelous Change: An Alternate Interpretation

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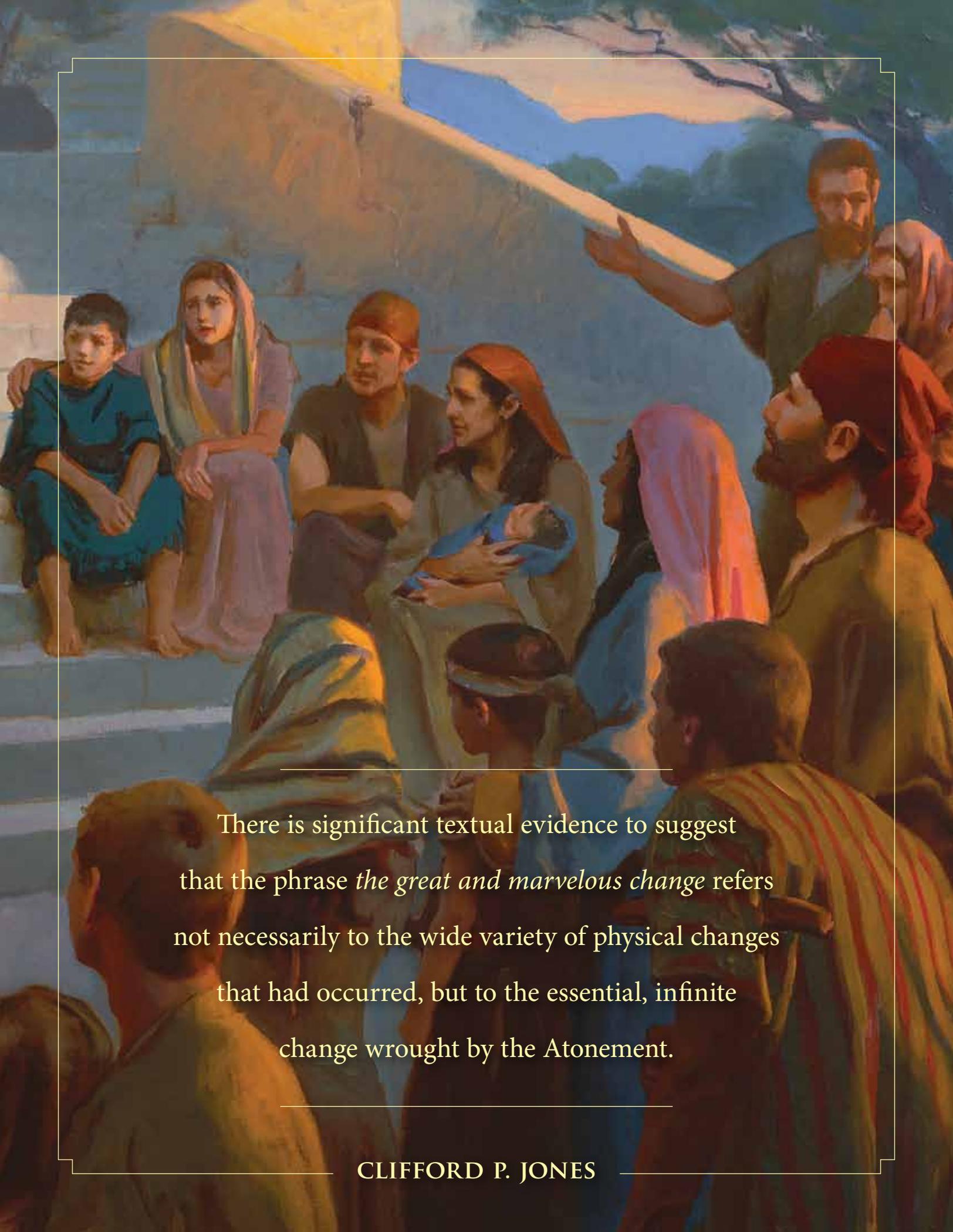
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**Abstract** The customary interpretation of 3 Nephi 11:1 has been that those around the temple in Bountiful were showing one another the “great and marvelous change” that had taken place in the land. However, Jones argues that those people were discussing instead the change that had taken place in their hearts. By examining the context in which this scripture appears and by interpreting other scriptures, especially ones emphasizing the way in which most revelation is received, Jones shows that the atonement of Jesus Christ and the individuals’ subsequent change of heart would have been the main topic of their discussion and would therefore be an appropriate understanding of the scripture.



THE GREAT AND  
MARVELOUS  
CHANGE

AN ALTERNATE INTERPRETATION

A painting depicting a group of people in a courtyard. In the background, a man with a beard and a dark tunic stands on a raised platform, pointing his right hand towards a wall. The wall has a small, dark, cross-like symbol on it. In the foreground, several people are seated or standing, looking towards the man on the wall. A woman in the center holds a baby wrapped in a blue cloth. The scene is set in a courtyard with a stone wall and a tree in the background. The lighting is warm, suggesting a sunset or sunrise.

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

**T**HE 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.

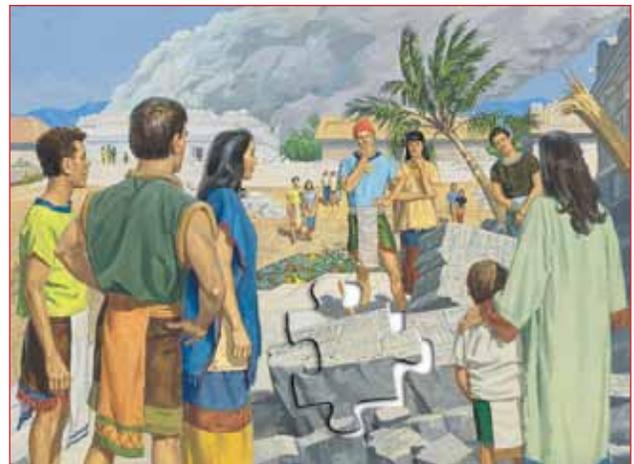
However, I believe that there is significant textual evidence to suggest that the phrase *the great and marvelous change* refers not necessarily to the wide variety of physical changes that had occurred, but to the essential, infinite change wrought by the Atonement. If the phrase *the great and marvelous 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

both agreed that it was, indeed, a better fit. In subtle ways, the second piece strengthened the puzzle and blended better with surrounding pieces.

Like the original puzzle piece, the idea that the people were discussing changes to the land fits well enough into the “picture” of the Book of Mormon that, lacking evidence of a better fit, it does not appear to need replacement. However, just as the

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replacement piece fits our puzzle better than the original, 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. This improved fit enhances many aspects of the “picture.” It corresponds better with the specific words involved, harmonizes with internal evidences of the nature and timing of the gathering, and emphasizes basic teachings about settings in which revelation takes place.

### 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 ear-

lier 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.”<sup>1</sup> *Marvelous* and *astonishing* 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.”<sup>3</sup> 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*

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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.”<sup>4</sup> The verb *to wonder*

has several connotations, including “to feel or be affected with wonder,” “to ask oneself in wonderment,”<sup>5</sup> and to “be desirous to know or learn.”<sup>6</sup> 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 marvel-*

*ous 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 “ponder-



ing 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

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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).<sup>7</sup>

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. Admittedly, the Spirit could have led these good men to join in with curiosity seekers at the temple, but 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.<sup>8</sup>

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 chil-

dren 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. 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.<sup>9</sup>

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.<sup>10</sup>

Another proponent of this theory similarly suggests that “the people would not have been pointing out changes that had taken place”<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup>

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.<sup>13</sup> 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<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> By the time the Savior appeared at the temple, the record of the fulfillment of many of Samuel’s prophecies had been com-

pleted 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).<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup> 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





*Christ in America.* Illustration by Joseph Brickey.

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.<sup>18</sup>

The word *ending*, as used in the phrase *the ending of the . . . year*, refers to “the concluding part of . . . a space of time.”<sup>19</sup> 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.”<sup>20</sup> 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.

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**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.**

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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.<sup>21</sup> 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.”<sup>22</sup> 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 Cumeni, 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,<sup>23</sup> 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.<sup>24</sup>

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*.”<sup>25</sup> 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.<sup>26</sup>

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.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> 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](http://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](http://www.1828-dictionary.com) (accessed 13 April 2010).
4. *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. "marvel." A similar definition is found in the online version of Webster's 1828 *American Dictionary of the English Language* at [www.1828-dictionary.com](http://www.1828-dictionary.com) (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](http://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.
  7. See S. Kent Brown, *From Jerusalem to Zarahemla: Literary and Historical Studies of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1998), 154. See also Sidney B. Sperry, *Book of Mormon Compendium* (Salt Lake City, Bookcraft, 1968), 401.
  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.
  9. Brown, *From Jerusalem to Zarahemla*, 154.
  10. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Answers to Gospel Questions* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1963), 4:29.
  11. John A. Tvedtnes, *The Most Correct Book: Insights from a Book of Mormon Scholar* (Springville, UT: Horizon Publishers, 2003), 245.
  12. Monte S. Nyman, *Book of Mormon Commentary, Vol. 5: Divine Ministry—the First Gospel* (Orem, UT: Granite, 2003), 127.
  13. The missing information probably included the prophesy itself as well as its fulfillment. See D. Lynn Johnson, “The Missing Scripture,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 3/4 (1994): 84–93.
  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: A Geologist’s View of the Great Destruction in 3 Nephi,” *BYU Studies* 37/3 (1997–98): 142.
  16. For descriptions of similar devastation at other times as the result of explosive volcanic eruptions, see John A. Tvedtnes, “Historical Parallels to the Destruction at the Time of the Crucifixion,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 3/1 (1994): 170–86; John Gee, “Another Note on the Three Days of Darkness,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 6/2 (1997): 235–44; and 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.
  19. *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v., “ending.” A similar definition is found in the online version of Webster’s 1828 *American Dictionary of the English Language* at [www.1828-dictionary.com](http://www.1828-dictionary.com) (accessed 13 April 2010).
  20. Tvedtnes, *Most Correct Book*, 236; Nyman, *Book of Mormon Commentary*, 128.
  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), 4:307. 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.
  22. *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. “soon.” A similar definition (“in a short time; shortly after any time specified or supposed”) is found in the online version of Webster’s 1828 *American Dictionary of the English Language* at [www.1828-dictionary.com](http://www.1828-dictionary.com) (accessed 13 April 2010).
  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.
  25. Scott D. Whiting, “Digital Detachment and Personal Revelation,” *Ensign*, March 2010, 19, emphasis added.
  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.