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Title Light: A Masterful Symbol

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Abstract From God's first creative act recorded in Genesis to the brightness with which the Savior will return in the second coming, light is ever present in scripture. Many instances in the scriptures record God's use of light to further his purposes—the stones that provided the Jaredites light while crossing the ocean, the light by which the children of Israel were led in the wilderness, and the light that announced the Savior's birth. None of these physical manifestations of light is without powerful symbolic meaning. At other points in scripture, light is used purely as a symbol—a symbol of truth, wisdom, power, and righteousness. More important than these, though, is that light can ultimately represent Jesus Christ himself, by whose light all can be saved.

LIGHT: A MASTERFUL SYMBOL

RICHARD DILWORTH RUST

Experienced by everyone and universal in time and space, light is a masterful symbol and can serve all people as such. Light is found extensively throughout the scriptures and is part of most of the important events in the scriptures both literally and symbolically. Light-related symbols have multiple possibilities and are open to individual and ever-expanding interpretations. Light symbolism is at the heart of the gospel. And most importantly, light characterizes the Savior.

Simply put, a symbol is to exhibit a likeness.¹ In the Lord's system, as he said to Adam, "All things have their likeness, and all things are created and made to bear record of me, both things which are temporal, and things which are spiritual; . . . all things bear record of me" (Moses 6:63). Nephi also learned this truth, and he showed his people that "all things which have been given of God from the beginning of the world, unto man, are the typifying of [Christ]" (2 Nephi 11:4).

A type is a God-given person, place, event, or thing that often symbolizes Christ. Light can be a type of Christ as in the sun's daily rising being a type of "the Sun of righteousness [who will] arise with healing in his wings" (Malachi 4:2). To the eighteenth-century minister Jonathan Edwards, "shadows of divine things" are "the voice of God," and typological symbolisms are the "language of God to instruct intelligent beings in things pertaining to Himself."² In a similar vein, Orson F. Whitney said, "God teaches





Adoration of the Child by Gerrit van Honthorst. Scala/Art Resource, NY.

with symbols; it is His favorite method of teaching.”³ As the first of a number of natural things ordered for types of spiritual things, Edwards referred to John 1:9, “That was the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world.”⁴ He saw the rising and setting of the sun as a “type of the death and resurrection of Christ.”⁵ And it is a sign, he said, that “the beautifull variety of the colours of light was designed as a type of the various beauties and graces of the spirit of God . . . so often represented in Scripture by beautifull colours.”⁶

According to Joseph Fielding McConkie and Donald W. Parry, “symbols are the universal tongue. . . . Symbols enable us to give conceptual form to ideas and emotions that may otherwise defy the power of words. . . . Symbolic language conceals certain doctrinal truths from the wicked and thereby protects sacred things from possible ridicule. At the same time, symbols reveal truth to the spiritually alert.”⁷ The Lord uses similitudes, Elder Bruce R. McConkie says, “to crystallize in our minds the eternal verities which we must accept and believe to be saved, to dramatize their true meaning and import with an impact never to be forgotten, to center our attention on these saving truths, again and again and again.”⁸ Light in the scriptures works especially well in revealing eternal verities to the spiritually alert.

Light: Common to All Human Experience

Light is a masterful symbol because light—the thing itself on which symbolism is developed—is common to all human experience everywhere and throughout time. Both literally and symbolically, light initially appears simple, yet in physics and

in the scriptures it is also profound. What is light? Newton conceived of it as the motion of some substance through the ether; later scientists saw it as a wave. Physicists today say that “light behaves like waves in its propagation through space and like particles in its interaction with matter. It has both wave and particle properties, and the more any experiment reveals one aspect, the less it reveals the other.”⁹ As astronomer Guy Consolmagno puts it, “No doubt about it, light is truly strange stuff.”¹⁰ The two most basic properties of light are that “light is a form of energy conveyed through empty space at high velocity” and that “a beam of light can convey information from one place to another.”¹¹ While we are regularly aware of visible light coming from sources like the sun, fire, and fluorescence, we see only a small part of the spectrum of light—sometimes defined as electromagnetic radiation of any wavelength.

Together with light explainable through the current laws of physics there is heavenly or spiritual light—and Christ is the source of both. The Lord taught Joseph Smith and others, “This is the light of Christ. . . . As also he is in the sun, and the light of the sun, and the power thereof by which it was made” (D&C 88:7–8). All who are born on earth have some light. The Lord affirms: “And the Spirit giveth light to every man that cometh into the world” (D&C 84:46). In addition to the light of Christ, forms of heavenly light include the light that emanates from heavenly beings, the inner light that radiates from individuals on earth, and the Holy Ghost, who brings greater enlightenment and “knowledge of things pertaining to righteousness” (Hebrews 6:4; Alma 24:30).

FROM THE EDITOR:

Richard Rust’s paper, being presented here, is the first of what I hope will be a series of articles that will result from the Symbolism in Scripture conference sponsored by the Laura F. Willes Center for Book of Mormon Studies in September 2010. Being literate in reading symbols is important because God uses symbols in the scriptures in the same way that Jesus used parables in the New Testament to speak to the people of ancient Judea. Symbols convey eternal truths to those who are prepared to receive them and, in Jesus’s love and concern, to veil those same truths from those who are not ready to receive them. In this paper Professor Rust has produced a useful discussion on the various ways light serves as a symbol.



The Sacred Grove by Valoy Eaton © By Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

Both the natural light of the sun and heavenly light were manifest in Joseph Smith's first vision. Valoy Eaton, whose paintings are found in many Latter-day Saint temples, has illustrated this combination in his painting of the Sacred Grove found in the Palmyra New York Temple. Looking at the painting, I first saw the light streaming down from above—as it does in other paintings of the Sacred Grove. Then I saw the shadows caused by the early morning light. Heaven and earth truly did come together in the sacred space of that grove.¹²

Light Found throughout the Scriptures

Light is a masterful symbol because it is found extensively throughout the scriptures in many manifestations. The word *symbol* is derived from the Greek verb *symbollein*, “to put together,” and the scriptures extensively put the Savior and essentially all gospel concepts together with light. Among many connections are those with creation, love, faith, conversion, power, and revelation. A consideration of light also includes darkness—the diminishment or absence of light—with darkness being connected to matters such as ignorance, uncertainty, spiritual blindness, temptations, wickedness, and destruction. These abstractions are made real and accessible through symbolic associations with light.

Light is associated with major scriptural events. “In the beginning, . . . the earth was without form, . . . and God said, Let there be light: and there was light” (Genesis 1:1-3). Symbolizing God's first creative act,

the coming of light out of darkness also represented Jehovah as the light of the world. The command “Let there be light” bears witness of the Word spoken of by the apostle John: “In him was the gospel, and the gospel was the life, and the life was the light of men; and the light shineth in the world, and the world perceiveth it not” (John 1:4-5 JST). The Savior's coming into the world as the baby Jesus was signaled by light and, in the Old World, symbolized a restoration of the gospel out of apostasy and darkness. Darkness prevailed at his crucifixion, and light at his resurrection. In the New World, light from a star announcing the birth of Christ extended through the night. Darkness and destruction signaled the Savior's death, and morning light shone with his resurrection. Darkness and then light marked conditions before the Savior's appearance in the New World. Out of the darkness came the Redeemer's voice: “I am the light and the life of the world” (3 Nephi 9:18).

Light is a masterful symbol because light—the thing itself on which symbolism is developed—is common to all human experience everywhere and throughout time. Both literally and symbolically, light initially appears simple, yet in physics and in the scriptures it is also profound.



Christ with Boy by Carl Bloch.

Subsequently, the Savior appeared to the Nephites at the temple, declaring his identity as Jesus Christ and reaffirming that he was the light and the life of the world (3 Nephi 11:11). In striking ways, light in 3 Nephi is thus both creative power and a symbol of the Creator. And just as “Let there be light” is an essential beginning to the story of creation in the first chapter of the Bible, so the book ends with creation of a new earth in which there is “no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it [the city of God]: for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof” (Revelation 21:23).

The light that facilitated the Jaredites’ miraculous voyage to the New World is an effective symbol of faith. In part, travels of the Jaredites represented the journey of life, and in crossing the turbulent ocean, the Jaredites faithfully “did thank and praise the Lord all the day long” while having continual light that came miraculously from the finger of God (Ether 6:9; 3:6).¹³ The pillar of fire that provided light during darkness to give the children of Israel guidance and protection during the exodus both manifested and symbolized the redemptive power of God. Intense light has accompanied theophanies and angelic appearances. In his encounter with the Savior, Saul, later to be called Paul, had suddenly shine on him “a light from heaven” (Acts 9:3). “In the Spirit on the Lord’s day,” John the Revelator saw Alpha and Omega whose “countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength” (Revelation 1:10, 16). Most notably, Joseph Smith in daytime vision “saw two Personages, whose brightness and glory defy all description” (Joseph Smith—History 1:17). A term for this kind of heavenly manifestation is Shechinah, defined in the LDS Bible Dictionary as being “the cloud of brightness and glory that marked the presence of the Lord. . . . The Prophet Joseph Smith described this phenomenon in connection with his first vision, as a ‘light . . . above the brightness of the sun’” (Joseph Smith—History 1:16).¹⁴ Darkness will precede Christ’s second coming (D&C 88:87; Joseph Smith—Matthew 1:33), and then light will be a sign of his appearance (Zechariah 14:6-7; D&C 45:16, 65:5). The millennial reign of Christ will end worldwide darkness and bring light and life. And as we learn in section 76 of the Doctrine and Covenants, light characterizes the degrees of glory and exaltation.

Scriptural writers often used light in a simile (a subset of a metaphor in which comparison of unlike

things is made using “like” or “as”). King David employed a simile when he spoke the words the Rock of Israel gave him: “He that ruleth over men must be just, ruling in the fear of God. And he shall be as the light of the morning, when the sun riseth, even a morning without clouds” (2 Samuel 23:3-4). The Psalmist said, “He shall bring forth thy righteousness as the light, and thy judgment as the noonday” (Psalm 37:6). He praised God “Who coverest thyself with light as with a garment” (Psalm 104:2). Isaiah wrote that Israel is “left as a beacon upon the top of a mountain” (Isaiah 30:17). Also, “Then shall thy light break forth as the morning” (Isaiah 58:8). The apostle Peter counseled his audience to take heed to “a more sure word of prophecy . . . as unto a light that shineth in a dark place” (2 Peter 1:19). John the Revelator employed similes in saying that he “saw another mighty angel come down from heaven . . . [whose] face was as it were the sun, and his feet as pillars of fire” (Revelation 10:1). In a later vision, John saw that the light of the heavenly Jerusalem “was like unto a stone most precious, even like a jasper stone” (Revelation 21:11). Using a compelling metaphor, the Psalmist said, “Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path. . . . The entrance of thy words giveth light; it giveth understanding unto the simple” (Psalm 119:105, 130; cf. 2 Samuel 22:29).

The pillar of fire that provided light during darkness to give the children of Israel guidance and protection during the exodus both manifested and symbolized the redemptive power of God.

The apostle Paul frequently used light as a metaphor—“saying one thing in terms of another” or “an analogy identifying one object with another and ascribing to the first object one or more of the qualities of the second.”¹⁵ Here are some instances: “Thou thyself art a guide of the blind, a light of them which are in darkness” (Romans 2:19). “Let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armour of light” (Romans 13:12). “The god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ . . .

should shine unto them” (2 Corinthians 4:4). “God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts” (2 Corinthians 4:6). “What fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness?” (2 Corinthians 6:14). “Ye are all the children of light, and the children of the day: we are not of the night, nor of darkness” (1 Thessalonians 5:5).

As the Lord’s word, the scriptures symbolically are light and provide light, with some of the most profound understandings coming from symbols that have individualized and multiple possibilities. Scriptures pertaining to light and darkness may be paradoxical yet are not necessarily ambiguous.

In these analogies, Paul may well have had in mind the Savior’s counsel: “Take heed therefore that the light which is in thee be not darkness. If thy whole body therefore be full of light, having no part dark, the whole shall be full of light, as when the bright shining of a candle doth give thee light” (Luke 11:35-36). (In his excellent book on light, *A Scriptural Discussion of Light*, Allen J. Fletcher provides an explanation of how the light that is in us can be darkness: “If what we have chosen inside to be our light, i.e., our guide or our compass, is really darkness, then how great is that darkness, for we have put the darkness for our light and we believe that it is light. Then when the true light comes along, we believe that it is darkness and reject it.”)¹⁶

As the Lord’s word, the scriptures symbolically are light and provide light, with some of the most profound understandings coming from symbols that have individualized and multiple possibilities. Scriptures pertaining to light and darkness may be paradoxical yet are not necessarily ambiguous. For instance, the Lord’s “pillar of the cloud . . . came between the camp of the Egyptians and the camp of Israel; and it was a cloud and darkness to [the Egyptians], but it gave light by night to [the Israelites]” (Exodus 14:19-20). The Lord deals in paradoxes. The Father of Lights “made darkness his

secret place” (Psalm 18:11) so as to stay hidden. If the Israelites became unfaithful, Moses said they would “grope at noonday, as the blind gropeth in darkness” (Deuteronomy 28:29). Job lamented that in “the land of darkness and the shadow of death, . . . the light is as darkness” (Job 10:21-22). Turned the other way around, the Lord through Isaiah promised for those who helped the hungry and the afflicted, their light would shine in the darkness and their “darkness be as the noonday” (Isaiah 58:10).¹⁷

Expansiveness of Light Symbolism

In its potential for expansiveness, light in all its manifestations is a highly effective symbol. As is true of Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden Pond* and Melville’s *White Whale*, an effective symbol is real and a thing in itself, yet is open to a rich multiplicity of associations and meanings.

Writing about the literal *Walden Pond*, Thoreau said, “I am thankful that this pond was made deep and pure for a symbol.”¹⁸ Thoreau succeeds with his symbolism because he engages the reader so thoroughly in the actuality of the world in which he lived for over two years. As in his work *Walden* he helps us come to know *Walden Pond* and environs intimately, Thoreau develops similitudes that embody his core beliefs and concerns: The pond’s crystal clear water symbolizes purity. “It is earth’s eye; looking into which the beholder measures the depth of his own nature.”¹⁹ It is an intermediary between heaven and earth. “The water, full of light and reflections, becomes a lower heaven.”²⁰ Its depth, rumored to be infinite, suggests infinite depth of character. And thawing of the pond in springtime suggests the resurrection: “*Walden* was dead and is alive again.”²¹

In his epic novel, *Moby-Dick*, Melville creates in great detail the world of whales and whaling, and at the same time invests the whale *Moby Dick* with rich symbolic meanings. To the “unconscious understandings” of the crew, the great white whale “might have seemed the gliding great demon of the seas of life.”²² Pondering the paradoxes of whiteness, Ishmael declares, “And of all these things the Albino whale was the symbol.”²³ And “all the subtle demonisms of life and thought; all evil, to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified, and made practically assailable in *Moby Dick*.”²⁴

A prominent reason that Thoreau's and Melville's works are so rich and powerful is that concrete realities are given depth and dimension through symbolic probing of many of the major abstract issues of life such as mortality and immortality, relationships to nature and to other people, ways of knowing, the problem of good and evil, the journey of life, and time and eternity. Likewise, these and many other major concerns of life here and hereafter are presented in the scriptures through the symbolism of light.

As we absorb it and act on it, light symbolism helps lead us to heaven. Our journey is a process, though, one step at a time, just as gaining a deep understanding of a symbol such as light is a process. Emily Dickinson put the need for a gradual process this way:

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise
As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind—²⁵

At the stage of childhood, it may be sufficient to know that Jesus wants me for a sunbeam. As I later read in the Sermon on the Mount, I think of my light as being an influence for good and a means of glorifying my Father in heaven (Matthew 5:16). A more expansive understanding comes when I read the Savior's progressive teachings to the Nephites about light. At first, Jesus repeats the same commandment given in the Old World, but he provides a new and challenging dimension when he says, "Therefore, hold up your light that it may shine unto the world. Behold I am the light which ye shall hold up—that which ye have seen me do" (3 Nephi 18: 24).

As a masterful symbol, light in the scriptures encourages openness and expansion. Doctrinally, for instance, we could ponder again and again on the meaning and application of Doctrine and Covenants 84:45: "For the word of the Lord is truth, and whatsoever is truth is light, and whatsoever is light is Spirit, even the Spirit of Jesus Christ." Again, "And the light which shineth, which giveth you light, is through him who enlighteneth your eyes, which is the same light that quickeneth your understandings; which light proceedeth forth from the presence of

God to fill the immensity of space—The light which is in all things, which giveth life to all things, which is the law by which all things are governed, even the power of God who sitteth upon his throne, who is in the bosom of eternity, who is in the midst of all things" (D&C 88:11-13). Here light is synonymous with the word of the Lord, truth, and Spirit. The light of Christ—the source of light—enlightens eyes, quickens understandings, fills the immensity of space, gives life to all things, and is the power of God. Light is the law by which all things are governed.

One must seek progressive guidance from the Holy Ghost to have the experience of being filled with light so as to comprehend all things. Pondering on light symbolism helps one in doing so. Chauncey Riddle affirms, "The Lord employs every opportunity to use physical things to teach us things spiritual. As we receive this teaching under the influence of the Holy Ghost, we are given an understanding of the truth sufficient for our salvation."²⁶ Regarding guidance from the Holy Ghost, LeGrand Baker has said, "Symbols may express any meaning the Spirit wishes to teach one. And one meaning does not preclude another. For example, baptism represents both death and birth. All of the ordinances are symbolic actions representing our personal part in the plan of salvation and our relationship with the Saviour."²⁷ Too, as S. Michael Wilcox has noted, the primary reason the Lord chooses to teach us through symbolism "may be that symbols can mean different things to different people at different stages of their life."²⁸

Light Symbolism and the Gospel

The word *light* is specifically linked throughout the scriptures to many words pertaining to "the light of the gospel" (D&C 138:30). Light is connected to or synonymous with life (John 8:12), joy (Alma 36:20), intelligence (D&C 93:36), truth (D&C 93:36-40), salvation (Psalm 27:1; Alma 26:15), knowledge (D&C 77:4), the glory of Zion (D&C 124:6), understanding and wisdom (Daniel 5:11, 14), law (3 Nephi 15:9), a standard for the nations (D&C 115:5), power (D&C 50:27), righteousness (Alma 38:9), and redemption (D&C 93:9).

Light symbolism masterfully presents the gospel as essential in the process of leading toward eternal life. Grateful for gospel light, Joseph Smith declared: "Hosanna, hosanna, hosanna to Almighty

God, that rays of light begin to burst forth upon us even now.”²⁹ The first principle of the gospel, faith, is portrayed in the opening sections of the Book of Mormon as going through mists of darkness (temptations) to reach the tree of life whose fruit is “white above all that is white” (Alma 32:42). Partaking of the fruit is described by Alma as tasting light (Alma 32:35). Tasting the light is not sufficient, though. Alma teaches that this tree of life, or tree of light, must be nourished until it becomes “a tree springing up unto everlasting life” (Alma 32:41).

The coming forth of the Book of Mormon is a perfect example of how light can be both literal and symbolic. Moroni states a literal fact about the plates being in darkness and also affirms symbolically that the book will provide truth in a benighted world and be available for people to see: “None can have power to bring it to light save it be given him of God. . . . And blessed be he that shall bring this thing to light; for it shall be brought out of darkness unto light, according to the word of God; . . . and it shall be done by the power of God” (Mormon 8:15-16).

The word *Gazelem* in Alma 37 could stand for either Joseph or the stone—later called “the interpreters.” As a synecdoche, the interpreters or Urim and Thummim could stand for the Book of Mormon itself, shining “forth in darkness unto light.”

The Book of Mormon and the Prophet Joseph Smith are at the fountainhead of the restored gospel. Both were defined by Alma as light shining in darkness: “And the Lord said: I will prepare unto my servant Gazelem, a stone, which shall shine forth in darkness unto light. . . . These interpreters were prepared that the word of God might be fulfilled, which he spake, saying: I will bring forth out of darkness unto light all their secret works and their abominations” (Alma 37:23-25). Joseph Smith, whose code name was Gazelam in earlier editions of the Doctrine and Covenants, prophesied that he would “stand and shine like the sun in the firmament.”³⁰

The word *Gazelem* in Alma 37 could stand for either Joseph or the stone—later called “the

interpreters.” As a synecdoche, the interpreters or Urim and Thummim could stand for the Book of Mormon itself, shining “forth in darkness unto light.” As referring to a seer stone, the Gazelem paradoxically required darkness in order to work. David Whitmer reported, “Joseph Smith would put the seer stone into a hat, and put his face in the hat, drawing it closely around his face to exclude the light; and in the darkness the spiritual light would shine.”³¹

Alma’s reference to “these interpreters” likely looks forward to the Lord’s giving Joseph Smith “power . . . to translate by the means of the Urim and Thummim” (D&C 10:1). The words *Urim* and *Thummim*, according to the authors of *Jehovah and the World of the Old Testament*, are “the transliterated forms of two Hebrew words that mean ‘lights’ and ‘perfections.’ . . . They represented the power and authority of the high priest to inquire and receive the will of the Lord on behalf of the people.”³² “The place where God resides is a great Urim and Thummim,” Joseph Smith taught. Further, “This earth, in its sanctified and immortal state, will be made like unto crystal and will be a Urim and Thummim to the inhabitants who dwell thereon. . . . Then the white stone mentioned in Revelation 2:17, will become a Urim and Thummim to each individual who receives one” (D&C 130:8-10). This will be the glorious culmination for everyone who has been given and stayed true to the “greater light” (D&C 82:3). Conversely, the Prophet taught, “He that will not receive the greater light, must have taken away from him all the light which he hath; and if the light which is in you become darkness, behold, how great is that darkness!”³³

Light symbolism is found in an unofficial Brigham Young University motto: “The glory of God is intelligence.” The implied rest of the motto is: “or, in other words, light and truth” (D&C 93:36). To me, light and truth connect well with BYU’s purpose to affirm both reason and revelation. This was part of the message, I think, of Alvin Gittins’s painting of the Prophet Joseph Smith that was installed in the Joseph Smith Building in 1959 but is now in the First Presidency’s suite. I admired that painting, and have subsequently seen many prints of it.

The painting represents Joseph Smith as a premier example of one who sought learning by study and also by faith. Light coming almost directly from above suggests revelation, and the most illuminated

spots on the painting are Joseph's forehead, his bosom, the papers he is holding (his revelations, likely), and his hands. Altogether, this suggests to me the integration of heart, might, mind, and strength as referred to in this scripture: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy might, mind, and strength" (D&C 59:5).

These scriptures about light could well apply to the portrayal of Joseph Smith:

For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God. (2 Corinthians 4:6)

Behold, I am the light and the life of the world, that speak these words, therefore give heed with your might, and then you are called. (D&C 12:9)

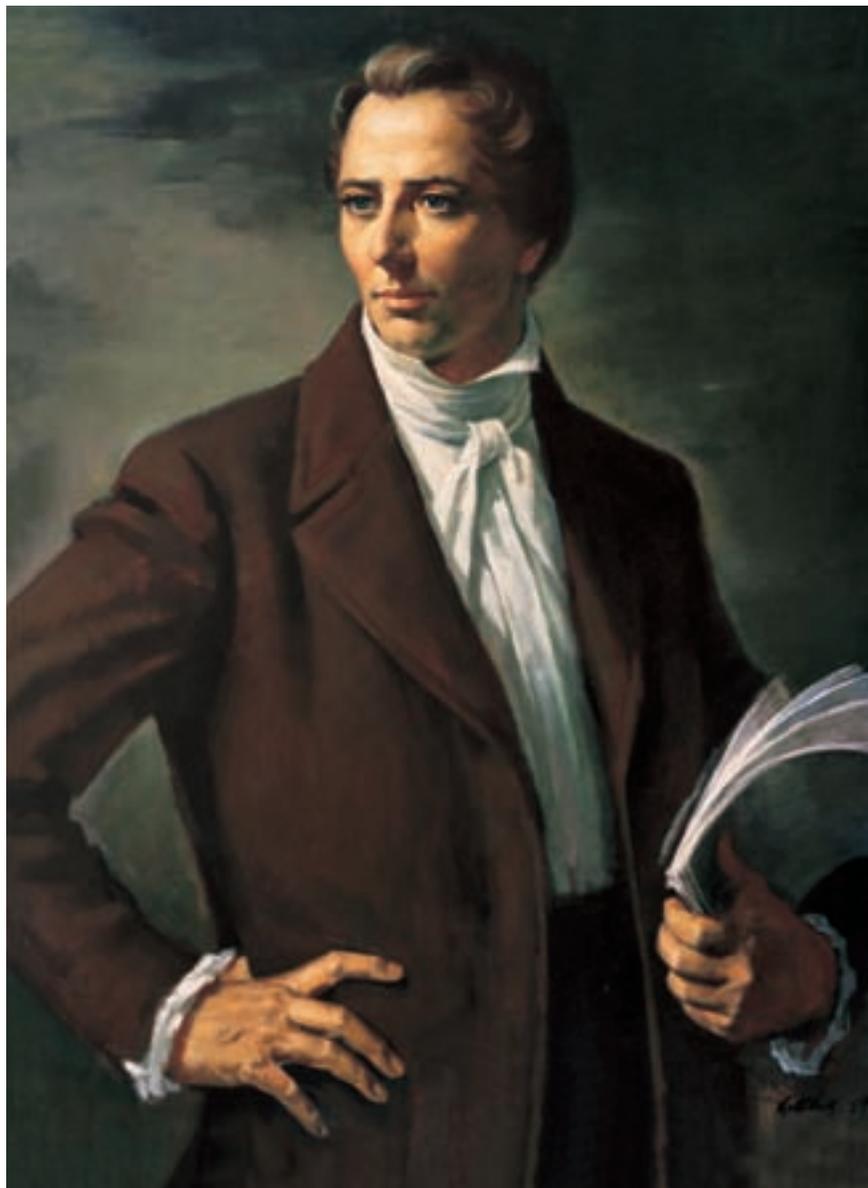
The light which did light up his mind . . . was the light of the glory of God. (Alma 19:6)

The Lord is my light and my salvation; . . . the Lord is the strength of my life. (Psalm 27:1)

Light Symbolism and the Savior

Most significantly, light is a masterful symbol because it is the quality that the Master chose so frequently to characterize himself; it is essential to our becoming like him; and the Master wants us to have a fulness of it. "I am," he said, "the true light that is in you" (D&C 88:50). Light characterizes the divinity of the Godhead, and it embodies the celestial condition and life that the Father and the Son want us to have. As a pervasive and rich symbol, light connects us fully with Christ—at least as much as a symbol can do. We learn of Christ as we reflect on the symbolism of the more than thirty titles of Christ that are connected to light. These titles include Star (Numbers 24:17), King of Glory (Psalm 24:10), Great Light (Isaiah 9:2), Crown of Glory and Beauty (Isaiah 28:5), Light of the Gentiles (Isaiah 42:6), Dayspring from on High (Luke 1:78), Light of Men (John 1:4), True Light (John 1:9), Light (John 12:35-36), Bright and Morning Star (Revelation 22:16), and Life and Light of the World (D&C 10:70).

The beginning point of coming unto Christ is to recognize him as the Light. As Jesus said to his auditors, "Yet a little while is the light with you. Walk while ye have the light, lest darkness come upon you: for he that walketh in darkness knoweth not whither he goeth. While ye have light, believe in the light, that ye may be the children of light" (John



Joseph Smith Jr., by Alvin Gittins, © 1959 Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

12:35-36). Having the light with one can mean having the light or influence emanating from Christ; then when the Savior says, "believe in the light," the phrase the light can also refer directly to Christ. To be the children of light is to be followers of Jesus (Luke 16:8); even more, it is to be covenanted members of Christ's church (Ephesians 5:8; 1 Thessalonians 5:5; D&C 106:5). The process of conversion can be dramatic. Figuratively, Alma the Younger says, those with his father "were in the midst of darkness; nevertheless, their souls were illuminated by the light



Supper at Emmaus, by Gerrit van Honthorst. Scala/Art Resource, NY.

of the everlasting word” (Alma 5:7). This was like his own experience: “I was in the darkest abyss,” he said, and then “what marvelous light I did behold” (Mosiah 27:29; Alma 36:20). While he expressed his conversion symbolically, Alma literally came out of a near-death darkness into light.³⁴

A prominent display in the east lobby of the Wilkinson Center challenges students at Brigham Young University to follow Christ as the Light: “Then spake Jesus again unto them, saying, I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life” (John 8:12). The life Jesus promises is eternal life, brought about through his atonement. Donald W. Parry and Jay A. Parry develop this in *Symbols and Shadows: Unlocking*

a Deeper Understanding of the Atonement: “The Lord through his prophets used a great number of symbols, types, and shadows to provide insight into the atonement. . . . Why are the types and symbols of the atonement ever present? Because the Father wanted to manifest his Son’s atonement clearly and time and again to his children who seek to know him. . . . Paul wrote that the Father helps us to be ‘partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light’ (Colossians 1:12). That inheritance of light includes all the blessings of the atonement of Christ. Those blessings, symbolized by light itself, include the gift of eternal life and eternal light, the energy and power we require to function spiritually, the enlightenment that fills our mind with truth, and much more.”³⁵

Understanding and Applying Light Symbolism

When accompanied by faith and diligence, a prayerful pondering of light symbolism in the scriptures encourages a progression of understanding and leads to increased righteousness. As the Lord has promised, a person who “receiveth light, and continueth in God, receiveth more light; and that light groweth brighter and brighter until the perfect day” (D&C 50:24). Light dispels darkness, and light in “the perfect day” means that there will be no darkness at all. This is the Lord’s promise in the continuation of section 88 of the Doctrine and Covenants: “And if your eye be single to my glory, your whole bodies shall be filled with light, and there shall be no darkness in you; and that body which is filled with light comprehendeth all things” (88:67). Putting together a number of scriptures about light, one can see that to be filled with light is to be filled with life, joy, intelligence, truth, knowledge, understanding, wisdom, and power (John 8:12; Alma 36:20; D&C 93:36-40; 77:4; Daniel 5:11, 14; D&C 50:27). It is to follow light as a standard and to experience salvation and redemption (D&C 45:9; Psalm 27:1; D&C 93:9).

To look at it again, the following scripture is central to an ever expanding comprehension of light and its symbolism: “For the word of the Lord is truth, and whatsoever is truth is light, and whatsoever is light is Spirit, even the Spirit of Jesus Christ. And the Spirit . . . enlighteneth every man through the world, that hearkeneth to the voice of the Spirit. And every one that hearkeneth to the voice of the Spirit cometh unto God, even the Father” (D&C 84:45-47). To come unto the Father is to enter into his rest, “which rest is the fulness of his glory [light]” (D&C 84:24).

Yet while appealing to some, coming unto God can be frightening. This was true of the children of Israel when Jehovah wanted to reveal himself to them. They saw the fearsome light of fire on the top of Mount Sinai and lost faith, thereby losing the prospect of having the ordinances and the authority of the Melchizedek Priesthood. Yet without that priesthood, “the power of godliness is not manifest unto men in the flesh; for without this no man can see the face of God, even the Father, and live. Now this Moses plainly taught to the children of Israel in the wilderness, and sought diligently to sanctify his people that they might behold the face of God; but they hardened their hearts and could not endure his presence; therefore, the Lord in his wrath, for

his anger was kindled against them, swore that they should not enter into his rest while in the wilderness” (D&C 84:21-24).

To ultimately behold the face of God, it is not enough to claim fellowship with him. This will be obstructed by the darkness of being spiritually blind, succumbing to temptations, and yielding to evil. As the apostle John said, “God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth: But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin” (1 John 1:5-7). The Lord’s latter-day promise is: “Sanctify yourselves that your minds become single to God, and the days will come that you shall see him; for he will unveil his face unto you, and it shall be in his own time, and in his own way, and according to his own will” (D&C 88:68). The Lord unveiled his face

The light of the Savior’s countenance can shine on His followers today as well, fulfilling the Savior’s prayer “they may be purified in me, that I may be in them as thou, Father, art in me, that we may be one, that I may be glorified in them” (3 Nephi 19:29).

to Moses, and Moses in turn absorbed and reflected Jehovah’s light—so much so that the people had him wear a veil to conceal his brightness. The resurrected Lord unveiled his face to Nephites assembled at the temple. His chosen twelve especially absorbed his light: The Lord’s “countenance did smile upon them, and the light of his countenance did shine upon them, and behold they were as white as the countenance and also the garments of Jesus” (3 Nephi 19:25). The light of the Savior’s countenance can shine on His followers today as well, fulfilling the Savior’s prayer “they may be purified in me, that I may be in them as thou, Father, art in me, that we may be one, that I may be glorified in them” (3 Nephi 19:29).

To enter the presence of God, one must “be found spotless, pure, fair, and white, having been

cleansed by the blood of the Lamb, at that great and last day” (Mormon 9:6). While Adam after his fall wore “a garment of leaves that provided him covering against his nakedness,” he subsequently received a garment “of extraordinary brilliance and splendor and possessed of supernatural qualities.”³⁶ A similar pattern is found in the Hymn of the Pearl. It is an account of a young man who left behind his garment of light, went on a quest that involved a number of temptations and trials, and ultimately returned to his heavenly parents to be reinvested in his shining mantle.³⁷ Thus just as God covers himself “with light as with a garment” (Psalm 104:2), so can we be covered if we are faithful.

In his dedicatory prayer for the Kirtland Temple, the Prophet prayed that the temple would be “a house of glory,” that the Lord’s glory would rest down upon his people and upon his house, and that the temple would “be filled, as with a rushing mighty wind, with thy glory” (D&C 109: 8, 12, 37). At the time Mercy Fielding Thompson received her endowments in May 1842, the Prophet said to her, “This will bring you out of darkness into marvelous light.”³⁸

The next step is not only to be in the temple, or to carry the temple experience with one, but to become a temple filled with light. Paul taught, “Ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (2 Corinthians 6:16). “If we are to hold up this Church as an ensign to the nations and a light to the world,” President

Gordon B. Hinckley said, “we must take on more of the luster of the life of Christ individually and in our own personal circumstances.”³⁹ The process of progressively obeying light and truth revealed to us, Lamar E. Garrard says, “will continue until sometime after the resurrection when we will receive a fulness of light and truth, becoming like Christ himself, possessing a fulness of the glory of the Father.”⁴⁰

“In LDS theology,” Richard G. Oman says, “light is the most consistent symbol of the glory of God.”⁴¹ The master symbol of light—the Master’s symbol—helps bring us toward that glory. It invites us to come unto Christ, “the light and the life of the world.” Fully engaged and acted upon, light symbolism enlightens our minds and illuminates our hearts; it motivates us, through the grace of Christ, to endure faithfully to the end so as to receive exaltation in the heavenly kingdom where all is light. ■



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NOTES

1. A symbol as defined by William Harmon is “something that is itself and also stands for something else, . . . as a flag is a piece of colored cloth that stands for a country. . . . In a literary sense a *symbol* combines a literal and sensuous quality with an abstract or suggestive aspect.” William Harmon, *A Handbook to Literature*, 11th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2009), 539.
2. Jonathan Edwards, *Images or Shadows of Divine Things*, ed. Perry Miller (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1948), 69, 61.
3. Orson F. Whitney, “Latter-day Saint Ideals and Institutions,” *Improvement Era*, August 1927, 861.
4. Edwards, *Images or Shadows*, 56.
5. Edwards, *Images or Shadows*, 58.
6. Edwards, *Images or Shadows*, 61.
7. Joseph Fielding McConkie and Donald W. Parry, *A Guide to Scriptural Symbols* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1990), 1.
8. Bruce R. McConkie, *The Promised Messiah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981), 377.
9. Gary Waldman, *Introduction to Light: The Physics of Light, Vision, and Color* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1983), 30.
10. Guy Consolmagno, “. . . *The Way to the Dwelling of Light*”: *How Physics Illuminates Creation* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 113.
11. *The New Encyclopædia Britannica* (Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 2007), s.v. “light.”
12. A print of this painting can be seen in the book *In Natural Light: Paintings by VaLoy Eaton, with Commentary by the Artist* (Salt Lake City:

- Gibbs Smith, 2003), 108. Prints of other temple paintings by Eaton can be seen on pp. 46–48, 92, 94, 95, 102, 105, 109–11, 113, 116, and 122.
13. In Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 3rd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 337–39, Hugh Nibley tells of other shining stones, including an ancient account that Noah’s ark was illuminated “by the aid of pearls and precious stones, whose lustre turned pale in the daylight and glittered at night” (p. 338). See John A. Tvedtnes, “Glowing Stones in Ancient and Medieval Lore,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 6/2 (1997): 99–123.
 14. LeGrand Baker and Stephen Ricks say that “the Shechinah is the first thing one sees, and sometimes the only thing the prophets mention, when they are brought into the presence of God. It is described many ways, but always as a bright light—sometimes a fire, sometimes a cloud.” *Who Shall Ascend into the Hill of the Lord? The Psalms in Israel’s Temple Worship in the Old Testament and in the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Eborn Books, 2009), 129–30. In personal correspondence with the author, LeGrand Baker said, “To me, that light has a great symbolic as well as a very real significance. It is the shechinah, the veil that invites the righteous to enter the presence of God and keeps out the wicked.” Hugh Nibley says God is “rendered invisible by the impenetrable veil of light that surrounds him.” “Treasures in the Heavens,” in *Old Testament and Related Studies* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1986), 185. Donald W. Parry says the “*Šākināh* was perceived as being the divine manifestation of Yahweh, whether at the burning bush, Mount Sinai, or any other theophanic appearance of the Israelite god. In the case of Mount Sinai, the tabernacle, and the temple of Solomon, the *Šākināh* was always accompanied with a cloud, which was a visible sign of the glory of God.” “Sinai as Sanctuary and Mountain of God,” in *By Study and Also by Faith*, ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 494. For an extensive treatment of Shechinah (or Shekhinah), see Freema Gottlieb, *The Lamp of God: A Jewish Book of Light* (Northvale, NJ: Aronson, 1989). Gottlieb says: “The name of God’s Presence dwelling within the physical is *Shekhinah*, traditionally viewed as feminine. . . . The root of the Aramaic word *Shekhinah* is ‘the act of dwelling,’ of Immanence and ‘Being Present,’ or ‘The Divine Presence’” (p. 22). For the Israelites in the wilderness, “The Pillars of Cloud and Fire (or ‘Glory’) represent two aspects of *Shekhinah*” (p. 50).
 15. Robert Frost, “The Constant Symbol,” in *Robert Frost: An Introduction*, ed. Robert A. Greenberg and James G. Hepburn (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1961), 87; Harmon, *Handbook to Literature*, 340.
 16. Allen J. Fletcher, *A Scriptural Discussion of Light* (Springville, UT: CFI, 2007), 147.
 17. Avraham Arie Trugman gives an extended treatment of paradoxes of light in *The Mystical Nature of Light: Divine Paradox of Creation* (New York: Devora, 2008). “A paradox,” he says, “occurs when what seem to be two mutually exclusive concepts defy reason by coexisting with each other and by, simultaneously, both being true” (pp. 3–4).
 18. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973), 287.
 19. Thoreau, *Walden*, 186.
 20. Thoreau, *Walden*, 86.
 21. Thoreau, *Walden*, 311.
 22. Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 187.
 23. Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 195.
 24. Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 184.
 25. *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Boston: Little, Brown, 1960), poem no. 1129.
 26. Chauncey C. Riddle, “Symbols and Salvation,” *BYU Studies* 8/3 (1968): 324.
 27. LeGrand L. Baker, private correspondence with the author.
 28. S. Michael Wilcox, “The Temple: Taking an Eternal View,” in *Every Good Thing: Talks from the 1997 BYU Women’s Conference*, ed. Dawn Hall Anderson, Susette Fletcher Green, and Dora Hall Dalton (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1998), 285.
 29. *History of the Church*, 5:362.
 30. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 69–70.
 31. David Whitmer, *An Address to All Believers in Christ* (Richmond, MO, 1887), 12.
 32. Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, Dana M. Pike, and David Rolph Seely, *Jehovah and the World of the Old Testament* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2009), 109.
 33. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 95.
 34. Kevin Christensen makes this connection in “‘Nigh unto Death’: NDE Research and the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2/1 (1993): 1–20.
 35. Donald W. Parry and Jay A. Parry, *Symbols and Shadows: Unlocking a Deeper Understanding of the Atonement* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2009), 2, 3, 162.
 36. Stephen D. Ricks, “The Garment of Adam in Jewish, Muslim, and Christian Tradition,” in *Temples of the Ancient World*, ed. Donald W. Parry (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1994), 710.
 37. Hugh Nibley, *The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Egyptian Endowment*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 2005), 487–501.
 38. Mercy Fielding Thompson, “Recollections of the Prophet Joseph Smith,” *Juvenile Instructor*, 1 July 1892, 400; quoted in *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith*, 414.
 39. Gordon B. Hinckley, “An Ensign to the Nations, a Light to the World,” *Ensign*, November 2003, 84.
 40. Lamar E. Garrard, “The Origin and Destiny of Man (D&C 93),” in *The Doctrine and Covenants*, ed. Robert L. Millet and Kent P. Jackson (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 1:374.
 41. Richard G. Oman, “‘Ye Shall See the Heavens Open’: Portrayal of the Divine and the Angelic in Latter-day Saint Art,” *BYU Studies* 35/4 (1995–96): 119.