



Unveiling Christ this Easter

Easter is not absent from the Old Testament; it is woven through its shadows, symbols, and sacred patterns.

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Imagine you are a first-century Jew at the time of Jesus. You saw the famed Rabbi of Galilee perform miracles. He multiplied food and raised the dead, miracles echoing Elijah and Elisha. You heard him teach doctrines that built upon the law of Moses, but he drew out principles that made the law much more challenging. You saw him ride into Jerusalem on a colt, cleanse the temple, and teach that he was not only the Messiah, but Deity himself.

And then he was betrayed by his friend and follower, Judas (known in Hebrew as Judah), the namesake of his own people. And rather than take his place on the political throne of Israel, you witnessed this Son of David condemned by Jew and Gentile alike, then tormented, crucified, and placed in a tomb.

What would you expect next if your only source of reference was the Hebrew Bible? Would you have recognized Jesus of Nazareth in the scriptures you studied? Could you have anticipated from scripture that this self-proclaimed Messiah would miraculously come back to life—forever?

As Easter approaches, perhaps we can feel more charity and empathy for the disciples' confusion following Christ's death. Their source of scripture was the Hebrew Bible, which we call the Old Testament. While the Nephites and potentially some ancient Israelites had explicit teachings about the Atonement and Resurrection, the Jews in Jesus' day faced an open question.

Despite being longer than the rest of the Latter-day Saint canon combined, the Old Testament has fewer explicit references to [“the fundamental principles of our religion”](#).

Yet while the Old Testament speaks less explicitly of Christ, shadows of His Atonement and Resurrection can be found in its pages. Some teachings of Christ may have been intentionally veiled in rituals and prophetic language. But just as the temple veil was rent at Jesus's death, making clear that the way back to God was through Christ, the Spirit can lift the veil from our understanding, helping us see that the Easter message is implicit in the Old Testament's pages.

Why Isn't the Resurrection Clearly Taught in the Old Testament?

Restoration scripture makes clear what the Old Testament does not: ancient prophets like [Adam](#), [Enoch](#), [Noah](#), [Abraham](#), [Joseph](#), [Moses](#), [Isaiah](#), and others knew of Christ's mission to some degree. This makes the relative absence of discussion about Christ's suffering, crucifixion, and resurrection in the Old Testament puzzling. As I see it, scripture (particularly the Book of Mormon) provides three potential explanations.

The first is that revelation occurs gradually: [“line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little and there a little.”](#) It may be that knowledge of Christ's atonement, death, and

resurrection was originally sparse, leading to less emphasis in earlier scripture. But our teachings about ancient prophets, if taken literally, are **too clear** about prophets' knowledge of Christ's atonement and resurrection for these doctrines to be considered only seedlings. This must be supplemented by other explanations.

The second possibility is that teachings of a suffering "Anointed One" were rejected, lost, or censored by those who compiled the texts. For example, the Book of Mormon cites Israelite prophets like Zenos, Zenock, and Neum—who aren't in our canon elsewhere—that **taught** of Christ's suffering, crucifixion, and burial. These prophets were **stoned** and **cast out**, and perhaps their teachings were likewise discarded.

Nephi also **states** that the Bible was altered before its international distribution: "**they** have taken away from the gospel of the Lamb many parts which are plain and most precious." The editing and authorship history of the Old Testament is complex, and some books could have been crafted by an editor who did not know of or believe in Christ, despite prophets having taught of Him.

A third possibility is that Old Testament teachings of Christ were veiled to the people by God's prophets, or even veiled to prophets by God Himself, because of ancient Israel's **spiritual unpreparedness**, or for some other divine purpose. Paul **spoke** of a "veil" that obscures understanding "in the reading of the old testament," but that this "veil is done away in Christ." The veiled message Paul speaks of likely came by giving Israel rituals that would resemble Christ's sacrifice, as well as giving them sacred texts that veiled the mission of Christ or that could point to Him as a secondary, or higher, meaning. The true nature of Christ's mission could only be gleaned by revelation.

Taken together, these explanations allow us to admit that explicit Old Testament references to Christ are sparse, but that Christ's mission can still be found through the Spirit's tutelage. Jesus **taught** that "the scriptures" of his day—meaning the Old Testament—"are they which testify of me" and commanded his audience to "search" them. With that imperative, I turn now to veiled Easter teachings of Christ found in the Old Testament for those with "**eyes** to see, and ears to hear."

Ancient Israelite Prophecy of Christ's Sacrifice

Abinadi, teaching about the Messiah's divinity, condescension, atonement, and resurrection, **claimed** that "all the prophets who have prophesied ever since the world began [have] spoken *more or less* concerning these things." Perhaps some of this teaching was censored, but much of it may have been inspired thematic and narrative parallels in scripture that constituted "more or less" a prophecy. As Nephi **said**, "*all things which have been given of God from the beginning of the world, unto man, are the typifying of him,*" including parallels in sacred history, poetry, and even prophecies with other primary meanings. Jacob **added** a second witness that the Israelite scriptures "truly testify of Christ" and "that none of the prophets have written, nor prophesied, save they have spoken concerning this Christ."

Christ's atoning sacrifice in Gethsemane and on the cross at Calvary is mirrored in some Old Testament narratives. In the *Akedah*, God commands Abraham to bind and then offer a burnt sacrifice of "thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest." This excruciating story, rife with philosophical complexity, does not thoroughly explain itself, but Jacob saw it as **typifying** Heavenly Father's offering of His Only Begotten Son for our sins. In further parallels to Christ, Isaac rode a donkey to Mount Moriah, just as Christ rode a donkey for his triumphal entry to Jerusalem, and Isaac carried the wood for the sacrifice to its site, just as Christ carried a wooden cross to Golgotha. When Isaac asked his father where the offering was, Abraham replied, "God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering." Isaac was miraculously delivered, and a ram in the thicket was provided as a substitute, symbolizing how the Lamb of God would ultimately sacrifice in our place.

In another example reminiscent of the crucifixion and resurrection, Moses is commanded to raise up a brass "**serpent** and set it upon a pole" for the Israelites to look upon for healing from fatal snake bites. As with the story of the *Akedah*, the Christian significance of the story is never explained in the Old Testament, but Christ **Himself** and **Book of Mormon prophets** interpret it as a veiled symbol of Jesus raised upon a cross to save us by having the faith to look to Him.

Beyond narrative mirroring, Christ's mission seems to be directly or indirectly described in isolated phrases and references. New Testament authors like Matthew felt comfortable declaring that Old Testament passages were "**fulfilled**" when they provided an inspired parallel, even if the context of the passage doesn't indicate at all that it is

messianic prophecy. I argue that we can generally feel comfortable accepting these parallels as well if we acknowledge that there might be a different primary meaning.

Language echoing Christ's betrayal and crucifixion is also scattered across the Psalms and connects Christ to his royal ancestor David. The Psalmist(s) describes betrayal by a "familiar friend, in whom I trusted, which did eat of my bread"; being despised, mocked, and taunted about how "He trusted on the Lord that he would deliver him"; being surrounded by "the wicked," after which "they pierced my hands and my feet"; being given "vinegar to drink"; crying "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"; having his clothing divided among a crowd; and being "poured out like water." The context of some of these psalms suggests that the entire psalms were not necessarily messianic prophecy, yet Gospel authors understood them as being strongly implicated, and Psalm 22 in particular bears stunningly similar parallels.

Finally, there were prophets whose writings could be fairly classified as more direct prophecies of Christ's sacrifice, most notably Isaiah. In particular, two of Isaiah's four "Servant Songs" testify strongly of Christ, even if they applied to multiple people (the unnamed servant has variously been understood to be Jesus, Israel, Isaiah, Cyrus, and others). One of the Songs speaks of an unnamed servant who listened to God without rebelling, who gave his "back to the smiters," and who did not hide his face "from shame and spitting."

Isaiah's fourth Servant Song, even though contested in interpretation, is by far the most reminiscent passage in the Old Testament of Christ's atonement. It describes a lowly "servant" of God with "marred" appearance who has "no form nor comeliness [and] no beauty that we should desire him," and who is "despised and rejected of man; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief." Although many prophets have been unpopular, the affliction this servant bears is for our griefs, our sorrows, our transgressions, and "the iniquity of us all." The servant is given as an atoning "offering for sin" by which he will "justify many" and make "intercession for the transgressors." In so doing he was "cut off out of the land of the living," "made his grave with the wicked," and "poured out his soul unto death." And despite his death, he will be "exalted and extolled, and be very high," will "prolong his days," will "see his seed," and will be divided "a portion with the great [and] spoil with the strong." Even if there were other applications of this prophecy, it testifies beautifully of Christ's mission and is perhaps the rarest gem of prophecy of Christ in the Old Testament.

Sacrifice

In addition to prophecies, the Old Testament practice of sacrifice foreshadows Christ's sacrifice for us all.

The Old Testament [speaks](#) openly of a victorious, reigning Messiah, but says little of a Messiah who suffers for sins. But that changes if we learn to see ancient animal sacrifice as a shadow of “[that](#) great and last sacrifice” that would satisfy the demands of justice for our sins.

Though animal sacrifice is as old as Adam, the books of Moses codified its intricacies. With five distinct offerings—[burnt offerings](#), [peace \(well-being\) offerings](#), [sin offerings](#), [trespass offerings](#), and [meat \(grain\) offerings](#)—the Mosaic rules for sacrifice were complex. The sacrifices had mixed and overlapping purposes: atonement or expiation of sin, removal of ritual impurity, gratitude, memorial, obedience, or petition for deliverance. Animals of both genders and even non-animals were used for many offerings, but all offerings were food items, often with symbolically pleasing smells. Sometimes the offeror ate the sacrifice, other times the priests ate it, and burnt offerings were simply burnt for God.

Some special sacrifices were associated with holy days, such as the Day of Atonement or Passover, and some were performed on behalf of all of God's people. The [Passover](#) sacrifice, in particular, involved the slaughter of a male lamb, whose blood saved the firstborn sons of Israel. And whatever other sacrifices were given, [all](#) firstborn animals were to be given to the Lord.

We can see how these many purposes of sacrifice map onto Christ's atonement and our own personal sacrifices. We see similarities to Christ describing himself as food and drink that must be ritually consumed by others. We especially connect the image of a male lamb of Passover to the Christian message because scripture [calls](#) Jesus the Lamb of God. In general, though, the Christian meaning of these sacrifices was hidden at the time. It is not clear from Leviticus that the Israelites were anticipating a final sacrifice. Leviticus merely taught the underlying principle that blood represents the sacredness of life, and “[it](#) is the blood that maketh an atonement for the soul.”

As we take the sacrament this Easter season, we symbolically consume Christ's body—just as Israelites did with animal sacrifice—and are divinely fed. We also promise to give up our sins. As the late Elder Neal A. Maxwell [taught](#), “Real, personal sacrifice never was placing an animal on the altar. Instead, it is a willingness to put the animal in us upon the altar and letting it be consumed.” We can also follow Christ's example and the other purposes of sacrifice in sacrificing our own time and wills, obeying God, expressing gratitude, asking God for what we need, and being “[an](#) odour of a sweet smell, a sacrifice acceptable, wellpleasing to God.”

The Law of Moses

In addition to its sacrifice requirements, the Law of Moses foreshadowed Christ, who later declared not only that he fulfilled the law but [that](#) “I am the law.” As the Book of Hebrews [teaches](#), “the law [of Moses] ha[s] a shadow of good things to come, and not the very image of the things.” The law seemed to require revelation to see Christ shadowed in it. [Abinadi](#) and [Benjamin](#) both taught that the Israelites “did not *all* understand the law,” not because of low intellect, but because they “hardened their hearts.” This was certainly true of [Sherem](#), who claimed Jacob was wrongly “converting” the law of Moses into worship of Christ.

Nephite prophets saw Mosaic Law as creating a typological framework for an ultimate self-sacrifice to atone for all sins. Nephi [taught](#) that “for this end hath the law of Moses been given”: “proving unto my people the truth of the coming of Christ.” Abinadi [taught](#) that it was “a shadow of those things which are to come.” Amulek [testified](#) that “the whole meaning of the law, every whit” was to point to “that great and last sacrifice” of “the Son of God, yea, infinite and eternal.” We, too, can acknowledge the complexity of the Law of Moses while affirming that it served as a type and shadow of Christ's atonement to ancient Israelites.

The Old Testament and Resurrection

As for its teachings about the resurrection specifically, the Old Testament shows a plurality of views about the afterlife. Resurrection isn't clearly taught in many of its books, especially the earlier ones. Jews in the days of Jesus were divided on whether it occurred. Pharisees, who accepted the later prophetic texts, believed in resurrection; Sadducees, who held only to the older books of Moses, did not. Zoramites like Zeezrom

and Antionah, who demonstrate knowledge of the early Hebrew Bible books, are also **puzzled** by references to the resurrection.

The Book of Daniel **declares** that “many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.” But that book falls relatively late in the Old Testament, and the clarity of the doctrine is obscured as we move back in time—perhaps another veiled or censored teaching. Though there is some uncertainty about what he meant, Isaiah prophesied that our God “will swallow up death in victory; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from off all faces;” and “O Lord. . . Thy dead men shall live, together with my dead body [or “together their bodies”] shall they arise.”

Other than these passages, there are a few resurrection passages that are debated but possibly veiled or which might have a secondary meaning. Ezekiel **prophesied** that a valley of dry bones will come to life as normal people, primarily as a metaphor for the restoration of Israel, but perhaps also suggesting the possibility of resurrection. The Hebrew grammar is jumbled, but Job seems to **say**, with words not in Hebrew italicized, “*though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet [from] my flesh shall I see God.*”

With these powerful images of resurrection available to him, Jesus, surprisingly, does not cite Daniel, Ezekiel, or Job when prophesying of his own resurrection. Instead, Jesus sees the most relevance in the story of Jonah (or Jonas in Greek): “**For** as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale’s belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.” We don’t instinctively think of Jonah being swallowed by a “great fish” as death, but Jonah’s prayer from inside the fish uses the language of death: “**out** of the belly of hell [Sheol] cried I, and thou heardest my voice.” He stayed there for three days before his deliverance.

Perhaps more importantly, God is the one who **breathes life** into humanity, and he saves Israel from death and bondage **repeatedly**. The Exodus is just one beautiful example of God delivering his people from bondage—a frequent metaphor for death in scripture. And God shows himself in the Old Testament to be a God of miracles. The same omnipotence that would allow God to **part the Red Sea, stop the sun in the sky, shake the earth, obliterate cities, turn back armies, bring springs to life, and deliver his people** is the same power required to perform the most stunning of all miracles: to raise from the dead.

Christ is the Meaning

Finding Christ in the Old Testament happens the same way we develop a testimony of Christ in the first place. Nephi **tells** us that a key to understanding Isaiah, for example, is the “spirit of prophecy”—**that is**, the “testimony of Jesus” obtained by revelation. If we encounter Christ’s character in the course of our study, we have found him in the text. Peter, who recognized Christ as the promised Messiah, **told** Jesus, “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God,” not because it was a logical imperative in scripture, but because **our** “Father which is in heaven” had “revealed it unto [him].” The Lord’s counsel for studying the Apocrypha also applies to the Old Testament: “**whoso** is enlightened by the Spirit shall obtain benefit therefrom; And whoso receiveth not by the Spirit, cannot be benefited.”

Christ **is** indeed “in all things, and is through all things, and is round about all things.” Like the first-century Jews who needed the Spirit to understand Christ in their scripture, we, too, can seek the Spirit’s help in unveiling Christ in every part of our lives, however hidden He may seem. As we search the scriptures and apply “our hearts to understanding,” we can come to see what Jesus taught His apostles: that the Old Testament scriptures “**are** they which testify of me.”

As Christ “**yielded** up the ghost” on Calvary, “the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom,” a symbol of overcoming the barriers to God’s presence under the old covenant. As the Book of Hebrews **teaches**, we can now “enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus . . . through the veil, that is to say, his flesh.” Just as the veil in the temple symbolized Christ’s broken body, the veil of the Old Testament is also rent by Christ Himself through revelation.

Perhaps we can now better understand, with the scarcity of explicit references to Christ’s suffering, death, and resurrection, how confused Christ’s disciples must have been immediately after his death. For those on the road to Emmaus, this confusion was dispelled when Jesus, “**beginning** at Moses and all the prophets . . . expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself,” and why he “ought . . . to have suffered these things, and to enter into his glory.” *He* was the veiled meaning all along.

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