

Interpreter

**A Journal of Latter-day Saint
Faith and Scholarship**

Ring in the Christ that Is to Be: Fulfilling the Pattern of His Life

Don Bradley

Article Print

Pages 323–328

© 2024 The Interpreter Foundation. A 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution — NonCommercial — NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>.

ISSN 2372-1227 (print)
ISSN 2372-126X (online)

Mission Statement

Supporting The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints through scholarship.

The Interpreter Foundation supports the Church in the following ways:

- **Promotion:** We provide tools to encourage and facilitate personal learning by study and faith, and disseminate accurate information to the public about the Church.
- **Explanation:** We make the results of relevant scholarship more accessible to non-specialists.
- **Defense:** We respond to misunderstandings and criticisms of Church beliefs, policies, and practices.
- **Faithfulness:** Our leadership, staff, and associates strive to follow Jesus Christ and be true to the teachings of His Church.
- **Scholarship:** Our leadership, staff, and associates incorporate standards of scholarship appropriate to their academic disciplines.

The Interpreter Foundation is an independent organization that supports but is not owned, controlled by, or affiliated with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The material published by the Interpreter Foundation is the sole responsibility of the respective authors and should not be interpreted as representing the views of The Interpreter Foundation or of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

This journal compiles weekly publications. Visit us online at InterpreterFoundation.org

Ring in the Christ that Is to Be: Fulfilling the Pattern of His Life

Don Bradley

Abstract: *The story of Christ, and of Christmas, is the story of Christ “the Lord God Omnipotent” incarnating in “a tabernacle of clay” (Mosiah 3:5). Christ took upon himself flesh so that he might also take upon himself burdens that he did not naturally have to bear—our burdens—in order to relieve us of those burdens. Christ, according to the scriptures, voluntarily “takes upon him” our pains, our sicknesses, death, our infirmities, and our sins (Alma 7:7–13). Unlike Christ, ordinary human beings do not “take upon them death” and bodily infirmity, but are, like king Benjamin, “subject to” them (Mosiah 2:11). In voluntarily taking upon himself our burdens, Christ brought redemption to us, and provided a pattern for us to live by. When we choose to bear burdens that we do not by nature or by necessity have to bear, we emulate him. Paul referred to following this pattern as living by “the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2), and, as Alma’s teachings at the Waters of Mormon indicate, we covenant at baptism that we will live this pattern with one another—to “bear one another’s burdens, that they may be light” (Mosiah 18:8–10). In so doing, we live as part of the body of Christ, measurably living out and incarnating our heavenly King in this world.*

As the year draws toward its close, after reaching its darkest days, we celebrate the coming into the world of the Light by which it was made. The birth of that Light is most profoundly described in the one New Testament Christmas story that we never read at or associate with Christmas—the Christmas story in the Gospel of John:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God.

The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not. . . .

And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth. . . .

And of his fulness have all we received, and grace for grace. (John 1:1–5, 14, 16)

John poetically describes the shining of the eternal Light into the darkness, the coming into the world of its Creator, God the Son (the “Word”) taking on human flesh.

It is in John’s account of the Christmas event, and in the anticipations of that sacred event in the Book of Mormon, even more than in the familiar Christmas stories narrated by Matthew and Luke, that the significance of Christ’s birth is made clearest—and that the pattern he set for us to live by is revealed most plainly. In the symbolic and theological narratives of Christmas given by John and the Book of Mormon prophets we learn of a God who came down to our level to lift us up to his, and who took upon himself our burdens and modeled how we should take upon us the burdens of others.

Unlike John, Book of Mormon prophets spoke of the Christmas event, often referred to in Christian history as the Incarnation, in *anticipation*—before it occurred.

The prophet Abinadi’s message a century and a half before the first Christmas was that in Christ “God should come down among the children of men, and take upon him flesh and blood, and go forth upon the face of the earth” (Mosiah 7:27).

Similarly, a century and a quarter before that first Christmas, King Benjamin learned of the Messiah’s coming birth via an angelic annunciation of “glad tidings of great joy” similar to Gabriel’s later Annunciation to Mary in Luke’s gospel:

I am come to declare unto you the glad tidings of great joy. . . . For behold, the time cometh, and is not far distant, that with power, the Lord Omnipotent who reigneth, who was, and is from all eternity to all eternity, shall come down from heaven among the children of men, and shall dwell in a tabernacle of clay. . . . And lo, he shall suffer temptations, and

pain of body, hunger, thirst, and fatigue, even more than man can suffer, except it be unto death; for behold, blood cometh from every pore, so great shall be his anguish for the wickedness and the abominations of his people. And he shall be called Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Father of heaven and earth, the Creator of all things from the beginning; and his mother shall be called Mary. (Mosiah 3:3, 5, 7–8)

Benjamin's Nephite hearers observed a kind of anticipatory Christmas based on these glad tidings.

The angel's annunciation to Benjamin anticipated not only Christ's birth — his coming "down from heaven among the children of men" to "dwell in a tabernacle of clay" — but also his atoning death, his sharing in our griefs so intensely that he suffers them even more than we can, taking on him the pains of the people he has created, and also "the wickedness and the abominations of his people."

Incarnation thus leads to Atonement: "the Lord God Omnipotent" takes upon him human flesh so that he might take upon him human sin and suffering.

The Book of Mormon's language of "taking upon" — that Christ would "take upon him flesh and blood" in order to take upon him our burdens — is used perhaps most strikingly and illuminatingly by Alma, in a sermon to the people of Gideon.

Evoking the messianic prophecies of Abinadi and Benjamin, and the pending arrival of the first Christmas, Alma promises:

the time is not far distant that the Redeemer liveth and cometh among his people. . . . And behold, he shall be born of Mary, at Jerusalem which is the land of our forefathers, she being a virgin, a precious and chosen vessel, who shall be overshadowed and conceive by the power of the Holy Ghost, and bring forth a son, yea, even the Son of God. And he shall go forth, suffering pains and afflictions and temptations of every kind; and this that the word might be fulfilled which saith *he will take upon him the pains and the sicknesses of his people*. And *he will take upon him death*, that he may loose the bands of death which bind his people; and *he will take upon him their infirmities*, that his bowels may be filled with mercy . . . the Son of God suffereth according to the flesh that he might *take upon him the sins of his people*,

that he might blot out their transgressions according to the power of his deliverance. (Alma 7:7, 10–13)

Alma repeats the language of Christ “taking upon him” our burdens several times, to refer to several kinds of burdens of our human condition:

- our pains
- our sicknesses
- death
- our infirmities
- our sins

Most curious is that Christ is said to “take upon him death.” When any one of us dies, will others say, “He took upon him death?” or “She took upon her death?” When ordinary mortals die, we do not “take upon us death”; rather we, like King Benjamin, are “*subject* to” death and the bodily infirmities that lead to it (Mosiah 2:11).

The divine Christ, who took on flesh for us, was not “subject to” death, but *submitted* himself to death (2 Nephi 9:5), and thereby “took death upon him” for our sake.

The story of Christ, and of Christmas, is of “the Lord God Omnipotent” taking on himself burdens he did not naturally have to bear — our burdens — in order to relieve us of those burdens.

In doing so, he saved us and gave us a pattern for living our own lives. Christ’s example, and his word, encourage us to bear one another’s burdens, even literally, as when he admonished his disciples to bear the burden of a Roman soldier an additional mile beyond the single mile compelled by Roman law (Matthew 5:41). Rather than merely bear a burden they *had* to bear by law, he encouraged them to take the initiative to bear another’s burden voluntarily, as he himself does with our burdens.

The Apostle Paul exhorted the early Christians, whom he described as becoming through baptism a single communal body — the body of Christ — to follow the Savior’s example in taking the burdens of others (1 Corinthians 12:13–27). He taught the Philippian saints to emulate Christ, who in his divine premortal glory did not grasp to hold onto his divine prerogatives but emptied himself of them to descend to our level, become like us, and take on our lowly condition:

Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon

him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. (Philippians 2:5–9)

To the Galatians, Paul went so far as to refer to living by this pattern—emptying or lowering ourselves to shoulder the burdens of others—as fulfilling the very “law of Christ”: “Bear ye one another’s burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2).

Christ’s central example of bearing for us the burdens he did not by nature have to bear, and that we by nature ultimately cannot adequately bear, explains the covenant Alma¹ called upon his people to make at the waters of Mormon, a covenant to bear *one another’s* burdens as Christ had borne theirs:

Behold, here are the waters of Mormon . . . and now, as ye are desirous to come into the fold of God, and to be called his people, and are willing to bear one another’s burdens, that they may be light; Yea, and are willing to mourn with those that mourn; yea, and comfort those that stand in need of comfort. . . . Now I say unto you, if this be the desire of your hearts, what have you against being baptized in the name of the Lord, as a witness before him that ye have entered into a covenant with him . . . ? (Mosiah 18:8–10)

The covenant we are invited to make is to emulate the divine Christ in his Incarnation and Atonement by, like him, shouldering burdens for others that we would not otherwise bear. Our own burdens we *have* to bear; the burdens of others we can *choose* to voluntarily take upon ourselves. In so doing, we emulate our Lord, who suffered the pains of sin and death, not because he had to, but voluntarily for our sake.

In living after this pattern, following his teachings and example of bearing one another’s burdens, we give flesh to his word and participate in a new birth, not a birth of the baby Jesus, but of the communal “body of Christ.”

Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s, beautiful poem, “Ring Out, Wild Bells,” particularly known to Latter-day Saints in the form of a hymn,¹ expresses a longing for Christ in the new year that begins a week after Christmas. Tennyson wrote anticipating the Savior’s Second Coming, which we

1. “Ring Out, Wild Bells,” *Hymns*, no. 215.

await in his due time, and also anticipating the growth and maturation of the communal body of Christ, in which we can now participate:

Ring in the valiant man and free,
The larger heart, the kindlier hand;
Ring out the darkness of the land;
Ring in the Christ that is to be.



Don Bradley is an author and historian specializing in the beginnings of the Restoration. He completed a Bachelor's in History at BYU and a Master's in History at Utah State University, where he wrote his thesis on "American Proto-Zionism and the 'Book of Lehi': Recontextualizing the Rise of Mormonism." Don has performed an internship with the Joseph Smith Papers Project working with the earliest Joseph Smith sources. He was the primary researcher for Brian C. Hales's Joseph Smith's Polygamy series. He has published on the First Vision, the translation of the Book of Mormon, plural marriage before Nauvoo, Joseph Smith's "grand fundamental principles of Mormonism," and the Kinderhook plates. His chapter, with Mark Ashurst-McGee, "'President Smith has Translated a Portion': Joseph Smith and the Mistranslation of the Kinderhook Plates," won the Mormon History Association's 2021 "Best Article Award." His first book is *The Lost 116 Pages: Reconstructing the Book of Mormon's Lost Stories* (Greg Kofford Books, 2019). He has further books in progress on Oliver Cowdery as a revelator and translator, and on the origin of Nauvoo polygamy.

Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship is a peer-reviewed academic journal published by The Interpreter Foundation. Our mission is simple: Supporting The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints through scholarship.