

Paradoxical statements in the book of mormon

[Literature](#), [Books](#)



As with all great literary works, more content is often present than first meets the eye. The Book of Mormon is no exception. One such way that the Book of Mormon proves its literary worth is through the use of paradox. In fact, the Book of Mormon uses paradox strategically to help the reader further ponder the meaning of the scriptures in his or her life, and thus discover statements of deeper doctrine.

In our theological dive into paradoxes found within the Book of Mormon, it is first important to understand what a paradox is and in what contexts it is used. The word itself can be derived from its Greek roots, para and doxa, meaning “beyond belief” (Parsenius). According to K. S. Kantzer in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, a paradox is “(1) an assertion which is self-contradictory, or (2) two or more assertions which are mutually contradictory, or (3) an assertion which contradicts some very commonly held position on the matter in question. (Kantzer) Most experts choose to break paradoxes into rhetorical paradoxes and logical paradoxes—the former being the juxtaposition of two seemingly incompatible ideas for the sake of striking an unconventional insight, and the latter “arises from the attempt by the human mind to unify or to coordinate the multiple facets of experience.” (Kantzer) It is this attempt mentioned by Kantzer, which allows the Holy Ghost to speak to our heart so we can gain a deeper understanding of the truths taught in the Book of Mormon.

Paradoxes can help to bring out a point by addressing it from a unique point of view or perspective, often catching the eye of the reader from sheer shock value. For example, in Shakespeare’s famous play *Julius Caesar*, Caesar tells his wife the famous paradoxical statement, “Cowards die many times before

their deaths, the valiant never taste of death but once. " (Shakespeare, 237) But how can a man die more than once? The seemingly impossible nature of the statement may derail a reader's train of thought, and cause him or her to go back and reread the line for clarification. Further scrutiny reveals the deeper meaning intended by Caesar—that death is inevitable in every man's life, and that we should not waste our lives trying to anticipate and avoid tragedy. Such paradoxes grab a readers' attention by expressing truth from a new point of view. Shakespeare understood this, and used paradoxical language in his plays to make them both literarily rich and insightful. Just as it is used in literature to arrest the readers' attention, so are paradoxical statements used in the Book of Mormon.

In 2 Nephi 9, the prophet Jacob uses paradoxical language which causes the reader an additional examination of his verse: "...wherefore I know that ye know that our flesh must waste away and die; nevertheless, in our bodies we shall see God. " (2 Nephi 9: 4) Or again in 2 Nephi 2, the prophet Lehi states: " For it must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things. If not so, my first-born in the wilderness, righteousness could not be brought to pass, neither wickedness, neither holiness nor misery, neither good nor bad. (2 Nephi 2: 11) To the non-believing reader, this must appear as folly; however, Lehi and Jacob use literary device to create an opportunity to teach doctrine. Jacob uses his verse to explain about the concept of a resurrection; Lehi, uses his to explain how without opposition, mortals would have no experience to compare to, and life would lose its meaning. Paradox is the opportunity through which prophets have chosen to express their more profound truths.

Were it not for the attention-grabbing essence of paradox, readers might not stop to ponder the depth contained in the Book of Mormon, and thus miss occasion to be further uplifted by its profound doctrine. Paradox is also a medium to deeper learning to those who can are ready to understand, and a shield of ignorance for those who are not. The Bible is rife with such paradox. It comes as no surprise then, that Jesus—the master teacher—used paradox in some of his best sermons. “ For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it. (Mark 8: 35) Jesus’ paradoxical sermons served to teach enlightening truths to those whose hearts had been prepared to accept them, but must have been a stumbling block for those whose hearts were not attuned to the spirit.

The case of Christ talking with Nicodemus is one such example: “ Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter the second time into his mother’s womb, and be born? ” In the vernacular, Nicodemus simply replies “ I don’t get it. Jesus used this instance to allow Nicodemus to ponder his words. Not being ready, Nicodemus merely got caught up attempting “ to unify or to coordinate the multiple facets of experience,” as Kantzer would put it. (Kantzer) However, for those ready for it, Jesus explained the higher doctrine of baptism as a requirement to enter into heaven. In this manner, paradoxes can be used to lay out the higher law to those spiritually ready to receive it, while not burdening others with the responsibility of living that law if they are not ready to understand.

As members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “ We believe the Bible to be the word of God, as far as it is translated correctly. We also believe the Book of Mormon to be the word of God. ” (Articles of Faith 1: 8) Logically, if we find the scripture to be riddled with paradoxical teachings, we must also speculate that not only the Bible but also the Book of Mormon contain paradoxes as a way to convey more profound doctrine. Indeed, the prophet Alma spoke in paradox when he said, “ for there can no man be saved except his garments are washed white...through the blood of him of whom it has been spoken of by our fathers. (Alma 5: 21)

The imagery of this paradox is perplexing—no garment can be washed in crimson blood and turn out white. That is, unless we understand the blood to be significant of the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Thanks to the vivid imagery, we can ponder the meaning of this paradox to gain access to the deep doctrine found within, as is common in the Book of Mormon. So what do paradoxes in the Book of Mormon mean for the seeker of truth and readers of the book at large? First, having an understanding to not take everything at face value will be invaluable.

If readers were to get hung up on the seemingly contradictory line “[God’s] paths are straight, and his course is one eternal round,” (Alma 37: 12) they would miss out on the beautiful doctrine of God’s unchanging and righteous nature. Second, if readers understand the most critical points of doctrine can be gleaned from seemingly paradoxical statements, they might take more time to ponder the meaning and gain additional insight through the Holy Spirit. The prophet Moroni advocated that we “ ponder... in our hearts” and

ask in faith, that the truth may be “ manifest...by the power of the Holy Ghost. (Moroni 10: 3-4)

Therefore, paradoxical statements serve as great opportunities to test Moroni’s promise. As readers do so, they will be able to gain additional insight on the paradox of the wondrous dual-nature of Jesus Christ as a mortal and a deity, or the most important paradox of mankind—the miracle atonement of Jesus Christ, who died that all may live. Paradoxes help us to pause and consider the deeper meaning held within the doctrine of the Book of Mormon. So take courage—if paradoxical statements seem like a stumbling block for smooth reading, they are. For God gives us weakness that we may be strong.