

The Beginning of Wisdom

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February 21, 1982. Sunday morning. About thirty missionaries—half the branch—came to read scripture together before lunch, and the study room, fit for twelve, was crowded. There were chair-desks around the room, tight next to each other, with two rows in the middle. I sat in a corner. On one wall hung a poster of a green European hillside, a pencil drawing of Jesus, a blackboard, and a corkboard with charts and photographs; on the opposite wall, behind the rows of missionaries, was a large seascape tapestry in royal blue.

I had thought out beforehand how to begin. Scripture, like music, is meant to be heard, I said: even those who appreciate music by reading it silently appreciate it more when they hear it.

Elder Thorton was taking notes: a small blond elder, alert and smiling (he often smiled), sitting in the middle of the room two arm lengths away from me.

If you read a passage aloud, I said, thinking about what you are reading, and remembering that there is a real person behind the words, a person who wants to speak, who has something to say, you will begin to hear him speak.

The room was quiet. The elders on the front row—watching and listening—sat this way and that in their dark suits. Elder Blood (a curious name) sat back in his chair with his feet out and crossed. He came from a large family, worked hard, and didn't say much in groups. He was a district leader; he could be trusted to give good counsel. I wondered about the elders I couldn't see, three rows back in the corner.

I said that you don't have to work at it when you read aloud; you don't want to try to make it dramatic; it is a matter of being open, attentive, of letting it come out. "What shall we read?"

Sister Mullins raised her hand. She wanted to hear Mormon 8, the first chapter Moroni wrote. "I can almost hear Moroni speaking," she said, "but it really requires a man's voice to read it right."

Elder Parcells—seated next to Sister Mullins and her less confident, less talkative companion—volunteered. Elder Parcells was Canadian,

from Calgary; he was tall and thin, had wiry black hair, and his eyebrows crossed the top of his nose. He was a convert of thirteen months and said he was in shock when he first entered the MTC and was learning to keep track of and to do everything expected of him. After two weeks he had been asked to be branch executive secretary: he had sat between the desks in the branch office (it doubles as a room-assignment office during the week) and listened closely to the description of his calling, his eyes alert, without expression on his face. The next Sunday, at 6:30 A.M., he had returned with schedules (he called them *schedules*), organizing all the meetings and interviews for the day.

The scripture bundles opened: zippers jerking and then the familiar flipping sound of the thin paper. Elder Parcells began reading.

"1. *Behold I, Moroni, do finish the record of my father, Mormon. Behold, I have but few things* [he paused, took a breath] *to write, which things I have been commanded by my father* [he spoke each word identically, precisely, as if with a computer voice].

"2. *And now it came to pass that after the great and tremendous battle at* [he hesitated] *Cumorah, behold, the Nephites who had escaped into the country southward were hunted by the Lamanites, until they were all destroyed* [breath].

"3. *And my father also was killed by them, and I even remain alone to write the sad tale of the destruction of my people* [he read as if he hadn't seen the words before and was reading them now only because he was supposed to]. *But behold, they are gone, and I fulfill the commandment of my father. And whether they will slay me, I know not* [each word with the same tone of voice].

"4. *Therefore I will write and hide up the records in the earth; and whither I go it mattereth not.*"

Elder Parcells looked up; everyone looked up. Their faces said, now what?

I said, "Thank you. Let's go back and look at these verses." I looked at the passage, thinking how reading aloud can help a discussion. Here, the discussion had to get the reading aloud going.

"In verse 1, he says he has to finish his father's record and he has just a few things to write and his father commanded him to write them. In verse 3, he repeats something like that: he says he has to fulfill the commandment of his father. How does Moroni feel about writing?"

Half the elders on the front row were looking hard at their scriptures; the others were as intently watching me. Elder Blood was watching me.

"He's not excited about it," someone in one of the back rows said. "It's something he has to do."

"In verse 3, he says *I even remain alone to write the sad tale of the destruction of my people. But behold, they are gone, and I fulfill the commandment of my father. And whether they will slay me, I know not. Therefore I will write and hide up the records in the earth; and whither I go it mattereth not.*"

"He's kind of down," someone said from the back rows.

"He's depressed," Sister Mullins said.

"Did you know," I asked, "that he wanders around for twenty years before he finally buries the plates?"

There was motion in the chairs; Elder Thorton was smiling. Elder Parcells began the next verse. The room was quiet again.

"5. *Behold my father hath made this record [pause], and he hath written the intent thereof [breath]. And behold, I would write it also if I had room upon the plates [another pause], but I have not [breath]; and ore I have none, for I am alone. My father hath been slain in battle [his tone of voice lower], and all my kinsfolk [a long pause], and I have not friends nor whither to go [his voice down]; and how long the Lord will suffer that I may live, I know not.*"

He stopped reading, and didn't look up.

I said, "There—when he read, *My father hath been slain in battle, and all my kinsfolk, and I have not friends nor whither to go*—right there you could hear Moroni's voice, his sadness and loneliness coming through."

Sister Mullins was leaning forward in her chair, vigorously nodding her head yes.

"You didn't try to put that in, did you?"

Elder Parcells looked up, a little red in the face, shook his head no, didn't say anything but looked back down at the words he had just read.

Why, I wondered, did he respond to the loneliness and the talk of kinsfolk and friends? He had friends in the Church, he had told me. But his parents hadn't joined, not yet. They had brought him down to the MTC. They had been impressed: the next month his father had done a thousand dollars' worth of free printing for the Church in Calgary. *And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers.*

Even Elder Blood was looking down at his scriptures now. There was talking in the room; they wanted to go on.

"Who else would like to read?"

Elder Housley, quick with answers, tall and dark like Elder Parcells but with thicker hair combed down across his forehead, put his hand

up. He was seated two chairs to my left with his back to the blackboard; he looked too big for the chair-desk and seemed uncomfortable with his legs protruding out into the room. I wondered, but couldn't remember, whether he was going to the north or the south. He would fit in better in the north—the Italians in the south were shorter. But it wouldn't matter; when some Italian branch president was giving him an *abbraccio forte*, Elder Housley would just have to stoop down, as he had to do with me at Cantiamo when after a thought and a song we gave each other hugs.

He read the next three verses.

"6. Behold, four hundred years have passed away since the coming of our Lord and Savior.

"7. And behold [he read distinctly, one word after another, and took a breath], *the Lamanites have hunted my people, the Nephites, down from city to city and from place to place, even until [breath] they are no more; and great has been their fall; yea, great and marvelous is the destruction of my people, the Nephites.*

"8. And behold [breath], *it is the hand of the Lord which hath done it. And behold also, the Lamanites are at war one with another; and the whole face of this land [breath] is one continual round of murder and bloodshed; and no one knoweth the end of the war.*"

More words, more unconnected facts. He looked up, and over at me, with a faint smile. He hadn't understood.

A week later Elder Housley sat between the desks in the branch office, looking down at his hands in his lap for some time before he started talking. He said he didn't want to question my decision; he wasn't that kind of person. "But," and there were tears in his eyes, "is it best to send Elder Glenn home?"

"What? Elder Glenn isn't going home."

"He was packing his bags this morning and said he'd talked to you."

It was lunchtime. I went to the cafeteria and sat down next to Elder Glenn and his district. I looked at them; they looked at me and at each other, and started laughing. I smiled, no one said anything, and I went back and explained to Elder Housley the joke that had been played on him. He was a little embarrassed, but mostly relieved—Elder Glenn wasn't being sent home. After lunch, at the Sunday School meeting, I told the branch a missionary had come to me, with tears in his eyes, to plead his brother's case.

"Why does he say the destruction was *great and marvelous*?" Elder Thorton asked. "It seems weird to call it *marvelous*."

I explained that *marvelous* has older meanings. I had been thinking about this earlier. Wonder, according to Greek philosophy, is the beginning of wisdom, its motivating cause. Marveling and wondering can mean being pulled up short, left open and vulnerable, everything at stake: *When Moses saw [the burning bush], he wondered at the sight: and as he drew near to behold it, the voice of the Lord came unto him.* It can mean being caught up with the significance of something's being one way rather than another: *When Jesus heard [the centurion at Capernaum], he marvelled, and said to them that followed, Verily I say unto you, I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel; and in his own country, among people he grew up with, he marvelled because of their unbelief.* But sometimes wondering stagnates, becoming an evasive way of staying ignorant: *why marvel ye at this? marvel not at these things; despise not, wonder not, but hearken unto the words of the Lord . . . doubt not, but be believing, and come unto the Lord with all your heart, and work out your own salvation with fear and trembling before him.* My academic education had taught me to wonder; I had learned not to panic at confusion; I had learned to watch for paradox, in hope that it would lead to new understanding. My education from the scriptures, which should have come first, was giving me more reason to hope. The beginning of wisdom, according to the scriptures, is the fear of God: his thoughts aren't my thoughts, but he speaks to me in a language I can understand, if I am willing to understand it, willing, like Jacob, to wrestle with the messenger, through the night, until he blesses me.

"When the scripture says, *Wonder not, but hearken unto the words of the Lord*, it means don't stand there confused—listen and believe. When Isaiah says this is *a marvelous work and a wonder*, he's saying it particularly for those who refuse to believe. If you won't allow the possibility that Joseph Smith was as prophet, the whole thing will just perplex you; you won't be able to figure it out; it will be marvelous to you."

We talked about Moroni's finding the destruction marvelous, not easy to understand, and his finding it less marvelous after he read the Jaredite record. We talked about how Moroni interjected his own thoughts into Ether (much more than his father did in compiling the rest of the book) and about how the Jaredite history helped Moroni think through his own history.

Elder Thorton was taking more notes; Elder Blood was watching me again; Sister Mullins was nodding yes.

"Notice in verse 6 that Moroni tells us when Christ came. Why do you think he puts that there?"

"He wants us to know how long it's been," someone said.

"Yes, but why? And why right there? Let me read verse 6 with the verse right after it:

"6. *Behold, four hundred years have passed away since the coming of our Lord and Savior.*

"7. *And behold, the Lamanites have hunted my people, the Nephites, down from city to city and from place to place, even until they are no more; and great has been their fall; yea, great and marvelous is the destruction of my people, the Nephites.*"

"Oh, I see," Sister Mullins said, again leaning forward in her chair, her eyes wide and her voice urgent. "Within four hundred years of Jesus' coming, everything fell apart. It amazes Moroni."

Before she left the MTC, Sister Mullins had finished all her discussions and was speaking fair Italian. The elders looked up to her and her companion, and at the departing testimony meeting praised the two sister missionaries so highly that I concluded a type of women's liberation was quietly taking place at the MTC. Her companion, Sister Wagner, didn't finish as many discussions as Sister Mullins; she was a different person. She had auburn hair, trimly styled; Sister Mullins had brown hair, full, blown dry. Sister Wagner wore office-type skirts and blouses; Sister Mullins wore pleated dresses. Sister Wagner's testimony was deepening; Sister Mullins had always known the Church was true. Sister Wagner was an inward person, gaining confidence; Sister Mullins was an outward person who wished she felt more peace inside. "I've always been competitive," Sister Mullins told me, "and now I'm fighting it."

We looked at verse 7. "What does Moroni think of the Lamanites?"

"They hunted the Nephites down," Elder Housley said, who had been watching Sister Mullins and wanted to give a right answer.

"Yes, but how does he feel about that? What do you hunt down? He's disgusted. The Lamanites *hunted my people, the Nephites, down from city to city and from place to place*. They hounded them, from one hiding place to the next, hunting and tracking them down like animals."

Elder Housley looked over at me and back at his scriptures, his legs pulled up under his desk now.

"And notice verse 8. What does Moroni think of the war?"

"It was over the whole face of the land," Elder Thorton said, "between the Lamanites, too, and nobody knew when it would end."

"It's a mess. But he does say it's the hand of the Lord; the Lord allows it."

Elder Housley read the next five verses.

“9. *And now, behold, I say no more concerning them for there are none save it be the Lamanites and robbers [breath] that do exist upon the face of the land.*

“10. *And there are none that do know the true God save it be the disciples of Jesus, who did tarry [breath] in the land until the wickedness of the people was so great that the Lord would not suffer them to remain with the people [breath]; and whether they be upon the face of the land no man knoweth.*

“11. *But behold, my father and I have seen them [breath], and they have ministered unto us.*

“12. *And whoso receiveth this record, and shall not condemn it [breath] because of the imperfections which are in it, the same shall know of greater things than these [breath]. Behold, I am Moroni; and were it possible, I would make all things known unto you.*

“13. *Behold, I make an end of speaking [breath] concerning this people. I am the son of Mormon, and my father was a descendant of Nephi.*”

Again rigid, flat. The front row was watching Elder Housley. Elder Thorton looked at me, our eyes met; he understood.

“Look what happens in verse 13.”

“It’s like he stops writing,” Elder Blood said.

“Yes, and rather abruptly: either he has nothing else to say, or he has to leave in a hurry. Notice in verse 9, there’s more about the Lamanites, what he thinks about them.”

“He lumps them with the robbers,” someone in the back said.

“Yes, and he’s saying they’re not worth writing about. The whole thing’s too depressing to write about. But notice verses 10, 11, and 12. There’s something he likes to write about.”

“The three Nephites,” Elder Housley said.

“Yes. He says, *behold, my father and I have seen them, and they have ministered unto us*, and you can see he likes writing that. That’s a great thing to know about, he says in the next verse. He’d like to tell us more. Maybe that’s why, back in verse 6, he wrote about Christ’s coming: that was a great thing. He wants to write about something important. We know that later he finds some teachings of Christ that his father didn’t include, and adds them in—the sacrament prayers, the baptismal prayer. But here in verse 13, he says he has to make an end of speaking.”

I closed my scriptures, the scripture bundles in the room zipped shut, and I said we had to make an end too. I asked if they had heard Moroni speaking to them. Heads here and there nodded yes.

The study room was soon empty, except for Elder Parcels and me. He wanted to check the interview schedule for the afternoon. Three months later he wrote me from Catania: *“Il lavoro qui sta andando bene e la gente qui ha molto rispetto per la chiesa e vuole ascoltare il messaggio che abbiamo.* The work here is going well and the people have a lot of respect for the Church and want to listen to the message we have. *Come lei sa, la Chiesa Cattolica è molto forte qui, ma la Chiesa di Gesù Cristo sta crescendo velocemente come era stato profetizzato dal Presidente Benson 18 anni fa.* As you know, the Catholic church is very strong here, but the Church of Jesus Christ is growing rapidly as was prophesied by President Benson eighteen years ago. *Amo l'Italia e questa è una buona esperienza.* I love Italy and this is a good experience. *Dica agli anziani di studiare forte perché è difficile studiare qui, perché c'è tanto lavoro.* Tell the elders to study hard because it is difficult to study here, because there is so much work to do.”