
Understanding Of Charity Book of Mormon

Charity in the Book of Mormon: An Exegetical Analysis

INTRODUCTION

In a society where poverty, natural disasters, warring countries, and other such conditions influence daily life for millions of people around the globe, the word “charity” has become well-known because of the relief it provides. What many do not consider or realize is that charity has been studied and nominated for thousands of years. The modern-day English word traces its roots back to the Latin *carus*, meaning “dear/beloved”, which later evolved to *caritas*, or “generous love”. The apostle Paul himself used the word “charity” well over thirty times throughout his epistles to the members of Christ’s church in the Eastern Hemisphere. The Bible, however, is not the only ancient record that speaks of charity. Charity also plays a role in the Book of Mormon. This book of scripture offers another detailed rendition of the meaning of charity. Prophet-historian Mormon’s discourse on faith, hope, and charity is recorded in Moroni 7:45-48 by his son, Moroni. A close study of Mormon’s verses on charity shows that charity is an overarching term for the desirable and virtuous qualities which humans are able to develop in life.

CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS

In about 385 AD, the entire Nephite population was destroyed by its Lamanite enemies in a massive, bloody battle. Moroni was the last Nephite survivor and therefore the last record-keeper. The fall of the Nephites forced him to go into hiding for fear of being slaughtered like his brethren. Originally, Moroni “had supposed not to have written more”, very likely thinking he would not have survived long enough to add to the record his fathers had kept for so many years (Moroni 1:1). Due to his prolonged survival and very likely divine intervention, Moroni finally decided to “write a few more things, that perhaps they may be of worth unto my brethren, the Lamanites, in some future day” (Moroni 1:4). Moroni’s writings are estimated to have been recorded between 401 and 421 AD. The ten chapters comprising his book are the product of a solitary prophet’s desire to speak one last time, not only to the descendants of his Lamanite brethren, but to anyone who will receive the prophetic writings of his people.

The six chapters leading up to Moroni 7 explain some of the workings of Christ’s church in Moroni’s time, including the prayers for the blessing of the sacrament, an anecdote of Christ’s visit to the Americas, and a description of how the church members were baptized and “nourished in the good word of God” (Moroni 6:4). Moroni then includes the seventh chapter, a total of forty-eight verses quoting a discourse given by his father, Mormon, on faith, hope, and charity. Originally given to the members of the church in a “synagogue”, Mormon’s purpose in speaking is to influence his fellow followers of Christ for good. The exact year of his discourse is unknown. Because he was a prophet, Mormon may have received revelation concerning the awful fate of his people before giving his discourse. As is stated in Amos 3:7, “the Lord God will do nothing, but he revealeth his secret unto his servants the prophets”. His exhortation to the people to pray for and develop faith, hope, and charity may have rested on the hope that some one of his people would die having lived an honest, Christian life. Moroni appears to have

chosen to include his father's discourse at the end of the Book of Mormon for a similar reason – to remind the human race that destruction, whether physical or spiritual, is best overcome through the development of virtuous habits and “a love of God and of all men” (2 Nephi 31:20).

FORM ANALYSIS

Mormon's words on charity follow the structure and form of rhetoric and prose, as his intent is to persuade his audience to choose to develop charity, all while speaking plainly and conversationally. There is, however, an element of poetry to his words. Imagery and metaphors fill Mormon's words with meaning, helping his listeners understand the doctrine that is being taught. The form of the verses specifically on charity, however, is most intriguing. In verse 45, for example, charity is personified through the use of phrases such as “suffereth long”, “envieth not”, and “seeketh not her own”. Mormon creates a sense of imagery here by giving his inanimate and rather abstract subject human capabilities. The listener is led to understand that having charity entails action. The definition of charity extends through verse 46 and ends with verse 47, leading to the pinnacle of Mormon's discourse: the invitation to act. He closes with a heartfelt testimony, declaring that those who pray for and are filled with charity shall “become the sons of God”, hoping to be “purified even as [Christ] is pure” (Moroni 7:48). The discourse is sealed with the punctuating utterance of an “amen”.

DETAILED ANALYSIS

Mormon establishes in verse 44 that, in order to know that Jesus is the Christ, one must have charity. Mormon wants his audience to correlate the figure of Christ with the characteristics of charity before learning about its meaning. Verse 45 then gives way to the in-depth description, beginning with the phrases, “charity suffereth long, and is kind”. The phrase “suffereth long” can be reworded as “longsuffering”, originating from the Greek words for “long” and “temper”. A “long temper” therefore belongs to one who is slow to anger and quick to control himself under any circumstance. 1 Nephi 19:9 gives an example from the life of Christ that binds the meanings of longsuffering with kindness. Here Nephi prophesies of what will become of Christ at the end of his mortal reign, saying the Jews will “scourge him, and he suffereth it; and they smite him, and he suffereth it. Yea, they spit upon him, and he suffereth it, because of his loving kindness and his long-suffering towards the children of men”. Given the origin of the word for longsuffering and its use in the scriptures by Nephi, one concludes that it characterizes patience and self-restraint rather than retaliation when outside influences cannot be controlled.

Mormon goes on to say that charity “envieth not”. At the time of the translation of the Book of Mormon in 1829, the word “envy” meant “to fret or grieve one's self at the real or supposed superiority of another, and to hate him on that account”, as well as “to grudge” or “withhold maliciously”. Envy's Latin root, *invideo*, literally means “to see against” –

hence the negative context. At certain times in their history, the Nephites experienced envy to the point where it consumed them. At their highest peak in wealth and prosperity, the members of Nephite society had “all things common among them; therefore there were not rich and poor, bond and free, but they were all made free” (4 Nephi 1:3). Conversely, when the people became prideful and envious, they esteemed each other as competitors and “began to seek to get gain that they might be lifted up one above another” (Helaman 6:17). Similar ideas concerning envy in verse 45 are conveyed by the phrases “not puffed up” and “seeketh not her

own". Envy created disunity and contention among the Nephites, which ultimately led to their total annihilation. Had charity been prioritized in their society, the consequences may not have been so tragic.

The next phrase in verse 45 says charity "is not easily provoked". The verb "provoke" is found scattered throughout the scriptures, oftentimes associated with "provoking the Lord" (1 Kings 14:15) through rebellious actions. The Old Testament, for example, is riddled with examples of poor behavior displayed by the people of Moses following their escape from Egypt. While God, as an all-knowing and just being, is perfectly capable of exercising perfect judgment, humans are limited within their own views and are incapable of acting reasonably when provoked. Why else would the human race be so sorely afflicted by a constant flow of murders, riots, and other displays of violence? It is also important to note, however, that Mormon does not say charity is never provoked. No mortal man who has ever existed could truthfully say he has never been provoked to anger. A Holocaust survivor once pointed out that "the only power to which man should aspire is that which he exercises over himself". Mormon's desire in speaking of charity as something that is not easily provoked is for people to focus on self-control.

Mormon then moves on to the phrases "thinketh no evil" and "rejoiceth not in iniquity but rejoiceth in the truth". The first scriptural mention of evil appears in Genesis 3:5, when God and Christ are discussing the forbidden fruit's power to allow man to distinguish between good and evil. The 1828 version of the American dictionary defines iniquity as "a particular deviation from rectitude; a sin or crime; wickedness; any act of injustice". Thus evil is the father of iniquity, but as the prophet Alma once wrote, "wickedness never was happiness" (Alma 41:10). It is commonly known and accepted that actions originate from thoughts. Proverbs 23:7 supports this claim by stating that, "as [man] thinketh in his heart, so is he". An article from a church magazine further concludes that "good character is the result of continual effort in righteous thinking and the righteous acts that such thinking brings about". Additionally, while man is free to choose for himself according to his wills and desires, the consequences lie out of control; and it is these consequences that make true Alma's statement about wickedness. Mormon's counsel stems from a well-informed observation of human psychology in relation to morality.

The last few phrases in verse 45 say that charity "beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, [and] endureth all things". The words "bear", "hope", and "endure" are closely correlated with the previously-analyzed phrase "suffereth long". One definition of bear is "to sustain with proportionate strength". Hope is described as "a desire of some good, accompanied with at least a slight expectation of obtaining it". Lastly, to endure means "to suffer without resistance, or without yielding". If the words "bear" and "endure" imply a strenuous effort to carry on, then one must have a purpose for persevering in suffering. Humans are so strongly averse to pain that the most powerful motivation for endurance through suffering is, in fact, hope for an ultimate outcome. A psychological study showed that the human brain "becomes more engaged, creative, motivated, energetic, resilient, and productive at work" when a positive outlook is employed. Now the attention must be drawn toward the curious choice of wording in the phrase "all things". These words appear numerous times throughout the scriptures, but do they refer to literally all things on the face of the earth? Should one believe and hope all things? The answer comes back to the meaning of the words "bear" and "endure". The fight for righteous desires, fed by hope, determines what is believed and what is hoped for. Mormon encourages his audience to believe divine truths and to hope to obtain truth.

Verse 46 introduces an odd concept: "if ye have not charity, ye are nothing, for charity never

faileth". Having examined Mormon's definition of charity, one concludes that it provides strength of character and resilience during difficult times. The nothingness Mormon speaks of refers to "a thing of no consideration or importance" or of "a low condition". Charity, therefore, adds value to the human journey throughout life by providing an incentive to carry on. The verb "fail", then, means to not achieve one's purpose or goal. Knowing the meaning of charity in Mormon's words, it becomes clear that, while man may fail to have charity, it will never fail to bring the expected results when put into practice. Hence, man cannot progress or feel he is of worth without the characteristic of charity.

The passage concludes with a powerful declaration: "charity is the pure love of Christ, and it endureth forever" (Moroni 7:47). The figure of Christ has been meticulously studied by scholars, theologians, clergy, common folk, and all others from the beginning of time. For Christians, he is, as Mormon claims, an example of "pure love". For those who do not believe in Christ but esteem him as an exemplary public figure, he represents the ability to reason with men and live life peaceably. Society today thirsts for true love and affection, and as one of the most powerful human emotions known to man since before the Creation, it can truly be said that love "endureth forever".

SYNTHESIS

Charity has proved itself to be a multi-faceted term rich in significance for the desirable qualities man seeks to develop. It advocates for endurance, hope, patience, moral behavior, humility, and purpose. Such traits have not only been proven worthwhile by years and years of human interaction, but by science as well. Charity allows man to fulfill his potential, whether he is religious or not.

THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION

Mormon's brief discourse on charity is one of the most well-liked passages in the Latter-Day Saint community, and yet many struggle to comprehend its true meaning. When examined closely through interpretations given by other scriptural passages and viewed in the historical and literary contexts of its origins and translation into the English language, charity reveals itself to be somewhat of a superpower. Verse 48 calls for the reader to "pray unto the Father with all energy of heart, that ye may be filled with this love". The statement suggests that a true development of charity cannot exist without divine aid. In my personal life, I have been able to discover time and time again that I cannot obtain charity alone. In fact, I still cannot say that I have charity. I have, however, caught glimpses of it while mourning the loss of a friend, comforting the spiritually weak, and receiving charity from others in my own time of need.

I personally feel that the description of charity as "the pure love of Christ" is the most fitting definition of them all. Whether or not a person believes, the accounts of Christ portray a man who never acted by motivation for his own well-being, but sacrificed his life for both the people who loved him and for those who despised him enough to order his death on the cross. Christ is the perfect example of someone who "suffereth long", "is not easily provoked", "is kind", and truly "beareth [and] endureth all things". I believe that he was sent to personify charity as one of the most divine traits known to mankind. I would not understand nor appreciate charity without the knowledge of who Christ is and his role in God's plan for me.

An understanding of charity may impact any one person, believer or nonbeliever, regardless of race, gender, or religious denomination. I feel that every human being has the capacity to do good, to become good. No one will become perfect in this life, but anyone can strive to become the best person they can be. Even those who seem unrepentant and wicked on the outside have an inner light calling for them to change their ways. Any person who believes in God and believes we are his offspring can consider that as truth. I am grateful for charity; I wish every person knew how to grasp it and hold it close for the rest of their lives. My hope in analyzing Moroni 7:45-48 is for me to increase my efforts to have charity and to help others see its importance in the process. Charity truly holds the power to make the world a better place, one person at a time.

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