Why Is 3 Nephi Sometimes Called the “Fifth Gospel”?  

“Verily, verily, I say unto you, this is my gospel.”  
3 Nephi 27:21

The Know
While describing the contents of the Book of Mormon in a First Presidency message in 2004, President Gordon B. Hinckley said, “It contains what has been described as the fifth Gospel, a moving testament of the New World concerning the visit of the resurrected Redeemer on the soil of this hemisphere.”

In April 1904, B. H. Roberts mentioned that some debated whether “fifth Gospel” was an appropriate designation of 3 Nephi, demonstrating the idea originated at least a century earlier than President Hinckley’s use.

Gospel literally means “good news,” and so in one sense 3 Nephi is a “gospel” because—along with Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—it declares the good news of Christ’s Atonement and resurrection. As a literary genre, though, gospel is somewhat difficult to define. Broadly speaking, gospels are texts which focus on the life, teachings, and miracles of Jesus.

Beyond the four canonical gospels, there are additional early Christian texts dubbed “gospels,” such as the Gospel of Mary, the Infancy Gospel of James, the Gospel of Nicodemus (The Acts of Pilate), the Gospel of the Ebionites, the Gospel of the Hebrews, the Gospel of the Nazareans, the Gospel of Thomas, and the Gospel of Philip. Some of these deal mostly with the post-resurrection acts and teachings of Christ, similar to 3 Nephi. Hugh Nibley compared the 3 Nephi account with many of these early Christian post-resurrection traditions and felt that 3 Nephi fit so naturally within that body of literature that “with the title removed, any scholar would be hard put to detect its irregular origin.”

Nibley’s work might suggest that 3 Nephi is a “gospel” within the meaning and tradition given to that genre by early Christians. Yet the designation as a fifth Gospel carries greater weight, suggesting it belongs within the same class as the four canonized Gospels, which, as New Testament scholar Christopher M. Tuckett observed, are quite different from the non-canonized gospels.

The four Gospels are of course somewhat different within themselves, but a number of points neatly suggest that 3 Nephi has a place alongside them. Some examples include:
Much like Matthew and Luke, 3 Nephi begins with the fulfillment of prophesied signs of the Savior's birth (3 Nephi 1; cf. Matthew 1–2; Luke 1–2).

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all mention John the Baptist, the forerunner sent to prepare the way for Christ in the Old World (Matthew 3; Mark 1; Luke 3; John 1). 3 Nephi likewise records the ministry of a forerunner who baptized among the Nephites—the prophet Nephi, son of Nephi (3 Nephi 7:15–26).

Just as Jesus did, Nephi cast out devils, healed the sick, and even raised his brother from dead. As the Savior’s New World forerunner, Nephi performed his miracles “in the name of Jesus” (3 Nephi 7:19–22). Thus, as New Testament scholar Krister Stendahl put it, 3 Nephi “transposes the ministry of Jesus into a ministry of Nephi, a man of miracles in the name of Jesus.”

Matthew, Mark, and Luke all record the Father bearing witness of the Son,

Just as all four Gospels document the death and crucifixion of Jesus, 3 Nephi records the fulfillment of prophesied signs confirming the Savior’s death and three days in the tomb (3 Nephi 8–10). The 3 Nephi account may even help clarify the timeline of Christ’s entombment, since the account of the destruction adds information about the timing and duration of Christ’s death.

Just as the New Testament Gospels record the teachings of the Savior during His earthly ministry, 3 Nephi records the teachings of the resurrected Lord.

This includes the Sermon at the Temple (3 Nephi 12–14), which parallels the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7) and Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6:17–49), the clarification of teachings recorded in John about His “other sheep,” and the institution of the sacrament.

The Nephite record stands as a fifth witness of the bodily resurrection of Christ (3 Nephi 11), in a way that exceeds the all other Gospels, canonical and non-canonical.

Several more points of comparison could be made. Yet just as the New Testament Gospels have key differences that ought to be noticed, 3 Nephi is different from the other four Gospels in important respects. As LDS gospel scholar Andrew C. Skinner noted, the Savior “said and did things of which the four Gospels have no record, and for which 3 Nephi is our treasured source.”

Key among these are the post-resurrection nature of the Savior’s ministry, and the emphasis on the temple in Christ’s teachings.

The Why

Many have attempted to imitate the Gospels, and have failed miserably. Yet 3 Nephi offers an authentic fifth Gospel which “complements and supplements the four biblical Gospels.” As Skinner pointed out, it is unique among Gospel accounts in possessing material “reviewed and edited by the Savior himself.”

In the October 2016 General Conference, Brother Brian K. Ashton similarly taught, “Jesus’s visit to the Nephites after His Resurrection was carefully organized to teach us the things of greatest importance.” Thus, disciples of Christ can be confident that “3 Nephi contains those matters that the Savior himself felt were and are most important.”

In July 1838, the Prophet Joseph Smith taught, “The fundamental principles of our religion are the testimony of the apostles and prophets concerning Jesus Christ, that he died, was buried, and rose again the third day, and ascended up into heaven.”

President Ezra Taft Benson taught that the Book of Mormon “is the keystone in our witness of Christ,” a point Elder Gary E. Stevenson reiterated recently.

While the entire Book of Mormon is saturated with various testimonies of Christ, the Gospel of 3 Nephi is the preeminent reason that the Book of Mormon stands as a keystone witness of Christ’s divinity.

By detailing the post-resurrection appearance and ministry of Jesus Christ in the Americas, “3 Nephi stands as an independent witness of the linchpin doctrine of the entire Christian faith—the bodily Resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.” It is a Gospel, not of the mortal Jesus, but of the risen Lord. In a time of ever-increasing skepticism about who Jesus was and who He claimed to be, the Book of Mormon, as LDS author Michael R. Ash observed, “is a unique second witness to the divinity of Christ and the reality of the Resurrection.”

“Truly, 3 Nephi is worthy of the designation Fifth Gospel—the capstone of all Gospel accounts,” Skinner concluded. It is a Gospel the world desperately needs now—a Gospel which has the potential to soften hearts,
change minds, and convert people unto the Lord. Skinner resolved, “For this Fifth Gospel we should be forever grateful and perhaps much more active in filling the earth with its contents.”

Further Reading

Monte S. Nyman, Book of Mormon Commentary, 6 vols. (Orem, UT: Granite, 2003), volume 5.


Notes

2. See B. H. Roberts, Conference Report, April 1904, 16.

3. Gaye Strathern and Andrew C. Skinner, “Introduction,” in Third Nephi: An Incomparable Scripture, ed. Gaye Strathern and Andrew C. Skinner (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2012), viii: “All five Gospels testify that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. They are Gospels because they all declare the ‘good news’ that the atonement of Jesus Christ makes salvation available to all who come unto him with faith, repentance, baptism, the sanctifying power of the Holy Ghost, and by enduring to the end (3 Nephi 27:13–21).” Interestingly, according to Christopher M. Tuckett, “Within first-century Christianity, the term ‘gospel’ was used to refer to the Christian kerygma centering on in the death and resurrection of Jesus.” See Christopher M. Tuckett, “Introduction to the Gospels,” in Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible, ed. James D. G. Dunn and John W. Rogerson (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003), 989. In 3 Nephi 27:13–15, Jesus likewise defined gospel as centering on His death and resurrection, thus making the Book of Mormon usage authentic to the first-century AD. See also Andrew C. Skinner, “Jesus’s Gospel-Defining Discourse in 3 Nephi 27:13–21: Doctrinal Apex of His New World Visit,” in Incomparable Scripture, 281–307.


5. Tuckett, “Introduction to the Gospels,” 989–990 mentions some of these. Literature on the post-resurrection ministry of Christ in the Old World is frequently considered to be a genre unto itself, called the 40-day literature, since Christ’s post-resurrection ministry was 40 days. See Hugh Nibley, Mormonism and Early Christianity, The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley, Volume 4 (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1987), 10–44. A listing with information about each of these documents is available at fortydayministry.com.


7. Tuckett, “Introduction to the Gospels,” 990: “Thus the Gospels which were finally placed in the [New Testament] canon are rather different in kind from the ones that were not.”


9. See Book of Mormon Central, “How was Nephi, Son of Nephi, Similar to John the Baptist? (3 Nephi 7:23–24),” KnoWhy 196 (September 27, 2016).

10. Krister Stendahl, “The Sermon on the Mount and


33. Strathern and Skinner, “Introduction,” viii: “It is not the account of the mortal Christ but the account of the resurrected, glorified Christ.”

