

Code words, an explanation, LeGrand Baker

A note to the Book of Mormon Project LeGrand Baker March 11, 2000

My beloved friends,

Not long ago Devan Barker, who is one of the founding members of this Project, came to visit me. During our conversation, one of the things we talked about was the Book of Mormon Project. Devan suggested I ought to clarify my use of the phrase "code word." He said he feared that it might be taken as though we are claiming some secret knowledge that no one else has. Such a claim would not only be silly on our part, but it would also be a red flag, which would misrepresent our intentions, and may cause some people to wonder what we are up to. So I told Devan that I would try to write something about that.

First of all, I would like to say something about my own writings, and particularly about what you will read below. When you read something in this project which I have written and which you do not agree with, call it my "opinion." When you read something which you do agree with, call it my "considered opinion." If you come upon something which the Holy Ghost says is true, call it "truth." But call nothing you read "truth" without the witness of the Spirit.

Opinions are like trees. Only dead ones are firm and unmovable. Living ones are flexible and subject to change. A twig may become a branch. The branch may grow and support many smaller branches, or the branch may die. Dead branches should be pruned away. In a living tree (even evergreens which lose a third of their needles every year) there is constant change with new growth, new strength, discard, and redistribution of energy. When changes stop, the tree is dead - so is it with opinion.

When I write, my short essays contain two kinds of interwoven thoughts. One is the expression of my firm testimony of the divinity of Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of the Father, and of his gospel as it was restored by the Prophet Joseph Smith, and taught by the LDS church today. The other kind of thoughts are only my own opinions. Sometimes the two kinds of thoughts support each other in my mind, so that in my writing I do not always differentiate between them. My testimony is true. Some of my opinions are well thought out and based on true premises. Some of them are flawed, and I have not yet noticed it. The flaws usually occur when the opinions are based on an incorrect premise, or when the logic is not sound. When I write these flawed ideas, I have no desire to lead anyone astray. Indeed I believe I cannot do so unless that person accepts as untested "truth" what I have intended to be understood as only my opinion. So please read what I write with discretion.

Having said that, let's go back to the original question. What of "code words." There are two kinds of code words in the scriptures. 1) words which were clearly understood by both the writer and the reader at the time they were written, and so were never intended to be code words at all. 2) words which were deliberately used by an author to encode his ideas. Before I talk about those two kinds of code words, let me tell you how I came to use that phrase. A few years back, I was working on a certain manuscript collection. An individual whom I respect as much as anyone alive, came and spent a few afternoons researching this collection with me. During

our conversation we mentioned the phrase "all spiritual blessings in heavenly places, in Christ" in Ephesians 13. In verse 20, Paul says Christ sat on the right hand of his father in "heavenly places." So we concluded that "heavenly places" denoted the throne room - the Holy of Holies - in the celestial temple. We also observed that "all spiritual blessings," if given in the Holy of Holies, would have been ALL spiritual blessings. My visitor called the phrase "heavenly places" scriptural "code words," observing that understanding such code words often enhances ones understanding of the scriptures.

Among the "code words" which were not intended to be that, are words like faith, which is translated from the Greek "pistis," which means the token of a covenant (like a wedding ring is not the covenant, but the token of a covenant). When one understands "faith" that way, scriptures which contain the word "faith" can take on a whole new layer of meaning.

Another is "righteous" or "righteousness." The Hebrew word is zedek, as in Melchizedek (king of righteousness), or Zadok, as in the proper name of the high priest who anointed Solomon to be king. After Solomon's time, every high priest who presided over the temple, until the high priesthood became a political appointment, was a descendant of Zadok. So as an adverb, the word "zadok," translated "righteous" or righteousness," often means "highpriestly," or "temple-appropriate." That is, something which is done the right way, with the right authority, using the right words, in the right place, by one who is dressed the right way. Again, when one reads "righteousness" to mean that, it gives the scripture significantly more meaning.

Another is "redeem." In both the usual Hebrew and Greek, it may mean to ransom or to purchase. Paul usually uses it that way. But in Job and in the Book of Mormon it often means to come into the presence of God (Job 14:14; Ether 3:13, Helaman 14:17-18; 2 Ne. 23:4; 2 Ne 11:5). If one reads "redeem" that way in those scriptures, it makes quite a difference.

In Psalms, etc. the references to being beneath the wings (as in Psalm 17), probably refers to the great cherubim wings which spanned the throne of God in the Holy of Holies. If it means that, then when Saviour refers to gathering Israel as a chicken gathers her babes under her wings, in the New Testament, Book of Mormon, and D&C, he may be talking about giving them the right to sit on the throne -- making them sacral kings.

"Mystery" and "secrets" often come from the Hebrew SOD ("sode" in Strong), which means the secrets of a Council, and usually refers to the decisions of the Council in Heaven. Sometimes it helps when one keeps that in mind. The other kind of code words were probably intended to be a code. Hugh Nibley was the first to teach us that in Isaiah, "mountain" often means "temple." "Path," "way," "highway" (as in Isaiah 49) all refer to the sequences of ordinances and covenants which are performed in the temple, and also to the way one lives according to those covenants when one comes out of the temple. In these scriptures, the sub-text actually makes more sense than the surface text. The following will serve to illustrate:

The way I use the phrase "code word" is illustrated by the way I might quote Isaiah 49:8-11. (When I put my own words as a commentary into a scripture in this project, I always put my words in brackets and in caps, because e-mail can handle caps, and that way there is no question which words are mine and which are scripture.)

V.8 Thus saith the LORD, In an acceptable time [A TIME WHEN THE ORDINANCES ARE VALID AND THEREFORE ACCEPTABLE] have I heard thee, and in a day of salvation have I helped thee and I will preserve thee, and give thee for a covenant of the people, to establish the earth, to cause to inherit the desolate heritages [AN IDEA WHICH IS USED IN ISAIAH 61 TO INDICATE THE REUNITING OF THE HUMAN FAMILY THROUGH ORDINANCE WORK FOR THE DEAD] V.9 That thou mayest say to the prisoners [IN ISAIAH 61:1-3 AND D&C 138:42 THESE ARE PEOPLE IN THE SPIRIT PRISON], Go forth; to them that are in darkness, Shew yourselves. They shall feed [FRUIT OF THE TREE OF LIFE] in the ways [CODE WORD], and their pastures shall be in all high places.[TEMPLES] V.10 They shall not hunger nor thirst; neither shall the heat nor sun smite them for he that hath mercy on them shall lead them, even by the springs of water [WATERS OF LIFE] shall he guide them. V.11 And I will make all my mountains [CODE WORD] a way [CODE WORD], and my highways [CODE WORD] shall be exalted. (Isaiah 49:11)

This method of using the phrase “code word” is not to suggest there are any great secrets. It is just that in the project we have already talked about the meanings of those words, and the “[CODE WORD]” is a convenient and economical way of saying what I want to say.

All this business about original meanings and code words is interesting, and may be valuable, but its value must be tempered by one’s individual inspiration. No one in this project, has the right – and I firmly believe, presumes to believe he has the right – to assert that his own individual beliefs ought to be accepted by anyone else as either truth or as a standard by which to judge truth. There are only two standards: What the scriptures and the Brethren say, and what the Holy Ghost confirms. In an article called “Scripture Reading & Revelation” on pages 7-9 of the Ensign of January 1995, Elder Dallin H. Oaks writes,

“Those who believe the scriptural canon is closed typically approach the reading of scriptures by focusing on what was meant at the time the scriptural words were spoken or written. In this approach, a passage of scripture may appear to have a single meaning and the reader typically relies on scholarship and historical methods to determine it. “The Latter-day Saint approach is different. Professor Hugh Nibley illuminates this in his essay “The Prophets and the Scripture.” He observes that “men fool themselves when they think for a moment that they can read the scripture without ever adding something to the text, or omitting something from it. For in the wise words of St. Hilary,... ‘Scripture consists not in what one reads, but in what one understands.’” Consequently, he continues, “in the reading of the scripture we must always have an interpreter” (The World and the Prophets, The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley, 12 vols., Salt Lake City: Deseret Book -Co., 1987, 3:202). “He concludes: ‘The question is not whether or not one shall add to the word of the scripture -- thousands of volumes of learned commentary have already done that -- but whether such addition shall come by the wisdom of men or the revelation of God’ (ibid., p.206)

I appreciate Devan's concern, and hope this helps clarify why we occasionally refer to "code words."

LeGrand Baker

