

ETHER

FAITH: Mormonism | TEXT: Book of Ether | VOLUME: Book of Mormon | AUTHOR: Joseph Smith

OVERVIEW

The Book of Ether serves as a second witness of destruction within the Book of Mormon, mirroring the Nephite demise. It purports to be an abridgment by Moroni of twenty-four gold plates found by the people of Limhi. The narrative follows the Brother of Jared, a man of profound faith who speaks with the Lord and leads his people across the ocean in submersible barges to a 'promised land' (the Americas). The text establishes a strict geographic covenant: inhabitants of this land must serve the God of the land, Jesus Christ, or be 'swept off' when fully ripened in iniquity. The history chronicles cycles of righteousness and wickedness, emphasizing the danger of 'secret combinations'-oaths used to usurp power. The narrative concludes with a civil war of total annihilation, leaving millions dead and only two survivors: the prophet Ether and the king Coriantumr. Theologically, it introduces the 'Brother of Jared's' vision of the pre-mortal Christ and Moroni's discourse on faith and weakness.

KEY FIGURES

The Brother of Jared (Mahonri Moriancumer), Jesus Christ (Jehovah), Moroni (Narrator/Abridger), Ether (Prophet), Jared, Coriantumr, Shiz, Akish, The Daughter of Jared

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. PRE-MORTAL SPIRIT BODY OF CHRIST

Assertion: Christ showed his spirit body to the Brother of Jared, which looked exactly like flesh and blood, thousands of years before his birth.

"Behold, this body, which ye now behold, is the body of my spirit... and even as I appear unto thee to be in the spirit, will I appear unto my people in the flesh. (Ether 3:16)"

Evangelical Comparison: In Ether 3, the text asserts that Jesus had a spirit body that was anthropomorphic (human-shaped) long before the Incarnation. The Brother of Jared is surprised to see the Lord's finger looks like flesh. This contradicts the Evangelical and Chalcedonian understanding of the Incarnation, where the Son took upon Himself a human nature at a specific point in history (John 1:14). The text implies the human form is the eternal form of the spirit, rather than the Logos assuming humanity.

2. MODALISTIC GODHEAD

Assertion: Jesus explicitly identifies Himself as both the Father and the Son.

"Behold, I am Jesus Christ. I am the Father and the Son. (Ether 3:14)"

Evangelical Comparison: While modern Mormonism teaches three distinct gods/personages, the 1830 text of Ether reflects a 'Modalist' theology where Jesus is identified as the Father. This contradicts the Biblical baptismal formula (Matthew 28:19) and Jesus's prayers to the Father (John 17), which Evangelicalism interprets as interaction between distinct Persons of the Trinity. This text collapses the distinction.

3. THEOLOGY OF WEAKNESS

Assertion: God intentionally gives humans weakness (singular) to ensure humility.

"I give unto men weakness that they may be humble... for if they humble themselves before me, and have faith in me, then will I make weak things become strong unto them. (Ether 12:27)"

Evangelical Comparison: Ether 12:27 is a cornerstone of Mormon anthropology. It suggests that human limitation and moral frailty are strategic endowments from God to induce humility. In contrast, Evangelical theology sees moral weakness as a corruption of the Imago Dei due to the Fall (Romans 5:12). The solution in Ether is a cooperative synergism (humility + faith = weakness made strong), whereas the Biblical model is reliance on Christ's strength amidst weakness, without attributing the origin of that weakness to God's creative intent.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: The Book of Ether introduces a theology where the pre-incarnate Christ has a spirit body of human form, blurring the distinction between Creator and creature. It also presents a 'land covenant' where salvation and survival are tied to a specific geography (the Americas) and collective righteousness, reminiscent of the Old Covenant with Israel but applied to a new location. This contrasts with the Evangelical understanding of the New Covenant, which is spiritual, universal, and not tied to maintaining possession of a specific landmass. Furthermore, the definition of faith in Ether 12 suggests a transactional model (faith triggers the miracle) rather than a relational trust in God's sovereignty.

Shared Values:

Condemnation of conspiracy and corruption; Call to repentance; Belief in Jesus Christ as Savior; Importance of faith and humility

Friction Points:

1. [Major] Theology Proper (Nature of God) – Asserts God has a human-form spirit body prior to incarnation.
2. [Critical] Theology Proper (Trinity) – Conflates Father and Son into one person (Modalism).
3. [Major] Christology – Redefines the Incarnation as taking on flesh for a pre-existing human-shaped spirit.
4. [Moderate] Sola Gratia – Suggests weakness is a tool for self-improvement through humility rather than a condition requiring total rescue.

Semantic Warnings:

"The Father and the Son"

In Text: A single personage (Jesus) acting in two modes or roles (Ether 3:14).

Evangelical: Two distinct Persons within the one Godhead (Trinity).

Example: In Ether 3:14, Jesus says 'I am the Father and the Son,' whereas in Matthew 3:17, the Father speaks from heaven to the Son.

"Weakness"

In Text: A condition given by God to induce humility (Ether 12:27).

Evangelical: A result of the Fall or human limitation, not a gift from God.

Example: Ether says God 'gives' weakness; James 1:13 says God tempts no one.

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: Being 'redeemed from the fall' and brought back into God's presence (Ether 3:13); also implies physical survival in the promised land.

How Attained: Through faith, repentance, and keeping the commandments to serve the God of the land.

Basis of Assurance: Personal revelation and 'perfect knowledge' (Ether 3:20).

Comparison to Sola Fide: Ether 12 emphasizes that 'faith is things which are hoped for and not seen' but then transitions to 'witness' coming *after* the trial of faith. This suggests a merit-based faith where the quality of faith earns the miracle/witness, contrasting with Sola Fide where faith is the empty hand receiving Christ's merit.

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

1. Repent and come unto Christ
2. Believe in God unto repentance
3. Serve the God of the land (Jesus Christ) or be swept off
4. Do not touch the sealed portion of the plates (command to Joseph Smith)
5. Awake to a sense of awful situation regarding secret combinations

Implicit Obligations:

1. Seek personal revelation/visions (piercing the veil)
2. Oppose secret societies and government conspiracies
3. Maintain a 'broken heart and contrite spirit'

Ritual Requirements:

1. Prayer (crying unto the Lord)
2. Baptism (mentioned in Ether 4:18)

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. In Ether 12:27, it says God gives us weakness to make us humble. How does that compare to the biblical view that God made creation 'very good' and sin entered through the Fall?
2. Ether 3:14 has Jesus saying, 'I am the Father and the Son.' When you pray, do you pray to Jesus as the Father, or do you see them as distinct?
3. The Jaredites were destroyed because they didn't serve the God of the land perfectly. How does the New Testament offer security even when we fail?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. The Air Hole in the Barge – Just as the Jaredites would perish in the sealed vessel without the air God provided, we are dead in our sins and 'sealed' in darkness unless the Holy Spirit breathes life into us. [John 3:8, Ezekiel 37:5]
2. Stones of Light – We are like the stones—opaque and dark by nature. We cannot generate our own light. We need the touch of God (Christ) to become light to the world. [2 Corinthians 4:6]

Spiritual Weight:

1. Performance/Perfectionism [Severe] – The text links physical survival and spiritual status to strict obedience. The threat of being 'swept off' creates a high-stakes anxiety about personal and national righteousness.
2. Uncertainty/Epistemological Pressure [Moderate] – The requirement to have faith ***before*** receiving a witness (Ether 12:6) places the burden of proof on the believer's exertion of will. If they don't see the miracle, the implication is their faith was insufficient.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Direct visual revelation (Theophany) and the 'trial of faith' which leads to knowledge.

Verification Method: Faith must be exercised ***before*** the witness is given (Ether 12:6).

Evangelical Contrast: Biblical faith is 'assurance of things hoped for' (Hebrews 11:1) based on God's character and word, not necessarily a mechanism to force a visual manifestation or 'perfect knowledge' that removes the need for faith (as described in Ether 3:19).

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: 1830 (Publication)

Authorship: Joseph Smith (Claimed translation of Moroni's abridgment of Ether)

Textual Issues: The text contains 19th-century revivalist language and concerns (e.g., 'secret combinations' mirroring anti-Masonic sentiment of the 1820s).