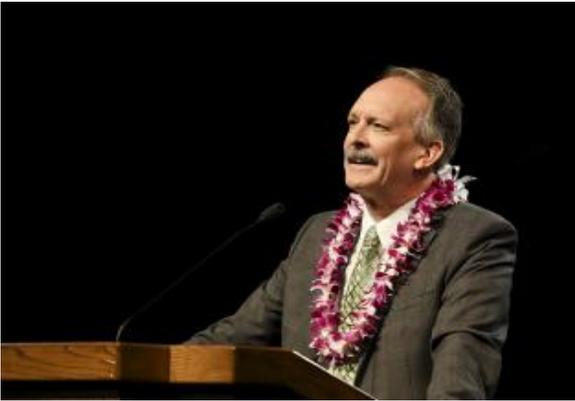


## “And All This for the Salvation of Zion”



Michael Murdock  
Associate Professor, Political Science Faculty of Business & Government  
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Brothers and Sisters ... Aloha. Thank you ... I'm sorry you don't get to hear my brilliant wife. She's working her temple shift so I get to introduce myself.

My resumé is not unusual: great parents, mission, college, callings, and jobs. I married my wonderful wife and we raised spectacular children. Even thinking about the usual introductory list puts me to sleep, so instead, I'd like to share a story to help you understand my talk.

When I was 10 years old, my school gathered all the fourth graders to hear the “bomb lecture”—a graphic explanation about what would happen to us if nuclear war erupted. After finishing a harrowing description of radiation poisoning, the teacher ended by declaring that if the sirens ever sounded, he'd jump in his truck and race to the nearest military base so he could be at ground zero when the bombs hit. That way, he smiled cleverly, he wouldn't have to suffer like everyone unlucky enough to survive. With all the other dazed fourth graders, I stumbled out to recess but his words kept echoing in my head. That night, as I knelt down for prayers, I mustered the sincerest prayer my tiny heart had ever produced, “Heavenly Father please don't let the bomb come tonight. Tomorrow's my birthday.” ... And so many of you wonder what's wrong with my generation.

Fortunately for us all, God answered my prayer and countless others since. Now I laugh at the experience but at the time I remember desperately needing God's assurance. He always gives it. I love him dearly. I love this world he created for us. I love watching his miracles unfold around us. I pray now that His spirit will attend so my words can somehow open one for you.

### 1. Introduction

Doctrine & Covenants section 93 illuminates some of the most sublime doctrines we have in scripture. In it the Lord teaches us about the premortal life, the creation, truth/light/elements & intelligences, the resurrection, agency, progress, evil, and more. The revelation ends, however, with somewhat mysterious instructions. “And, verily I say unto you, that it is my will that you should hasten to translate the scriptures, and to obtain a knowledge of history, and of countries, and of kingdoms, of laws of God, and man, and all this for the salvation of Zion, Amen.”[\[1\]](#)

I remember reading verse 53 when I was a skinny 19-year-old missionary in the MTC, trying to learn Mandarin. Verse 53 hit me like a bolt of lightning—and not in a good way—because I had NO interest in history, kingdoms, or countries. None. When I got my mission call to Taiwan it took me an hour to find it on a world map. Literally. As I examined verse 53 again, I wondered out loud, “Why history?” and “Why would “Zion’s salvation” depend on it? Why not biology or geology or some other interesting subject?”

This question haunted me for 36 years. Even after I got a PhD in history I didn’t understand. Slowly, however, the Lord awakened my mind. Now when I read verse 53 it fills me with deep appreciation for His wisdom. Today I’d like to share why section 93, and verse 53 specifically, matter to me in the hope that my words might also inspire you. Before I turn to D&C 93, however, I must quickly explain two things about memory of the past, what I’ll call “historical memory”: 1) it’s plastic, and 2) it’s power.

## **II. Historical Memory is Plastic**

Number one, our memory of the past is plastic. We can bend it into any shape we want. Today is June 4, 2019. Exactly thirty years ago—June 4, 1989—my good wife and I and the rest of the free world were riveted to our TV sets watching the Beijing student demonstrations on Tiananmen Square. The students had been protesting for weeks, calling for political reform and liberalization. Their courage raised hopes around the globe that something wonderful would follow. On June 4, 1989, however, regime hardliners sent troops and tanks to shoot, crush, and scatter the protestors. Vivid reports of bloodshed shocked the world, but they also energized action elsewhere. Just five months later protestors tore down the Berlin Wall. Two years after that further demonstrations and reforms dissolved the Soviet Empire.

My intent is not to explain what happened in 1989 but what has happened since. In China today those events of 30 years ago have been largely scrubbed from public memory—erased. For many Chinese, it’s as if they never happened. In her book, *The People’s Republic of Amnesia*, Louisa Lim details China’s government’s efforts to bleach the past. She describes the results: “Those who continue to remember [the past] are consigned to a life on the periphery [because] moving on—not dwelling on the past—has become a key survival tactic, perhaps the most important one. Young Chinese people have little idea of, or little interest in, what happened.”[\[2\]](#)

Similar efforts to erase, bend, or obscure history also occur here in the United States, especially in the south where activists are attacking memory of the Civil War era. In the UK stories, symbols, and statues tied to Britain's imperialist past face similar purges.

The past is a gigantic tidal wave of trillions times trillions of data points capturing every act, thought, feeling, reaction, exchange, and encounter *ad nauseum* of every particle and participant. What happened in the past is fixed. It can't be changed. However, ... how we choose to remember the past changes all the time. To create "memory of what happened," we choose which details matter, how interactions are framed, what we feel about them, and then dump the remaining 99.9999%. Memory changes and we choose how.

### **III. Historical Memory is Power**

Number 2: How we choose to remember the past matters immensely because it determines how we think, act, and interact right now. In short, historical memory has the power to shape society. It does so in three important ways, 1) it substantiates social values, 2) it defines community, and c) it steers behavior.

Histories are great at substantiating social values. Values constitute the bedrock foundation of all social orders. However, by themselves values all have a flaw: no matter how ideal, noble, and perfect they appear on paper, they generate disagreements and social tension when put into practice. The problem is that IF a value is true—worthy of our respect and loyalty—that truth is not evident or inherent in the value itself. For example, while some would definitely agree that "honesty, modesty, or spirituality" matter. Others will scoff.

That's where history comes in—it gives weight to values, encouraging wider consensus and silencing critics. To Americans, the values "freedom, liberty, justice for all" become more than just abstract ideals when showcased within the narrative surrounding July 4, 1776. History substantiates values even if historical events repudiate them; it simply calls those events "bad." Thus, Hitler beautifully confirms the values of "human dignity, compassion, and justice," because we saw what happened when his Nazis abandoned them.

Values tell us how to set up our laws, customs, norms, and more. It's the job of history, however, to reveal the worth of those values and build support for them. All it need do is create a historical narrative—a story—pitting "heroes" who personify our values against "villains" who defy them. Conflict, tension, and drama result as good battles evil, progress faces down degeneration, kindness defies brutality, strength sweeps aside weakness, prosperity supplants poverty, knowledge trumps ignorance, or tolerance beats segregation. As the narrative unfolds, we cheer for the "good." When certain values help the "good" triumph, those values become valued by us and sink deep into our hearts.

The second way historical memory shapes social order is by defining community. We all live in multiple, overlapping communities: family, city, nation and so forth. Each relies on history—formal or not—to help members identify with it. History explains the community’s origins, hierarchy, purpose, roster, allies, enemies, vision, setbacks, victories, possessions, culture, rules, and so on. Rare and wonderful, our community of BYU-Hawaii would dwindle and disintegrate if it ever stopped sharing the story of President McKay’s vision with all who come and many across the globe who don’t. That history passes our university’s defining essence person to person, generation to generation, motivating commitment, contribution, and consecration.

The third way memory of the past shapes society is by steering behavior. When history judges past figures as “heroic” or “villainous,” we naturally identify with “heroes” and dislike “villains.” “Heroes” defend our community and meet glorious ends—even if it means martyrdom. “Villains” betray our values and meet ugly fates. It’s not the figures that history judges. It’s the behavior. By showing what happens to Moses and Pharaoh, Alma and Korihor, Queen Esther and Jezebel, Churchill and Hitler, history encourages us to follow the “heroic” path. Good little girls, hearing that Jezebel was eaten by dogs and Queen Ester saved her people, all want to be Queen Esther on Halloween ... not Jezebel.

In sum, memory of the past shapes society by substantiating values, defining community, and steering behavior. These three qualities give history a voice. I call it a voice because it calls to us, seeking to persuade us to embrace the values, community, and behavior encapsulated within it. This voice—the raw creative power of social order—is why kings, emperors, sultans, dictators, presidents, popes, CEOs, politicians, celebrities, social activists, and parents of teenagers all possess a keen interest in historical memory. Whoever controls it can control society. Whoever controls it can control us.

#### **IV. Today’s War of Historical Voices**

This brings us to D&C 93. In our day an enormous range of different historical voices call to us. In the past, wars were fought over territory, religion, resources, slaves, ideologies or other things. Today, wars are waged for our attention. Battles rage between different voices of history, each with its own set of values, community, and behavior. This new war operates by different rules. “The pen is mightier than the sword,” is no longer accurate. Today the pen IS the sword. “History is written by the victor,” is now reversed. Today the writing of history happens first. When people embrace it, it is victory that follows.

The sheer volume of these contending historical voices staggers the imagination. They reach everywhere. Their variety is confounding. All clamor for attention and loyalty and the resulting din and cacophony can spin people around in confusion. Many don’t know what to believe or which one to follow. ... One reason the Lord gave us D&C 93 is because he wants us to know how to distinguish “good” voices from “bad” ones.

##### **A. “Things as They Were”—Truth History**

In verses 24 and 26 the Lord describes “good” historical voice. He starts by defining truth: “24) And truth is knowledge of things as they are, and **as they were**, and as they are to come; ... 26) The Spirit of truth is of God. I am the Spirit of truth, and John bore record of me, saying: He received a fulness of truth, yea, even of all truth; ...”[\[3\]](#)

By defining truth as “knowledge of things as they were” the Lord identifies a type of history that is truth itself—“truth history.” It’s easy for God to identify “truth history” because he sees all—including the role of His own hand. It’s almost impossible for the world to find “truth history” because it doesn’t see much of anything. Fortunately, the Lord offers His help as the “Spirit of Truth.” Historical voices that invite the Spirit of truth are “good.”

Missionaries employ “truth history” when they teach. If you examine it closely *Preach My Gospel* is really just a bunch of history lessons: The First Vision, the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, Christ’s life, death, and resurrection, the Great Apostasy, the Restoration. It’s history, virtually all of it. Even the Plan of Salvation is a history, reaching back before the earth was formed and far into the future where history hasn’t happened yet. When the “Spirit of truth” confirms a history to be “things as they were,” its voice is “of God,” reflecting the values, community, behavior that fulfill God’s purpose and create His social order here on earth.

## **B. “Wicked Traditions”**

In contrast to “truth history,” the Lord also explains a version of “not-truth history.” In verses 25 and 39 He explains: “25) And whatsoever is more or less than this [“things as they “are, ... were, and ... are to come”] is the spirit of that wicked one who was a liar from the beginning. ... 39) And that wicked one cometh and taketh away light and truth, ... from the children of men, ... because of the tradition of their fathers.”[\[4\]](#)

The Book of Mormon—prepared by Christ, the “Spirit of truth” himself, for us in our day—offers a perfect example. The Nephites and Lamanites shared the same ancestor, hometown, language, and trek to the Promised Land. The Nephites heeded the Brass Plates record and used its voice to interpret and remember their own experiences. In contrast, the Lamanites remembered the past as nothing but a series of offenses that justified hatred against the Nephites. Packed with righteous indignation, blame, and accusation, this historical voice used derogatory language, sought vengeance, and produced divisive “us verses them” lines of identity. It objectified, demonized, and enslaved. Mormon called this version of historical memory ... “wicked traditions.”

These “wicked traditions”—a chosen view of history—produced a thousand years of hatred. The Lamanites didn’t destroy the Nephites. It was “wicked traditions.” In their last decades, the Nephites and the Lamanites both embraced “wicked tradition” versions of history. As the two historical voices fed hate into and enflamed one another, provocations escalated until violence overwhelmed everything. History builds. It can also destroy.

## V. “Obtain a Knowledge of History”

The great challenge of our age—the last dispensation—looks very much like the great conflict of the Book of Mormon, except that now globalization and technology mean that the battle lines are everywhere. In almost every corner of the globe the beautiful voice of Zion—a song of love offering salvation to any who will receive it—competes with accusatory shouts of “wicked tradition” versions of history.

This brings us to verse 53 of section 93 and my original question, “Why would the Lord command us to “obtain a knowledge of history, and of countries, and kingdoms ... and all this for the salvation of Zion?” There are several ways verse 53 inspires me, but I’m only going to explain two.

### A. Hearts Filled with Spiritual Power

First, a knowledge of history can transform our hearts and fill them with great spiritual power. Our Savior showed us how. In Gethsemane Christ shouldered the sins of each and every one of us. He came to know every betrayal, foul thought, and dirty deed. He saw us truthfully—“as we are.” Technically, in Gethsemane he “obtained a knowledge of history”—mine, yours, all of our histories. Rather than accuse us, however, he chose to see us “as we can become.” That choice transformed him. Alma explains it beautifully: “12) And [Christ] will take upon him death, that he may loose the bands of death ...; and he will take upon him [our] infirmities, that his bowels may be filled with mercy, ..., that he may KNOW ... how to succor his people according to their infirmities.”<sup>[5]</sup>

It was history—our personal histories—that filled the Savior with enough mercy and knowledge to heal us. Because he chose to see good in us, our histories somehow infused him with new levels of power. Christ already possessed more love and charity than anyone—but he got even more when he obtained a knowledge of your history.

If we do as the Savior did—“obtain a knowledge of history” and choose to see divine purpose in it, choose to search for God’s hand in it, choose to seek input from the “Spirit of truth”—we too can gain “knowledge of things as they are and were.” At that point we’ll see—in a limited sense—the way God sees. When we see others and their history as God sees them, His spirit will fill us with His mercy, light, and power.

This isn’t new. Most of us have already covenanted to do this. At the Waters of Mormon, Alma asked his followers if they were willing to bear one another’s burdens, mourn with those who mourn, and comfort those who stand in need of comfort.<sup>[6]</sup> What is this if not obtaining “a knowledge of history” about our neighbors—local, national, global—allowing the “Spirit of Truth” to fill our hearts with mercy and compassion, and then using our new power to lift the burden of that same history? That’s what Christ did for us. It’s what all who love truth should do to follow him. To me, this is history’s ultimate power: its capacity to invite the “Spirit of Truth” and fill our hearts with faith, conviction, compassion, and charity—the building blocks of miracles.

The enemy hates such hearts and employs a powerful weapon against them ... “wicked traditions.” In 1998, Elder Richard G. Scott warned us about them, saying: “Your Heavenly Father assigned you to be born into a specific lineage from which you received your inheritance of race, culture, and traditions. That lineage can provide a rich heritage and great reasons to rejoice. Yet you have the responsibility to determine if there is any part of that heritage that must be discarded because it works against the Lord’s plan of happiness.”<sup>[7]</sup> These “wicked traditions” appear in many forms, accusing other nations, ethnicities, cultures, classes, and communities.

The most common form among us here, however, are the dark histories that we create about ourselves. In God’s glorious wisdom, “what happens” in the past doesn’t matter so much. The past is past. It doesn’t change. However, how we choose to remember the past matters immensely. Every story, both the exquisite and the excruciating, can advance a soothing voice of truth or the angry growl of “wicked traditions.” We choose. Because our Savior chose to see good in us, we also have the power to choose how we remember history. We can choose to heed him—the Spirit of truth—and see ourselves as he sees us—the way “we are.” We can’t change the past but, thanks to Christ, we can change the imprint it leaves on us and fill our hearts with His light in the process.

## **B. Hearts Knit in Unity**

This brings us to my second point about verse 53. In this great day of gathering, efforts to “obtain a knowledge of history, and of countries, and of kingdoms” can knit hearts in unity, establishing Zion and spreading peace.

The antidote to “wicked traditions” is truth, “knowledge of things as they are, were, and are to come.” However, truth does not function like a cleaning agent or medicine. You can’t use it to scrub off “wicked traditions” or inject it like a vaccine. To have any effect, truth must persuade. It must change hearts, altering the beliefs, feelings, and loyalties that bind people to their traditions. Without any way to get inside a person, without a “soft heart” to receive it, truth only fuels angry reactions like those that killed Abinadi, Joseph Smith, and Christ himself.

Ironically, one powerful way to soften the hearts of others is to ... “obtain a knowledge of history” ... their history. Knowing the history of others earns you a chance to stand within their community because it is history that helps define that community in the first place. It changes you from an “outsider”—ignorant, suspect, apart—into someone “who understands us”—someone possibly worthy of trust.

This process happens all the time. Missionaries teach the gospel ... history. As investigators accept it, the missionaries, bishop, and other members come to know the investigators' back story. This exchange of history—plus the new shared narrative of the conversion process—expands sympathy, trust, and loyalty, knitting all together in love and fellowship. In the Book of Mormon this pattern unites entire peoples. Several times large groups of outsiders ask to join the Nephite nation: Zarahemla's people, Limhi's refugees, Alma's converts, and King Anti-Nephi-Lehi's immigrants. Each time ... every time, the newcomers and the Nephites first exchange their stories of the past. As both sides come to "know" the other, sympathy flows, trust rises, and hearts soften, uniting the two peoples into one.

The exchange of histories does more than just transfer information. When we share our histories with others and the "Spirit of truth" confirms "things as they are and were," we and our new friends begin to see each other as God sees us. Mercy and compassion flow. If either has cause to mourn or burdens bear, hearts fill with mercy and compassion to bursting and yearn to alleviate suffering with selfless acts of kindness and service. In the end, hearts on both sides are knit as one. This unity is the defining characteristic of Zion. In the Book of Moses, the Lord says so. "And the Lord called His people Zion, because they were of one heart and one mind."<sup>[8]</sup>

Exchanging history has the power to draw converts to Zion and unify them with the Saints—and visa versa. It also has the power to bind Zion with other communities, uniting both in acts of service and goodness across the globe. In this great day of gathering, our objective must be unity. The Lord warns: "I say unto you, be one; and if ye are not one ye are not mine."<sup>[9]</sup> If not perfectly unified, why are we not his? Because he is the "Spirit of truth," the cause of unification. Any community that isn't unified clearly doesn't have His spirit and, hence, can't be his.

It's no accident that the day of gathering opened with the coming forth of a history—the Book of Mormon. It's also no accident that even before that Moroni repeatedly taught Joseph Smith the prophecy of Malachi: "And he shall plant in the hearts of the children the promises made to the fathers, and the hearts of the children shall turn to their fathers."<sup>[10]</sup> I like this verse. It contains all the pieces. As the Lord places in our hearts the promises he made to our fathers—covenants he made with people long ago, ancient history really—our hearts shall turn to the fathers. Once again, we see the formula: history confirmed by the "Spirit of Truth" binds hearts and builds unity—this time across generations.

## **VI. Conclusion**

In conclusion, if we are to gather our brothers and sisters to safety of Zion—a community with specific values, community, and behavior—we're going to need to employ all the power that history has to offer. Our part requires that we "obtain a knowledge of history," choose to see good in our history and theirs, and pray for God to send His "Spirit of truth." Once His spirit shows us "things as they are," we'll see others as God sees them. Our hearts will be transformed and the hearts of others will soften at the same time. God's light and love will knit those hearts in unbreakable bonds of loyalty, love, and commitment. We'll be one. If that happens, brothers and sisters, ... the salvation of Zion will be assured. Amen.

[1] D&C 93:53.

[2] Louisa Lim, *The People's Republic of Amnesia*, p. 6.

[3] D&C 93:24, 26.

[4] D&C 93:25, 39.

[5] Alma 7:12.

[6] Mosiah 18:8-10.

[7] Elder Richard G. Scott, *Removing Barriers to Happiness*, April Conference, 1998.

[8] Moses 7:18.

[9] D&C 38:27.

[10] D&C 2:2.