

# A study of Jacob 5

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## Introduction

Together with the Isaiah chapters, the fifth chapter of Jacob is probably the most "dreaded" part in the Book of Mormon. Understandable, when a superficial reader gets the impression that the story deals merely with an apparent unending cycle of nourishing, pruning and grafting of a tame olive tree. Seven pages of cryptograms can become tedious when it is not clear what all this work in the vineyard refers to. However, a greater understanding of Jacob 5 will arouse our astonishment and admiration for the way in which so much can be said in only seven pages. In this essay I will try to explore and explain the most important aspects of Zenos' prophecy. Since some aspects of the prophecy are not yet fulfilled, and because insofar as some of the prophecies are fulfilled, the knowledge of that is not always at our disposal, it is impossible to give a super detailed explanation of all the verses. Such a venture would lead to speculation. Even the parts of the allegory that have already been fulfilled are interpreted in different ways in the various commentaries that are in circulation. Caution with studying Jacob 5 is therefore very appropriate.

The best way to understand Jacob 5 is to become acquainted with the history of Israel and God's plan for spreading the gospel on earth. A serious student will have to delve into God's intentions with the House of Israel from other scriptures. A good understanding of the prophecies of Isaiah, Nephi, and Jacob regarding Israel enables a student to better understand the allegory of Zenos. When one has acquired insight into these matters, Jacob 5 appears to be a brilliant summary of what can be found elsewhere in the scriptures. The purpose of my essay will be to first provide the reader with some necessary carry-on baggage to be able to appreciate the allegory. To this end I will first define some introductory concepts and outline the history of Israel. Then I will provide verse by verse commentary.

## Israel and the Covenant

The only metaphor that is explicitly explained in Jacob 5 is that the tame olive tree represents the House of Israel (v. 3). That is what the chapter is about. But who belong to the House of Israel and what is the origin of the Israelites? Although Israel is the name given to Jacob in the Old Testament (Gen. 32: 10; 35: 10), it was soon associated with his twelve sons and their offspring. But the name can be interpreted even more broadly. Israel is the covenant people of God and that covenant goes beyond the literal descendants of the twelve sons of Israel. Although the two definitions partly overlap, the nuance is essential. Both Christ himself and Paul taught clearly that descent does not in itself guarantee blessings (Matthew 3: 9, Romans 9: 6-8). The covenant that God has made with Israel goes back to Abraham. The blessings promised to him

were later confirmed on the head of his son Isaac (Gen. 26: 1-4, 24), and later on the head of his son Jacob, or Israel (Gen. 28: 35: 9- 13; 48: 3-4). Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are often mentioned in the scriptures in one breath (Alma 5: 28, 7: 25, Hell 3: 30 etc ...) as "founders" or fathers of the covenant people.

The covenant of God with Abraham consists mainly of three blessings that were promised on the basis of obedience. Firstly, Abraham was promised a numerous offspring, like the stars in the sky. Secondly, he was promised that the blessings of the gospel (e.g. baptism, priesthood, marriage, etc.) would be offered to all the nations of the earth by his offspring. And thirdly, different countries were promised to his offspring as an inheritance (Abr 2: 9-19). These blessings literally related to earthly life, but also to eternal life: eternal offspring, eternal blessings of the priesthood for this offspring and dominions in the celestial kingdom (D&C 132: 30-31). On the basis of the second promise it is necessary that all who are blessed with the gospel are counted among the covenant people or the House of Israel. After all, it is everyone's calling who has received the gospel to bless others with it. For that reason, all who do not literally belong to the posterity of Abraham are adopted in one of the twelve tribes of Israel. The descent of an individual is usually mentioned in the patriarchal blessing, among other things as a testimony to the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham. Moreover, the promises to Abraham are confirmed on every saint as on Isaac and Jacob (cf. D&C 132: 31). It is important to note that the various sons of Israel received additional promises and duties (Gen. 49) that applied to their offspring and that are also reflected in Jacob 5. For example, it was promised to Judah that Christ would be born from his offspring (Gen. 49: 8-12) and to Joseph, among other things, that his offspring would flourish on the other side of the ocean (Gen. 49: 22; 2Ne 3: 5). The third promise, with regard to countries that would be given, is also an important part of the covenant and also for our understanding of Jacob 5. Different divisions of Israel were blessed with different areas, as evidenced by the case of, for example, Lehi in America.

### **Scattering and gathering**

Now that we are somewhat familiar with the covenant of the House of Israel, we can better understand how God deals with His people in order to fulfill His promises. A covenant presupposes two parties and reciprocal agreements. If one party fails to comply with its obligations, the other party is relieved of its obligations (D&C 82: 10). It is clear from the scriptures that many Israelites misbehaved in the course of history, so that they have missed the promised blessings of the covenant, e.g. that they would live in peace. As long as there are still Israelites on earth, however, God wants to give them the opportunity to remember the covenant and to stick to their agreement. To achieve this, God has applied different tactics and will carry out some plans in the near future. When the House of Israel as a whole went astray in the Old Testament (during the time of the kings), he has sent many prophets to warn them and give them the opportunity to repent. However, when it turned out that the vast majority of people did not want to listen and that those who did were persecuted (e.g. Lehi in Jerusalem), the Lord decided to bring those righteous people somewhere else, so he could continue to work with them separated from the corrupt masses. Not only did He (mostly secretly) take away the good Israelites (1Ne 17: 38; 2Ne 10: 22), but he also had the bad Israelites carried

away and punished as part of his plan to gather them once more with the righteous. The result of this policy was that Israel was spread all over the earth. Not only was this scattering literal, that is, geographically, but also Israel, including the righteous divisions, had eventually strayed from the gospel in all possible ways. In this sense, Israel is also scattered spiritually or lost. Even to the point, that many Israelites, apart from most Jews, do not even know who they are anymore. The Lamanites used to be a clear example of this.

The Lord thus had, for some time, several branches of the House of Israel in various places in the world under His care. For example, when the Jews in Judea found themselves in a period of decline between the Old and New Testaments (roughly 450-0 BC), the Nephites were largely a blessed people. The Lord had success for a long time with his plan to take care of the different branches independently, until all the divisions of the House of Israel became apostate. Jacob 5 teaches us that the Nephites in the Book of Mormon have remained a righteous people for the longest time (James 5:42) and their final apostacy can be dated back to about 385 AD. The Lord's policy of leading righteous Israelites away to bless them elsewhere was not useful anymore, for there were no righteous Israelites anywhere in the whole world. The term 'the Great Apostacy' gets more meaning when we realize this. The apostacy was not limited to the church that was founded in Jerusalem, but had also made its appearance in all other churches in the various branches of the House of Israel. The Lord, of course, knew this would be the case, and His prophets have prophesied much about this. His last attempt to bless the House of Israel is already underway. To this end, a restoration of all things from the beginning was required (Acts 3:21), because everything was lost. Joseph Smith's task was certainly not small when you consider that he was given the responsibility for the entire House of Israel, like Moses at the time (L & V 110: 11), where it should be noted that Israel of course had grown a great deal since Moses, and that cultural differences between the scattered branches had become huge. Joseph Smith is for good reason compared with Moses in the scriptures (2Ne 3: 5-24).

Like the scattering, the restoration of Israel is twofold. In the first place spiritually. The blessings of the gospel, which are central to the covenant, must of course first be restored before Israel could bless the other nations of the earth. The Book of Mormon plays a major role in this restoration. During Christ's visit to the Nephites, he taught them that the Book of Mormon is the sign by which one can recognize that the Father has begun to restore Israel (3Ne 21: 1-7). The second gathering is literal, that is, geographically. Two areas are central to the literal gathering of Israel: the old Jerusalem where the Jews are being gathered, and the New Jerusalem where the other tribes will be gathered under the leadership of the tribe of Ephraim. It is striking that the Jews will be gathered literally before they will be gathered spiritually with the rest of Israel (i.e. will repent and accept Christ), while the rest of Israel, in particular the tribe of Ephraim, will first gather spiritually (i.e. join the The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) and afterwards literally in the New Jerusalem. It is the specific task of the tribe of Ephraim to spread the gospel in the last days and thus to bless all the peoples of the earth, and to be the host in the New Jerusalem for the lost ten tribes that will come from the 'Northern Lands' (D&C 133: 26-35). To date, however, it is unknown who and where those Ten Tribes are.

## **A brief overview of the history of the House of Israel**

Now that we have become acquainted somewhat with the concepts of scattering and gathering, we will go deeper into the actual history of Israel, which should serve as an illustration of the above. In the covenant that God made with Abraham, it was promised that the land of Canaan would be given to the posterity of Abraham (Abr. 2: 19). This promise was more a prophecy for the future than an immediate gift. Abraham himself spent only a short time of his life in the promised land. Abraham's grandson Jacob had twelve sons of whom the second-youngest, Joseph, was hated by his brothers. Joseph was sold to a caravan that went to Egypt, and through miraculous events he became one of the most influential men in Egypt. Driven by famine, Joseph's eleven brothers came to Egypt, where they were later invited by Joseph to remain permanently. Jacob, then already an old man, also moved to Egypt to spend his last days there.

The twelve sons of Israel had a lot of offspring in Egypt. The Israelites became so numerous that a few hundred years later a Pharaoh saw the large number of 'strangers' as a serious political and social threat and decided to prevent a possible danger by enslaving the Israelites. After many years of oppression, the Lord called Moses to lead the children of Israel out of Egypt back to the promised land. The Lord richly blessed the children of Israel in their travels through the desert, although they were a wicked and stubborn people. Joshua succeeded Moses and was the one who brought God's people into the promised land with great conquests. A government of judges was then formed in the promised land that lasted for several centuries. These judges, of whom the strong Samson is most famous, were not usually what we would call good and righteous leaders. Around the year 1000 BC, when the Philistines were a danger to the east of the Israelites, the people demanded a proper king. This was contrary to the will of the Lord, because, as warned by the prophet Samuel, a wicked king would only make the people even more wicked. In case of heritable kingship, a people do not control who rules them. The people did not, as usual, pay attention to the counsel of the Lord's prophet. Samuel did anoint a king. Saul became the first king of Israel. One of his most important tasks was to win the war against the Philistines. Saul began to rule righteously, but ended badly and was killed in a battle with the Philistines. His successor David was one of the greatest men in the history of Israel. The Israelite kingdom reached its climax under his kingship. Unfortunately, also David's life, because of adultery and murder, had a sad ending. Solomon did not fare better. As wise and just as he began to rule, so he ended wickedly as well. During the reign of Solomon, the famous temple of Solomon was built.

After the death of Solomon, a lot of turmoil arose in the kingdom. Ten tribes rebelled against the successor of Solomon, Rehoboam, and appointed a new king. The tribe of Judah, however, remained faithful to the House of David so that a schism took place in Israel. Ten tribes founded a kingdom in the North called Israel or the Northern Kingdom, while the tribe of Judah (the Jews) and a large part of the tribe of Benjamin in the South kept a small kingdom called Judea.

The kingdom of Israel under the 'house of Omri' temporarily played a certain role in Syria, but the rising Assyrian empire constituted a great danger for the ten tribes. The Lord sent important prophets, including Isaiah (around 750 BC), to call Israel to repentance and to warn them that in their wickedness they could not count on the help of God. Israel did not repent and in 721 BC Samaria, the capital of Israel, was taken and destroyed by Sargon II. Most of the Israelite population was taken captive to Assyria (the lost ten

tribes) while the remains of the population mingled with strangers. That mixture of Israelites and strangers formed the people of the Samaritans.

Although Syria and Israel had been overrun by the Assyrians, Judea had managed to maintain a precarious independence, i.e. the Jews had to pay taxes to Assyria but kept their own government. The Jews, however, were not much more righteous than the other scattered tribes, so that the Lord again sent prophets to save the Jews from the same fate. Meanwhile, the hegemony of the Assyrians in the East had been taken over by the Babylonians. They now formed a real threat to the Jews together with the Egyptians. Men like Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Lehi (around 600 BC) went around in the kingdom of Judea to warn the Jews against the Babylonians, or rather against the consequences, both temporarily and eternally, of their sins. The Jews rejected the prophets again and tried to kill them. The Lord led away expeditions from Judea to accommodate righteous Israelites elsewhere (among others Lehi et al.). In 587 BC, Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the city of Jerusalem and the temple of Solomon. The Jews were led away like the tribes of the North. After the Jews spent some time in Babylonia during the so-called "Babylonian exile," they were given the unique opportunity to return to their country in 537 BC. Persia had taken over the power of the Babylonians and Cyrus, King of Persia, had decided that Judea might exist as a vassal state of Persia. Under the leadership of Nehemiah and Ezra, some of the Jews returned to Jerusalem where they rebuilt the city of Jerusalem.

After the Babylonian exile, the Jews "understood" that they had sinned seriously. Their attention was now focused on returning to the Law of Moses and the prophets. This "conversion" paradoxically led to more wickedness. If their ancestors had violated the commandments of God of old, some Jews would now make their own new commandments. The Law and the prophets were now so glorified that the Jews completely lost sight of its purpose and meaning (Jac.4: 14-15). This was the heyday of the scribes and Pharisees who were later criticized by Jesus.

After the conquests of Alexander the Great in Palestine (332 BC) and the subsequent Greek influences, the Jews enjoyed a brief period of independence after a revolt under the Maccabean dynasty, until the Romans took over power in Palestine (63 BC). It was during this Roman domination that Jesus was born and fulfilled his earthly mission. After His ministry Jesus sent His apostles into the world with the mission to bless all nations with the gospel. He taught them not to restrict their missionary activities to the pure descendants of Abraham (mainly Jews), but to take the gentiles into the church so that they would be made partakers of the covenant. Thus, the Christian church expanded slowly but surely in the first century. However, the church was confronted from the beginning with persecutions, false teachers, syncretism (the mixing of two or more religions) and wickedness within the church so that the apostasy in the Roman empire was already complete around the year 100. This apostasy deteriorated rapidly when Christianity in the Roman empire was first tolerated (312 edict of Milan) and later forced upon all romans as a state religion (392). The Christian church grew into a gigantic and powerful institution (1Ne 13-14). During the Reformation in the sixteenth and subsequent centuries all kinds of attempts were made to 'restore' the church, but despite the good intentions of the many reformers, revelation and priesthood authority were lacking. Instead of restoration and clarity, the reformation resulted in the foundation of many churches that all claimed to represent Christ.

The Jews fared as badly as the church of Christ. In 70 AD Jerusalem was destroyed by Titus. The Jewish temple that had been rebuilt and extended over a period of almost eight decades under Herod, a Jewish vassal king of the Romans, and later governors was razed to the ground only six years after it was finished, just as Jesus had prophesied (Matthew 24: 1-2). In addition, the Jews were expelled from their land. They ended up among other peoples around the world by whom they were persecuted, abused and expelled in the most horrible ways (1Ne 19: 14; 2Ne 10: 6; 25: 14-15). This scattering of the Jews is called the Diaspora. After the fall of the Roman empire, the land of Palestine was occupied by various peoples (including Arabs, Turks, English).

The history of the modern state of Israel since 1948 is very complicated. What is important, however, is that the tribe of Judah is now gathering there. This migration of Jews to Israel is admittedly part of the overall gathering of Israel, but although the media extensively report on the conditions in the Middle East, the most important event concerning the gathering of Israel is the restoration of the Church of Jesus Christ. The Jews still miss out on great blessings as long as they do not come unto Christ. Although the spiritual gathering of Ephraim receives little attention in the world, the growth of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is already far greater than the number of Jews who travel to Israel each year. Missionary work is also the gathering of Israel. In this dispensation is the final harvest and we are given the opportunity to help God to fully restore Israel.

With this basic historical knowledge, Jacob 5 appears to be mainly a fill-in exercise. However, Jacob sometimes refers to matters concerning Israel that are not entirely clear to us from history because they refer to divisions of Israel of which we have no in depth knowledge, except that they exist.

### **The context**

In order to understand a text, it is always useful to know what an author intends. Although Jacob is not the author of Jacob 5, it is presented to us in the midst of his own discourse. Clearly there must have been a reason for Jacob to include the allegory of the tame olive tree in his not very extensive writings. Why does he even quote Zenos instead of explaining the topic in his own way? Or in other words: in what context is Jacob 5 included in the Book of Mormon?

In order to understand Jacob's choice to quote Zenos, it is not sufficient to only read the preceding verses of Jacob and the next chapter, but we also need insight into the totality of Jacob's prophecies, several of which have been quoted by Nephi. Jacob was called to bring his people (the Nephites) to Christ and urge them to repent (Jac.1). For a large part of his life he served as a spiritual leader together with his brother Nephi. Once arrived in the promised land, Nephi and Jacob realized that their task was to teach their descendants to keep the commandments and to explain why they had been brought to America, or in other words to 'legitimize the crossing and their presence in the promised land.' It was not Lehi's plan to move, but a part of a very extensive plan from God. Especially Nephi and Jacob spent a lot of energy to expand the world view of the Nephites in the hope that they would live with this awareness according to God's expectations. In both 1- and 2 Nephi there are many chapters on Israel and God's plan with them (1Ne 1, 10,

12-15, 19-22, 2Ne 1, 3, 6-8, 10, 12-24, 25-27, 29, 30). Of these chapters, 19 are taken from Isaiah, who as the last prophet before the dispersion, spoke much about Israel and its near and distant future.

Mormon was inspired to include the small plates in his abridgment precisely because these small plates were so full of prophecies, both about Christ and Israel (WoM 1: 3-5). Jacob 5 is one of those chapters that can greatly contribute to the purpose of the Book of Mormon: to convince the Jews, Lamanites and other Israelites and nations that Jesus is the Savior.

However, the immediate reason for Jacobs quotation from Zenos must be deduced from the preceding verses. Jacob was explaining how the Jews would not accept Christ because they had so distorted the Law and the prophets that they no longer recognized or wanted to recognize their fulfillment (James 4: 14-15). Nevertheless, it was prophesied that Christ, or the Rock as He is called in these verses, would be the leader and source of salvation of the Jews. How then must the rejection of Christ by the Jews be reconciled with this prophecy? Well, Jacob would explain that on the basis of the allegory of the tame olive tree. After all, the conversion of the Jews has everything to do with the gathering of Israel, and a correct understanding of the gathering can only be obtained after a good understanding of the scattering. The conclusion of Zenos' prophecy, however, would appear to refer not only to the Jews, but also to the descendants of Lehi, so that Jacob's argument served two purposes at the same time (Jacob 6: 1-7).

## **Commentary and explanation**

### **The Old Testament vss. 1-14.**

**Vs 1,** Jacob refers to the prophecy of Zenos that his audience, the Nephites, had read and knew. This fact implies at least two things. First, that Zenos's writings were on the brass plates. For unknown reasons, however, these are not included in our Old Testament. Secondly, one can deduct from the verse that the Nephites, at least in their initial stages, were a literate people.

**Vs 2,** The prophecy of Zenos not only deals with the House of Israel, but it is also specifically written for the Israelites so that they would recognize themselves in the allegory and become aware of their responsibilities and promised blessings. From the fact that Zenos speaks here in the first person, it appears that Jacob was not paraphrasing but verbatim quoting the prophecy.

**Vs 3,** The House of Israel is compared to a tame olive tree. This metaphor is the starting point for the rest of the chapter. An allegory is a series of image statements that are based on the same metaphor. A comparison sometimes speaks more to the imagination than an enumeration of facts. However, one must always be careful that one does not take a comparison to the extreme. Often an allegory violates reality somewhere. It is sometimes difficult to find out whether an author correctly intended a certain similarity between his allegory and reality, or whether it is a similarity that one should not look for. Anyway, the metaphor of the olive tree is very suitable for Zenos' story. Israel is compared to a tame olive tree because it produces good

fruit. Good fruits in this metaphor are images of righteousness, godliness, good works, etc ... The man of the vineyard is God, namely, Jehovah, or Jesus Christ. God cared for Israel by protecting them and sending prophets to instruct and guide them (e.g. Moses, Joshua). Israel had grown over a few centuries into a large nation that, as time went on, became more and more apostate. In spite of the fact that God had led them through the desert, and had helped them to obtain the promised land, and had blessed them with religious and more or less secular laws and leaders, God's devotion was largely fruitless, as it turned out at the time of the kings. (975-587 BC).

**Vs 4,** The Lord was obviously worried about Israel and decided to carry out a big 'campaign' in order to obtain a righteous people again. His intention was to win righteous Israelites, preferably all, but if that aim was too high, at least some Israelites (if not the whole tree at least some branches).

**Vss 5-12,** The verses 5-12 are best studied as a unit. The literary style shows this more or less. The verses form a chiasm, that is to say a parallelism in mirror image, which can be systematically represented as follows: A B C, C 'B' A '. Upon study, vss. 5-6 to correspond with vss. 11-12, vs. 7 with vss. 9-10, and vs. 8 is written in mirror image. Another reason why these verses can be seen as unity is because the events described in this section do not only correspond to one set of events in actual history, but can relate to different periods in the history of Israel. The following comments will make this clearer.

**Vs 5,** The Lord cared for the covenant people by sending prophets to call the Israelites to repentance. Before the conquests of the Assyrians, the chief of these prophets were Joel, Hosea, Amos, Isaiah, and Micah. They warned the Israelites that a great disaster awaited them if they did not want to repent. In later times, prior to the invasion of the Babylonians, it was Nahum, Jeremiah, Zephaniah, Obadiah, Daniel, Habakkuk, Ezekiel, and Lehi who, as far as we know, who were calling the Jews to repentance.

**Vs 6,** Despite the work that was done by the old testament prophets to improve the condition of Israel, the people as a whole did not repent, but there were only a few who turned to God again.

**Vs 7,** The Lord then decided to punish Israel by allowing heathen or gentile peoples to overpower them. The wicked Israelites were conquered by the Assyrians (721 BC), later by the Babylonians (587 BC), then by the Greeks (332 BC) and ultimately by the Romans (63 BC).

**Vs 8,** Before the Lord, however, proceeded to punish his people through various heathen nations (wild olive branches), He first brought those Israelites who wanted to repent and were very vulnerable because of the wickedness surrounding them (young and delicate branches) to other areas in order to bless them elsewhere. One can compare the image with removing a few good apples from a basket full of rotten apples before they would become affected as well. Of such groups that were deported, only the identity of two groups are known to us: The group of Lehi and the group of Mulek, both mentioned in the Book of Mormon. But Nephi clearly states that there have been more such expeditions and knows well that the expedition of him and his family is not at all unique (2Ne 20:22) !

**Vss 9-10,** Many Israelites were destroyed (burned) by the heathen nations. The victors often settled in the conquered land, so that the heathens mingled (were grafted in) with the Israelites (e.g. Samaritans).

**Vss 11-12,** After the Lord sent the Assyrians to punish the Israelites, he again sent prophets to admonish them to repent. The Jews did not listen either, which led to the Babylonian exile. Even after that exile, the Lord again sent prophets, showing that the Lord gives His people time and again the chance to repent.



Unfortunately, all those attempts of the Lord to obtain a righteous people were largely in vain. Thus, the events around the tame olive tree in these verses can refer to the invasions of Assyria and of Babylonia and even of the Greeks and Romans.

**Vss 13-14**, The Lord meanwhile, "hid" different branches of Israel around the world. Even to his servant (the prophets) He did not tell where He hid the branches. To date, for example, it is unknown where the ten tribes have been taken away by Assyria. Nor did the Jews know about the Nephites. The branches that He carried away were natural branches, that is, literal offspring of Abraham.

### **The New Testament vss. 15-18.**

**Vss 15-16**, After the reconstruction of destroyed Jerusalem by the Babylonians, from about 537 BC, some other prophets appeared. The prophet Malachi turned out to be the last one around 430 BC. The time from Malachi to John the Baptist was a period of apostasy among the Jews. The fanatical scribes distorted the meaning of the Law of Moses. Thus, a long time passed before new scripture was written again. The Lord was about to restore Israel again, but this time he did not only send His servants to work in the vineyard, but he would also be present in person. Jesus served as son of God and master of the vineyard among the Jews together with His disciples during his earthly ministry. The servant points in vs. 16 on the condition of the tree, that is, Israel, in its original place: the land of Palestine where the Jews lived in the dispensation of Jesus.

**Vs 17**, The gospel that was preached in the dispensation of Jesus was not only reserved for the pure Israelites (mainly Jews), but was also preached to the Greeks and Romans. The heathen nations (wild olive branches) contributed in this way to the rapid expansion of the Church in the first century. One could even say that most Jews collectively rejected the gospel and that the converted Gentiles became a righteous people under the covenant of Israel.

**Vs 18**, Well, how could the gentile nations in the Roman empire become such a righteous people? Because the Gentiles were adopted into the House of Israel. They received the same covenants and blessings (the roots of Israel) as literal descendants of Abraham. If the Gentiles were not included in the Church of Jesus Christ at that time, not so many righteous people would have existed, for the real Israelites, or in other words the Jews at the time, usually did not want to know much about Christ.

### **The state of the scattered Israel vss. 19-28.**

**Vs 19**, The Lord told the Jews during His ministry that He had other sheep who were not of their flock (John 10: 16). In the Book of Mormon, the Lord explained that by this statement He specifically referred to the Nephites who lived on the other side of the world and who would receive the same blessing, namely the ministry of Jesus Christ among them. But after Jesus told the Nephites the fulfillment of John. 10: 16, He gave the Nephites a similar reference to other branches of the House of Israel (3Ne 16: 1-3) to whom He would appear. The verses 20-28 deal with the state of the other branches of the House of Israel that were

scattered abroad away from Judea. Zenos mentions in his allegory four groups of Israelites that have been cut off from the original tree. Only from the latter group is it really clear who this is meant to be.

**Vss 20-22**, The first group was taken away to a bad area so probably to a land with less fertile ground or a bad climate (vs 21). Despite this disadvantage, the group appeared to contain a large number of righteous people. The servant is amazed at this result and asks the Lord to explain his decision to take this group to such an area. The Lord then answers that He knows what He is doing, and that He does not need the counsel of His servant to carry out His plans with Israel. The Lord has done much to get such a result. Surely these people were led by great men like Nephi or Peter, and they also wrote much scripture that will come to us later (2Ne 29: 12-13).

**Vs. 23**, The second group lived in an area that was even worse than the first. Nonetheless, there were also many righteous people among this branch. These Israelites were also led by great prophets whom we unfortunately do not know because of we don't have their writings.

**Vs 24**, The least information is given about the third group. There is, however, a clue that may tell us who these Israelites were. When the Lord comes back later in the chapter and rehearses the state of these scattered branches of Israel, it is striking that the third branch is no longer mentioned separately (v. 39). This can have several reasons. The branch may have become extinct or it might have been included in one of the other natural or wild branches. Possibly the third branch relates to the Mulekites, who got mixed with the Nephites a few hundred years after their arrival in the promised land. In that case, "the last" in vs. 39 would refer to both the third and the fourth branch, or the Mulekites and Nephites combined.

**Vs 25**, The fourth branch relates to the group of Lehi, which was taken away to good ground (2Ne 1: 5, Ether 2: 7). The group of Lehi split into two groups, one of which was predominantly good (Nephites) and the other predominantly bad (Lamanites) (2Ne 5). Like the other divisions of the House of Israel, the Lord has blessed the Nephites with many revelations and divine protection so that they could thrive in the promised land. Note that the separation that is mentioned in this verse is between branches that produce tame and wild fruits, and I have interpreted that division to refer to respectively the Nephites and Lamanites. Although at the beginning of the Book of Mormon this distinction is still ethnic, it is difficult to use the same interpretation when later in the Book of Mormon the Lamanites are more righteous than the Nephites. Throughout the book, however, there is always a separation between the more righteous and unrighteous people with the exception of the period described in 4 Nephi. After the golden age of the Nephites following the visit of Christ the wicked were again called Lamanites, regardless of their ethnic origin (4Ne 1: 35-38).

**Vss 26-27**, Although the Lord did not pay attention to the counsel or question of His servant in vs 22, He seems receptive to the persuading of His servant to not destroy the Lamanites, but to save them, so that they might later repent. This dialogue between the servant and the Lord may refer to Lehi's statements in 2Ne 4: 6-9 where he blesses the sons and daughters of Laman and Lemuel: 'Wherefore, if you are cursed, behold, I leave my blessing upon you, that the cursing may be taken from you, and be answered on the heads of your parents. *Wherefore, because of my blessing, the Lord God will not suffer that ye shall perish*; wherefore he will be merciful unto you and unto your seed forever ... wherefore thou shalt not be utterly be destroyed but in the end thy seed shall be blessed.'

**Vs 28,** The Lord had shown himself to these branches of the House of Israel after His resurrection, and had established His church among them. After Christ's resurrection, a very fruitful time began. In different parts of the world, the disciples of Jesus taught the people about the plan of salvation and as a result many people accepted the gospel.

### **The Great Apostacy from the church in Jerusalem vss. 29-39.**

**Vs 29,** The disciples of Jesus successfully taught the people on earth for some time among the different branches of the House of Israel, but after a while the people became more and more wicked and eventually apostate. A very long time passed before the Lord again gave revelations to restore Israel. The last days were drawing closer and the Lord wanted to make one last attempt to prepare and save Israel before the great and terrible day would come.

**Vss 30-32,** Before the Lord would work with His servants the prophets in the latter days, however, He first carefully examined the condition of apostate Israel. If he could find the cause of the apostacy He could make a plan for restoration in the last days. His attention was first drawn to the church that he established in Jerusalem that had been spread all over Europe and the Middle East among the Gentiles by the Jewish apostles and early missionaries (vss 15-18). The Lord observed that the tree was overloaded with all kinds of fruits. It was not only *a lot* but especially *all kinds* of fruit. The church in Europe and the Middle East was no longer united, but as a result of the reformation it had undergone many dissensions. Thousands of different Christian denominations were the result. Although all these churches pretended to be the true church, and had the appearance of godliness, but after 'tasting' it appeared that the Lord was not satisfied with any of these churches (JS-G 1: 19).

**Vss 33-36,** The input of the gentile nations in the early church had helped to maintain the covenant between God and Israel, because they were counted among the covenant people once they were baptized. Moreover, the gentiles had helped to compile and distribute the Bible, thus bringing the knowledge of the covenant of God with Israel to large parts of the world. Although the Church of Jesus Christ had apostatized, the covenants and doctrines of Christ were not completely lost. In the many denominations many things of the original church were still recognizable and true. Moreover, the Jewish nation, although dispersed among many nations, was still very intact. Although the true church was no longer on the earth, there were still roots that were good to rebuild the church. Without the Bible and without Israelite blood, the repair would be much more difficult.

**Vs 37,** Although the Gentiles had helped to strengthen and fulfil the covenant, they also caused the Church to fall away. The influx of gentiles was so great that they stifled the 'pure blood'. Already from the letters of Paul in the New Testament it appears that especially the Greeks and Romans introduced all kinds of unchristian philosophies and practices into the church. Later, when the whole of Europe, the Mediterranean and other parts of Africa and Asia became Christianized, the pagan influences on the gospel were unstoppable.

**Vs 38,** After learning about the state of the church that originated in Jerusalem, the Lord turned his attention to the churches among the other branches of the House of Israel, to find out whether they had also fallen away.

**Vs 39,** Upon inspection, all the other branches of the House of Israel had become wicked as well, including those groups that the Lord had carried away during the Old Testament. The apostacy was now universal. No righteous branch of the House of Israel was to be found anywhere on the earth. No further details are given about the cause of the apostacy among the other split off branches, except for the Nephites.

#### **The Book of Mormon vss. (25-27), 40-46.**

**Vs 40,** Already in vss. 25-27 Zenos described the separation between Nephites and Lamanites in the promised land. The Lamanites (wild branches) had gained the upper hand over the Nephites (tame branches), until the Nephites ceased to exist as a people. The Nephites were completely wiped out from the face of the earth during the last wars in the Book of Mormon (1Ne 12: 20, Morm. 6).

**Vs 41,** The fact that the Lord was crying over the destruction of the Nephites, shows His love and care for Israel and especially for the Nephites. The Lord had really done everything possible to keep the Nephites from falling away, and yet they too had fallen!

**Vs 42,** When all the branches of the House of Israel had already fallen away, the Nephites were still a blessed and righteous people. They were the last remnant of Israelite blood that had the true gospel in their midst. With the final apostacy and destruction of the Nephites, the Great Apostacy around the world was complete.

**Vs 43,** The Nephites and Lamanites were placed on earth in a promised land that was choice among all other lands with the best opportunities to bless a people. They had many advantages the other branches lacked. Apart from the fertility of the land, the isolation they enjoyed was also a great blessing to flourish (contrary to the many dangerous foreign influences in the land of Jerusalem) (2Ne 1: 6-9).

**Vs 44,** In order to give the Nephites their promised land, the Lord had even made the Jaredites disappear, so that the Nephites had the opportunity freely to develop in peace (Ether 13: 21).

**Vs 45,** Because the Lord had not destroyed the Lamanites (verses 26-27), they were able to exterminate the Nephites. The Nephites were more wicked in their final phase than the Lamanites, so that in fact the bad part of the tree had already taken over the good part before the Nephites had lost the war.

**Vs 46,** Notwithstanding all the blessings the Lord had poured upon the Israelites, they did not want to listen to His counsel. The Lord had hoped that the Nephites and Lamanites would not suffer the same apostacy as the church in Jerusalem or the other branches of Israel, but the result was even worse. Unlike the remnants of the true gospel (the many different Christian churches) that were present in the Western world, the Lamanites had become totally pagan (like a wild olive tree) and could no longer be recognized as part of the House of Israel with an evangelical background (were it not for the knowledge we have from the Book of Mormon).

### **Causes of the Great Apostacy vss. 47-51.**

**Vs 47,** What else could the Lord have done to save Israel? The indignation of the Lord towards Israel is also expressed in several other scriptures. Not only is He sad about Israel, but He also opposes the attitude as if God is turning away from man instead of the other way around (Isa 5: 1-5; 49: 15; 50: 1-2). What is the cause of the apostacy of Israel?

**Vs 48,** It is PRIDE, the universal sin. In all its subtle forms it has been the pride of the converted Gentiles, Jews, Nephites, and other Israelites that has caused the apostasy. A second cause were external factors that accelerated the process of apostacy. In the case of the church in Jerusalem and Europe, it was the pagan influences and persecutions that caused the church to go astray. In the case of the Nephites it was the Lamanites who overpowered the Nephites in the long run.

**Vss 49-51,** Again it is the servant who persuades the Lord to have mercy and give Israel another chance, that the Israelites might repent. Perhaps this refers to the many prayers of ancient prophets in behalf of their people in the last days. (Enos 1: 11-18, L & V 10: 46-54).

### **The Gathering of Israel vss. 52-74.**

**Vss 52-59,** Nephi explained to his people that the interpretations of Isaiah's difficult prophecies would only become clear when they were fulfilled (2Ne 25: 7). Many things that Isaiah has written are only understood after the moment they were fulfilled (eg, Isa 29: 11-12, for prof. Charles Anthon). Zenos' predictions regarding the gathering of Israel are also not entirely understandable to us, because we do not yet know exactly how this will work. However, some general things are clear from these verses. Both the branches of Israel and the Jews, both wild branches, will be united. In that process the Lord will get rid of the branches that are most bitter, namely those that are very wicked and do not want to repent anymore. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the organization in which the different branches of Israel will be gathered again. Although the tribe of Ephraim has played a dominant role in this gathering so far, the Lamanites will play a very important role, which is obvious from the great missionary success in South America (3Ne. 20). Later on, the lost tribes and the Jews will also join the members of the church in large numbers. Thus, the Israelites will be gathered again. This gathering will naturally create a great collective consciousness among the different tribes, the same awareness that the prophets of old emphasized when they called branches of Israel to repentance (James 6: 4, Hell 8: 11, Isa. 14: 1-2). The Lord hopes that Israel will remember the covenant and fulfill their part of the agreement once they have become aware of their promises.

**Vss 60-62,** In order to gather Israel in the Church of Jesus Christ, as we have just outlined, there is a great need of workers who spread the gospel. The end, the second coming of Christ, is imminent, so hard work has to be done.

**Vs 63,** The gathering will proceed in the reverse order of the scattering. First, the Gentiles will receive the gospel (they were taught by the Jews after Christ preached the gospel to the various branches of the House

of Israel). Then the Lamanites will accept the gospel, then the Jews, and finally the lost ten tribes, who were the first to be led away. Thus, the first will be the last and the last will be the first.

**Vss 64-69**, The Lord sends prophets and missionaries for the last time to work in the vineyard. However, the growth of the church will begin slowly. It is not desirable that the church will once again fall away through "mass conversion" of unclean people, as was the case in the Roman Empire. The caution expressed in these verses is reminiscent of the parable of the wheat and the tares in D&C 86. There it is explained that the Lord postpones the destruction of the wicked so that the church first has the chance to grow sufficiently, both quantitatively and qualitative. As the polarization between the world and the church becomes clearer, the end is approaching.

**Vss 70-74**, The prophets in the last dispensation call upon missionaries to preach with them the restored gospel. Although there are more than 60,000 missionaries around the world today, that number is actually no more than a drop in the ocean. The world population increases considerably faster than new members join the church. It is therefore no surprise that the number of servants is called small in number. However, the missionaries do not work alone. In fact, they cannot. The Lord guides the missionaries into the field, and as they work with all their might and strength (D&C 4) and keep the commandments of the Lord, the Lord will inspire them to find the elect. The reward promised by the missionaries (Note: every member a missionary!) Is very simple and yet intense: Joy in the joy of the converts, both on earth and in the next life. Thus, the church will grow even more and the Lord will eventually destroy the wicked, as in Nebuchadnezzar dream about the stone that would fill the whole earth and overthrow all worldly kingdoms (Dan 2: 29-45). Israel will become one again as it was before the scattering. These blessings, of course, only apply to the Israelites who repent. Again: descent alone does not guarantee blessings!

### **Millennium and last judgment vss. 75-77.**

**Vss 75-76**, After Christ will have returned there will be a thousand years of peace during the so-called millennium. Then Christ will personally reign on earth (Article of faith 10). Israel will be righteous and Satan will be bound (Revelation 20: 2, L & V 43: 31, 45: 55). The servants of the Lord will be rewarded with glory and joy.

**Vs 77**. At the end of the millennium, however, Satan will regain control over the hearts of the children of men (Revelation 20: 7, L & V 43: 31-33). Then the Lord will judge and the good and bad people will be assigned their place. Finally, the earth will be made celestial.

### **Conclusion**

Zenos has described a long history in very few words. The allegory begins with the origin of Israel and ends with the time that the earth will be made celestial. Without prior knowledge of the history of Israel, however, the meaning of the allegory is not entirely clear to us. It is written to substitute the metaphors with actual historical and prophetic data. The allegory is intended primarily to obtain insight into God's plan, and to

show that the Lord has worked and is still working purposefully with the House of Israel. That nothing is unknown to the Lord and that Israel has left his God and not the other way around. That the gathering of Israel in the last days is a very extensive and important work. That good and faithful servants are much needed for that, and that righteousness is more important than mere Israelite descent. That the Lord will assist the few workers in the last days and that unity of action is important. That those who have worked for the Lord in the vineyard will in no way lose their reward and that those who do not want to listen to the prophets and apostles will in no way escape their punishment (L & V 1: 14; John 6: 3).

Jacob has shown by quoting Zenos' that, although the Jews will reject the Messiah in the first instance, both the Jews and Lamanites, mixed with a remnant of the Nephites (1Ne 13:30), along with the other scattered branches of Israel, will all be restored at the last day in the true gospel and that Israel will eventually accept Jesus Christ as their Rock and Savior. With this allegory, Jacob wanted to inspire the Nephites to keep the commandments, in a time when they were so abundantly blessed by the Lord with prophets who proclaimed unto them the Word (James 6: 4-8).

Studying Jacob 5 is not enough to get a good understanding of the history and prophecies concerning Israel. Many of the details regarding God's plan with Israel are mysteries of the gospel that can only be understood after study and prayer. It must always be remembered that Jacob 5 is above all an overview to give us a greater picture of God's dealings with his people.

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