

Alma 4

Many Are Baptized and Join the Church

Alma 4:1–4

1 Now it came to pass in the sixth year of the reign of the judges over the people of Nephi, there were no contentions nor wars in the land of Zarahemla;

2 But the people were afflicted, yea, greatly afflicted for the loss of their brethren, and also for the loss of their flocks and herds, and also for the loss of their fields of grain, which were trodden under foot and destroyed by the Lamanites.

3 And so great were their afflictions that every soul had cause to mourn; and they believed that it was the judgments of God sent upon them because of their wickedness and their abominations; therefore they were awakened to a remembrance of their duty.

4 And they began to establish the church more fully; yea, and many were baptized in the waters of Sidon and were joined to the church of God; yea, they were baptized by the hand of Alma, who had been consecrated the high priest over the people of the church, by the hand of his father Alma.

Comments

These verses tell us a little more about Mormon's interest in his records. Later in his editing he will not give this type of detail for a year in which there were no real actions. In this case, he is still early in working with the annalistic change in the large plates of Nephi. He gives the year, and some of the important information for the year.

In this case, nothing new happens. The information about what happens in the sixth year is the result of the wars of the fifth year. Those conflicts shook the Nephites and they realized that they must not have been sufficiently righteous. Without specifically invoking the promise of the land, that is clearly what is happening here. The wars were devastating, and therefore the Nephites had not been sufficiently protected; they needed to repent and become more righteous. They did, and “many were baptized in the waters of Sidon and were joined to the church of God.”

Pride and Wickedness Arise in the Church

Alma 4:5–6

5 And it came to pass in the seventh year of the reign of the judges there were about three thousand five hundred souls that united themselves to the church of God and were baptized. And thus ended the seventh year of the reign of the judges over the people of Nephi; and there was continual peace in all that time.

6 And it came to pass in the eighth year of the reign of the judges, that the people of the church began to wax proud, because of their exceeding riches, and their fine silks, and their fine-twined linen, and because of their many flocks and herds, and their gold and their silver, and all manner of precious things, which they had obtained by their industry; and in all these things were they lifted up in the pride of their eyes, for they began to wear very costly apparel.

Comments

As with the sixth year, the seventh year sees righteous Nephites. The verse ends with the phrase “continual peace,” which lets the reader know that this condition is about to change.

In the eighth year, Nephite righteousness has led to prosperity. Verse 6 provides an interesting contrast to a very similar verse, Alma 1:29, which also described Nephite prosperity. It, too, spoke of fine silks and fine-twined linen, flocks and herds, and gold and silver. The contrast was the effect of that wealth. In Alma chapter 1, the people continue in their religious principles of egalitarianism. Alma 1:30–31 describe how the people just four years earlier cared for each other and made sure that they had “no respect to persons as to those who stood in need” (Alma 12:30).

Now, in the eighth year, they also have prosperous conditions, but this time “they were lifted up in the pride of their eyes, for they began to wear very costly apparel.” The wearing of costly apparel is the signal that social ranking is returning. Seeing oneself as better than another is the Nephite definition of being lifted up in pride, and it is signaled by the very visual trappings of costly apparel.

Alma 4:7–10

7 Now this was the cause of much affliction to Alma, yea, and to many of the people whom Alma had consecrated to be teachers, and priests, and elders over the church; yea, many of them were sorely grieved for the wickedness which they saw had begun to be among their people.

8 For they saw and beheld with great sorrow that the people of the church began to be lifted up in the pride of their eyes, and to set their hearts upon riches and upon the vain things of the world, that they began to be scornful, one towards another, and they began to persecute those that did not believe according to their own will and pleasure.

9 And thus, in this eighth year of the reign of the judges, there began to be great contentions among the people of the church; yea, there were envyings, and strife, and malice, and persecutions, and pride, even to exceed the pride of those who did not belong to the church of God.

10 And thus ended the eighth year of the reign of the judges; and the wickedness of the church was a great stumbling-block to those who did not belong to the church; and thus the church began to fail in its progress.

Comments

Mormon spends more time than usual on the description of the brewing problems in Nephite society. The social segregation led to even less desirable results. Those who were able to obtain the trappings of wealth, when others could not, began to make that distinction more than visible. They “began to be scornful, one towards another, and they began to persecute those that did not believe according to their own will and pleasure.”

This was not simply a church versus non-church division. Those who were in the church had also prospered and had also begun to believe that they should show the trappings of their new prosperity. Thus, “there began to be great contentions among the people of the church.” The problem was no longer one of affiliation with the church, but to the greater social movement to hierarchy and inequality.

It is important for modern readers to note that “the wickedness of the church was a great stumbling-block to those who did not belong to the church.” When we can be seen living in such a way that we are no longer upholding the beliefs and covenants of the church, it becomes more difficult for those outside the church to believe that the church offers them anything better.

Alma 4:11–14

11 And it came to pass in the commencement of the ninth year, Alma saw the wickedness of the church, and he saw also that the example of the church began to lead those who were unbelievers on from one piece of iniquity to another, thus bringing on the destruction of the people.

12 Yea, he saw great inequality among the people, some lifting themselves up with their pride, despising others, turning their backs upon the needy and the naked and those who were hungry, and those who were athirst, and those who were sick and afflicted.

13 Now this was a great cause for lamentations among the people, while others were abasing themselves, succoring those who stood in need of their succor, such as imparting their substance to the poor and the needy, feeding the hungry, and suffering all manner of afflictions, for Christ’s sake, who should come according to the spirit of prophecy;

14 Looking forward to that day, thus retaining a remission of their sins; being filled with great joy because of the resurrection of the dead, according to the will and power and deliverance of Jesus Christ from the bands of death.

Comments

There is no alleviating of the church's problems in the ninth year. The problems deepen with greater inequality among the people, even those who belonged to the church. This, of course, was of great concern to those who did try to maintain the beliefs and covenants of the church.

We see more details for this social division that we have seen before in Mormon's writings. Perhaps there was something similar in the book of Lehi that was lost, but we don't see it in the book of Mosiah. Perhaps a part of the reason is that Mormon is discussing the problems that arose from the introduction of the new form of Nephite society. There were two changes, one to the government and one to the religious community.

Mormon used the Amlicite uprising to show the problems that arose from the change from monarchy to judges, and perhaps these details are intended to be a parallel showing the types of issues that arose from the separation of the religious community into churches and non-churches. When it was easier for non-church people to reject egalitarianism, it became more difficult for those in the church to withstand the social pressures to follow the attractive movement to more visibility and prestige modeled so much around them.

It is certainly a problem that modern readers experience frequently. The desire to be like the attractive image of the world around us can certainly affect the way we present ourselves. Sometimes, we might similarly drift so far into the tempting trappings of the world that we forget some of the more important gospel principles we have covenanted to uphold.

Alma₂ Steps Down from the Judgment Seat

Alma 4:15–17

15 And now it came to pass that Alma, having seen the afflictions of the humble followers of God, and the persecutions which were heaped upon them by the remainder of his people, and seeing all their inequality, began to be very sorrowful; nevertheless the Spirit of the Lord did not fail him.

16 And he selected a wise man who was among the elders of the church, and gave him power according to the voice of the people, that he might have power to enact laws according to the laws which had been given, and to put them in force according to the wickedness and the crimes of the people.

17 Now this man's name was Nephiah, and he was appointed chief judge; and he sat in the judgment-seat to judge and to govern the people.

Comments

The recombination of the religious and political aspects of Nephite society into one person ends after only nine years. Alma₂ abdicates the chief judge seat and selects another person to rule. Although the chief judge would no longer be the head of the church, he was nevertheless chosen from "among the elders of

the church,” and accepted by the voice of the people. That the voice of the people accepted such a man as their chief judge suggests that while there were increasing divisions, the larger number of people in Zarahemla were either church members, or at least followed the Nephite religious and political ideals.

Alma 4:18–20

18 Now Alma did not grant unto him the office of being high priest over the church, but he retained the office of high priest unto himself; but he delivered the judgment-seat unto Nephiah.

19 And this he did that he himself might go forth among his people, or among the people of Nephi, that he might preach the word of God unto them, to stir them up in remembrance of their duty, and that he might pull down, by the word of God, all the pride and craftiness and all the contentions which were among his people, seeing no way that he might reclaim them save it were in bearing down in pure testimony against them.

20 And thus in the commencement of the ninth year of the reign of the judges over the people of Nephi, Alma delivered up the judgment-seat to Nephiah, and confined himself wholly to the high priesthood of the holy order of God, to the testimony of the word, according to the spirit of revelation and prophecy.

Comments

When Alma₂ leaves the chief judge position, he retained the office of high priest over the church. The reason for this was his intention to try to resolve the growing contentions in the church by going on a personal missionary journey. However, this journey would not be to make new members for the church, but to encourage those of the church to recommit to living correctly according to Nephite principles.

It is interesting that although there is an internal division among the people and Alma₂ had the opportunity to apply a political or military solution, he did not do so. It is probable that there was no simple way to apply a military solution. There was no standing police force or military. Thus, Alma₂ would have to call up neighbors to take arms against neighbors. That would hardly have had a healing result. Thus, his solution was to try to change hearts rather than enforce specific actions.

Our chapter 4 was Mormon’s chapter II. No change was made to this chapter, as it was already very short. The reason for this chapter break is that Mormon is going to change source material for his record, and he makes that change in a new chapter.

