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Lesson 12 - The Pioneer Tradition and the True Church

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Abstract: The Israelites always looked back upon the days of the wandering in the wilderness as the true schooling of the Chosen People and the time when they were most nearly fulfilling the measure of their existence. The concept of man as a wanderer and an outcast in a dark and dreary world is as old as the records of the human race. The desert has always had two aspects, that of refuge and asylum on the one hand, and of trial and tribulation on the other: in both respects it is a place where God segregates and tests his people. Throughout the history of Israel zealous minorities among the people have gone out into the wilderness from time to time in an attempt to get back to the ways of the Patriarchs and to live the old Law in its purity, fleeing from Idumea or the wicked world. This tradition remained very much alive among the early Christians, and is still a part of the common Christian heritage, as can be seen from numerous attempts of Christian groups to return to the ways of Israel in the desert. Only the restored Church of Jesus Christ, however, has found itself in the actual position of the ancient saints, being literally driven out into the desert.

Lesson 12

THE PIONEER TRADITION AND THE TRUE CHURCH

Prospectus of Lesson 12: The Israelites always looked back upon the days of the wandering in the wilderness as the true schooling of the Chosen People and the time when they were most nearly fulfilling the measure of their existence. The concept of man as a wanderer and an outcast in a dark and dreary world is as old as the records of the human race. The desert has always had two aspects, that of refuge and asylum on the one hand, and of trial and tribulation on the other: in both respects it is a place where God segregates and tests his people. Throughout the history of Israel zealous minorities among the people have gone out into the wilderness from time to time in an attempt to get back to the ways of the Patriarchs and to live the old Law in its purity, fleeing from Idumea or the wicked world. This tradition remained very much alive among the early Christians, and is still a part of the common Christian heritage, as can be seen from numerous attempts of Christian groups to return to the ways of Israel in the desert. Only the restored Church of Jesus Christ, however, has found itself in the actual position of the ancient saints, being literally driven out into the desert.

The Pioneer Background, a Book of Mormon Tradition: Time and again the Book of Mormon people were admonished by their leaders always to remember the trials and deliverances of Abraham in the wilderness, of the Children of Israel in the Exodus, of Lehi in his wanderings, and of the tribulation and release of various wandering saints and ancestors in the New World.¹ This is another example of the significant timing of the Book of Mormon, for none knew at the time of its appearance that the saints of the new dispensation would soon be continuing that great tradition of tribulation and triumph in the wilderness. The Book of Mormon was the best preparation and training-manual for what was to come.

Recently scholars have become aware as never before of the importance and significance of the wilderness and the wandering in the religious teachings both of ancient Israel and the primitive Christian Church. A number of important studies have appeared on the subject,

and these supply a welcome commentary and confirmation for the rich fund of information that the Book of Mormon gives us about the ways of the wilderness.

The Hebrews and the Wandering: It has often been pointed out that the Hebrews always idealized the desert life as the good life. For the prophets of Lehi's time the years of Israel in the wilderness were in spite of all hardships "Israel's ideal time," when the people were nearer to God than ever before or after.² It was to recapture the spirit of that time that Jonadab ben Rekhab and his followers, fleeing from "paganizing influences in law and religion," settled in the desert some hundred years before Lehi.² The idea was much older than that, however. "The narrative of the exodus," writes Daube, "is dominated by the concept of God as *go'el*, 'redeemer', of the nation, as the mighty relative or legitimate owner who enforces his right to recover a member of the family or property subjected to foreign domination."³ That is, the Exodus was not only a real event, but also "a type and a shadow of things," representing both escape from the wicked world and redemption from the bondage of sin.

Man the Outcast: Now the idea that this life is a pilgrimage through the desert did not originate with the Christians or even the Jews: it has been the religious memory of the human race from the earliest dispensations of the Gospel. The apocryphal writings are full of it, and the great antiquity of the tradition they report may be judged from Haldar's study of the oldest known temple texts—those of the Sumerians. The religious activity of the Sumerians centered about a ritual drama that took place at the temples (built for that purpose) at the New Year, celebrating and dramatizing the creation of the world, the fall of man, the redemption and resurrection. The ritual drama began by depicting the original home of man as a Garden of Eden, "a beautiful place adorned with greenery," in which the hero, the father of the race, resided; next "the enemies enter the

edin (for such the Sumerians called the place), destroying and carrying off the god to another place, also called *edin* . . .”⁴ *Edin* is thus the world before and also after its transformation, when it becomes a dark and dreary place: “we meet with a kind of ‘exodus’ into the desert as an equivalent to the *descensus ad inferos*,” in which man becomes a homeless wanderer in a land of desolation,⁵ a place *not* to be confused, however, with the underworld or place of the dead.⁶

As Halder summarizes it,

In the beginning we meet with the ‘steppe’ flourishing with verdure being the pasture of the herds. Then, the enemies from the desert enter the god’s field, destroy it, and make it a desert; at this moment the god descends to the Nether World. Then the change occurs, and finally, the god’s triumph over his enemies and his return to life are celebrated, the field again becoming the flourishing dwelling place of the cattle.⁷

What we should notice here is not the important resurrection theme, or the Garden of Eden motif, or the appearance in the earliest known human records not only of an “eschatology of woe,” but also of a millennial hope and “eschatology of bliss,” but the specific reference to this world as a desert. Man has lost his paradise and though he shall regain it eventually through the sacrifice of the hero who overcomes death, he must live meanwhile as an outcast in a dark and dreary place. In the greatest Sumerian epic, man is represented by the wandering and homeless hero Gilgamesh (often identified by scholars with Adam), who travels through a dark desert in search of the water of life and the plant or tree of immortality (of which a serpent deprives him). Hundreds of parallels to this have been found in folklore and ritual literature everywhere; it is the great heritage of the whole human race.⁸

The Desert’s Two Faces: The desert has two faces; it is a place both of death and of refuge, of defeat and victory, a grim coming-down from Eden and yet a sure escape from the wicked world, the asylum alike of the

righteous and the rascal. The pilgrims' way leads through sand and desolation, but it is the way back to paradise; in the desert we lose ourselves to find ourselves. These familiar paradoxes are literal as well as figurative: "It may be said, without any exaggeration," wrote the celebrated Burckhardt from much personal experience, "that the poorest Bedouin of an independent tribe smiles at the pomp of a Turkish Pasha."⁹ In the midst of poverty that we can hardly imagine, the man of the desert deems himself rich. "Among themselves," says Burckhardt, "the Bedouins constitute a nation of brothers," but only as they keep to the desert: ". . . in proportion as they reside near to a town, an avaricious spirit becomes more general among them."⁹ Our Mormon missionaries have often noted that the same thing holds true of the Indians among whom they have worked: the farther from the highway they live, the higher are their moral standards and the purer their traditions. "The Bedouins are sober," a recent observer reports, "because they cannot be otherwise. Since they must carry everything with them, they must ration everything, always counting on the possibilities of being held up at every departure and every arrival. They accept their lot because they know no other."¹⁰ There is no escape from the discipline of desert life, and no compromise with city ways: there is always trouble when the two come into contact.

The Desert as an Escape: Bitter experience has taught the desert people that the world envies and resents their hard-bought freedom. The mass and inertia of a city civilization is a terrible thing: since none can stand against it, the only hope of opposing it lies in escaping from its reach. The skill of the Arabs in "silently stealing away," dissolving like a wraith into the trackless sands, is proverbial. So is their quick and deadly reaction to the presence of strangers in their midst. Robbed at every turn by the smooth manipulators of the city, the Arabs can hardly be blamed for thinking that

robbery is the normal form of human economy and making themselves masters of the craft. Upon turning his talents to business many a simple desert sheik has displayed a capacity that seemed nothing short of genius. Since their land is unproductive, these people must deal in goods that they neither produce nor consume; they become carriers and conveyors, skillful middlemen artfully turning every situation to their own advantage. The Arabs feel perfectly justified in raiding the caravans which do not buy their protection. There is nothing cynical about their ancient and established blackmail, which is simply the application in their own country of business methods learned in the city—they sell what they have to sell for all they can get. If the outside world forces itself upon them, the outside world must pay the price, for they know that the only hope of preserving their integrity is to avoid contact with the outside world altogether, even at the risk of appearing morbidly anti-social.

Volumes have been written on the pure and noble character of the Bedouin in his native state. "I was inclined in the prime of my past," writes an ancient poet, "to make my residence among the people of the desert, in order to acquire their high-minded temperament, and their pure Arab language."¹² Both are very hard to find, and totally beyond the reach of the short-time visitor: "In order to form a really good estimation of Arab character, it would be necessary to live in these remote districts for many years, following the migrations of one of their great tribes. . . ."¹³ One can no more get to know these people by casual contacts in and around the towns than one can get to know our Indians by talking to them in trading-posts. Theirs is a secret and hidden life to which access is only possible for one who is willing to share that life all the way.

Thus it is no exaggeration to say that the dwellers in the wilderness are utterly removed from the ordinary affairs of men. When "the world" becomes too much for the Arabs, "they withdraw into the *depths* of the

wilderness, where none can follow them with hopes of success."¹⁴ This suggested to Harmer that the Biblical term "*dwelling deep*, which Jeremiah recommends to some Arab tribes (Jer. 49:8, 30) means this plunging far into the deserts; rather than going into deep caves, and dens, as commentators suppose."¹⁵ To this day the proximity of the desert to the town "at the best of times . . . hampers the government by offering a refuge and recruiting ground to all the enemies of order."¹⁶ But fleeing into the wastes, which from the point of view of the city people is the act either of insane or criminal persons, all such refugees being lumped together as outlaws,¹⁷ has been the resort of the righteous as well as the wicked from the beginning: "Come out of her, O my people! Partake not of her sins lest ye partake of her plagues!"

Come out of Her, O My People!: Careful studies of the apocryphal writings have revealed that in olden times the Jews believed that even the Ten Tribes "in order to be able to live the Law without molestation, resolved . . . to depart from the society of mankind and migrate *in terram aliam*, that is, to the Other World 'in a land beyond, where no member of the human race had ever before lived.'"¹⁸ Such was certainly the case of the Jaredites who at the beginning of history were ordered to leave the wicked and fallen world of the Tower and betake themselves "into that quarter where there never had man been." (Ether 2:5) The Rekhabites who went out into the desert before Lehi's day are typical of the back-to-the-wilderness movements among the Jews in every age, the *paritsim*, or "those who separated themselves from the nation," and were viewed accordingly as traitors and outlaws by "the Jews at Jerusalem."¹⁹ Lehi could never have gone back to Jerusalem even if he had wanted to. In 1 Maccabees 2:29 (written about 175 B.C.), we are told that "at that time many who were seeking after righteousness and judgment went down into the desert (or wilderness) to settle, with their children and their wives and their property, being sore op-

pressed by the evils of the time."²⁰ In the Dead Sea Scrolls we have the contemporary records of just such a community. Another such were the Ebionites who from their teachings have the peculiar appearance, even as the Dead Sea people and Lehi's own community do, of being both Christians and Jews at once.²¹ From the Talmud we learn that any Jew was free to take the *Nasir* oath that bound him to observe the severe and simple ways of Israel in the wilderness—a way of life that never ceased to appeal to individuals and groups.²²

"Idumea, or the World . . .": In Jewish tradition the pious man who flees to the desert is represented by Elias, according to Käsemann, "as the counterpart of Adam, the sum and type of all righteous souls," as well as the pattern of the High Priest. This Elias-Adam, the great High-priest, is a stranger on the earth, or "wicked Idumea," where only his holy office and mission enable him to survive at all, and where when that mission is completed he is put to death by the wicked.²³ Idumea is the desert to the south of Judaea, where Lehi began his wanderings as an outcast, having been "driven out of Jerusalem,"—a classic place both of suffering and of temptation. In using the expression "Idumea, or the world," the Lord opens his book of revelations for this last dispensation by reminding us that we too are travelers and outcasts in the wilderness.²⁴

Käsemann begins his remarkable study of the *Christian* community of ancient times as God's people wandering in the wilderness by observing that a state of homeless migration is the "normal manner of existence of those who are the bearers of revelation."²⁵ The early Christians, he says, "regarded themselves as wholly led by revelation: for them everything is directed from the Other Side; their whole life is oriented towards the *epangelia*, the promise, which is the goal of their journeyings." Their life and mission on earth was for them "a confident journeying" from a heavenly past to a heavenly future,²⁶ or in the words of the Apostolic

Fathers and the Dead Sea Scrolls, "the way of light is out of one eternity and into another."²⁷ Käsemann further notes that this way through life was one set out in God's plan from the beginning of the world, and though its continuity has often been broken by the wickedness of man, "God constantly restores it to earth by his Word, as at the beginning." By this way the saints must walk while they are in the earth, their life here being an *apodemia*, both figuratively (as in the Jewish philosopher Philo) and literally, i.e., a temporary sojourn in a strange land.²⁸ Such being the case, the journey in the wilderness is, in the primitive Christian view, God's special way of training and educating his people. As they travel through the wilderness they are led and sustained by revelations from on high, exactly as Alma describes it (Alma 13:23); yet they are also given an earthly leader, who is properly designated as the High Priest.²⁹ Like the early Hebrews and the later Jews, the first Christians thought of themselves as walking in the ways of their spiritual ancestors, "a band of homeless saints passing over the earth in search of their heavenly home."³⁰

It is not surprising, then, to find the Dead Sea sectaries organized in camps in deliberate imitation of Israel in the desert,³¹ or to learn that many scholars see in John the Baptist, the voice in the wilderness, the surest link between those sectaries and the first Christians.³² Some have detected wandering Israel in the organization of the Apostolic Church, in which all the general authorities "received nomadic apostolate."³³ John's description of the Church as a woman who flees to the wilderness always captivated the imagination of later churchmen, who never knew quite what to make of it.³⁴

Attempts to return to the Old Ways: Just as pious Christians have always looked for "Letters from Heaven" and willingly accepted forgeries when the real article has failed to appear, so Christian communities in every century have made determined attempts to get back to the ways of the wilderness and the wandering,

and not hesitated to produce by artificial means the conditions and surroundings necessary to put themselves in a situation resembling that of Israel in the Desert of the Exodus. Like the Jewish sectaries before them, enthusiasts of the Christian monastic movement diligently sought out the wildest deserts they could find as the only proper setting for a way of life pleasing to God.³⁵ In the same spirit the pilgrims of the Middle Ages inflicted upon themselves all the hardships of wandering in strange lands and thirsty deserts in the endless search for a heavenly Jerusalem,³⁶ while in modern times Protestant sects have attempted to relive at their camp-meetings the very life of ancient Israel on the march. These and many like practices bear eloquent testimony to the deep and abiding influence of the wandering and the desert in the Christian and Jewish traditions. Throughout the whole course of the history of the Christian churches, one detects the powerful working of the conviction that God's people must always be travelers in the wilderness, both literally and figuratively.

The Real Church in the Real Wilderness: While some groups such as the Quakers and Pilgrim Fathers have been driven into the wilderness against their will—though always with a measure of calculation on their part—one church alone has had the honor of resembling Israel on the march in all details without having to resort to any of the usual artificial devices and theatrical props.

The parallels between the history of the restored Church and the doings of the ancients are so numerous and striking that even enemies of the Church have pointed them out again and again—what writer has not compared Brigham Young to Moses, for example? But I think in the case of the Latter-day Saints these resemblances have an extraordinary force, and that for two main reasons: (1) that they are not intentional, and (2) that they actually are the fulfillment of modern-day prophecy.³⁷

The prophecy in question is found in the Doctrine and Covenants 49:24-25:

But before the great day of the Lord shall come, Jacob shall flourish in the wilderness, and the Lamanites shall blossom as the rose. Zion shall flourish upon the hills and rejoice upon the mountains, and shall be assembled together unto the place which I have appointed.

It is significant that all three of these "chosen people" were to suffer and dwell in the wilderness before the days of their rejoicing. The trials and tribulations of Zion in a very real wilderness in the remotest regions of the earth were matched by those of the Lamanites, driven from their lands and reduced to the last extremes of poverty and hardship in miserable and out-of-the-way tracts of wood and desert, and even more closely resemble the untold labors and dangers of the heroic settlers in the barren wastes of modern Palestine. All this is a sequel and vindication of the Book of Mormon, binding the Old World and the New together in a single divine economy, as the prophets foretold.³⁸ The principal actors of the mighty drama are still the descendants of Lehi on the one side and the children of "the Jews at Jerusalem" on the other, and the scene of their trials and victories is still as ever the desert.

A Constant Theme: One often hears it suggested that perhaps the Latter-day Saints overdo the "pioneer business." Yet as far as can be discovered the true church in every age has been one of pioneers—wanderers and settlers in the wilderness in the most literal sense. And in every age the Church has been careful to preserve and recall in the midst of its own trials the pioneer stories of its own early days and of still earlier dispensations, thousands of years ago. If the stories are all strangely alike that is no accident: we can do no better than to "liken all scriptures unto us," as did Nephi of old, "that it might be for our profit and learning."

Questions

1. Is the recollection and admiration of the deeds of pioneer ancestors peculiar to the Church of this dispensation alone?

2. What was anciently the purpose in rehearsing those deeds and recalling those tribulations?
3. Why did the Hebrews always look back upon the years of the wandering as "Israel's ideal time"?
4. How old is the religious concept of man's life as a wanderer in the wilderness? What theories might account for its origin?
5. What does the desert have to offer to the righteous? To the wicked?
6. How was the tradition of the desert kept alive among the more pious members of the Jewish society?
7. How do desert conditions enforce an austere and abstemious way of life?
8. What is there in the New Testament to illustrate the early Christian concept of life as a pilgrimage?
9. Name some instances of attempts by Christian groups to revive the old life of Israel in the wilderness.
10. What is singular about the relationship of the Latter-day Saints to the wilderness? What aspects of their flight to the West are peculiarly like those of ancient times?
11. Is the pioneer theme overemphasized in the Church today?
12. What is the significance of the flight-into-the-wilderness theme for modern Americans? Where do we go now?