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The Way of the Wicked

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The Way of the Wicked

Crime has a conspicuous place in the Book of Mormon. It is organized crime and for the most part singularly respectable. Here we trace the general course of criminal doings in the Book of Mormon, showing that the separate events and periods are not disconnected but represent a single great tradition. Petty crime is not the concern of the Book of Mormon, but rather wickedness in high places. The Book of Mormon tells us how such comes into existence and how it operates, and how it manages to surround itself with an aura of intense respectability and in time to legalize its evil practices. Finally, the whole history of crime in the Book of Mormon is directed to our own age, which is described at the end of the book in unmistakable terms.

Accent on Crime

To the casual reader it might seem that the Book of Mormon refers too much to evil-doing and "all manner of iniquity." But the reasons for this emphasis on the ways of the wicked are fully explained by the book itself. They are meant as a warning and example to that peculiarly wicked age for which the Book of Mormon message has been preserved and to which it is addressed. Nothing marks the Book of Mormon more distinctively as a special message for the New World, or gives it a more convincing ring of authenticity, than the emphasis it puts on the subject of crime and the peculiar type of crime it describes.

Respectable Crime

The pattern of crime in the Book of Mormon is clearly established in the very first chapter, where we read of a plot among the Jews at Jerusalem to put Lehi out of the

way. It was no excited street-rabble or quick impulse of a city mob that threatened his life; certain parties "sought his life" (1 Nephi 1:20) with purpose and design: "behold, they seek to take away thy life," said the warning voice of the Lord in a dream (1 Nephi 2:1), and his awareness of the danger gave Lehi time to plan and execute an escape (1 Nephi 2:4). In the same way Laman and Lemuel "also . . . sought to take away his life," in one of their evil plots. The most significant thing about both these plots is that their authors, "murderers in [their] hearts" (1 Nephi 17:44), had themselves convinced that they were doing the right thing; they believed that Lehi was a dangerous and irresponsible troublemaker and, in view of the international situation, treasonable and subversive to the bargain, while they themselves were defenders of respectability and the status quo. "We know," say Laman and Lemuel, "that the people who were in the land of Jerusalem were a righteous people; for they kept the statutes and judgments of the Lord, and all his commandments, according to the law of Moses; wherefore, we *know* that they are a righteous people; and our father hath judged them" (1 Nephi 17:22). These words deserve careful consideration. Laman, Lemuel and the Jews at Jerusalem were defenders not only of common sense against a man "led away by the foolish imaginations of his heart" to exchange the comforts of gracious living for years of misery in the desert (1 Nephi 17:20), but they had solid conservative arguments of respectability and religion on their side. In daring to criticize them and to predict awful things about them, Lehi had set himself up as a judge.

How could Nephi answer that? He does so by reminding his brothers that this is simply the old story of the fleshpots of Egypt. It was the Lord who commanded the people to give up all that sort of thing and saved his people in the desert while the Egyptians were destroyed; and what did the people do then? "They hardened their hearts and blinded their minds, and reviled against Moses and against

the true and living God" (1 Nephi 17:30). They took exactly the same position as Laman and Lemuel. And what about their vaunted common sense and righteousness? Forget that pious cant about Chosen People, Nephi tells his brothers. If the Canaanites had been righteous they would have been as "choice" to God as the Hebrews (1 Nephi 17:34). "The Lord esteemeth all flesh in one; he that is righteous is favored of God" (1 Nephi 17:35). Trust God to destroy the wicked and lead "away the righteous into precious lands" (1 Nephi 17:38), says Nephi, who then reminds his brothers that the Lord has probably already destroyed the Jews at Jerusalem (1 Nephi 17:43), whom they believed to be both righteous and secure.

This first episode in the Book of Mormon sets the stage for all that follows. The criminal element is almost always large and usually predominant in the Book of Mormon, and it is always consciously and vocally on the side of virtue. There is a ring of righteous indignation in Laban's charge against Laman: "Behold thou art a robber, and I will slay thee" (1 Nephi 3:13), and a strong case might be made to show that Laban at all times was acting within his rights.

There are two great treatises on crime in the Book of Mormon, the one in the book of Helaman, describing the doings of the ancient Americans, the other in Mormon, describing the doings of modern Americans. Let us consider them in that order.

Crime under the Judges—The First Phase

The story opens with three of the sons of the great judge Pahoran contending after his death for the vacant judgment-seat, thereby causing "three divisions among the people" (Helaman 1:2-4). The prize went to the eldest brother, but the youngest, Paanchi, continued to make trouble, and when he was condemned to death for treason his supporters got Pahoran assassinated as he sat on the judgment-seat (Helaman 1:5-9). The man who in disguise

committed the crime, one Kishkumen, went back to the Paanchi people and told them that they were now all in it together, so they all took a vow "by their everlasting Maker" not to divulge Kishkumen's secret (Helaman 1:11). Then having taken this pious religious oath (not by the devil but by the Creator!) the defenders of Paanchi (who was only trying to save his own life) went about their business unrecognized as perfectly respectable citizens (Helaman 1:12). Soon after, a Nephite dissenter named Coriantumr led a Lamanite army in a surprise attack right into Zarahemla, the capital, and took the city (Helaman 1:15-20). The skill and energy of a Nephite commander in charge of defenses in another city, however, trapped and destroyed the invading army (Helaman 1:28-34).

Peace being restored, a successor was appointed to the chief judge, who had been killed in the war. But Kishkumen the old judge-killer was back in business, and the old supporters of Paanchi were now a loyal band. This group was taken over and trained to a high state of efficiency by one Gadianton, a smart and competent gentleman "expert in many words, and also in his craft" which was "the secret work of murder and of robbery" (Helaman 2:4). Gadianton's object was to become chief judge himself, and he promised to remunerate his faithful followers by putting them into key positions if he were elected: "they should be placed in power and authority among the people" (Helaman 2:5). But first of all the ruling judge, Helaman, had to be gotten out of the way, so Kishkumen went to work. Counter-espionage was also at work, however, and a servant of Helaman killed Kishkumen in Kishkumen's attempt to assassinate the judge (Helaman 2:8-9). Their plans to gain power having been discovered, the gang, under the leadership of Gadianton, "took their flight out of the land, by a secret way, into the wilderness" and thus escaped the police (Helaman 2:10-11). Thus we have the negative side of the flight into the wilderness, and Gadianton and his

band were now outcasts. How then, could "this Gadian-ton . . . prove the overthrow, yea, almost the entire destruction of the people of Nephi" (Helaman 2:13)? How could an exposed and discredited criminal bring a whole nation to ruin? That question deserves the closest consideration.

The Second Phase

Twenty-four years after Gadian-ton's forced retirement things began stirring again. The chief judge "Cezoram was murdered by an unknown hand as he sat upon the judgment-seat. And . . . his son, who had been appointed by the people in his stead, was also murdered" (Helaman 6:15). Such atrocities were but the reflection of the general moral depravity, for "the people began to grow exceedingly wicked again" (Helaman 6:16). And of what did such exceeding wickedness consist? It is important to know, and the Book of Mormon gives us a clear and frightening answer:

For behold, the Lord had blessed them so long with the riches of the world that they had not been stirred up to anger, to wars, nor to bloodshed; therefore they began to set their hearts upon their riches; yea, they began to seek to get gain that they might be lifted up *one above another*; therefore they began to commit secret murders, and to rob and to plunder, that they might get gain (Helaman 6:17).

During the long period of peace and prosperity the people had come to direct all their energies into economic channels; the one thing that counted was to get rich and thereby mount in the world: "to get gain that they might be lifted up one above another." Wealth became the standard measure of human values; and as inevitably happens, people became less and less particular as to how a man got money, just so he had it—the business of getting gain be-

came utterly sordid and unscrupulous. Before long the more part of the Nephites began to join up with the Gadianton crowd for protection of their businesses both against investigation by the government and against the strong-arm methods of competitors:

the more part of the Nephites . . . did unite with those bands of robbers, and did enter into their covenants and oaths, that they would protect and preserve one another in whatsoever difficult circumstances they should be placed, that they should not suffer for their murders, and their plunderings, and their stealings (Helaman 6:21).

The Gadianton Protective Association soon became the biggest business in America! Card-carrying members (those who knew the secret signs and words) (Helaman 6:22) could do about anything they wanted “contrary to the laws of their country and also the laws of their God” (Helaman 6:23), and thus acquire unlimited wealth and power. Nevertheless we must not think of the protective association as a lawless outfit. Far from it! They operated with great integrity, instructing their members in all the company rules and disciplining them in accordance with those rules (Helaman 6:24). For them the laws of the land were supplanted by this new code of laws.

The Criminal Tradition

The book of Helaman gives us a significant account of the history and background of this law code. It explains that it was not handed down in the official records of the nation which were transmitted by Alma to his son but came from another source, having been “put into the heart of Gadianton by that same being who did entice our first parents to partake of the forbidden fruit— . . . who did plot with Cain . . . and . . . who led on the people who came from that tower into this land” (Helaman 6:25-28). And by what means does the devil put these things into men’s

hearts? "He . . . doth hand down their plots, . . . and their plans of awful wickedness, from generation to generation according as he can get hold upon the hearts of the children of men" (Helaman 6:30). He does not give men direct revelation but rather he sees to it that the records are there whenever men fall low enough to be interested in them. The book of Helaman traces the record here as far back as the Jaredites. These oaths and techniques were given to the Jaredites "by the power of the devil . . . to help such as sought power to gain power" (Ether 8:16), yet specifically they were imparted through the consultation of "the record which our fathers brought across the great deep" (Ether 8:9). When in time the Gadianton band became extinct, they "concealed their secret plans in the earth" (Helaman 11:10), and a few years later when men were again far gone in wickedness "they did search out all the secret plans of Gadianton; and thus they became robbers of Gadianton" (Helaman 11:26). Thus the devil puts things into men's hearts by a system of tangible transmission. Since Gadianton's plans were had by the Jaredites and since Gadianton's name is pure Jaredite, as we have pointed out elsewhere, this would seem to be another of the many cultural holdovers of Jaredite civilization among the Nephites. Certainly the tradition was an unbroken one, stretching "from the beginning of man even down to this time" (Helaman 6:29).

Crime Sets the Tone

It is important to understand that Gadianton's phenomenal success was due to the fact that the *majority* of the whole Nephite nation submitted to his plan of operation and his philosophy "and did build up unto themselves idols of their gold and their silver. And it came to pass that all these iniquities did come unto them in the space of not many years" (Helaman 6:31-32). But while the Nephites sank lower and lower in their cycle of producing and acquiring goods as the measure and purpose of man's exist-

ence, the Lamanites set about to exterminate the Gadianton society among their own nations, and succeeded in a most noteworthy fashion. What were their weapons? No strong-arm methods were employed; no knives and poison, tear-gas and sawed-off shot-guns, or the usual arsenal of crime-bursting futility: they simply "did preach the word of God among the more wicked part of them" (Helaman 6:37) and that ended the crime-wave! If that sounds a little too idealistic, we must remember that we are dealing here not with the small and peculiar band of professional or congenital criminals, but with the general public gone mad after money – people not really criminal at heart, but unable to resist the appeal of wealth and the things it could buy. Among the Nephites these things actually "seduced the more part of the *righteous* until they had come down to believe" in the system of the Gadiantons and "partake of their spoils" (Helaman 6:38). Why not? they said, everybody is doing it! And everybody was: soon Gadianton's Protective Association "did obtain the *sole management of the government*" (Helaman 6:39).

If the reader has imagined to himself the Gadianton band as abandoned wretches or street Arabs lurking in dark alleys and fleeing from the light of day in dingy and noisome hideouts, let him disabuse his mind of such a concept. They were a highly respected concern that made their handsome profits by operating strictly within the letter of the law, as they interpreted and controlled it. They were the government, the well-to-do, the respectable, and the law-abiding citizens. There *was* a dangerous and irresponsible element in the society, namely those improvident and negatively inclined fanatics who called themselves the "followers of God," whose leaders constantly predicted the worst for society; but public opinion and common sense were strongly against such characters and made things pretty hot for them. They were the anti-social prophets of doom and gloom, the real criminal element (Helaman 6:39).

“And thus we see,” the record concludes, “that they were in an awful state, and ripening for an everlasting destruction” (Helaman 6:40). And thus we also see the meaning of the paradoxical statement that the disreputable Gadianton “did prove the overthrow, yea, almost the entire destruction of the people of Nephi” (Helaman 2:13). He did it not as a criminal and bandit but as one of the most able and successful men of his time, and entirely with the public’s consent.

Corruption Breeds Corruption

Being in control of the government, we find “those Gadianton robbers filling the judgment-seats” (Helaman 7:4) and employing their office very profitably indeed, “letting the guilty and the wicked go unpunished because of their money;” and using their positions “in office at the head of government, to . . . get gain and glory” (Helaman 7:5). When the righteous Nephi gave a sermon to a crowd of outraged citizens gathered in his garden (outraged against him, not the government!) he told them some home truths. “How could you have forgotten your God?” (Helaman 7:2) he asks, and gives the answer:

It is to get gain, to be praised of men, yea, and that ye might get gold and silver. And ye have set your hearts upon the riches and the vain things of this world, for the which ye do . . . all manner of iniquity (Helaman 7:21).

Nephi too puts his finger on the spot: drugs, sex, gambling, anything that comes under the heading of iniquity are all the inevitable adjuncts of national depravity, but they are passed by every time—almost completely ignored—to put the spotlight on the real culprit of which they are but the faithful attendants, the seat of infection and the root of evil being the desire to be rich and successful: “to get gain, to be praised of men” (Helaman 7:21).

Nephi's Crime

Nephi's little sermon received more than a cool reception. Some judges who happened to be card-holding members of the Protective Association were in the crowd and they immediately demanded that Nephi be brought into court and charged with the crime of "revil[ing] against this people and against our law" (Helaman 8:2). And indeed if contempt of institutions was a crime, Nephi was guilty, for he "had spoken unto them concerning the corruptness of their law" (Helaman 8:3). Still, the judges had to proceed with some care, since they were supposed to be administering justice (Helaman 8:4), and could not be too crude and obvious in their attack, for even among the exceedingly wicked and depraved Nephites the feeling of civic virtue was perhaps as alive as it is in America today; instead of trying to lynch Nephi in fact, the crowd actually protected him from the treatment the judges would have liked to give him (Helaman 8:4). The latter therefore harangued the people on the monstrousness of Nephi's treasonable behavior in telling them "that . . . our great cities shall be taken from us. . . . And now we know that this is impossible, for behold, we are powerful, and our cities great, therefore our enemies can have no power over us" (Helaman 8:5-6). Still, even among the wicked Nephites, there were those in the crowd who had the courage and fairness to cry out: "Let this man alone, for he is a good man, . . . for . . . he has testified aright unto us concerning our iniquities" (Helaman 8:7-8). Fair play prevailed, and Nephi continued his preaching and revealed by inspiration that destruction was at the doors and that even at that moment the chief judge had been murdered, "and he lieth in his blood" (Helaman 8:27).

At the big public funeral that took place the next day, the judges who had tried to stir the crowd up against Nephi declared that his knowledge of the murder showed he was in on it, and though there were protests he was bound and

brought to formal trial. The trial was held publicly, "before the multitude" (in the absence of television), and the judges were at their best, questioning Nephi "in divers ways that they might cross him," slyly offering him bribes and immunity if he would tell about the murder and his connection with it (Helaman 9:19-20). Nephi told them more than they bargained for, advising them to question the brother of the murdered judge, taking care to inspect the skirts of his cloak and to accuse him of the murder. Under such treatment the culprit confessed and in so doing cleared Nephi, who next went about on a preaching tour through the whole country, going "from multitude to multitude," while his assistants did the same (Helaman 10:17). This alarmed the Protective Association, the "secret band of robbers" who sat in high places and whose real motives and methods were concealed from the public, and to counteract the effect of Nephi's preaching they systematically stirred up contentions everywhere (Helaman 10:18; 11:2 make this clear). Nephi's message was rejected everywhere, but the fighting that had been stirred up got entirely out of hand and developed into a civil war, or rather a series of "wars throughout all the land among all the people" (Helaman 11:1).

Now the Lord had promised Nephi that he would grant him whatsoever he asked of him, for he knew that Nephi could be trusted to ask for the right things (Helaman 10:5). So to put an end to the terrible state of strife in the nation after it had gone on for two years Nephi prayed for a famine to afflict the land. The prayer was heard and the ensuing famine was so severe that in the end the people gave up fighting and went down on their knees (Helaman 11:3-7). By the time the famine ended, at the request of Nephi, the Gadianton band had become extinct (Helaman 11:10).

Third Phase

The end of the famine saw a great improvement in spiritual matters, the more part of the people, both the

Lamanites and Nephites, belonging to the church (Helaman 11:18-21). A period of economic expansion and much building also followed, and yet within a scant three years "there began to be much strife" again, certain groups of dissenters taking to murder and plunder in the old style, building up great strength in the mountains and the wilderness by "receiving daily an addition to their numbers." As they had learned nothing these people "did search out all the secret plans of Gadianton; and thus they became robbers of Gadianton" (Helaman 11:23-26). Within a year the mountains and the wilderness became so infested with the robbers as to be closed entirely to Nephite occupation (Helaman 11:31). The bands were well organized and defied both Nephite and Lamanite military power, making themselves an object of terror to the whole land by their raids and onslaughts (Helaman 11:32-33). Still the people continued to forget the Lord and to ripen again for destruction for another five years (Helaman 11:36-37).

Commenting on this, Mormon observes that "we may see at the very time when he doth prosper his people, . . . then is the time that they do harden their hearts, . . . and this because of their ease, and their exceedingly great prosperity" (Helaman 12:2). It was at this time that Samuel the Lamanite "came into the land of Zarahemla, and began to preach unto the people" (Helaman 13:2), telling them that the only reason they had been spared so long was "for the righteous' sake," and when they should finally cast out the righteous it would be all over for them (Helaman 13:14). He discoursed on the futility of attempting to achieve security by hiding up one's treasures in the earth, a practice of those who "have set their hearts upon riches; and because they have set their hearts upon their riches, and will hide up their treasures when they shall flee before their enemies . . . cursed be they and also their treasures; . . . hearken unto the words which the Lord saith; for behold, he saith that ye are cursed because of your riches,

and also are your riches cursed because ye have set your hearts upon them . . . unto boasting, and unto great swelling, envyings, strifes, malice, persecutions, and murders, and all manner of iniquities" (Helaman 13:20-22). "All manner of iniquities" covers every type and variety of crime, but the cause for all of them is always the same.

Next Samuel comments significantly on the suffocating air of respectability and the sanctimonious talk that appear as one of the normal signs of that decadence which according to the Book of Mormon follows upon the enjoyment of great wealth and prosperity:

And now when ye talk, ye say: If our days had been in the days of our fathers of old, we would not have slain the prophets; . . . Behold ye are worse than they; for . . . if a prophet come among you . . . you will say . . . that he is a sinner, and of the devil. . . . But behold, if a man shall come among you and shall say: Do this, and there is no iniquity; . . . do whatsoever your heart desireth, . . . ye will receive him, and say that he is a prophet (Helaman 13:25-27).

Their piety was plainly of that brand which styles itself broad-minded, liberal, and understanding. These smart, up-to-date, prosperous, intensely respectable people were in no mood to be told: "the time cometh that he curseth your riches, that they become slippery. . . . And then shall ye lament, and say, . . . O that we had remembered the Lord our God in the day that he gave us our riches, . . . for behold, our riches are gone from us" (Helaman 13:31-33).

After he had told them many wonderful things that converted many, the general public, full of outraged virtue, accused Samuel of being possessed with a devil and tried every means to kill him, but he escaped and "was never heard of more among the Nephites" (Helaman 16:8). After Samuel's departure all the emphasis in the buzz of talk that

his preaching and mission had stirred up in the country was on the absurdly unscientific nature of the things he had predicted, and so, with Satan continually going about “spreading rumors and contentions,” the book of Helaman ends.

A Typical Deal

In the opening chapter of the book that follows we learn that the revived Gadianton institution was gaining great hold over the imagination of the *young*, who were easily flattered into joining up in large numbers (3 Nephi 1:29). A letter from the leader of the society to the governor of the Nephite land gives remarkable insight into their psychology. The chief who signs himself the governor of the Society (3 Nephi 3:9) begins by expressing warm admiration for the Nephite governor’s firmness “in maintaining that which ye suppose to be your right and liberty” (3 Nephi 3:2), showing himself to be a fair-minded and sporting type. In the next verse he is very patronizing—every inch the “big-shot.” “And it seemeth a pity unto me, most noble Lachoneus, that ye should be so foolish and vain as to suppose that ye can stand against so many brave men who are at my command” (3 Nephi 3:3). So, big hearted as he is, the chief proposes a deal, but not until he has first given a little sermon which burns with righteous indignation for the wrongs he and his people have suffered (3 Nephi 3:4). The deal is that Lachoneus, for whose genuine talent and courage the chief again expresses his sincere admiration, is to be taken into the Society, and in return for bringing with him all the property over which his authority extends, he is to be received on a 50-50 basis—“not our slaves, but our brethren and partners of all our substance” (3 Nephi 3:6-7). It was all very high-minded and idealistic. The chief was speaking only in the name of virtue; he was simply giving the other side a break, “feeling for your welfare,” as he so nicely put it (3 Nephi 3:5). If the deal was refused,

it would be curtains [“mob talk”]; “ye shall become extinct” (3 Nephi 3:8). All he is asking for, Giddianhi concludes, is “that this my people may recover their *rights* and government, who have dissented away from you because of your wickedness in retaining from them their rights of government” (3 Nephi 3:10; italics added). And let no one suppose that his followers did not sincerely believe that they were the righteous and offended ones, and their opponents just too wicked to live with.

A General Strike

In reply to this challenge Lachoneus did a most interesting thing. All the people who had been producing for the benefit of the predatory half of society, following instructions from Lachoneus, simply “left their lands desolate, and . . . gathered . . . all their substance, and they were in one body, . . . having reserved for themselves provisions . . . that they might subsist for seven years” (3 Nephi 4:3-4). They simply sat tight and starved out their exploiters. The question has often been asked, “what would happen if the farmers went on a strike?” What Lachoneus did was to call a general strike. Such things had been attempted in the Old World all through ancient times and especially during the Middle Ages, from the revolt of the Bagaudi at the beginning to the Peasants Revolt at the end of them, and in every case the robber barons, the “folk-devouring Lords,” reacted exactly as the Gadianton robbers did. They decked themselves out most terribly and swooped down upon the peasants and the cities, sword in hand, to claim their rights and discipline those who dared defy them (3 Nephi 4:7-8). At the sight of these avenging bands the opposition was supposed to fall helpless “with fear because of the terror of their armies” (3 Nephi 4:9). This behavior of the robbers was exactly what Lachoneus was counting on, and by applying hunger as his secret weapon he was able to draw out the oppressors into open

battle again and again, until they were virtually exterminated. Of course an alternative of the bands would have been to go to work and make food for themselves, but that is strictly against the heroic code of honor according to which "there was no way that they could subsist save it were to plunder and rob and murder" (3 Nephi 4:5).

Fourth Phase

In the years that followed there developed among the Nephites a centralized bureaucracy of businessmen, officials, and lawyers that reminds one strongly of certain periods of the later Roman and Byzantine Empires (3 Nephi 6:11). Among other things "the people began to be distinguished by ranks, according to their riches and their chances for learning" (3 Nephi 6:12), as under some Byzantine rulers and especially under the Caliphs. That is a sure sign of decadence. "And thus there became a great *inequality* in all the land, insomuch that the church began to be broken up" (3 Nephi 6:14). Economic inequality is a deadly danger to the Church in every age. Again the usual explanation is given for the increasing iniquity of the society. It is nothing but the desire "for power, and authority, and riches, and the vain things of the world" (3 Nephi 6:15). In a word, it is what we all want! This led in a very short time to what Nephi calls "a state of awful wickedness" (3 Nephi 6:17). When inspired men began to oppose the trend, they were met with fierce indignation, especially on the part of the governing classes, the "judges, and they who had been high priests and lawyers; yea, all those who were lawyers were angry with those who testified" (3 Nephi 6:21).

These lawyers and judges had one annoying check on their power—the "Federal Government." All orders of capital punishment had to be signed by the governor of the whole land (3 Nephi 6:22). To evade the galling restrictions of centralized government, these men of affairs accordingly developed skillful techniques of putting people out of the

way before the governor could hear about it (3 Nephi 6:23). When news of this leaked out and they were brought to trial, the friends and families of the judges rallied to the cause of regional rights, while all the bureaucracy of lawyers and high-priests closed ranks, came together – “and did . . . unite with the kindreds of those judges” (3 Nephi 6:27). This is a clear and vivid picture of class government and how it worked. All these people, who were the rulers and masters of the country, holding high office and keeping the power in their family and their class, then covenanted “to destroy the governor, and to establish a king over the land” (3 Nephi 6:30). The next step is the breakup of the Nephite state “into tribes, every man according to his family and his kindred and friends; and thus they did destroy the government of the land” (3 Nephi 7:2). The hated central government with its intolerable restraints on the great families and the great fortunes was no more. They formed very great tribes (3 Nephi 7:3-4), and “their leaders did establish their laws, every one according to his tribe” (3 Nephi 7:11). The victory of partisan Nephites over centralized government was complete. This was the state of things when the great destructions occurred at the time of the crucifixion.

Fifth Phase

Hundreds of years later we again read of the usual crimes and abominations, including the revival of the Gadianton society. The first two chapters of Mormon give a wonderful description of the complete breakdown of a civilization. “And it was one complete revolution throughout all the face of the land” (Mormon 2:8). Recent studies have shown that when the Roman Empire collapsed all of a sudden, just such vast roving and plundering bands filled the earth as those described in the Book of Mormon. Insecurity was complete (Mormon 1:18); people took refuge in “sorceries, and witchcrafts, and magics” (Mormon 1:19). The Dark Ages were upon them. “No man could keep that

which was his own, for the thieves, and the robbers, and the murderers, and the magic art, and the witchcraft which was in the land" (Mormon 2:10). Everywhere, as in the Old World in the days of Salvian, there was a feeling of pathological frustration, men sorrowing "not unto repentance . . . but it was rather the sorrowing of the damned, because the Lord would not always suffer them to take happiness in sin . . . they did curse God, and wish to die. Nevertheless they would struggle with the sword for their lives, . . . and I saw that the day of grace was passed with them, both temporally and spiritually" (Mormon 2:13-15). "A continual scene of wickedness and abominations has been before mine eyes," writes Mormon, "ever since I have been sufficient to behold the ways of man" (Mormon 2:18). The end of all is the lone survivor, Moroni. "I even remain alone to write the sad tale of the destruction of my people" (Mormon 8:3).

A Tract for Our Times

And how is it with us? Speaking to our own society, the Book of Mormon does not mince matters, but goes right to the point. The power of God has been denied, the churches have become defiled, there are "great pollutions upon the face of the earth, . . . murders, and robbing, and lying, and deceivings, and whoredoms, and all manner of abominations" and all for one reason: "For behold, ye do love money, and your substance, and your fine apparel, and the adorning of your churches, more than ye love the poor. . . . Why do ye adorn yourselves with that which hath no life, and yet suffer the hungry, and the needy, and the naked, and the sick and the afflicted to pass by you, and notice them not?" (Mormon 8:37-39). The final warning of the Book of Mormon is that the people of the land have been destroyed because of their concern for the vain things of the world, and always their destruction has come through the same instrumentality, "secret combinations, to get

power and gain" (Ether 8:22). We are warned that such combinations, built up to get power and gain, will again be the overthrow and destruction of America if they are allowed to get the upper hand (Ether 8:21-22).

And they do not gain the upper hand by any genius or skill of their own, but only with the active consent of the people who "suffer these things to be" (Ether 8:23), yielding to fair promises because they themselves love and admire power and gain (Ether 8:17). This is the message of the Book of Mormon to the Gentiles (Ether 8:23), and its message to the Church is like unto it:

And if ye seek the riches which it is the will of the Father to give unto you, ye shall be the richest of all people, for ye shall have the riches of eternity; and it must needs be that the riches of the earth are mine to give; but beware of pride, lest ye become as the Nephites of old (D&C 38:39).

Here the Lord tells us what the riches are that *he* wants us to seek; but if we seek the other riches they are also his to give. God has no objection to man's enjoyment of the good things of the earth. What he condemns in the strongest and clearest language is the *unequal* enjoyment of them.

That which cometh of the earth, is ordained for the use of man for food and for raiment, and that he might have in abundance. But it is not given that one man should possess that which is above another, wherefore the world lieth in sin (D&C 49:19-20).

This was the lesson the Nephites would not learn, though their great King Benjamin pleaded with them to remember, "Behold, are we not all beggars?" (Mosiah 4:19). Wo unto us if we judge a man for his improvidence, however real it might be (Mosiah 4:22), or withhold our substance from those who have brought poverty on themselves (Mosiah 4:17). The man who argues that he has a right to

more of this world's goods than another because he has worked harder "hath great cause to repent" (Mosiah 4:17-18). The fact that a man has greater gifts, more intelligence, and more knowledge than others, or that he has worked harder and sacrificed more, does not give him the right to coerce even the meanest of his fellowmen through the command of goods and services. Jesus made this clear when he laid down the principle that "he that is greatest among you shall be your servant" (Matthew 23:11; John 13:16), but not as a seller of service (John 10:12-13). God has given us our gifts and talents to be placed freely at the disposal of our fellowmen (Jacob 2:19), and not as a means of placing our fellow men at our disposal. Few men have ever had greater talent, energy, or devotion to a cause than Gadianton, but since his objective was "power and gain" his genius was only as that of the brilliant and ambitious Lucifer, the Prince of this world. Gadianton, too, became top man in his society.

"Money Answereth All Things"

The beginning of the end for the Nephites came when they changed their pattern of life: "And from that time forth they did have their goods and their substance no more common among them" (4 Nephi 1:25). Now the interesting thing about this change was that it was economically wise, leading immediately into a long period of unparalleled prosperity, a business civilization in which "they lay up in store in abundance, and did traffic in all manner of traffic" (4 Nephi 1:46). The unfortunate thing was that the Gadianton outfit got complete control of the economic life again. And the economic life was all that counted. The whole society was divided into economic classes (4 Nephi 1:26); the only righteous people in the land were "the disciples of Jesus" (4 Nephi 1:46), and they were given a very bad time (4 Nephi 1:34). It was as in the days of Alma when anybody could get rich who really wanted to, and those who were

not rich were accordingly "despised of all men because of their poverty, yea, and more especially by our priests" (Alma 32:5). Yet only these, the poor class of people, were willing to embrace the gospel (Alma 32:2).

Such an economic order in which everyone was busy trafficking and getting rich was not, according to 4 Nephi, a free society. It was only under the old system, he tells us, that "they had all things common among them; therefore there were not rich and poor, bond and free, but they were all made free, and partakers of the heavenly gift" (4 Nephi 1:3).

This sad tale as we have given it is but a skeleton outline of one aspect of history contained in one section of the Book of Mormon. Nothing can do justice to the power and impact of the Book of Mormon account itself. And still there are those who maintain that a flippant and ignorant youth (so regarded) of twenty-three composed this vast and intricate history, this deep and searching epic of the past, this chastening and sobering tract on the ways of the wicked, in the spirit of sly roguery and jaunty exhibitionism. Those who can continue to make such a claim are not merely mistaken or deluded, they are, by Book of Mormon standards, actually in a state of awful wickedness, and will have terrible things to answer for.

In Joseph Smith's day whole nations were not controlled as they are now by secret combinations to get power and gain. In his day such a thing as a general strike was unknown. Big bosses did not write smooth and flattering letters to competitors making deals and offering protection. The selling of protection by huge gangs operating in high places was unknown.

The arts of manipulating public opinion as practiced by the Gadianton society have not been discovered until our own day. This is no picture of the rustic America of the 1820s, but of the world of the Nephites and of twentieth century America.

Questions

1. Why does the Book of Mormon, a religious record, have so much to say about crime?
2. Did Laman and Lemuel and the Jews at Jerusalem really believe they were righteous?
3. How did Gadianton rise from the status of a discredited outcast to the position of the most influential man in Nephite society?
4. In what ways are the histories given in Helaman and 3 Nephi a sermon for Americans?
5. Is it possible for men to tell when a society as a whole is righteous or wicked?
6. Why will those who love money never admit that they do? By what signs, according to the Book of Mormon, do we know who loves money?
7. What was the social status of the wicked, as a rule, among the Nephites? Of the righteous?
8. In what did the "awful wickedness" of the Nephites consist? What was the main cause of it?
9. What reveals Giddianhi to be a typical "big-shot"?
10. What according to the Book of Mormon are the most effective ways of dealing with a crime-wave?