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Churches in the Wilderness

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Churches in the Wilderness

As outcasts and wanderers, the Nephites took particular pains to preserve unbroken the records and traditions that bound them to their ancestors in the Old World. Special emphasis is laid in the Book of Mormon on one particular phase of the record; namely, the care to preserve intact that chain of religious writing that had been transmitted from generation to generation by these people and their ancestors "since the world began" (1 Nephi 3:20). The Book of Mormon is a religious history. It is specifically the history of one religious community, rather than of a race or nation, beginning with the "people of Nephi," who became established as a special minority group at the very beginning of Book of Mormon times. The Nephite prophets always preached that the nation could maintain its integrity and its very existence only by remaining a pious religious society. Alma founded a church based on religious traditions brought from the Old World: it was a church in the wilderness, a small group of pious dissenters who went forth into the desert for the purpose of living the law in its fullness. This church was not unique among the Nephites; other "churches of anticipation" flourished in the centuries before Christ; and after Christ, came many churches carrying on in the apocalyptic tradition.

The Unbroken Chain

If Lehi's people, as we have seen, continued to view themselves as Israel on the march in a literal as well as a figurative sense, their ties with the past were far more than a mere matter of sentiment. They were the key to their identity as a people, the sheet anchor of their civilization; as a branch "broken off from its parent" they had no other roots than the records and traditions they carried with them. They were acutely conscious of that fact. At the very outset Nephi explained to his brothers why they should be willing to run any risk to get the brass plates:

Behold, it is wisdom in God that we should obtain these records, that we may preserve unto our children the language of our fathers; and also that we may preserve unto them the words which have been spoken by the mouth of all the holy prophets . . . *since the world began*, even down unto this present time (1 Nephi 3:19-20; italics added).

The purpose of the plates, as he saw it, was to preserve the cultural heritage of the past for generations to come, and especially to retain intact the unbroken religious tradition of God's people back to the very beginning.

This is the announcement that launches the vast and restless record-keeping project of Lehi's descendants, determined to keep intact the chain of writings that bound them to the righteous of every age in a single unbroken faith and tradition. For the ancients all history was sacred history; but it was Eduard Meyer who first pointed out that "scientific" history first began with the Jews, who in their passion for keeping full and accurate records amassed a great deal of material which we would call "secular history." "There are many records kept of the proceedings of this people," says one Nephite historian, "by many of this people, which are particular and very large, concerning them. But behold, a hundredth part of the proceedings of this people . . . cannot be contained in this work" (Helaman 3:13-14). Mere mass made it necessary to edit. From the first, Nephi had stated the guiding principle in the preserving of plates and records: "Wherefore, the things which are pleasing unto the world I do not write, but the things which are pleasing unto God and unto those who are not of the world" (1 Nephi 6:5). The primary and original aim of keeping those records which make up the Book of Mormon was to preserve the *religious* tradition of the righteous few who down through the centuries have heeded God's word and been guided by his prophets.

The history of God's dealings with men is a timeless

one, a story of things "not of this world." It is interesting that the latest studies of primitive Christianity, especially since the coming out of the Dead Sea Scrolls, see in John the Baptist and the Apostle John the chief links between Christianity and Judaism; for Nephi proceeds to give a circumstantial account of the mission of John the Baptist (1 Nephi 10:8-10), while designating the other John by name as a fellow worker who shall write records that will substantiate his own, "sealed up to come forth in their purity" (1 Nephi 14:12-27). He thinks of himself and his father as engaged in a single vast and timeless project along with all the other righteous prophets who ever lived. "Ye need not suppose," he reminds us speaking for his own day, "that I and my father are the only ones that have testified (1 Nephi 22:31). "The mysteries of God," says Nephi, "shall be unfolded . . . as well in these times as in times of old, and as well in times of old as in times to come; wherefore, the course of the Lord is one eternal round" (1 Nephi 10:19).

Nephi Preserves the Religious Tradition

Lehi in fleeing from Jerusalem represents the righteous minority whose history is the main concern of the Book of Mormon. Hardly had the party landed in America when it was necessary for Nephi in turn to "depart . . . and flee into the wilderness" (2 Nephi 5:5). With him he took a select group: "And all those who would go with me were those who believed in the warnings and the revelations of God; wherefore, they did hearken unto my words" (2 Nephi 5:6). It was, that is, strictly a *religious body* that went forth, taking their tents and journeying "in the wilderness for the space of many days" (2 Nephi 5:7). They settled down as a religious community, calling themselves the "people of Nephi" (2 Nephi 5:9). Though they were only a minority group, viewed forever after as traitors and dissenters from the main body, it was they who preserved unbroken and intact all the religious ties with the Old World: it was they

who had the records that were brought from Jerusalem (stolen, said the Lamanites!), and the ball and sword that were to become the traditional national treasures (2 Nephi 5:12-14); and as soon as they settled in the wilderness they built a temple "after the manner of the temple of Solomon" (2 Nephi 5:16), which many of them had seen with their own eyes. Most important is the all-embracing rule of life they followed:

And we did observe to keep the judgments, and the statutes, and the commandments of the Lord in all things, according to the law of Moses (2 Nephi 5:10).

In all these things they were simply following in the established line without any break from the past. In teaching his people, Nephi tells us, he "did liken all scriptures unto us, that it might be for our profit and learning" (1 Nephi 19:23).

Nephi's successor and brother, Jacob, explains very clearly why his people kept the law of Moses while actually believing in Christ, the Anointed One to come: "We knew of Christ . . . many hundred years before his coming; and . . . also all the holy prophets which were before us. . . . And for this intent we keep the law of Moses, it pointing our souls to him" (Jacob 4:4-5). A later prophet explains the law of Moses as "a law of performances and of ordinances, a law which they were to observe strictly from day to day, to keep them in remembrance of God and their duty towards him. But . . . all these things were types of things to come" (Mosiah 13:30-31). Until the Lord himself should come, the people were to be guided by Moses "and even all the prophets who have prophesied ever since the world began" (Mosiah 13:33).

Two Nations, Two Churches

The nation founded by Nephi was strictly a religious society, the prophet himself remaining "their ruler and their

teacher," though refusing to become their king, as they wanted him to (2 Nephi 5:18-19). And a religious society it remained. Jacob and Joseph, having "been consecrated priests and teachers of this people, by the hand of Nephi" (Jacob 1:18), labored mightily to keep them on the path in the face of growing disaffection and worldliness. Jacob's teaching was that if the nation was to survive it could never forget its peculiar *religious* nature and calling:

Wherefore, thus saith the Lord, I have led this people forth out of the land of Jerusalem, by the power of mine arm, that I might raise up unto me a righteous branch from the fruit of the loins of Joseph. Wherefore, I the Lord God will not suffer that this people shall do like unto them of old (Jacob 2:25-26).

For him as for Nephi there are just two sides to the question. He groups all factions and complexions of people into two arbitrary categories. After naming seven different groups, he adds, "But I shall call them Lamanites that seek to destroy the people of Nephi, and those who are friendly to Nephi I shall call Nephites" (Jacob 1:14). In the same way, Nephi had explained: "He that fighteth against Zion, *both Jew and Gentile . . .* are they who are the whore of all the earth" (2 Nephi 10:16; italics added). By this reasoning there are *never* more than "save two churches only" in the world, and indeed Nephi's much-commented remark to that effect (1 Nephi 14:10) reads more like a statement of general principle than the denunciation of one particular church among many.

When Lehi bade farewell to his people, he spoke to them as a group who could only escape "captivity" by being united in the closest bonds of social unity: "Arise from the dust, my sons, and be men, and be determined in one mind and in one heart, united in all things, that ye may not come down into captivity" (2 Nephi 1:21). Such intimate bonds of affection could only be implemented by a religious al-

legiance, and when Jacob tries to stem the tide of secularization he appeals passionately for the preservation of the old rules of equality on a religious basis:

Think of your brethren like unto yourselves, and be familiar with all and free with your substance, that they may be rich like unto you. But before ye seek for riches, seek ye for the kingdom of God. . . . The one being is as precious in his sight as the other. And all flesh is of the dust; and for the selfsame end hath he created them, that they should keep his commandments and glorify him forever (Jacob 2:17-21).

But the world went its wicked way, and down through most Book of Mormon history the righteous remain, as always, in the position of dissenting minorities. The fullest and most interesting description of such churches comes from the time and activities of the great Alma almost 500 years after Nephi.

Abinadi Preaches the Tradition

The story begins with the activities of the prophet Abinadi in the days of the wicked King Noah (Mosiah 11:20). When his preaching of repentance put his life in danger, Abinadi "came among them in disguise, that they knew him not, and began to prophesy among them" (Mosiah 12:1). The people protested: "We teach the law of Moses. And again he said unto them: If ye teach the law of Moses why do ye not keep it?" (Mosiah 12:28-29). It is still the same old issue of the law of Moses as a type and a preparation for the Messiah and greater things to come *versus* the law of Moses as an end in itself and a full justification of the status quo. That was the argument with which the Book of Mormon began (1 Nephi 17:22), and it has never ceased to be the main issue between the two great traditions of Israel. *Reading* to them the voice of God in the first person, Abinadi explains exactly wherein the

force and virtue of the law of Moses – to which these people claim such loyal devotion – really reside (Mosiah 13:30), showing them that not only Moses looked forward to the coming of the Messiah, but “all the prophets who have prophesied ever since the world began – have they not spoken more or less concerning these things?” (Mosiah 13:33). It is significant that the bulk of Abinadi’s teachings and prophecies was *read* by him to the people out of the books: “And now I read unto you the remainder of the commandments of God, for I perceive that they are not written in your hearts; I perceive that ye have studied and taught iniquity the most part of your lives” (Mosiah 13:11). This is a beautiful touch of prophetic irony, incidentally, in the best tradition of the great prophets, with its clever play on the words “read,” “write,” and “study.”

Alma Finds a Church

When one of the priests who attended on the king, a young man by the name of Alma, tried to persuade the king to spare the prophet’s life, he only succeeded in putting his own life in jeopardy and had to run away (Mosiah 17:2-3). “And he being concealed for many days did write all the words which Abinadi had spoken” (Mosiah 17:4). Thus Alma equipped himself with a full written account of the traditions as Abinadi had read it to his hearers at great length; it took him “many days” to do the job, and we can be sure that when he emerged from hiding he was steeped in the traditions not only of the priests (for he was one of them) but of the prophets as well. He was ready to organize his church: First he “went about privately among the people, and began to teach the words of Abinadi” (Mosiah 18:1). Then

as many as did believe him did go forth to a place which was called Mormon, . . . having been infested, by times or at seasons, by wild beasts. Now, there was in Mormon a fountain of pure water, and Alma resorted thither, there

being near the water a thicket of small trees, where he did hide himself in the daytime from the searches of the king (Mosiah 18:4-5).

The nature of the place seems clear: it is in wild, open, desert country – not a jungle – an oasis where some small trees grew around a spring.

Alma baptized the people who came to him there (Mosiah 18:10), and when some 204 of them had congregated in the desert he organized them into a church, “and they were called the Church of God, or the Church of Christ, from that time forward” (Mosiah 18:17).

Whosoever was baptized by the power and authority of God was added to his church. And . . . Alma, having authority from God, ordained priests; even one priest to every fifty of their number did he ordain to preach unto them, and to teach them concerning the things pertaining to the kingdom of God. And he commanded them that they should teach nothing save it were . . . spoken by the mouth of the holy prophets. . . . And he commanded them that there should be no contention one with another, but that they should look forward with one eye, . . . having their hearts knit together in unity and in love one towards another. . . . And thus they became the children of God (Mosiah 18:17-18, 21-22).

A Picture of Alma’s Church in the Wilderness

Consistent with the ancient practices which he was consciously following, Alma insisted on absolute equality, teaching “his people, that every man should love his neighbor as himself, that there should be no contention among them” (Mosiah 23:15). The priests worked for their living: “The preacher was no better than the hearer, neither was the teacher any better than the learner; and thus they were all equal” (Alma 1:26). “And they did impart of their substance, every man according to that which he had; . . . they were liberal to all, . . . whether out of the church or in the

church" (Alma 1:27, 30). For all their liberality and humanity, Alma's people thought of themselves as completely severed from the rest of the nation: "Come ye out from the wicked," he said to them, "and be ye separate, and touch not their unclean things; . . . the names of the wicked shall not be numbered among the names of the righteous" (Alma 5:57). Just as his followers were not allowed to touch unclean things, so none from the outside and none unwilling to accept their own strict standards could mingle with them; "that the word of God may be fulfilled, which saith: The names of the wicked shall not be mingled with the names of my people" (Alma 5:57).

This was more than a spiritual segregation – it was a real organization: "They did assemble themselves together in different bodies, being called churches; every church having their priests and their teachers, and every priest preaching the word according as it was delivered to him by the mouth of Alma" (Mosiah 25:21). There were seven such churches, "and they were called the people of God" (Mosiah 25:24). Everything remained strictly under Alma's control, for he "was their high priest, he being the founder of their church" (Mosiah 23:16) who personally consecrated the priests and teachers who "did watch over their people, and did nourish them with things pertaining to righteousness" (Mosiah 23:17-18). Moreover, the people had their own territory, and "they called the land Helam" (Mosiah 23:19), and they built their own city, "which they called the city of Helam" (Mosiah 23:20).

Other "Churches of Anticipation"

This revival of the old ways continued down to the time of Christ. A generation after Alma, the Nephite nation broke up into all sorts of independent groups – unholy as well as holy – in which "their leaders did establish their laws, every one according to his tribe" (3 Nephi 7:11). At such a time, Nephi, another mighty religious leader, came forward and

began calling the people back to the right way, "that there were none who were brought unto repentance who were not baptized with water" (3 Nephi 7:24). Likewise, after the preaching of Samuel the Lamanite, the people "went forth and sought for Nephi, . . . desiring that they might be baptized" (Helaman 16:1), while his work went forward: "baptizing, and prophesying, and preaching, crying repentance unto the people, showing signs and wonders, working miracles among the people, that they might know that the Christ must shortly come" (Helaman 16:4). But again it was only the more righteous minority who were interested—those who believed the words of the prophet Samuel—the rest remaining as they were in town and country (Helaman 16:5-7).

False Churches

Now when Christ finally came and established his church, it was very much like those "churches of anticipation" we have been describing (4 Nephi 1:1), and indeed the multitude to which Jesus appeared was a small one (3 Nephi 19:2-3; 17:25). And after the Lord had departed, in time came the usual corrupters: "false Christs, . . . false prophets, and false preachers and teachers among the people, . . . and many dissensions away unto the Lamanites" (Words of Mormon 1:15-16). King Benjamin and King Mosiah both tried to make the nation identical with the church—God's people—and preached the same doctrine and practices as Alma and Nephi had, thus confirming the original and unchanging concept of the nation and church as God's elect, looking forward to the coming of the Messiah. The whole scheme of things as to doctrine, organization, and tradition is fully and carefully set forth in the Book of Mormon, always with the clear understanding that what is done is but a continuation of what was done of old—it is difficult to find any innovation in the Book of Mormon, or any religious institution or practice that did

not rest its case on the ways of the ancients and the timeless and unchanging nature of God's dealings with his children.

Questions

1. In what specific ways do the Nephites display attachment and devotion to their past in the Old World?
2. Why is it important to realize that the Book of Mormon is primarily the history of a religious community?
3. What evidence is there that the Book of Mormon is primarily a religious history?
4. Into what two categories do Nephi and Jacob divide all society? What is significant in this division with regard to the identity of the "great and abominable church"?
5. Describe the rise and organization of Alma's church.
6. Who authorized Alma to found a church?
7. How can there have been a plurality of churches among the righteous part of the Nephites if there is only one true church?
8. What is a "church of anticipation"?