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Good People and Bad People

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The Supreme Test

Since it first came forth the Book of Mormon has been subjected as it were to a graded series of tests. First of all, was Joseph Smith bluffing? It was all right to tell wonderful stories to beguile the local yokels, but would the easy-going country boy back down when he found himself in real trouble? If he knew it was all a joke he certainly would. But he didn't give an inch, and to the end of his life never so much as hinted that the slightest explanation or apology was due for his youthful indiscretion. Well, he had told his story of the angel and the book: could he produce the book? He produced it. It is a surprisingly big book, supplying quite enough rope for a charlatan to hang himself a hundred times; as the work of an impostor it must unavoidably bear all the marks of fraud, it should be poorly organized, shallow, artificial, patchy, and unoriginal; it should display a pretentious vocabulary (the Book of Mormon uses only 3,000 words), overdrawn stock-characters, melodramatic situations, gaudy and overdone descriptions, and bombastic diction. Assuming that it must be that kind of a book, the critics, without bothering to read it, have not hesitated to brand it, with Bernard DeVoto, "a yeasty fermentation, formless, aimless, and inconceivably absurd."¹ That is why we have just gone to the trouble in this book to glance at just a few of the technical aspects of the Book of Mormon – to give the reader some idea of the infinite study and pains that would have to go into the composition of such a com-

plicated structure in which one slip would bring down the whole edifice. Whether one believes its story or not, the severest critic of the Book of Mormon, if he reads it with any care at all, must admit that it is the exact opposite to what DeVoto said it was: it is carefully organized, specific, sober, factual, and perfectly consistent.

Ah, but this fabulous story claims to be really history — can you prove that? No, nor can we prove that Herodotus or Gregory of Tours or the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles are history; but we have good reasons for believing that they contain authentic history, and many of the same reasons support our endorsement of the Book of Mormon as history — we have indicated some of those reasons in the preceding pages. But now comes the real test. Granted, since we can't deny it, that Joseph Smith did give a big book to the world and that its production was an altogether remarkable performance — so remarkable, indeed, as to make the problem of its authorship a very puzzling one indeed — still, all that is beside the point or of very minor significance in comparison with what the book actually has to say. As we see it, if an angel took the trouble to deliver the book to Joseph Smith and to instruct him night after night as to just how he was to go about giving it to the world, and if Joseph Smith bade farewell to peace and security for the rest of his life in order to carry out instructions (and Brigham Young informs us that we can't imagine the threats and perils that constantly surrounded him), that book should obviously have something of importance to convey. The question that all are now asking of the Bible — "What does it have to say that is of relevance to the modern world?" applies with double force to the Book of Mormon, which is a special message to the modern world. It claims to contain an enormously important message for whoever is to receive it, and yet until now those few who have been willing to receive it as the authentic word of God have not shown particular interest in that message. Why is that?

Because, as we shall see, the full import of the message is just beginning to materialize. What was a romance of the far away and long ago to our parents and grandparents has in our own generation become a grim reality. Suddenly the Book of Mormon has become as modern as today's newspaper. If this seems like an overstatement, let us consider a few points.

A Polarized World

One thing the reader of the Book of Mormon is never allowed to forget is that the Nephites lived in a polarized world, in which they were perpetually engaged either in hot or cold wars with the Lamanites. Their basic problem was one of survival; security was an obsession with them. Vastly outnumbered and usually surrounded by people whose way of life and whose ideology were totally alien to their own, who nursed ancient grudges and attributed all their own setbacks and misfortunes to Nephite wickedness, with whom any communication was usually out of the question, the Nephites had by all human standards ample cause for alarm. Yet from the beginning they received full assurance that God had purposely arranged things that way, and that they had absolutely nothing to fear as long as they behaved themselves. God intended that the Nephites should have hostile Lamanites breathing down their necks: "I will curse them even with a sore curse, and they shall have *no power* over thy seed except they shall rebel against me also. And if it so be that they rebel against me, they shall be as a scourge unto thy seed, to stir them up in the ways of remembrance" (1 Nephi 2:23–24).

So it was a blessing to the Nephites after all to have the Lamanites on their doorstep to "stir them up to remembrance" — "Happy is the man whom God correcteth" (Job 5:17). No matter how wicked and ferocious and depraved the Lamanites might be (and they were that!), no matter by how much they outnumbered the Nephites, darkly clos-

ing in on all sides, no matter how insidiously they spied and intrigued and infiltrated and hatched their diabolical plots and breathed their bloody threats and pushed their formidable preparations for all-out war, *they were not the Nephite problem*. They were merely kept there to remind the Nephites of their real problem, which was to walk uprightly before the Lord. That is why as soon as the Nephites started talking about settling the Lamanite question once and for all by using their military might to “cut them off from the face of the land,” Mormon “did utterly refuse from this time forth to be . . . a leader of this people” (Mormon 3:9–11), pointing out that God had expressly forbidden that sort of thing, and that if there was any avenging to be done God and God alone would do it: “But, behold, the judgments of God will overtake the wicked; and it is by the wicked that the wicked are punished” (Mormon 4:5). From being a maker of history, Mormon became its recorder—for our benefit. For he immediately appends to the above remark: “I write unto you, Gentiles, and also unto you, house of Israel, . . . and I write also unto the remnant of this people” (Mormon 3:17–19).

And his theme is coexistence. At that time the Lamanites were feeling about the Nephites exactly as the Nephites felt about them, and so the process of polarization had been pushed to its limit, with each side out to exterminate the other, obsessed with the old doctrine of “It is either you or us.” As in the days of Shiz and Coriantumr, everybody was forced to choose either one side or the other, at a time, of course, when there was very little to choose between them, for “both the people of Nephi and the Lamanites had become exceedingly wicked one like unto another” (4 Nephi 1:45). Indeed, Mormon says of his own people, “Their wickedness doth exceed that of the Lamanites” (Moro-ni 9:20).

Whenever the Nephites were truly righteous, however, the old polarization broke down or vanished completely.

When things were at their best “there was no contention in all the land, . . . neither were there Lamanites, nor any manner of -ites; but they were in one. . . . And how blessed were they!” (4 Nephi 1:15, 17–18). This happy state of things persisted until “a small part of the people . . . had revolted . . . and taken upon them the name of Lamanites” (4 Nephi 1:20), reviving the old prejudices and teaching their children to hate, “even as the Lamanites were taught to hate the children of Nephi from the beginning” (4 Nephi 1:39). And so the polarizing process began all over again.

In the days of their integrity the Nephites displayed singular forbearance in their dealings with the Lamanites. We have seen how Moroni time and again resolutely refused to punish the Lamanites when he was in a position to do so. The case of the Lamanite maidens is an impressive lesson in self-control. When the wicked priests of Noah carried off some Lamanite girls, the Lamanites, thinking that the people of Limhi were to blame, made war on them. In the battle the Lamanite king was wounded and taken to Limhi, who asked him to explain his hostility. The king told about the stolen girls, and somebody remembered that the priests of King Noah were wandering loose in the woods—so there had probably been a mistake. At this the king not only apologized but offered to explain things to his people, “that they may be pacified” (Mosiah 20:19). At the same time, the mighty Nephite warrior Gideon urged his people to “pacify the king, . . . for it is better that we should be in bondage than that we should lose our lives; therefore, let us put a stop to the shedding of so much blood” (Mosiah 20:22). But before the Lamanite king could explain things to his people, he had to get them to listen to him, which he did by “bow[ing] himself down before them, and did plead in behalf of the people of Limhi,” who had come out with him completely unarmed. Whereupon “the Lamanites . . . had compassion on them and were pacified towards them, and returned with their king in

peace to their own land” (Mosiah 20:25–26). Here was a perfect set-up for a long war; but because Limhi took the pains to investigate, and Gideon talked sense instead of heroic clichés, and a proud king was willing to humble himself before his subjects, and those subjects were willing to have compassion on a hereditary foe, and because the people of both sides, though both had been attacked without provocation, were able to see that a mistake had been made, the story had a happy ending.

Even more instructive is the experience of Ammon. First he went among the wickedest of the Lamanites, addressing their king with courtesy and respect and expressing his desire to live in the land and serve the king (Alma 17:23–25). The people he converted in the land absolutely refused to shed blood, even when a Lamanite army started mowing them down (Alma 24:21–22). This, we might say, is coexistence carried to absurd lengths; and yet it was wisdom, for presently the Lamanites realized what they were doing and “did forbear from slaying them,” and ended up joining their society in large numbers (Alma 24:23–26).

“Good Guys and Bad Guys”

Critics like O’Dea have told the world that the Book of Mormon is a rather naive tale, a typical “Western,” in which the “good guys” fight the “bad guys.”² Nothing could be further from the truth. At every confrontation of the Nephites and Lamanites in war, the Book of Mormon is at pains to point out that the conflict is to be attributed to the wickedness of both parties. Indeed, the greatest battle before the final debacle was fought not between the Nephites and Lamanites but between Nephite armies (3 Nephi 4:11). “They shall have no power over thy seed,” the Lord promised Nephi, “except they shall rebel against me *also*” (1 Nephi 2:23). The “also” is important—it means that whenever the Nephites and Lamanites fight it is because

both have rebelled against God. It is never a case of “good guys versus bad guys.”

In the Book of Mormon we are constantly admonished of the folly of pinning “good” and “bad” labels on people. Father Lehi constantly took his wicked sons, Laman and Lemuel, to task for murmuring against God, and yet when the going got really rough he joined them in their complaints: “And also my father began to murmur against the Lord his God” (1 Nephi 16:20), as a result of which “he was brought down into the depths of sorrow” (1 Nephi 16:25). One thinks of Peter, the first president of the church and truest of the true, who vowed that he would never deny the Lord even at the cost of his life, and within twelve hours was swearing “with an oath” that he had never known him.

Likewise the Brother of Jared, the most righteous man of his time, after all his sufferings and tribulations had to be severely rebuked “because he remembered not to call upon the name of the Lord” (Ether 2:14). Nephi’s penitential hymn was no hollow rhetoric: he too had sinned, only with transparent honesty he finds the cause of his reverses entirely within himself, and rebukes himself for wanting to take it out on others: “And why should I yield to sin, because of my flesh? . . . that the evil one have place in my heart to destroy my peace and afflict my soul? Why am I angry because of mine enemy?” (2 Nephi 4:27).

If the good people slip in the Book of Mormon, the bad people often surprise us no less. Laman and Lemuel, determined to murder Nephi, could still hear the voice of the Lord, and “did turn away their anger, and did repent of their sins” (1 Nephi 16:39). There never were more noble and powerful teachers of righteousness than Alma the Elder and Mosiah, and yet their sons were perfect rotters, and deliberately went about undermining all their work; it took an angel to convert them, but almost overnight the arch-delinquents became model missionaries (Mosiah 27:11–13,

32–36). Another archenemy of the church who suddenly became a great missionary was Zeezrom (Alma 11). Morianton, a descendant of the wicked Riplakish, was a fierce outlaw who came to the throne by violence and was decidedly immoral in his personal life, yet once in power he was an excellent ruler who “did do justice unto the people” (Ether 10:11). One of the keepers and transmitters of the holy record was the heroic Omni, who fought gallantly to preserve his people, and yet must confess, “I of myself am a wicked man, and I have not kept the statutes and the commandments of the Lord as I ought to have done” (Omni 1:2).

Were the Nephites good people? Some of the time, but by no means always. Early in their history Jarom marvels that they have not long since been destroyed because of their sins (Jarom 1:3), and tells how the prophets had to threaten and protest continually and how the laws had to be savagely severe to keep the people in line. In the midst of the most desperate military crises Nephite society was shot through with dissensions and intrigue (Alma 53:8–9). When they were on the very verge of destruction, their leaders “marvelled . . . because of the wickedness of the people” (Alma 59:12). When they lost half their country to the Lamanites, it was because “they were wicked even like unto the Lamanites” (Helaman 4:22). In the final escalation of atrocities the Nephites were not a whit behind the Lamanites (Moroni 9).

If the Nephites are not all good, the Lamanites are by no means all bad. For many years it was only because Nephite dissenters stirred them up that the Lamanites came to war against the Nephites. It was hardened Lamanite troopers who had sworn vengeance upon the Nephites (Alma 25:1) who, upon returning from a campaign, of their own free will went over in large numbers “and did join themselves to the people of God, who were the people of Anti-Nephi-Lehi” (Alma 25:13). It was fierce tribesmen with

a long record of savagery and bloodshed who suddenly decided to bury their weapons and became the most righteous people in the New World (Alma 24:19). It was also the Lamanite veterans of a long war who later went over in droves to join them, becoming overnight model Nephite citizens (Alma 62:17, 29).

The prophets in the Book of Mormon marvel at how soon a righteous people can become wicked, and the speed of the reverse process is even more surprising. It is a common fallacy to think of things happening very slowly in history, and especially in ancient history. But the student has only to compare *any* two consecutive decades of history to realize that things do not move slowly at all—history moves at breath-taking speed, and as far as the existing records show, always has. If, as the result of a single famine, a wicked nation becomes a righteous nation (Helaman 11:18); if after the Gadianton crisis the Nephites suddenly became believers to a man (3 Nephi 5:1) and people hardened in the ways of sin “did serve God with all diligence day and night” (3 Nephi 5:3); if the Gadianton robbers themselves at that time presently became solid citizens (3 Nephi 6:3); and if the hardened criminals in a Lamanite prison could suddenly be “encircled about, yea every soul, by a pillar of fire . . . and . . . filled with that joy which is unspeakable and full of glory” (Helaman 5:43–44) and then go forth as missionaries to convert “the more part of the Lamanites” (Helaman 5:50) — if all such changes seem rather sudden, we have only to think of countless parallels in our own history. How long did it take millions of Germans and Italians, individually and collectively, to change completely from one state of mind to another? As a single speech could turn thousands of mild and sober citizens into ranting fanatics, so with the disappearance of the leader, dangerous men of war reverted just as quickly to well-meaning and sympathetic human beings. Does it take fifty years for great

nations to change from fast friendship to bitter enmity? Twenty-four hours is enough.

The Law of the Judgment

The Book of Mormon does not leave us to draw our own conclusions from all this, even though those conclusions are rather obvious. By precept as well as example the book keeps hammering away at the great lesson summed up by Mormon and Moroni as they look back over the course of Nephite history before closing and sealing the record and sorrowfully asking: "Where did we go wrong?" Hear the magnificent words of Mormon: "For behold, the same that judgeth rashly shall be judged rashly again; for according to his works shall his wages be; therefore, he that smiteth shall be smitten again, of the Lord. Behold what the scripture says—man shall not smite, neither shall he judge; for judgment is mine, saith the Lord, and vengeance is mine also, and I will repay" (Mormon 8:19–20). "See that ye do not judge wrongfully; for with that same judgment which ye judge ye shall also be judged" (Moroni 7:18).

Our own dispensation opens with the same ringing declaration that closed the book of Nephite history: "The Lord shall come to recompense unto every man according to his work, and measure to every man according to the measure which he has measured to his fellow man, . . . that man should not counsel his fellow man, neither trust in the arm of flesh" (D&C 1:10, 19).

The opposite of judgment, vengeance, and the arm of flesh is charity, and Mormon and Moroni both end up with an impassioned plea for charity. Mormon, who had seen nothing all his life but "a continual scene of wickedness and abominations" (Mormon 2:18), has a great yearning for peace and rest (Moroni 7:3–4), but he is convinced that unregenerate men are not capable either of receiving or giving good of themselves (Moroni 7:10), and must remain as nothing until they have charity, "the pure love of Christ"

(Moroni 7:44–47). He gives an ancient definition of charity (the same one Paul gives)—for charity there is no book-keeping, no *quid pro quo*, no deals, interests, bargaining, or ulterior motives; charity gives to those who do not deserve and expects nothing in return; it is the love God has for us, and the love we have for little children, of whom we expect nothing but for whom we would give everything. By the Law of the Harvest, none of us can expect salvation, for “all men that are in a state of nature, . . . a carnal state [and] . . . have gone contrary to the nature of God,” and if they were to be restored to what they deserve would receive “evil for evil, or carnal for carnal, or devilish for devilish” (Alma 41:11, 13). “Therefore, my son,” says Alma in a surprising conclusion, “see that you are merciful unto your brethren” (Alma 41:14). That is our only chance, for if God did not have mercy none of us would ever return to his presence, for we are all “in the grasp of justice” from which only “the plan of mercy” can save us (Alma 42:14–15). But God does have mercy, and has declared that we can have a claim on it to that exact degree to which we have shown charity towards our fellow man. Man cannot be righteous before God, his wisdom is foolishness with God (1 Corinthians 1:25), his intelligence is laughable even to himself, his courage is highly conditioned and subject to change without notice, he can be virtuous and abstemious only in the absence of temptation (2 Nephi 4:27), in short “a man being evil cannot do that which is good; neither will he give a good gift” (Moroni 7:10).

What can man do, then, that will be to his credit? He can do two good things, according to Alma and all the other Book of Mormon prophets: he can have mercy, and he can repent—that is the theme of Alma’s great discourse to his wayward son who questions the justice of God in punishing men (Alma 42). And charity to be charity must be “to all men,” especially to those evil people who hate us, “for if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not

even the publicans do the same?" (Matthew 5:46). Nor should we demand or expect charity in return: "If they have not charity it mattereth not unto thee, thou hast been faithful" (Ether 12:37). Still, we might say that the Law of the Harvest wins after all, since we must have and give charity to receive it.

We find, then, in the Book of Mormon, that the Lamanites are sometimes better than the Nephites and sometimes worse, that good people can become bad with astonishing speed (a "fall" is usually a rather sudden affair), and bad people can just as suddenly become good—the instant that the wicked Alma called upon Jesus he became a new man, "born of God" (Alma 36:18–23). Thus we learn by precept and example the folly of trying to judge our fellow man. Of one thing we can be sure, however—the good people never fight the bad people; they never fight anybody: "It is by the wicked that the wicked are punished; for it is the wicked that stir up the hearts of the children of men unto bloodshed" (Mormon 4:5). We are apt to forget when we read about the heroic resistance of the Nephites to the overwhelming Lamanite power and the noble deeds of the 2,000 youths during the long war, that the gallant Nephites had brought the war upon themselves and were being punished by God for their sins. Surveying conditions throughout the entire land on the eve of that war, which he knew was coming, Alma was "exceedingly sorrowful" at the wickedness and hardheartedness of the people everywhere, who refused all counsel. And so he and his sons worked like beavers to do what good they could to stave off the increasing violence and cynicism that were leading the Nephites right into a major conflict (Alma 35:15–16). Whenever Nephites and Lamanites collide it is because they are both bad. Being good or bad, therefore, does not consist in being on one side or the other—that was the illusion of Nephites and Lamanites alike in the day of their wickedness, when each side sought to put off its sins on the heads

of the other. One did not have to be a Nephite or a Lamanite, however, in order to be wicked or righteous: every man and woman who ever lived has been capable of doing right and wrong no matter when or where he or she lived.

Free agency, according to the Book of Mormon, belongs to everybody. Again it is Mormon who reminds us of this: "For behold, my brethren, it is given unto you to judge, that ye may know good from evil; and the way to judge is as plain, that ye may know with a perfect knowledge, as the daylight is from the dark night. For behold, the Spirit of Christ is given to *every* man, that he may know good from evil; wherefore, I show unto you the way to judge" (Moroni 7:15–16). At last man is allowed to judge – himself! This free agency was given to us in the preexistence as a basic principle of the plan of life; no mortal can give it to another or take it away from another: "Whosoever perisheth, perisheth unto himself," said Samuel the Lamanite to the benighted Nephites – apparently their living under a bad government deprived none of them of free agency – "and whosoever doeth iniquity, doeth it unto himself; for behold, ye are free; ye are permitted to act for yourselves; for behold, God hath given unto you a knowledge and he hath made you free. He hath given unto you that ye might know good from evil, and he hath given unto you that ye might choose life or death; and ye can do good and be restored unto that which is good . . . or ye can do evil, and have that which is evil restored unto you" (Helaman 14:30–31). This is an absolute law and operates regardless of the type of society in which one lives (Alma 41:7–8, 42:7, 26–28). It is true that some environments favor virtue as others do sin, that "an unrighteous king doth pervert the ways of all righteousness" (Mosiah 29:23), and sometimes "the voice of the people doth choose iniquity" (Mosiah 29:27), but that is no excuse for an individual; he is not thereby deprived of his knowledge of good and evil or his free agency: in a telling passage Alma reports how "because of

the exceedingly great length of the war . . . many had become hardened . . . and many were softened because of their afflictions" (Alma 62:41). The same cause produced a hardening in the one case and a softening in the other— who could blame the war for his bad behavior? No person or thing can force another to sin, for a sin is only a sin to that degree to which one participates of his own free will.

But if all have free agency in the Book of Mormon, all do not have civil liberties. The Zoramites, as we have seen, had a thought-police, "therefore they found out privily the minds of all the people," and forthwith deported "those who were in favor of the words . . . spoken by Alma" (Alma 35:5–6). Amulon, as a vassal ruler under the supreme king of the Lamanites, kept a close watch on the Nephites under his authority, "that whosoever should be found calling upon God should be put to death" (Mosiah 24:11). The descendants of this Amulon, "those rulers who were the remnant of the children of Amulon" (Alma 25:7), "having usurped the power and authority over the Lamanites, caused that many of the Lamanites should perish by fire because of their belief" (Alma 25:5), that is, when they began to embrace the teachings of the missionaries and prophets (Alma 25:6). Just before the birth of Christ, the unbelieving majority of the Nephites planned a coup and set a day on which "all those who believed in those traditions [of the coming of the Messiah] should be put to death" (3 Nephi 1:9). This was illegal, of course, but then it was also illegal among the Nephites to put any individual to death "save their condemnation was signed by the governor of the land," a rule which the clever lawyers tried with some success to evade (3 Nephi 6:22–26). It was also the lawyers who tried to get a death-sentence against Nephi the son of Helaman for speaking against them and the laws (Helaman 8–9). He was saved because some ordinary Nephites still retained some sense of fair play (Helaman 8:7). Civil rights have never been a strong point with kings, of

course, and Abinadi was burned alive for preaching what was displeasing to King Noah and his court.

By contrast, among the righteous Nephites, Korihor was allowed to speak out freely against the religion and practices of the people, and though he was an embarrassment to local authorities, he was never kept in prison nor tried nor sentenced for his preaching, for "there was no law against a man's belief" (Alma 30:6, 11). One could be punished only for specific crimes, and wrong belief was not a crime punishable by man: "If a man desired to serve God, it was his privilege," not a duty imposed by law, and if he was an atheist "there was no law to punish him" (Alma 30:9). This was more than a sense of fair play, the Nephites being convinced that "it was strictly contrary to the commands of God that there should be a law which should bring men onto unequal grounds" (Alma 30:7). This explains why Korihor was not only free to believe what he wanted, but to teach wherever he chose, for to muzzle him would put him "onto unequal grounds" with other preachers, right or wrong. In short, the Nephites shared the opinion of Joseph Smith, who said in the King Follett Discourse: "Every man has a natural, and, in our country, a constitutional right to be a false prophet, as well as a true prophet."³

To guarantee such liberty, the Nephites passed and enforced laws. "King Mosiah sent a proclamation . . . that there should not any unbeliever persecute any of those who belonged to the church of God" (Mosiah 27:2). This did not give the church unfair advantage, for at the same time there was "a strict law among the people of the church, that there should not any man, belonging to the church, arise and persecute those that did not belong to the church" (Alma 1:21). Among the Nephites it was also "against the law . . . that there should be any slaves among them" (Alma 27:9). The law of Mosiah was the organic law of the land (Alma 1:14; 11:1; Helaman 4:22), and Mosiah had laid down its fundamental concept at his inauguration: "I desire that

this inequality should be no more in this land, . . . but I desire that this land be a land of liberty, and every man may enjoy his rights and privileges alike" (Mosiah 29:32). Mosiah realized that liberty and equality must go together. Even a king of the Lamanites protected by law and where necessary by the application of force the right of Ammon and other Nephite missionaries to preach freely among his people (Alma 32:1–2).

Some have felt that the attempt of the state to implement the ideas of liberty and equality by passing and enforcing laws repugnant to a majority or minority, i.e., laws restraining persecution, discrimination, slavery, and all violence whatever, is an infringement of free agency. But plainly the Nephites did not think so. As we have seen, they believed that no one was ever without his free agency: one can sin or do unrighteously under any form of government whatever; indeed, the *worse* the government the better the test: after all, we are all being tried and tested on this earth "under the rule of Belial" himself, "the prince of this world"; but since no one can ever make us sin or do right, our free agency is never in the slightest danger. But free institutions and civil liberties are, as history shows, in constant danger. They are even attacked by those who would justify their actions as a defense of free agency, and insist that artificial barriers erected by law to protect the rights of unpopular and weak minorities are an attempt to limit that agency.

How far can men go in "counselling" their fellow-men? God can give life and he can take it, he can judge and he can punish, he can smite the blasphemer and the unbeliever, he can heal and bless at will, he can forgive or condemn whom he will, he can curse and he can segregate, and he can put a mark on whom he pleases, and be avenged on his enemies—all of which we learn from the Book of Mormon. But *men* may *not* do these things; God has reserved judgment and punishment for himself and pro-

nounced terrible penalties on any man who shall presume to exercise those high offices. In punishing Cain he pronounced seven-fold vengeance upon any mortal who should presume to contribute to that punishment (Genesis 4:15). When the Nephites decided to "avenge themselves of the blood of their brethren," the voice of the Lord pronounced their doom in awful wrath as it came to Mormon, "saying: Vengeance is mine, and I will repay" (Mormon 3:14–15). He punishes the wicked even in this life, but does not enlist the aid of the righteous in that unpleasant task, for "it is by the wicked that the wicked are punished" (Mormon 4:5). The closing verses of the Book of Mormon remind us that the Lord alone exercises power and judgment, or, in the words of Nephi, "the keeper of the gate is the Holy One of Israel; and he employeth *no servant* there, . . . for he cannot be deceived, for the Lord God is his name" (2 Nephi 9:41). When Korihor by his vicious and subversive teachings sinned grievously against God, Alma left it entirely up to God to punish him, and it was not the Nephites but the wicked and intolerant Zoramites who put him to death by mob action (Alma 30:59). As for the Nephites, whenever they became wicked they would also become intolerant and "scornful, one towards another, and they began to persecute those that did not believe according to their own will and pleasure" (Alma 4:8). The Book of Mormon offers striking illustrations of the psychological principle that impatience with the wickedness of others (even when it is real wickedness and not merely imagined) is a sure measure of one's own wickedness. The Book of Mormon presents what has been called the "conspiratorial interpretation of history." People who accept such an interpretation are prone to set up their own counter-conspiracies to check the evil ones. But that is exactly what the Book of Mormon forbids above all things, since, as it constantly reminds us, God alone knows the hearts of men and God alone will repay.

Nephite Disease: The Danger Signs

When a person suffering from diabetes consults a doctor, the doctor does not prescribe a treatment for cancer, even though cancer is today considered *by far the more dangerous disease*. What we read about in the Book of Mormon is the “Nephite Disease” – and we have it! We should be glad that we do not have the much worse diseases that infect some other societies, and that there is greater hope for us. But diabetes if neglected can kill one just as dead as cancer – after all, the Nephites were terminated. We can be most grateful, therefore, regardless of how sick others may be, that God in the Book of Mormon has diagnosed our sickness for our special benefit, and prescribed a cure for us. It is into our hands that the Book of Mormon has been placed: after more than a century, many people still do not know of its existence. Plainly it is meant for us, as it reminds us many times; it is the story of what happened to the Nephites – and we are the Nephites: “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). There it is in a nutshell: it is the fate of the Nephites, not of the Lamanites, Greeks, or Chinese, that concerns us; and that doom was brought on them by pride which in turn was engendered by the riches of the earth.

There are four portentous danger-signals in the Book of Mormon, three internal and one external. Internal and external go hand in hand; in the brief but ample exposition on cold war in the 35th chapter of Alma we see how the growing corruption in all the cities as “the hearts of the people began to wax hard” (Alma 35:15) was accompanied by steady deterioration of relations with the Lamanites and mounting danger on all the frontiers. Alma and Moroni were always convinced that the internal ills were the really dangerous ones, and that without them there would be no external threat whatever – “they shall have no power over thy seed except they shall rebel against me also” (1 Nephi

2:23). The external threat is of course the Lamanites; the internal danger signals are (1) the accumulation of wealth, (2) the appearance on the scene of ambitious men, and (3) the presence in the society of “secret combinations to get power and gain.” Let us consider these in order.

1. Wealth: A Fringe Benefit, Not a Goal

Wealth as such is not described as an evil in the Book of Mormon; indeed, prosperity is depicted as the normal reward of righteousness. Many have asked why God would consistently reward the virtues of the Nephites with a prosperity which almost infallibly destroyed that virtue. The answer is in the “almost” – there is no paradox here; wealth need not be destructive. A person in exuberant health is certainly more likely to be tempted of the flesh than one suffering from a dire disease. And yet exuberant good health is a reward of right living. The temptations of health and the temptations of wealth are real, to be sure, but they are *not* irresistible, and they *are* necessary to test mankind in this life of probation.

The Book of Mormon starts out with Lehi in Jerusalem, a very rich and also a very righteous man – which shows us that wealth is not in itself an evil. But almost immediately Lehi is called upon to choose between his love of righteousness and his comfortable circumstances by leaving all his precious things behind him and taking to the desert. His elder sons think this is simply insane, that they are being led by “a visionary man . . . to leave . . . their gold, and their silver, and their precious things, to perish in the wilderness . . . because of the foolish imaginations of his heart” (1 Nephi 2:11). The difference between Lehi and his sons was not one of wealth but of attitude to wealth; the old man did not set his heart on the stuff and was willing to give it up, but the boys were very bitter: “Behold, these many years we have suffered in the wilderness, which time we might have enjoyed our possessions, . . . yea, and we

might have been happy" (1 Nephi 17:21). That is the situation throughout the Book of Mormon where prosperity wears a double face.

The righteous can be entrusted with unlimited wealth because *they do not put their hearts upon it*. To his highly prosperous subjects King Benjamin announced, "I . . . have not sought gold nor silver nor any manner of riches of you" (Mosiah 2:12). And his even more prosperous son was never guilty of "seeking for gain, yea, for that lucre which doth corrupt the soul" (Mosiah 29:40). Riches are to be accepted gratefully as a fringe benefit, in the Book of Mormon, but never to be the object of our search: "But the laborer in Zion shall labor for Zion; for if they labor for money they shall perish" (2 Nephi 26:31). The condemnation of the Nephites in the days of wickedness and vengeance is ever that "they have set their hearts upon their riches." "Ye are cursed because of your riches," says Samuel the Lamanite, "and also are your riches cursed *because ye have set your hearts upon them*" (Helaman 13:20–21; italics added). At the very beginning Nephi declares, "But wo unto the rich; . . . their hearts are upon their treasures; wherefore, their treasure is their God" (2 Nephi 9:30). And another Nephi at the time of Christ repeats the refrain: "O, how could you have forgotten your God in the very day that he has delivered you? . . . Ye have set your hearts upon the riches and the vain things of this world" (Helaman 7:20–21).

Why should we labor this unpleasant point? Because the Book of Mormon labors it, for our special benefit. Wealth is a jealous master who will not be served halfheartedly and will suffer no rival—not even God: "Their treasure is their God" (2 Nephi 9:20). "*Ye cannot serve God and Mammon*" (Matthew 6:24; italics added). In return for unquestioning obedience, wealth promises security, power, position, and honors, in fact anything in this world. Above all, the Nephites, like the Romans, saw in it a mark of

superiority and would do anything to get hold of it, for to them "money answereth all things" (Ecclesiastes 10:19). Even the people of the church when they "began to wax proud, because of their exceeding riches" (Alma 4:6) became fiercely competitive, full of "envyings, and strife, and malice, and persecutions, and pride" (Alma 4:9). "Ye do always remember your riches," cried Samuel, ". . . unto great swelling, envyings, strifes, malice, persecutions and murders, and all manner of iniquities" (Helaman 13:22). Along with this, of course, everyone dresses in the height of fashion, the main point being always that the proper clothes are expensive — the expression "costly apparel" occurs fourteen times in the Book of Mormon. The more important wealth is, the less important it is how one gets it; in one of many enlightening passages we are told how the Lamanites upon adopting Nephite business methods became corrupt as a matter of course, almost as if it were inevitable: "They taught them that . . . they might write one to another. And thus the Lamanites began to increase in riches, and began to trade one with another and wax great, and began to be a cunning and a wise people, . . . delighting in all manner of wickedness and plunder, except it were among their own brethren" (Mosiah 24:6–7). At least they retained a spark of ethics.

Wealth and Inequality. The most calamitous effect of wealth, according to the Book of Mormon, is the inequality it begets in any society. Right at the beginning Jacob sounds the warning: "Many of you have begun to search for . . . precious ores, in the which this . . . land of promise . . . doth abound most plentifully. And the hand of providence hath smiled upon you most pleasingly, . . . and because some of you have obtained more abundantly than that of your brethren ye are lifted up in the pride of your hearts. . . . Do ye not suppose that such things are abominable unto him who created all flesh? And the one being is as precious in his sight as the other" (Jacob 2:12–13, 21).

Jacob then denounces the “grosser crime” of immorality, which in the Book of Mormon as in secular history is the infallible attendant on the pride of wealth. Inequality is not only the result of wealth-seeking: it is sometimes actually its purpose: “They began to seek to get gain *that they might* be lifted up one above another” (Helaman 6:17).

With great insight the Book of Mormon shows us how wealth-oriented societies sought moral justification in a display of religious piety, like the Zoramites, “a wicked and a perverse people; . . . their hearts were set upon gold, and upon silver, and upon all manner of fine goods. . . . Their hearts are set upon them, and yet they cry unto thee and say—We thank thee, O God, for we are a chosen people unto thee” (Alma 31:24, 28). It would even seem that church people are especially susceptible to the Nephite disease; none reverence “precious things” more ardently than the priests, and yet even the people of the true church share the weakness: “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” (Alma 4:8). An aggressive and self-righteous bigotry was the best defense against uneasy consciences.

Accordingly, as Samuel the Lamanite caustically observes, any professional toady who could not only justify but sanctify the ways of the affluent Nephites could name his own price, “because he speaketh flattering words unto you, and he saith that all is well” (Helaman 13:28). An army of Nephite lawyers made everything legal and respectable and in the process laid “the foundation of the destruction of this people” (Alma 10:27). But who would be such a churl as to speak of robbing the poor of money that went to adorning the house of God? (Mormon 8:37, 39). For that matter, who persecutes the poor? Nobody in our time goes

out of his way to oppress the poor—as Mormon puts it, you simply suffer the poor “to pass by you, and notice them not” (Mormon 8:39). They just don’t exist. The guilty conscience, or rather, the guilty subconscious, is hypersensitive to criticism in the Book of Mormon, and reacts vigorously to it, denouncing the critic as “a false prophet . . . a sinner, and of the devil,” and taking immediate measures in “all manner of ways to destroy him” (Helaman 13:26). The great Nephi when he dared criticize the lawyers was in danger of his life at their hands and was only saved because there were a few common people who still preserved a lingering sense of justice and fair play (Helaman 8–9). And Samuel’s blast against the curse of riches was met by a “self-righteous” counter-blast: “Take this fellow and bind him, for behold he hath a devil” (Helaman 16:6).

Champions of Equality. King Benjamin was a stickler for equality in word and deed. He labored with his own hands to make it clear that his people should “labor to serve one another” (Mosiah 2:14, 18). He rebuked the self-made: “Can ye say aught of yourselves? I answer you, Nay. . . . And I, . . . whom ye call your king, am no better than ye yourselves are” (Mosiah 2:25–26). He insisted that anyone who withheld his substance from the needy, no matter how improvident and deserving of their fate they might be, “hath great cause to repent” (Mosiah 4:16–18), explaining his position in ringing words: “For behold, are we not all beggars?” (Mosiah 4:19). His son Mosiah wrote equality into the constitution, “that every man should have an equal chance throughout all the land” (Mosiah 29:38). “I desire,” said the king, “that this inequality should be no more in this land . . . of liberty, and every man may enjoy his rights and privileges alike” (Mosiah 29:32). This does not mean that some should support others in idleness, “but that the burden should come upon all the people, that every man might bear his part” (Mosiah 29:34). This was in conform-

ance with Benjamin's policy of taxation: "I would that ye should [this is a royal imperative] impart of your substance to the poor, every man *according to that which he hath*, . . . administering to their relief, both spiritually and temporally, *according to their wants*" (Mosiah 4:26). In the same spirit, King Limhi, during an emergency, "commanded that every man should impart to the support of the widows and their children, that they might not perish with hunger" (Mosiah 21:17).

Here taxation appears as a means of implementing the principle of equality. Whenever taxation is denounced in the Book of Mormon, it is always because the taxpayer uses the funds not to help others but for his own aggrandizement. Thus Benjamin says that he has labored for his own support so that nobody will have to pay taxes to support *him* (Mosiah 2:14). The people of Limhi suffered under a punitive tax imposed by their conquerors, a vicious tax because it was designed to give the payers no benefit whatever, direct or indirect (Mosiah 7:15). King Noah levied a 20 percent tax, which was the normal tax in ancient times (e.g., in Egypt and Greece), and was by no means ruinous; the trouble was that instead of spreading it around, Noah spent every penny of the tax on himself and his court (Mosiah 11:4–6). The same applies to Riplakish the Jaredite, who saw to it that all the wealth of the kingdom flowed in one direction only, until "the people did rise up in rebellion" and drove him out (Ether 10:5–8).

When the constitution of Mosiah was threatened by the king-men, Moroni came to the rescue and "put an end to the stubbornness and the pride of those people who professed the blood of nobility; but they were brought down to humble themselves like unto their brethren" (Alma 51:21). This drastic enforcement of equality was justified by an extreme national emergency; but both Alma and Moroni had pointed out to the people on occasion that the worst danger their society had to fear was inequality. It was in-

equality that had broken up the church, according to Alma: "And . . . Alma saw the wickedness of the church . . . bringing on the destruction of the people. Yea, he saw great inequality among the people, . . . and seeing all their inequality, began to be very sorrowful" (Alma 4:11–12, 15). Commenting on the war that followed, Alma concluded: "Thus we see how great the inequality of man is because of sin and transgression, and the power of the devil" (Alma 28:13). Four hundred years later the religious and civil society was again broken up when the people "had become exceedingly rich, . . . and from that time forth they did have their goods and their substance no more common among them. And they began to be divided into classes" (4 Nephi 1:23–26). It was the beginning of the end.

2. Ambitious People

There are no -isms in the Book of Mormon—they are an expression of our modern passion for classifying. But there are certain irreducible constants that get down as it were to the bedrock of history—there are things and there are people. Put them together and you get prosperity: the word "prosperity" occurs no fewer than 75 times in the Book of Mormon, "riches" 46 times, and "gain" 43 times, "treasures" and "precious things" each 23 times, and "money" 14 times. These words regularly appear in company with what may be called their derivatives, indicating less tangible qualities: "Pride" 63 times, "power" 44 times, the "poor" 32 times. It needs no electronic computer to tell us in what sense these words are to be interpreted by us; even the casual reader of the Book of Mormon cannot miss the point, both because it is explicitly pointed out to him and because the significant stock situations are repeated over and over again for our benefit.

The Book of Mormon is greatly concerned with the issue of power: the word "power" occurs over 100 times in a good sense—when it refers to the power of God, which is

available to men through righteous living, and over 40 times in a bad sense, usually in the common formula "power and gain," when it refers to the power which men seek for themselves and which is available through the possession of wealth. In the ups and downs of Nephite history, the prologue to disaster is always the accumulation of wealth, but the evil genius of the plot is always an ambitious and driving individual. In this history the infallible test for distinguishing good leaders from bad is the touchstone of ambition. The greatest king, chief judge, high-priest, and general of the Nephites each retired and yielded up his great powers to others when he felt that his own maximum usefulness was past. Ambitious men do not give up power — they seek it: Laman sought the kingship that Nephi refused, and generations of Jaredites fought and bled to seize the throne that all the righteous sons of the Brother of Jared had wisely turned down.

It is largely the doings of ambitious seekers after power and gain which provide the dramatic and tragic interest of the Book of Mormon. We have already looked in on the careers of some of these. Some, like the ancient Sophists, had an intellectual appeal, and aspired to guide the faith and thinking of the nation to their own glory and renown: such were Sherem, Nehor, Amlici and his school, and Korihor. Typical followers of such would be such young "smart Alocs" as Alma Jr. and the sons of Mosiah, and Alma's youngest son, Corianton. Others sought power through political manipulation and intrigue: we have already seen the deadly Amalickiah in action. What they all had in common along with a passion to be top man was "much power of speech" — a gift of words and a knack for telling people what they wanted to hear. "Flattery" and "flatter" occur 22 times in connection with their operations. The baneful activity of ambition can best be surveyed in the operations of those "secret combinations to get power and gain" which we must now consider.

3. The Secret Combinations

As the type and model of secret combinations to be avoided, the Book of Mormon gives us the Gadianton Society. Let us look at it. Gadianton history really begins with the skilled professional killer, Kishkumen. After Pahoran had foiled the attempt of the king-men to overthrow the "free government and to establish a king" (Alma 51:3–5), he was succeeded by his son Pahoran in a popular election. The defeated candidates were the new judge's brothers, and bore the good Egyptian names of Paanchi and Pacumeni. One of them conceded the election and "did unite with the voice of the people," but the other "was exceedingly wroth" at losing the election and "was about to flatter away those people [his supporters] to rise up in rebellion." Just in time he was seized, tried, and condemned to death for having "raised up in rebellion and sought to destroy the liberty of the people" (Helaman 1:6–8). His backers, however, weren't going to take that lying down, and so "they sent forth one Kishkumen," who "murdered Pahoran as he sat upon the judgment-seat" (Helaman 1:9). Then they all took an oath, following Kishkumen's instructions (for he had "the goods" on them and they could not refuse) to support Kishkumen and preserve complete secrecy regarding their operations; after which they went forth and "did mingle themselves among the people" as respectable citizens (Helaman 1:11–12).

Thus they became an underground organization, whose members' identity was "not known unto those who were at the head of the government" (Helaman 3:23). And that explains how it was possible later on, in the midst of great peace and prosperity, for the chief of state, Cezoram, and after him his son and successor, to be murdered in office in such a way that the assassins were never discovered (Helaman 6:15). It is significant that the times of great prosperity and abundance were also the times when murder and intrigue were the order of the day, "for behold, the

Lord had blessed them so long with the riches of the world that . . . 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 murder . . . that they might get gain" (Helaman 6:17). The sequence is a natural one: with easy wealth comes the feeling of superiority which makes people status-conscious; and with a feeling for status comes a desperate need to acquire the one thing that will give status; and with the recognition of the all-importance of that one thing, any scruples that may stand in the way of its acquisition are pushed aside, even murder being permissible as long as one is not found out.

Determined to "get gain" at any price, the Nephites soon learned that the quickest way to get rich with a minimum risk and the best way to avoid the inconvenience of the law was to belong to a protective society: "The more part of the Nephites . . . did unite with those bands of robbers, and did enter into their covenants and their oaths, that they would protect and preserve one another" (Helaman 6:21). With this type of insurance an individual could operate with impunity "contrary to the laws of their God," enjoying the protection and priority of another system of laws—the rules of the society or corporation (Helaman 6:23–24). This system, Helaman tells us, went right back to the beginning of the race, and took root among the Nephites at the time when they "did trample under their feet the commandments of God . . . and did build up unto themselves idols of their gold and silver" (Helaman 6:31). It was not idols, please note, but the gold and silver itself that they worshipped.

The objectives of the Gadianton society being to overthrow or gain control of the government and run things to suit themselves, in time they "did obtain the sole management of the government, insomuch that they did . . . turn their backs upon the poor and the meek" (Helaman 6:39).

None of Mosiah's or Limhi's sentimental social legislation for them! The one thing the Gadianton administration respected was money, and their policy was "to rule and do according to their wills, that they might get gain and glory of the world," naturally "letting the guilty and the wicked go unpunished because of their money" (Helaman 7:5). To operate with impunity they needed public support: "Ye have united yourselves unto . . . that secret band . . . established by Gadianton!" cries Nephi to his countrymen. "Yea, wo shall come unto you because of that pride which ye have suffered to enter your hearts, which has lifted you up beyond that which is good because of your exceedingly great riches!" (Helaman 7:25–26; cf. D&C 38:39).

But wealth is a comparative thing, being pure quantity and nothing else, and the rivalry and jealousy among the elite and between various groups organized to grab the biggest share of the take became terrific, "insomuch that there were wars throughout all the land among all the people of Nephi" (Helaman 11:1). Then it was that Nephi called for a famine and got it (Helaman 11:4–5). The famine brought the people to their senses, and in the poverty of hard times the Gadianton band simply disappeared, as "the more part of the people, both the Nephites and the Lamanites," began to behave themselves (Helaman 11:10, 21). Then came more prosperity, and gradually small groups of the revived Gadianton order began to make raids on the country from hiding-places in the mountains, assisted by tip-offs from Nephite dissenters (Helaman 11:24–25). This sort of thing had a romantic and adventurous appeal to the younger generation of Nephites who went off and joined up with the bands in large numbers (3 Nephi 1:27–29). Finally the bands by uniting were strong enough to lay waste Nephite cities and defy whole armies until "the Nephites were threatened with utter destruction" (3 Nephi 2:11–13), not because of the genius of the Gadiantons but "because of the wickedness of the people of Nephi"

(3 Nephi 2:18). The Gadianton campaign now took the form of a crusade, with the ancient and honorable society (3 Nephi 3:9), fighting, as it maintained, only to recover that rightful control of the government which had been wickedly denied it (3 Nephi 3:10). In a high-minded letter addressed to the Nephite chief of state, Giddianhi, the "governor of the society of Gadianton," testified to its lofty ideals and the high moral character of its leaders, its sense of fair play (3 Nephi 3:2-3), its magnanimity (3 Nephi 3:5), the indomitable courage of its members (3 Nephi 3:4), and the grievous wrongs they had suffered, ending up with the characteristically paranoid charge that all the present trouble was "because of *your* wickedness in retaining from them their rights of government" (3 Nephi 3:10).

Lachoneus, the Nephite governor, was not intimidated. He ordered the evacuation of vast tracts of land, which the Gadiantons proceeded to occupy by massive infiltration. But since they were a predatory order and found no loot but only "black earth," they were finally forced into open battle (3 Nephi 4:1-4). Thoroughly beaten in spite of their skillful psychological devices for inspiring terror (3 Nephi 4:7-9), and cut off in their retreats (3 Nephi 4:16-26), the band again became "extinct" as it had been in the days of the younger Nephi (Helaman 11:10). And by what means were they wiped out? That is the most surprising thing of all. The whole gang was in time rounded up and imprisoned, and there the people of Lachoneus "did cause the word of God to be preached unto them; and as many as would repent of their sins and enter into a covenant that they would murder no more were set at liberty" (3 Nephi 5:4) and rehabilitated by being given "lands, according to their numbers, that they might have, with their labors, wherewith to subsist upon" (3 Nephi 6:3). Those who refused to change their ways, and "who did still continue to have those secret murders in their hearts," and betrayed their intentions by "breathing out threatenings against their

brethren were condemned and punished according to the law" (3 Nephi 5:5).

Fifty years earlier the Lamanites had "utterly destroyed" the Gadianton robbers from their lands by the same method: "The Lamanites did hunt the band of robbers of Gadianton; and they did preach the word of God among the more wicked part of them, insomuch that this band . . . was utterly destroyed" (Helaman 6:37). "If that sounds a little too idealistic," we once wrote, commenting on this, "we must remember that we are dealing here not with a 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 to 'partake of their spoils' (Helaman 6:38)."⁴

The wave of prosperity that followed Lachoneus's victory over the Gadiantons brought "a great inequality in all the land, insomuch that the church began to be broken up" (3 Nephi 6:14). Finally various groups of king-men, ambitious local officials, priests, judges, lawyers, and great families ("kindreds," 3 Nephi 6:27) "did enter into a covenant one with another" and "did combine against the people of the Lord" in such a strong coalition that working together they were able "to deliver those who were guilty of murder . . . [and] set at defiance the law and rights of their country" (3 Nephi 6:27–30). It was the usual elements combined with the usual objectives—overthrow or seizure of the government and silencing "the voice of the people." This time the central government was indeed overthrown, for good. But when the followers of the ambitious Jacob then declared him king, the other groups resented it and regretted his baneful success, being "united in the hatred of those who had entered into a covenant to destroy the

government" (3 Nephi 7:11). Too late they regretted their folly in removing a strong central government in the interests of unlimited ambition. So Jacob and his people planned to move out of the country and build up strength for a comeback (3 Nephi 7:12). At this point the great earthquake changed everything.

Two hundred years later the old evil raised its head again as the people, having "become exceedingly rich, . . . began to be divided into classes" (4 Nephi 1:23–26), built elegant churches (4 Nephi 1:26, 41), and "began again to build up the secret oaths and combinations of Gadianton" (4 Nephi 1:42). Again "the robbers of Gadianton did spread over all the face of the land" (4 Nephi 1:46), while business boomed as never before—"and gold and silver did they lay up in store in abundance, and did traffic in all manner of traffic" (4 Nephi 1:46). But the Gadiantons were tops at the grabbing game, and before long everybody started hiding up his possessions for security (Mormon 1:18). In vain—nothing could secure their valuables from gravitating into the competent hands of the society. In the end the Nephites had to settle for formal treaties with the Gadiantons as an independent power, sharing their lands with them on a permanent basis (Mormon 2:28–29).

The Jaredite Experience

These secret societies were already old in the time of the Jaredites, who learned about them from the records they brought with them, which told "them of old . . . secret plans [for getting] kingdoms and great glory" (Ether 8:9). It was a pact "to help such as sought power to gain power" (Ether 8:16). When the Jaredite Akish sought to seize the throne and administered the oath to his supporters with fair promises, it was not by the devil but "by the God of heaven" that they swore (Ether 8:13–17). But God did not approve of such secret combinations, "which combination is most abominable and wicked above all, in the sight of

God. For the Lord worketh not in secret combinations, neither doth he will that man should shed blood, but in all things hath forbidden it from the beginning of man" (Ether 8:18–19). Every man may covenant, with God, and may keep or break his covenant, with God alone to judge and punish him. But men may never covenant with each other: "Swear not at all, . . . by heaven . . . nor by the earth" (3 Nephi 12:33–37). It was these secret combinations, Moroni informs us, that destroyed both the Nephites and the Jaredites, and will eventually destroy those who follow them in the land of promise unless they "awake to a sense of your awful situation" (Ether 8:24), that is, the situation which allows the secret combinations to arise and flourish: the societies themselves are the symptom, not the disease.

Years later Heth "began to embrace the secret plans again of old" (Ether 9:26). This led to a series of troubles and crimes that ended only with a terrible famine and plague of serpents. After that came more prosperity and the resumption of the "power and gain" game, with king Shez's son Shez being killed by a robber "because of his exceeding riches" (Ether 10:3). The general prosperity increased, and "there began to be robbers, . . . and they adopted the old plans . . . and sought again to destroy the kingdom" (Ether 10:33). The result was "wars and contentions, famine, pestilence, great destruction," as the various rival combinations spread havoc in murderous gang-war among themselves. But everybody was playing the game – that is what makes it so tragic – and "the prophets mourned and withdrew" (Ether 11:13). A popular uprising against "that secret combination which was built up to get power and gain" (Ether 11:15) put one Moron on the throne, and he was followed by the mighty Coriantumr, who fought plots against himself with the skill of an expert, a master at fighting fire with fire and meeting violence with violence (Ether 13:15–18). The outcome of this was the dissolution of all semblance of organized government, with "every man

with his band fighting for that which he desired" (Ether 13:2–5).

But it was the next step downward that achieved the ultimate in social dissolution. The end of the road is the family shelter, with each family entirely preoccupied with its own survival as it fends off all the neighbors and guards its own supplies: "Wherefore every man did cleave unto that which was his own, with his hands, and would not borrow neither would he lend; and every man kept the hilt of his sword in his right hand, in the defense of his property and his own life and of his wives and children" (Ether 14:2). In the final polarization of the society between Shiz and Coriantumr, both sides went down to extinction enjoying alike the assistance and the opposition of the "secret combinations" (Ether 14:8).

"Gadantonism"

Let us summarize the essential nature of what some have called "Gadantonism":

Objectives. (1) "Power and gain," the two being interactive: power wins gain and gain wins power for whoever has either. (2) Control or overthrow of the government; using political office "to rule and do according to their wills, that they might get gain and glory" (Helaman 7:5).

Methods. (1) Secret agreements between individuals and groups. The Gadantons are essentially an underground movement. (2) Assassination. These two things, "secret combinations" and "that men should shed blood," have been forbidden by God "in all things . . . from the beginning of man" (Ether 8:19). (3) "Payola": "Akish did offer them money" (Ether 9:11); "letting the guilty . . . go unpunished because of their money" (Helaman 7:5). (4) Skillful propaganda and public relations: "flattering words." (5) The hate campaign: a steady output of charges, accusations, and rumors, in the manner of Amalickiah: Accuse – always accuse. Eagerness to accuse is from the devil, as Brigham

Young often taught.⁵ (6) Intimidation: “breathing out many threatenings,” operating “by the hand of secrecy,” wearing fearsome disguises (3 Nephi 4:7). (7) Showmanship, e.g., the picturesque uniforms and romantic appeal to the young (3 Nephi 1:29). (8) Tight control of members – death penalty for betrayal (Ether 8:14; Helaman 1:11).

Attitude. (1) The Gadiantons were totally partisan, the laws and interests of the combination taking priority over all other laws and interests. (2) All were ambitious, hence the labor for power and gain: Cain is the type and model. (3) The combinations were highly competitive, feuding fiercely among themselves. (4) They sought to project a noble image, with much talk of rights and wrongs, high courage and upright character (the letter to Lachoneus). (5) They professed piety and religion, swearing their forbidden oaths not by the demons but “by the God of heaven” (Ether 8:14), “by their everlasting Maker” (Helaman 1:11). (6) They were paranoid, always attributing their troubles to the wickedness of others; never the aggressors, they are constantly seeking to avenge their wrongs. Vengeance is their watchword.

Ecology. (1) They flourish best in an affluent business society, and wither in times of poverty. (2) They crystalize around ambitious individuals. (3) They readily coalesce with king-men, would-be nobility, great families, ambitious local officials, and rapacious Lamanite overlords, i.e., with all who are opposed to popular government among the Nephites. (4) They have destroyed every civilization in the New World in which they have been able to thrive. (5) They cannot thrive or even survive without the acceptance and encouragement of the society in general. Being predatory and non-productive, i.e., parasites, they must have a complacent society to host and support them. Such a society is one which accepts as desirable the Gadianton goals of power and gain. (6) They can become dormant for long periods of time and then, when circumstances are favorable,

suddenly appear in full strength and vigor, their plans having been buried and preserved intact against the day of opportunity.

The Gadiantons, terrible as they were, are treated more as a symptom than as a disease: the society that has them is sick, but they are like maggots that prey only on dead tissue; they simply exploit the evil situation that gives them their opportunity. We shall refer to the cure later.