



Type: Book Chapter

Prophecy in the Book of Mormon: The Three Periods

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Source: *Since Cumorah*, 2nd ed.

Published: Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: Foundation for
Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1988

Page(s): 373–397



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Prophecy in the Book of Mormon: The Three Periods

The prophecies of the Book of Mormon belong to the three categories of past, present, and future. The *past* prophecies cover the time from the days of Lehi to the translating of the book by Joseph Smith; the *present* prophecies are those which apply to our own dispensation from the coming forth of the Book of Mormon to the present; the *future* prophecies foretell events from now until the millennium. The first and last of these divisions cannot be rigorously controlled, of course, since what happened before 1830 could have been learned by the author of the Book of Mormon from mundane sources, while what happens after today is still in the future and cannot be checked. It is the middle phase that is really impressive, telling things that we now look back on but which were still in the future when the Book of Mormon was published.

Past Prophecies

Though what we call "past prophecies" in the Book of Mormon all refer to times already past when that book was published, still those prophecies contain things that were not known to anyone at the time and have only been discovered "since Cumorah." Such a thing was the loss of precious things from the scriptures and the effect of that loss on the world, which we have discussed above. The scattering of the Jews as prophesied in the Book of Mormon

follows a pattern unfamiliar in Joseph Smith's day but being confirmed in our own. Until recently scholars have held that the "apocalypse of bliss" and the "apocalypse of woe" represented two totally different traditions; but the Book of Mormon shows how they have always gone together in a pattern of dispensations: "And never hath any of them been destroyed save it were foretold them by the prophets of the Lord" (2 Nephi 25:9). The scattering was to be not only more widespread than one supposed, embracing "all the face of the earth" even to the unknown "isles of the sea" (1 Nephi 22:3-4), but it goes on in installments, some of the migrations going back into early times and many of them being unknown to history: "And behold, there are many who are already lost from the knowledge of those who are at Jerusalem, . . . and whither they are none of us knoweth" (1 Nephi 22:4). The Dead Sea Scrolls and other documents now attest the reality of such emigrations from Jerusalem.

Lehi prophesied a total destruction for Jerusalem and a dire scattering of the people in his own time. Biblical scholars, however, always assumed that the destruction of Jerusalem was only a superficial one and that only the more important people were carried away to Babylon; it was not until the present generation that archaeological findings showed that "all, or virtually all, of the fortified towns in Judah [were] razed to the ground."¹ The prophesied fate of the Nephites before and after Christ need not detain us here, since its fulfillment is described only in the Book of Mormon itself.

"Present" Prophecies

The Book of Mormon foretells its own reception by the world. Though the critics have always maintained that Joseph Smith expected it to be a best seller and make him a lot of money, the ancient prophets knew better — they knew that they were not writing "the things which are pleasing

unto the world" (1 Nephi 6:5); and tell how "many of the Gentiles shall say: A Bible! A Bible! We have got a Bible, and there cannot be any more Bible" (2 Nephi 29:3), and refuse to believe that God can "remember one nation like unto another," and "speak the same words unto one nation like unto another" (2 Nephi 29:8). The book is to cause more than a local flurry; while it may make some sensation among the outraged gentiles, it is to go quietly and steadily forth over all the world to seek out the chosen: "And my words shall hiss forth unto the ends of the earth, for a standard unto my people, which are of the house of Israel" (2 Nephi 29:2). Its appearance is not a triumphant one at all, but only marks the first step, the very beginning, of the latter-day work: "Therefore, when ye shall receive this record ye may know that the work of the Father has commenced upon all the face of the land" (Ether 4:17). It shows "that I may set my hand again the second time to recover my people, which are of the house of Israel" (2 Nephi 29:1). It is characteristic of adventist and millennialist sects to preach a hasty and spectacular consummation of all things. Not so the Book of Mormon, whose coming forth is depicted only as the opening scene of a long and eventful drama. With it, "the work of the Father" has commenced, not ended (1 Nephi 14:17; 2 Nephi 3:13; 30:8; 3 Nephi 21:26–28; Mormon 3:17).

But it has commenced with power; not with the ruminations and counsels of men but with the intervention of angels; and not in the familiar unfolding of history, but by the exercise of special providence: "All the kindreds of the earth cannot be blessed unless he shall make bare his arm in the eyes of the nations. Wherefore, the Lord God will proceed to make bare his arm in the eyes of all the nations, in bringing about his covenants and his gospel unto those who are of the house of Israel" (1 Nephi 22:10–11). The Book of Mormon predicts the going forth and unfolding of the message and its effect in the world in terms that no one could have foreseen. Who can tell when a church is founded

what direction, form, and consequence its growth is going to take? Writing with special consideration for their own descendants, the Book of Mormon prophets are especially concerned for the future of that highly mixed people known as the Indians. In the 1820s the Indians still held most of the continent and felt themselves a match for any invader. But Mormon forewarns them that all their efforts to prevail by force of arms will be hopeless (Mormon 7:4). In the beginning Lehi prophesied that his descendants who would survive until our day should see generations of "bloodsheds, and great visitations among them" (2 Nephi 1:12), and that God would "bring other nations unto them, and . . . give unto them power, and . . . take away from them the lands of their possessions, and he will cause them to be scattered and smitten" (2 Nephi 1:11). Nephi foretold the same: "The Lord God will raise up a mighty nation among the Gentiles, yea, even upon the face of this land; and by them shall our seed be scattered" (1 Nephi 22:7). This scattering and smiting was to exceed anything the Indians had experienced before 1830: it was to be carried to the point of virtual extermination, "driven about as chaff before the wind, . . . led about by Satan, even as chaff is driven before the wind, or as a vessel . . . without anything wherewith to steer her. . . . But behold, it shall come to pass that they shall be driven and scattered by the Gentiles . . . who shall possess the land" (Mormon 5:15–20). Speaking in the present tense, Lehi sees the descendants of Laman and Lemuel "visited by sword, and by famine, and are hated, and are led according to the will and captivity of the devil" (2 Nephi 1:18). Their blessings are forfeit to their persecutors: "And behold, the Lord hath reserved their blessings, which they might have received in the land, for the Gentiles who shall possess the land" (Mormon 5:19). And with the blessings the Gentiles inherit the risk: God now requires of them what he requires of all inheritors of the promised land: "And after they have been driven and

scattered by the Gentiles, behold, then will the Lord remember the covenant . . . unto all the house of Israel. . . . And then, O ye Gentiles, how can ye stand . . . except ye shall repent and turn from your evil ways?" (Mormon 5:19–22).

The state of the world after the coming forth of the Book of Mormon and the scattering of the Indians is vividly described, right down to our own time. First we get a picture of Joseph Smith's generation, when the sacred record comes "out of the earth . . . in a day when it shall be said that miracles are done away; . . . in a day when the blood of the saints shall cry unto the Lord, because of secret combinations and the works of darkness [the persecutions of the Saints]; . . . in a day when the power of God shall be denied, and churches become defiled and be lifted up in the pride of their hearts; . . . in a day when there shall be heard of fires, and tempests, and vapors of smoke in foreign lands; and . . . wars, rumors of wars, and earthquakes in divers places; . . . in a day when there shall be great pollutions upon the face of the earth, . . . murders, and robbing, and lying, and deceivings, and whoredoms, and all manner of abominations; . . . in a day when . . . churches . . . shall say: Come unto me, and for your money you shall be forgiven of your sins" (Mormon 8:26–32).

Next we are taken to a later time relative to the one just indicated, "concerning that which must shortly come, at *that* day when these things shall come forth among you" — these are events subsequent to the time of the coming forth; the prophet helpfully informs us that he is speaking in the timeless idiom of prophecy: "Behold, I speak unto you as if ye were present, and yet ye are not. But . . . I know your doing" (Mormon 8:35). And so this is for us: "And I know that ye do [present tense] walk in the pride of your hearts; and there are none save a few only who do not lift themselves up in the pride of their hearts, unto the wearing of very fine apparel, unto envying, and strifes, and malice,

and persecutions, and all manner of iniquities" (Mormon 8:36). Here is our own fashionable, well-dressed, status-conscious, and highly competitive society. The "iniquities" with which it is charged are interesting, for instead of crime, immorality, and atheism we are told of the vices of vanity, of the intolerant and uncharitable state of mind: pride, envy, strife, malice, and persecution. These are the crimes of meanness; whereas libertines, bandits, and unbelievers have been known to be generous and humane, the people whom Mormon is addressing betray no such weakness. They are dedicated people: "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 and the needy, the sick and the afflicted" (Mormon 8:37). These people do not persecute the poor (they are too singleminded for that), but simply ignore their existence: "Ye adorn yourselves with that which hath no life, and yet suffer the hungry, and the needy . . . to pass by you, and notice them not" (Mormon 8:39).

It is important to note that these people are church builders (the unbelievers are addressed in the next chapter), and that they include the members of the true church: "O ye . . . who sell yourselves for that which will canker, why have ye polluted the holy church of God?" (Mormon 8:38). The apostate churches were already pointed out in the earlier period (Mormon 8:32–33) along with their wresting of the Bible (Mormon 8:33). After the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, moreover, there is only one "holy Church of God" (1 Nephi 14:10). The expression here, moreover, cannot refer to the primitive church, of which these latter-day Christians know nothing—they are not in a position to pollute *it*, and pollution is necessarily an inside job. And why should the true Church be any more immune to the blandishments of money and fine clothes and beautiful churches today than it was in the days of the Nephites? Unless even these times are "cut short in righteousness,"

who shall be saved? If the Book of Mormon is to be trusted, the members of the Church as well as the nonmembers need someone to “prick their hearts with the word, continually stirring them up unto repentance” (Jarom 1:12). Why should they now think that all these warnings are not meant for them, but only for the wicked outsiders? It is exactly the attitude which Nephi and Samuel the Lamanite attacked with such vigor. The Book of Mormon was given to us because it was meant for us.

But the unbelievers are bad enough in these days, and Mormon devotes his next section to them: “And now, I speak also concerning those who do not believe in Christ” (Mormon 9:1). His warning to them is, “Wait and see!” (Mormon 9:2–4). Their position is wholly untenable, scientifically or otherwise, as they will realize “when ye shall be brought to see your nakedness . . . it will kindle a flame of unquenchable fire upon you” (Mormon 9:5). That position is set forth in the Book of Mormon with superb clarity and brevity in a speech attributed to Korihor. A full generation before Bentham, Mill, Darwin, and Marx, the Book of Mormon was stating the case for naturalism, materialism, and the survival of the fittest with the greatest precision.

Modern Thinking

First of all, Korihor insisted on a strictly rational and scientific approach to all problems, anything else being but “the effect of a frenzied mind” (Alma 30:13–16); he crusaded against the tyranny of ancient traditions and primitive superstitions, which led people to believe things which just “are not so” (Alma 30:16), calling for an emancipation from “the silly traditions of their fathers” (Alma 30:31). He called for a new morality with the shedding of old inhibitions (Alma 30:17–18, 25). He called for economic liberation from priestly exploitation (Alma 30:27), demanding that all be free to “make use of that which is their own” (Alma 30:28). He preached a strict no-nonsense naturalism: “When a man

was dead, that was the end thereof" (Alma 30:18), and its corollary, which was a strict materialism: "Every man fared in this life according to the management of the creature" (Alma 30:17). From this followed a clear-cut philosophy of laissez-faire: "Therefore every man prospered according to his genius, and . . . every man conquered according to his strength," with right and wrong measured only by nature's iron rule of success and failure: "And whatsoever a man did was no crime" (Alma 30:17). It was survival of the fittest applied to human behavior, and the removal of old moral and sentimental restraints was good news to many people, "causing them to lift up their heads in their wickedness, yea, leading away many . . . to commit whoredoms" (Alma 30:18). Along with his attitude of emancipation Korihor cultivated a crusading zeal and intolerance of any opposition, which has been thoroughly characteristic of his school of thought in modern times, calling all opposition "foolish" (Alma 30:13–14), "silly" (Alma 30:31), and the evidence of frenzied and deranged minds (Alma 30:16). And while for Alma a free society was one in which anybody could think and say whatever he chose (Alma 30:7–12), for Korihor the only free society was one in which everyone thought exactly as *he* thought (Alma 30:24) — which was also the liberal gospel of Huxley, Dewey, Marx, et al.

The philosophy of Korihor, with its naturalism, materialism, and moral relativism, is the prevailing philosophy of our own day, as was foreseen in the Book of Mormon: "Yea . . . there shall be great pollutions upon the face of the earth . . . when there shall be many who will say, Do this, or do that, and it mattereth not, for the Lord will uphold such at the last day. But wo unto such, for they are in the gall of bitterness and in the bonds of iniquity" (Mormon 8:31). Enormously proud of their accomplishments, "the Gentiles are lifted up in the pride of their eyes, and have stumbled, because of the greatness of their stumbling block" (2 Nephi 26:20). Their own expertise is the highest

court of appeal, as they “preach up unto themselves their own wisdom and their own learning, that they may get gain and grind upon the faces of the poor” (2 Nephi 26:20). The theologians “set themselves up for a light unto the world, that they may get gain and praise of the world” (2 Nephi 20:29), as they “contend one with another, . . . teach with their learning, and deny the Holy Ghost” (2 Nephi 28:4).

The whole world will be caught up in the great illusion when, “in the last days, or in the days of the Gentiles, . . . *all* the nations of the Gentiles and also the Jews, both . . . upon this land and . . . upon other lands . . . will be drunken with iniquity and all manner of abominations” (2 Nephi 27:1; italics added). As the upheavals of nature increase (2 Nephi 27:2), war becomes the order of the day, caused by “secret abominations to get gain [which] cause that widows should mourn . . . and also orphans . . . and also the blood of their fathers and their husbands to cry unto the Lord from the ground, for vengeance” on those combinations (Mormon 8:40). The selective killing makes it clear that organized warfare is meant here. As in the last two World Wars, the Christian nations “shall war among themselves, and the sword of their own hands shall fall upon their own heads, and they shall be drunken with their own blood” (1 Nephi 22:13). This would seem to refer to revolution as well as war. Miraculously, the House of Israel will be the survivor, as “every nation which shall war against thee . . . shall be turned one against another. . . . And all that fight against Zion shall be destroyed” (1 Nephi 22:14), and pass away “as a dream of a night vision” (2 Nephi 27:3). Formidable plans to destroy the upbuilding of Zion need not concern the Saints—like the Nephites, they have only their own sins to worry about. As for their enemies, “they shall fall into the pit which they digged to ensnare the people of the Lord” (1 Nephi 22:14). Likewise “that great and abominable

church," whatever it is, should be no concern of ours, for we are assured that with all its clever scheming and accumulated might it "shall tumble to the dust and great shall be the fall of it" (1 Nephi 22:14).

Still in the Future

Using the same means of designating relative time that Mormon does, Nephi refers to a development that is to come "speedily" at some time after "the Lord God shall commence his work among all nations," namely, "that the Lord God shall cause a great division among the people," which, it is explained, will be necessary if the wicked are to be destroyed without destroying the righteous also (2 Nephi 30:8, 10). This may be future, though the division may be going on right now. It is not a division between the eastern and western hemispheres, since the Book of Mormon makes much of the gathering of the Jews when "the Lord will set his hand again the second time to restore his people from their lost and fallen state," as he "shall bring forth his words unto them . . . for the purpose of convincing them of the true Messiah" (2 Nephi 25:17-18). Note that this gathering will begin before the Jews begin to believe in Christ. It is only "after the book [of Mormon] . . . shall come forth" and is carried to the remnant of Lehi's seed that "the Jews which are scattered also shall begin to believe in Christ; and they shall begin to gather . . . [and] shall also become a delightful people" (2 Nephi 30:3-7). And after the Book of Mormon has come forth, "it is yet a very little while and Lebanon shall be turned into a fruitful field; and the fruitful field shall be esteemed as a forest" (2 Nephi 27:22, 26, 28), showing that this particular gathering will be in the Old World.

When the house of Israel "shall rend that veil of unbelief, . . . then shall the great and marvelous things which have been hid up from the foundation of the world" begin to come forth (Ether 4:15), "greater things" than any yet

known, that have been "hid up because of unbelief" (Ether 4:13), "things the Father hath laid up for you, from the foundation of the world" (Ether 4:14); such as the lost writings of John—"When ye see these things, ye shall know that the time is at hand that *they* shall be made manifest" (Ether 4:16). Note the relative time: when certain important events of the restoration have already been witnessed, then is the time for these other things: "Therefore, when ye shall receive this record [the Book of Mormon] ye may know that the work of the Father has *commenced*" (Ether 4:17). The future, then, holds more ancient records for the faithful.

The restoration of the Lamanites goes along with that of the Jews. With the Book of Mormon, "the gospel of Jesus Christ shall be declared among them; wherefore, they shall be restored unto the knowledge of their fathers" (2 Nephi 30:5); and at the same time that the Jews "shall begin to believe . . . and . . . shall begin to gather in" (2 Nephi 30:7), the Lamanites shall "rejoice . . . and their scales of darkness shall begin to fall from their eyes; and many generations shall not pass away . . . save they shall be a pure and delightsome people" (2 Nephi 30:6). It is still a matter of generations. The Gentiles might as well realize that this land has been consecrated to Lehi's descendants forever (2 Nephi 10:19), and stop despising them and the Jews alike (2 Nephi 29:4–5). If the Gentiles in the Promised Land, having been given their chance and great blessings, do not repent and turn from their evil ways (Mormon 5:22), the time will come when "a remnant of . . . Jacob shall go forth among you as a lion, and tear you in pieces, and there is none to deliver" (Mormon 5:24). Who is the remnant of Jacob? The Lord in person told the mixed Nephites and Lamanites that heard him in the temple, that these words of Isaiah applied to them: "And ye shall be in the midst of them who shall be many; and ye shall be among them as a lion . . . and as a young lion among the flocks of sheep" (3 Nephi 20:16). Though greatly outnumbering the Laman-

ites, the Gentiles will be unable to put up a resistance because the Lord will no longer be with them, "if the Gentiles do not repent after the blessing which they shall receive, after they have scattered my people" (3 Nephi 20:15). So Lehi's descendants are to stage a comeback after the Gentiles have scattered them as chaff and had everything their own way. The second half of the story is still in the future, but the first half has been thoroughly fulfilled.

The Great Overburn

The culmination of the wars and troubles to come, according to the Book of Mormon, is the Great Overburn. The evil word "overburn," coined in our own generation, is made to order to describe the final holocaust of the Book of Mormon. This is not the end of the world, when the heavens are rolled up as a scroll, when "the elements should melt with fervent heat, and the earth should be wrapt together as a scroll, and the heavens and the earth should pass away," preceding the Last Judgment (3 Nephi 26:3; Mormon 9:2). This is a preliminary debacle just before the millennium, as we shall see. It is the last of the great wars, but it is a special kind of war, described not in the usual terms as "bloodshed" or the work of the "sword," but only as a burning. The Book of Mormon prophets give this specific interpretation to the words of Isaiah, cited by Nephi: "For *every* battle of the warrior is with confused noise, and garments rolled in blood; but *this* shall be with burning and fuel of fire" (2 Nephi 19:5). And again, "Through the wrath of the Lord of Hosts is the land darkened, and the people shall be as the fuel of the fire" (2 Nephi 19:19).

The time of the Great Overburn is clearly stated. It is just when the nations "shall war among themselves, and . . . be drunken with their own blood" (1 Nephi 22:13), that "the day soon cometh that all the proud and they who do wickedly shall be as stubble; and the day cometh that they must be burned" (1 Nephi 22:15). It is just when "all

the nations . . . will be drunken with iniquity and all manner of abominations—And when that day shall come they shall be visited . . . with the flame of devouring fire” (2 Nephi 27:1–2), and become “as a dream of a night vision” (2 Nephi 27:3). It is just when “the Messiah will set himself again the second time to recover them (“who wait for him”) that “they who believe not in him shall be destroyed, both by fire, and by tempest, and by earthquakes, . . . and by pestilence, and by famine,” with fire heading the list (2 Nephi 6:13–15).

It will be a general destruction involving all the nations, “even blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke must come; and it must needs be upon the face of the earth” (1 Nephi 22:18). What is this “vapor of smoke” on the face of the earth? The aftermath of the fire, or, since it is not ordinary smoke but a vapor, possibly fallout. “All those who are built up to get power over the flesh, and those who are built up to become popular . . . and those who seek the lusts of the flesh and the things of the world, . . . they are those who must be brought low in the dust; they are those who must be consumed as stubble; and this is according to the words of the prophet” (1 Nephi 22:23). For God “must destroy the wicked by fire” (2 Nephi 30:10). Thus Nephi interprets Isaiah, and Moroni also: “At my command . . . the earth shall shake; and at my command the inhabitants thereof shall pass away, even so as by fire” (Ether 4:9).

What makes it clear that this is not the end of the world is that it precedes the second coming of the Lord and the Millennium, and that the destruction is not a total but a selective one, with many survivors. That anyone should escape such a general holocaust is indeed miraculous, but the Lord has his ways of doing things: “Wherefore, he will preserve the righteous by his power, even if it so be that the fulness of his wrath must come, and the righteous be preserved, even unto the destruction of their enemies by fire. Wherefore, the righteous need not fear; for thus saith

the prophet, they shall be saved, even if it so be as by fire" (1 Nephi 22:17). The theme is repeated and its miraculous nature emphasized: "For behold, the righteous shall not perish, . . . and the Lord will surely prepare a way for his people" (1 Nephi 22:19–20).

And the righteous need not fear, . . . [but] all those who belong to the kingdom of the devil are they who need fear; . . . they are those who must be brought low in the dust; they are those who must be consumed as stubble (1 Nephi 22:22–23).

When the Lord is about to come to those who wait for him, "he will manifest himself unto them in power . . . unto the destruction of their enemies, . . . and none will he destroy that believe in him" (2 Nephi 6:14). Nephi prophesied the same miraculous preservation in a previous burning; that which was to be at the time of the Crucifixion: "Wherefore, all those who are proud, and that do wickedly, the day that cometh shall burn them up, . . . for they shall be as stubble" (2 Nephi 26:4). "For the fire of the anger of the Lord shall be kindled against them, and they shall be as stubble, and the day that cometh shall consume them. . . . But behold, the righteous that hearken unto the words of the prophets . . . behold, they are they which shall not perish" (2 Nephi 26:6–8). This, according to the Book of Mormon, was literally fulfilled.

The saving of the righteous "even if it so be as by fire" (1 Nephi 22:17) suggests some sort of counter-fire. That there is to be a segregation between those to be spared and those to be destroyed is clearly stated: After "the Lord God shall commence his work among all nations" (2 Nephi 30:8), then "the time speedily cometh that the Lord God shall cause a great division among the people, and the wicked will he destroy; and he will spare his people, yea, even if it so be that he must destroy the wicked by fire" (2 Nephi 30:10). This is the "cutting off" of the wicked from the rest

of the people preparatory to the Great Overburn (1 Nephi 22:19–20).

After the great burning comes a great peace, “and all the nations that fight against Zion . . . shall be as a dream of a night vision” (2 Nephi 27:3). It shall not be a peace of death but a millennial peace, when “the Holy One of Israel must reign. . . . And he gathereth his children . . . and there shall be one fold and one shepherd. . . . And because of the righteousness of his people, Satan has no power; wherefore, he cannot be loosed for the space of many years” (1 Nephi 22:24–26). If there shall still be nations during this period of peace, they must be all united: “But behold, all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people shall dwell safely in the Holy One of Israel if it so be that they will repent” (1 Nephi 22:28). As soon as the wicked are destroyed by fire (2 Nephi 30:10), “*then* shall the wolf dwell with the lamb” (2 Nephi 30:12; italics added), “and Satan shall have power over the hearts of the children of men no more, for a long time” (2 Nephi 30:18).

The Problem of Survival: Words of Plainness

If the Book of Mormon said only what we wanted it to we wouldn't need it. But we do need it. It is written “according to the plainness of the word of God” (Jacob 2:11), “in plainness, even as plain as word can be” (2 Nephi 32:7). It needs no handbook (not even this one) to explain its meaning. “I glory in plainness,” said Nephi (2 Nephi 33:6), “for my soul delighteth in plainness; for after this manner doth the Lord God work, . . . for he speaketh unto men according to their language, unto their understanding” (2 Nephi 31:3). So that leaves us pretty much without excuse.

Now the one inescapable fact about the Nephites is that they were destroyed. They speak from the dust, and they speak to us, and the Book of Mormon is the story of just how their destruction came about. The purpose of telling

the story, therefore, is not to reassure but to warn those who inherit the Promised Land after the Nephites, that they might not suffer a like fate without having been given a fair chance: "And this cometh unto you, O ye Gentiles, that ye may know the decrees of God – that ye may repent, and not continue . . . as the inhabitants of the land have hitherto done" (Ether 2:11; 3 Nephi 30:1–2). "Give thanks unto God," says Moroni to our generation, "that he hath made manifest unto you *our* imperfections, that ye may learn to be more wise than *we* have been" (Mormon 9:31). Some civilizations have been destroyed by plague, some by upheavals of nature, some by invading hordes, some by exhaustion of natural resources. Whatever the ultimate cause, the decline and fall was usually accompanied by a weakening of moral and mental fiber, rendering the society progressively less capable of meeting progressively mounting dangers.

The tragedy of the Nephites, who brought destruction by war upon their own heads, was not what became of them but what they themselves became: "A man's character is his fate," said Heraclitus.² Mormon minces no words in describing for our benefit just what the Nephites had become on the eve of their destruction:

O the depravity of my people! They are without order and without mercy. . . . And they have become strong in their perversion; and they are alike brutal, sparing none, neither old nor young. . . . They are without principle, and past feeling; and their wickedness doth exceed that of the Lamanites. . . . I cannot recommend them unto God . . . and I pray unto God [for] . . . the return of his people unto him, or their utter destruction. . . . And if they perish it will be like unto the Jaredites, because of the wilfulness of their hearts, seeking for blood and revenge (Moroni 9:18–23).

Please note that their wickedness does not consist in being on the *wrong side*—in the Book of Mormon it never

does. And Mormon's son, Moroni, minces no words in describing *our* society: "Behold, I speak unto you as if ye were present; . . . I know your doing. And I know that ye do walk in the pride of your hearts" (Mormon 8:35–36). What he then proceeds to decry is not specific crimes but a meanness of character, a passion to dominate others, with "envying, and strifes, and malice, and persecutions," with the same hardness and inconsideration, in fact, that Mormon deplored in his own compatriots: "Ye adorn yourselves with that which hath no life, and yet suffer the hungry, and the needy . . . and the afflicted to pass by you, and notice them not" (Mormon 8:39). "Ye build up your secret combinations to get gain, and cause . . . the blood of . . . fathers and husbands to cry unto the Lord from the ground, for vengeance upon your heads" (Mormon 8:40). "Behold, the sword of vengeance hangeth over you . . . for he will not suffer their cries any longer" (Mormon 8:41). "Hearken, O ye Gentiles," wrote Mormon, "God . . . hath commanded me that I should speak concerning you . . . that I should write, saying: Turn, all ye Gentiles, from your wicked ways; and repent of your evil doings, . . . and your idolatries, and of your murders, and your priestcrafts, and your envyings, and your strifes, and from all your wickedness and abominations" (3 Nephi 30:1–2). This applies to "all Gentiles" and not only to those of a particular nation or party. But it is to those in this land of promise that the Book of Mormon is particularly addressed.

The Two Promises

The Nephites and Lamanites each received a promise in the beginning, and each promise contained two parts, a promise of bliss and a promise of woe, "for this is the cursing *and* the blessing of God upon the land" (Alma 45:16). In the Dead Sea Scrolls every covenant which promises a blessing if kept promises a corresponding curse if broken, for a contract in which either party should be bound

to no conditions whatever would be meaningless (see 2 Nephi 2:5–10). For the *Lamanites* the penalty of their backsliding is that they shall be scattered and smitten and driven by the Gentiles; the reward of their faith is that they are to survive all their afflictions and in time become the Lord's own people again. For the *Nephites* the promised reward of faith is that nothing on earth can without their own will and action in any way ever mar their liberty, security, prosperity, and happiness: "And now there was nothing in all the land to hinder the people from prospering continually, except they should fall into transgression" (3 Nephi 6:5). This tremendous guarantee is matched by a promise of total extinction in case they should fail to comply with the conditions of the contract. Since they never became fully ripe in iniquity as did the Nephites, the Lamanites were allowed to remain in the land, paying for the privilege by taking a terrible beating: "Wherefore, if ye are cursed, behold, I leave my blessing upon you. . . . Because of my blessing the Lord God will not suffer that ye shall perish" (2 Nephi 4:6–7). It was an unconditional promise of survival (Jacob 3:5–9; Helaman 7:24; 15:14–17). *No such promise was given the Nephites*, and Enos was told that though the Nephites might perish, still the Lamanites would survive to receive his record (Enos 1:13, 16).

The two promises are held up in contrast by Nephi the son of Helaman: "The Lord . . . will lengthen out *their* days, . . . when *thou* shalt be utterly destroyed except thou shalt repent" (Helaman 7:24; italics added). And by Samuel the Lamanite: "Therefore, saith the Lord: I will *not* utterly destroy them, but . . . they shall return again unto me." And the Nephites: "If they will not repent . . . I *will* utterly destroy them" (Helaman 15:16–17; italics added). And by Alma: "For behold, the promises of the Lord are extended to the Lamanites, but they are *not* unto you if ye transgress; for has not the Lord expressly promised and firmly decreed,

that if ye will rebel against him that ye shall utterly be destroyed from off the face of the earth?" (Alma 9:24).

Alma explains the eminent fairness of the arrangement: "For he will not suffer that ye shall live in your iniquities, to destroy this people. . . . He would rather suffer that the Lamanites might destroy all . . . the people of Nephi, if . . . they could fall into sins . . . after having had so much light . . . given unto them, . . . yea, after having been favored above other nations" (Alma 9:19–20). And Samuel notes the difference: "Yea, the people of Nephi hath he loved, and . . . chastened them because he loveth them. But behold my brethren, the Lamanites, hath he hated because their deeds have been evil continually. . . . But behold, salvation hath come unto them through the preaching of the Nephites; and for this intent hath the Lord prolonged their days" (Helaman 15:3–4).

God does not rejoice in the suffering of his children, and in his kindness has set aside places where those qualified to be happy could enjoy happiness even in this life: "He leadeth away the righteous into precious lands" (1 Nephi 17:38), where "the hand of providence" pours blessings upon them in almost embarrassing abundance (Jacob 2:13). Those who come to the land of promise come by invitation: "There shall none come into this land save they shall be brought by the hand of the Lord" (2 Nephi 1:6). Hence they are expected to behave themselves, "and if it so be that they shall serve him . . . it shall be a land of liberty to them" (2 Nephi 1:7). But he will tolerate no nonsense, having "sworn in his wrath . . . that whoso should possess this land of promise . . . henceforth and forever, should serve him . . . or they should be swept off when the fulness of his wrath should come upon them" (Ether 2:8); "for behold, there is a curse upon all this land, that destruction shall come upon all those workers of darkness, according to the power of God, when they are fully ripe. . . . Yea, and cursed be the land forever and ever unto

those workers of darkness and secret combinations, even unto destruction, except they repent before they are fully ripe" (Alma 37:28, 31). There are cultures in the Old World, such as those of the Greeks, Arabs, Egyptians, and Chinese, which were ancient when Lehi left Jerusalem, and which though altered still preserve their identity. But there are no such cultures in the New World. To keep this a land of promise, the wicked must be utterly removed from it to preserve it for the righteous (1 Nephi 17:38). Only the Lamanites plod on between occupants, and the Lamanites are still here and *we* now occupy the fortunate but dangerous position of the Nephites.

The Cure

Our medical analogy is not without illustrious precedent. The word "history," in fact, is simply the adaptation by Hecataeus of Miletus of a medical term to the affairs of nations. "Historia" means the progress of symptoms marking the course of a disease. It is highly applicable here, since the Book of Mormon itself uses the medical analogy when it speaks of "money, and your substance, and your fine apparel" as "that which will canker," i.e., cause cancer (Mormon 8:37–38). Since the first step in the Nephite disease is exposure to wealth, the only sure cure or prevention would seem to be strict avoidance of wealth. But is it any pleasanter to die of anemia than of cancer? One can avoid almost any disease by giving up eating altogether, but there must be a better way.

One of Satan's favorite tricks is to send ailing souls after the wrong cure, leading them by his false diagnosis to "strain at a gnat and swallow a camel." In this he is ably abetted by those physicians who would force us to choose between their own violent, extreme, and sometimes fantastic remedies and a sure and agonizing death. Either accept the Wackleberry Cure, they say, or resign yourselves to a frightful and certain end—no other alternative is con-

ceivable. And so by instilling fear with one hand and offering an only hope with the other, such practitioners gain a following.

But the Book of Mormon is against violent remedies. It prescribes the gentlest of treatments – charity, accompanied by strong and steady doses of preaching of the gospel. The final analysis of Mormon and Moroni was that the fatal weakness of the Nephites was lack of charity. And whenever the worst epidemics of Nephite disease were brought under control and even stamped out, it was always through a marvelous display of charity and forbearance by such great souls as Alma, Ammon, Moroni, or Nephi or his father Helaman, and specifically through the preaching of the word, which Alma knew was more effective than any surgery: “The preaching of the word . . . had had more powerful effect upon the minds of the people than the sword, or anything else, which had happened to them – therefore Alma thought it was expedient that they should try the virtue of the word of God” (Alma 31:5).

It is most fortunate that the Book of Mormon not only sets before us the clear “historia” of Nephite disease, but describes for us as well the circumstances under which it has been cured and the remedies employed. Let us take the four danger-signals in order and see what was done to meet the threat indicated by each of them.

As to the external danger, since the Lamanite threat was meant by the Lord to serve a purpose, any attempt to achieve security by the removal of the Lamanites or by “total victory” over them was out of the question. They had to be accepted on a basis of permanent coexistence. Since the Lamanites were meant to serve as a “reminder” whenever the Nephites started slipping, the first line of defense against them was always to put the Nephite house in order, which was done by the preaching of the gospel and a strict enforcement of the laws. The second line of defense was to preach to the Lamanites, and some of the greatest Ne-

phites went among the toughest and meanest of them and preached with great success. When Nephite-Lamanite relationships did deteriorate, as they were bound to do from time to time, able Nephite leaders were always willing to meet the Lamanites more than halfway, and when they had the upper hand never pressed their advantage. When there was fighting, the great Nephite commanders showed remarkable humanity and restraint, and never failed to remind the people that the enemy were their "brethren." Nephite military strategy was strictly defensive, almost all fighting being done on Nephite soil. The rule of the third offense made this unavoidable; it also rendered aggressive warfare impossible and preventive warfare utterly unthinkable. Nephite military preparations were reluctant and defensive—minimal—with God acting as their radar and warning-system. Since they depended on God, the real prevention and cure of Lamanite trouble was spiritual, the key to security being a state of mind: "Their minds are firm, and they do put their trust in God continually" (Alma 57:27). Such optimism was justified by the promise of complete immunity to Lamanite infection as long as the simple rules of health were observed.

Since wealth was dangerous only when people set their hearts upon it, the preaching of the word was the best defense against its insidious inroads. However, once the infection had gained entry it spread rapidly, and drastic measures were necessary. The entire society would be reduced to such a state of penury that mere survival became an objective that effectively supplanted the lust for power and gain; this was done (sometimes at the express request of holy men) through droughts, wars, upheavals of nature, or the baffling melting away of wealth as God made "slippery" the treasures upon which men had foolishly set their hearts. The cure for the inequality which is the most pernicious effect of accumulated wealth, according to the Book of Mormon, was first of all preaching, then royal decrees

or other laws for the support of the indigent, and, when things went too far, economic collapse. Equality was protected by the enforcement of laws guaranteeing such civil rights as freedom of religion and speech; Moroni led popular uprisings to “pull down” those who sought to override “the voice of the people” and establish kingship or aristocracy. But since equality is a state of mind, the most effective remedy was always preaching.

The threat of ambitious individuals was met by public-spirited but *not* ambitious leaders backed by “the voice of the people.” The common downfall of ambitious people, however, in the Book of Mormon as in other history, is provided by other ambitious people—they almost automatically produce antibodies which then act as a check on their power. Such is the regular course of Jaredite history. Indeed, Mormon lays down the general principle: “It is by the wicked that the wicked are punished” (Mormon 4:5). The conflict is costly and wasting, however, to the body politic, and may even lead to its destruction, as in the Roman Republic.

Secret combinations are formed to implement the ambitions of individuals, seeking power through gain and gain through power. Hence they produce and thrive in an atmosphere of conflict, within the groups and between them, assassination being, as the Book of Mormon makes very clear, the cornerstone of their dire economy. Local applications (police harassment) can be effective, but usually force the evil underground and make it harder than ever to deal with. Because these bodies are parasitic, however, they can be effectively starved out, as was demonstrated by Lachoneus and his general strike. Also because they are parasitic, in order to thrive or even survive they must enjoy a measure of cooperation from a willing host. Reports on the Mafia and Cosa Nostra agree that these societies cannot exist without the help of corrupt local officials and a complacent public; they receive financial aid from businessmen

who would never be seen in a casino and yet will lend the owners money because their operations are "legal" and bring money into the community. So it was anciently: "Now the people of Akish were desirous of gain, even as Akish was desirous for power," and so his "wicked and secret society . . . had corrupted the hearts of *all* the people" (Ether 9:6, 11).

In this particular case the disease proved fatal, and the Book of Mormon makes it very clear that the appearance of this loathsome parasite is the most dangerous symptom of all, since it has "caused the destruction of this [the Jaredite] people . . . and also the destruction of the people of Nephi. And whatsoever nation shall uphold such secret combinations, to get power and gain, until they shall spread over the nation, behold, they shall be destroyed" (Ether 8:21–22). What makes the thing so frightening is not the parasite itself but the fact that a society is willing to offer it entry and encouragement (to "uphold" it), without which it is not dangerous at all. Its presence therefore should be viewed more as a symptom than a cause: "Wherefore, the Lord commandeth you, when ye shall see these things come among you that ye shall awake to a sense of *your* awful situation" (Ether 9:24). Immediate repentance, not police action, is urgently prescribed: "O ye Gentiles . . . repent of *your* sins, and suffer not that these murderous combinations shall get above you, which are built up to get power and gain" (Ether 9:23).

There is good news, however, along with the bad, for in the verse just cited we are assured of an effective cure: "It is wisdom in God that these things should be shown unto you, that thereby ye may repent of your sins." The Lamanites actually cured a very bad case of Gadianton infection one time; they "did hunt the band of robbers of Gadianton . . . insomuch that this band of robbers was utterly destroyed from among the Lamanites" (Helaman 6:37). But this was strange surgery indeed, for instead of

hunting them with knives, clubs, and spears, "they did hunt the band . . . 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). Even for the most advanced stages of the most dangerous disease, the gentlest remedy is the most effective.

It was when he was commenting on the fate of the Jaredites that Alma addressed his sermon to their successors, including us: "Cursed be the land forever unto those workers of darkness and secret combinations, even unto destruction, except they repent before they are fully ripe" (Alma 37:31). Always there is the repentance clause, God leaving the door open until the last moment. Alma says that the less people know about these combinations in their intimate workings the better (Alma 37:32), and then he tells us what we really need to defend ourselves:

Preach unto them repentance, and faith on the Lord Jesus Christ; teach them to humble themselves and to be meek and lowly in heart; teach them to withstand every temptation of the devil, with their faith on the Lord Jesus Christ. Teach them to never be weary of good works, but to be meek and lowly in heart; for such shall find rest to their souls. . . . Counsel with the Lord in all thy doings, and he will direct thee for good; yea, when thou liest down at night lie down unto the Lord, that he may watch over you in your sleep; and when thou risest in the morning let thy heart be full of thanks unto God; and if ye do these things, ye shall be lifted up at the last day (Alma 37:33–37).