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Qumran and the Waters of Mormon

Author(s): Hugh Nibley

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Qumran and the Waters of Mormon

Alma's church in the wilderness was a typical "church of anticipation." In many things it presents striking parallels to the "church of anticipation" described in the Dead Sea Scrolls. Both had gone forth into the wilderness in order to live the Law in its fullness, being dissatisfied with the official religion of the time, which both regarded as being little better than apostasy. Both were persecuted by the authorities of the state and the official religion. Both were strictly organized along the same lines and engaged in the same type of religious activities. In both the Old World and the New, these churches in the wilderness were but isolated expressions of a common tradition of great antiquity. In the Book of Mormon, Alma's church is clearly traced back to this ancient tradition and practice, yet until the recent discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls no one was aware of its existence. We can now read the Book of Mormon in a totally new context, and in that new context much that has hitherto been strange and perplexing becomes perfectly clear.

The Church of Anticipation in the Book of Mormon

Let us go back to Alma's community at the oasis of Mormon. We have seen that it was organized after an accepted pattern as a "church of anticipation." Lehi himself had belonged to that great tradition of faithful Israelites who ran afoul of the official party at Jerusalem ("teachers and rulers," Justin Martyr called them) and because of their "priestcrafts and iniquities" (2 Nephi 10:5) had to flee to the desert. "Our father Lehi was driven out of Jerusalem because he testified of these things. Nephi also testified of these things, and also almost all of our fathers, even down to this time; yea, they have testified of the coming of Christ,

and have looked forward, and have rejoiced in his day which is to come" (Helaman 8:22).

All the Book of Mormon churches before Christ were "churches of anticipation." "They shall not be ashamed that wait for me," was their slogan from the beginning (2 Nephi 6:7), "for the people of the Lord are they who wait for him; for they still wait for the coming of the Messiah" (2 Nephi 6:13). "Notwithstanding we believe in Christ," Nephi explains, "we keep the law of Moses, and look forward with steadfastness unto Christ, until the law shall be fulfilled" (2 Nephi 25:24). In this hope the people were fully justified: "We also had many revelations, and the spirit of much prophecy; wherefore, we knew of Christ and his kingdom, which should come" (Jacob 1:6; cf. 4:6). "For, for this intent have we written these things," says Jacob, "that they may know that we knew of Christ, and we had a hope of his glory many hundred years before his coming; and not only we ourselves had a hope of his glory, but also all the holy prophets which were before us. . . . And for this intent we keep the law of Moses, it pointing our souls to him" (Jacob 4:4-5).

Centuries later the great prophet Abinadi, who converted Alma, gave a wonderful sermon on this doctrine, which the people had well-nigh forgotten. It comprises the whole fifteenth chapter of Mosiah, in which he says "that whosoever has heard the words of the prophets, . . . and believed that the Lord would redeem his people, and have looked forward to that day for a remission of their sins, I say unto you, that these are his seed, or they are the heirs of the kingdom of God" (Mosiah 15:11). "Notwithstanding the law of Moses," Alma reports of the Nephites of his own day, "they did look forward to the coming of Christ, considering that the law of Moses was a type of his coming, and believing that they must keep those outward performances until the time that he should be revealed unto them. Now they did not suppose that salvation came by

the law of Moses; but the law of Moses did serve to strengthen their faith in Christ" (Alma 25:15-16). "Begin to believe in the Son of God, that he will come," this Alma implores his people, ". . . that he shall suffer and die, . . . that he shall rise again from the dead, which shall bring to pass the resurrection, that all men shall stand before him" (Alma 33:22). Many followed his advice and "took upon them, gladly, the name of Christ, or Christians as they were called, because of their belief in Christ who should come" (Alma 46:15—remember that this is a translation! What the old Nephite word for "Christians" was we cannot even guess).¹

Alma's Community in the Desert

We have seen that Alma went forth and founded a community in the desert and in time established and presided over seven churches. What concerns us here is the early desert community which set the pattern of strictness followed by the others. One aspect of life by the waters of Mormon was the strict observance of the old Jewish Sabbath (Mosiah 18:23), combined with observances on another day of the week as well: "There was one day in every week that was set apart that they should gather themselves together to teach the people, and to worship the Lord their God, and also, as often as it was in their power, to assemble themselves together" (Mosiah 18:25).²

On one of these days of assembly the king's agents, who had been on the lookout for this sort of thing, "the king, having discovered a movement among the people," reported to Noah, who "sent his army to destroy them" (Mosiah 18:32-33).

And it came to pass that Alma and the people of the Lord were apprised of the coming of the king's army; therefore they took their tents and their families and departed into the wilderness. And they were in number about four hundred and fifty souls (Mosiah 18:34-35).

Many sympathizers were left behind among the people, and when things got worse at home “they would have gladly joined with them” (Mosiah 21:31), but it was too late, and for the present there was nothing to do but wait:

Therefore they did not at that time form themselves into a church, waiting upon the Spirit of the Lord. Now they were desirous to become even as Alma and his brethren, who had fled into the wilderness (Mosiah 21:34).

Alma’s people in their flight took grain with them (Mosiah 23:1), and after “eight days journey into the wilderness . . . they pitched their tents, and began to till the ground, and began to build buildings” (Mosiah 23:3-5), establishing a new community, the order of which is described in Mosiah 23. This community ran into trouble with a rival settlement led by Amulon and some priests of king Noah, and so they decamped again and after traveling twelve days in the wilderness arrived at the city of Zarahemla (Mosiah 24:25). There the king, Mosiah, called a great public assembly at which the king “read, and caused to be read, . . . the account of Alma and his brethren, and all their afflictions” (Mosiah 25:4-6).³

From first to last these people are conscientious record-keepers, passionately devoted to reading and writing. Armed with voluminous writings of the traditions of the prophets penned by himself, Alma had gone forth and founded his community by the waters of Mormon, and from their long wanderings the society returns with full and careful records of all that has happened.

The Qumran Community

Now let us turn to the Qumran community – the people who wrote and hid up the Dead Sea Scrolls. The one thing that emerges most clearly from the Dead Sea documents is the picture of a pious community of Israelites who had gone out into the desert in order to live the law of Moses in its

perfection. This society can best be described by quotations from their "Manual of Discipline" or *Serek Scroll*. As of the purpose of this group:

Everyone who comes to the united order shall enter into the covenant of God before the eyes of all those who have dedicated themselves, and he shall place himself under solemn obligation by a strong oath to turn [or return] to the Law of Moses even to all he commanded, with all his heart and all his soul insofar as it has been revealed to the Sons of Zadok, the priests who keep the covenant.⁴

Teaching the Law [and all that] he commanded [or established] by the hand of Moses, to carry out all that has been revealed from time to time even as the holy prophets have explained [or revealed] it by the Holy Ghost [or Spirit of his Holiness].⁵

These people deliberately separated themselves from "the Jews at Jerusalem" because they were convinced that the nation as a whole under the guidance of ambitious priests and kings had fallen into a state of apostasy.⁶ All new candidates had to attend a meeting at which

the Levites must read of the iniquities of the Children of Israel, and all their transgressions and sins in the rule of Belial. Those entering the Covenant will confess after them saying: We have gone astray, . . . we have done evil even we. . . . His judgment is come upon us and our fathers.⁷

They have come to "lay foundation of truth for Israel," the people having become "uncircumcised of heart and stiff-necked."⁸

They knew the meaning of persecution, considered themselves as living "under the rule of Belial," and required an oath of their members "not to return from following [God] out of any fear whether of intimidation or testing by fire in the kingdom of Belial."⁹ The society was very well organized:

And all who embrace the truth must bring with them all their mind, might, and possessions to the church of God. To purify their *minds* in truth of the statutes of God, and their *physical strength* [or might] as a test of fine gold of his ways, and all their *property* as following a righteous counsel.¹⁰

No one shall stumble from his appointed position nor be thrown from his appointed place, for everyone shall be active [valid, good] in the church [or unity].¹¹

In the council of the church twelve men, and three priests, perfect in all that has been revealed touching all the Law, to execute truth and righteousness and judgment in love, mercy and humility, for every man with his neighbor. To keep faith in the earth, to build up the established order, and a broken spirit, and to atone for the evil by doing judgment and putting to the test, with [due] observance of time.¹²

They covenant to love one another,¹³ and

when they enter the covenant the priests and Levites will declare blessed the God of Salvation and all who observe [do] his truth, and all those entering the covenant shall say after them: "Amen! Amen!"¹⁴

This is the arrangement (*serek*) for the seating of the [general] assembly, each man according to his position: the priests shall sit first in order, the elders second, and the rest of all the people [and all the remaining people] shall sit each man in his place.¹⁵

[At the initiation], the priests come first in order . . . one by one, and then the Levites, and after them all the people. . . . And they shall pass by three according to order [rank], one after the other, for thousands, and hundreds and fifties and tens, according to knowledge [or so that every man of Israel may know], every man of Israel as man of the house of his standing in the church of God.¹⁶

Rules of initiation and examination were strict. Most remarkable is the mention of baptism:

[Of one who enters the covenant with any reserva-

tions]: he shall not be purified among the redeemed nor cleansed in the water of purification [or grace], and he shall not sanctify himself in the waters and the rivers, and he shall not be purified in all the waters of washing.¹⁷

His sin is forgiven him and in the humility of his soul he is for all the Laws of God; his flesh is cleansed shining bright in the waters of purification, even in the waters of baptism (*dukh*); and he shall be given a new name in due time to walk perfect in all the ways of God.¹⁸

The Qumran "Church of Anticipation"

All this and much else is so very Christian that the Qumran community has been called a "Church of Anticipation."¹⁹ Everything looks to the future:

When these things shall come to pass in Israel, and the designated organization truly established, planting the seed for eternity – a holy Temple for Aaron, true witnesses to testify and those of proven hearts; to make atonement for the earth [or land] and assure the wicked their just desserts. This is the tested wall, the precious cornerstone whose foundations will not tremble nor be removed from their place, . . . a true and perfect temple in Israel, to establish a covenant for eternal ordinances [or statutes].²⁰

And when these things shall come to pass in Israel by these dispositions, they shall be removed from the midst of the seats of the wicked to go into the desert and prepare there the way of the Lord, as it is written: "In the desert prepare a highway [for the Lord] make straight in the wilderness a road for our God: This preparation is the study of the Law, as he established it by the hand of Moses."²¹

And when these things come to pass in Israel, according to all these patterns for establishing the Holy Spirit, for the eternal truth, for the atonement of sins and transgressions – . . . at that time the men of the community will be set apart as a holy house [temple] for Aaron, being united as a holy of holies and a common temple for Israel, the pure in heart.²²

To circumcise in the Church the uncircumcised of

heart, even the stiffnecked, so as to lay a foundation of truth for Israel, for a church and an eternal covenant, for the salvation [atonement] of all who are willing to accept it, for the sanctification of Aaron and a True Temple in Israel.²³

This "church of anticipation" considered itself only a temporary organization, living the old Law as fully as possible and marking time until the coming of a new dispensation: All these regulations are for Aaron and Israel "until there shall come a prophet and anointed ones [messiahs] of Aaron and Israel."²⁴ These people believed that God took the fullness of the Gospel from among men because of sin.²⁵ Those to whom this knowledge was imparted were not to divulge it to the general public: There must be no discussion or argument about these things with "the men of the pit, so that the counsel of the Law may be kept secret in the midst of men of iniquity."²⁶ They must keep themselves far from all evil and designing men, but cling to unity in the Law and property.²⁷

Other Churches in the Desert

These few passages will serve to give some insight into the general nature of the Qumran organization. Just as resemblances of expression and doctrine can be found in the writings of many other societies, Jewish and Christian, so the scholars have easily perceived resemblances in the nature and function of the society itself with those of other ancient communities. There has been a good deal of argument as to which group the Qumran people most closely resemble, and for a while it was widely believed that they were actually the Essenes or a branch of them. Not enough is known about the Essenes (or what is known is so contradictory as to cancel out a good deal of it) to justify the position, but, after all, the problem of nomenclature is not the important thing. The nature of the society itself is what counts.

Molin's Summary

The fullest study of the community of Qumran yet to appear is that of the Austrian, Georg Molin. The main points of his study represent the common reaction of scholars to the scrolls, and few would dispute them. For economy of space we give them here.²⁸

1. The Qumran people formed a *church* in the plain and original sense of the word, "a society of people specially chosen and set apart, . . . an ekklesia, a host of elect spirits called for a special mission upon this earth."²⁹

2. "As a chosen group it is however at the same time the ideal or perfect Israel." This goes back to the time of such prophets as Hosea, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, to whom, in spite of all its hardships, Israel's best time—its ideal time—was the years spent in the desert, when they were nearer to God than in later periods. "The paganizing of law and religion led already about 800 B.C. to the founding of the Rekhabite society, whose members . . . wanted to continue the simple way of life of the desert."³⁰

3. "Their minds made up, this holy army separated themselves from the people of God who had betrayed God, from their priests and kings, who had been foremost in iniquity. . . . They saw themselves surrounded by signs of impending calamity on all sides. They had read their prophets well (especially Isaiah, Ezekiel, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi)."³¹

4. They fulfilled the conditions of the Old Covenant as perfectly as they could be carried out, and though that was a great deal, it left them unsatisfied, cramped by limitations beyond which they could not go. Doctrine interested them far more than cult and ordinance and they were looking and waiting for light, filled with the feeling that "the time was growing near and every day could be the last."³² "Apocalyptic thoughts are constantly and everywhere in evidence [in the scrolls], and taken completely for granted. One has the impression that their readers or hearers already possessed a very respectable knowledge of apocalyptic teachings."³³

5. These people were no starry-eyed fanatics: "They viewed their present condition with a complete lack of any illusions, even with some pessimism, but with no lack of courage. A new age is coming . . . in which the plan which was laid down for the world from the beginning will go into fulfillment. It even seems that the world is to be completely changed, so that its physical structure as well as its basic plan is to be altered."³⁴

6. "Thus the whole way of life of the sect appears constantly in the light of the Last Days. 'Latter-day Saints' a certain 'Christian' sect of a later time called themselves. One can correctly attribute the title to the sect we are dealing with here. They knew no other way than the Jewish way, but they pursued that way with a holy devotion that puts us to shame."³⁵

The last remark quoted from Molin is indeed a significant concession – the more so since it is a very grudging one. The Mormons have been guilty of stealing this ancient sectarian thunder – a hundred years before anybody knew about it! But as a matter of fact all this *was* clearly set forth before the restored church was organized – in the Book of Mormon.

The Resemblance Is Not Accidental

The astonishing parallels between the churches of the Book of Mormon and that of the Qumran community – the reader may search out any number of them – are more than mere coincidence. Molin has observed that people were behaving in the manner of the Qumran Jews as early as 800 B.C., and there is evidence that such a group was living at Qumran itself as early as the 7th century B.C., that is, before and during the time of Lehi.³⁶ There is no question of any of these groups being the *true* church – what we are interested in here is simply to point out that there were just such churches before the time of Christ. We were at pains to show that the Book of Mormon churches of anticipation got their whole tradition and practice from the Old

World in unbroken succession, Lehi himself being one of those who were driven out into the wilderness because he insisted on preaching about the coming of the Messiah and denouncing the Jews for false ideas regarding the law of Moses. And so the Scrolls from the Dead Sea are teaching us, as they are teaching the Christian world, how little we really know about the Bible – and especially about the Book of Mormon!

Questions

1. Why was Lehi driven out of Jerusalem?
2. What evidence for “churches of anticipation” is there among the Nephites?
3. Was Alma aware of the Old World tradition of churches in the wilderness when he went forth to found his church? What evidence is there for that?
4. How does Alma’s community resemble the Qumran sect in purpose and spirit?
5. How does it resemble the Qumran community in organization and function? In the keeping of records?
6. What is the significance for the Book of Mormon of the fact that evidence for sects of the Qumran variety in the desert goes back to the time of Lehi and earlier?
7. What evidence is there that Alma’s church was not the only community of its kind in the Book of Mormon? What is the significance of that? Was it the first of its kind?
8. Is it possible that the Qumran church was really led by revelation? Was Alma’s church?
9. What are the implications of Molin’s suggestion that the best name for the Qumran church would be Latter-day Saints? Did they really live in the last days?
10. List the arguments for and against the proposition that the remarkable resemblance between Alma’s church and the Qumran community is purely accidental.