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The Flight into the Wilderness

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The Flight into the Wilderness

To appreciate the setting of much of Book of Mormon history, it is necessary to get a correct idea of what is meant by "wilderness." That word has in the Book of Mormon the same connotation as in the Bible, and usually refers to desert country. Throughout their entire history the Book of Mormon people remain either wanderers in the wilderness or dwellers in close proximity to it. The motif of the flight into the wilderness is found throughout the book, and has great religious significance as the type and reality of the segregation of the righteous from the wicked and the position of the righteous man as a pilgrim and an outcast on the earth. Both Nephites and Lamanites always retained their nomadic ways.

What Is a "Wilderness"?

Without the wilderness to provide a frequent diversion and perpetual background for its story, Book of Mormon history would be quite unthinkable. The word "wilderness" occurs at least 336 times in the Book of Mormon. There has always been a prejudice in favor of interpreting the word "wilderness" as signifying forest or jungle, both out of courtesy to the jungles of Central America – the classic Book of Mormon country – and to the language of our fathers, who grew up in a world happily unfamiliar with deserts. To our ancestors, deserted land was land grown wild – overrun and choked with vegetation. Yet according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, that is the fourth and least common meaning of the word, which properly refers to desert country. Certainly there is no doubt at all that the Book of Mormon is speaking of desert most of the time when it talks about wildernesses.

Wilderness in the Bible

We have the Bible to guide us here, for the Book of Mormon opens in Bible country, and in the Bible “wilderness” almost always means desert. Thus when Lehi assures his wife that the Lord will bring their sons “down again unto us in the wilderness,” even while the young men “journeyed in the wilderness up to the land of Jerusalem” (1 Nephi 5:5-6), we know beyond a doubt that the wilderness in question was the country between Jerusalem and the Red Sea, all of which is very dry and desolate. When, in Arabia, Lehi’s people had to be “keeping in the most fertile parts of the wilderness” in order to survive (1 Nephi 16:14), it is clear what sort of country they were in.

The Wilderness in Book of Mormon Tradition

The eight years of wandering in the deserts of Arabia, which the next few lessons of this series describe, are simply an introduction to the wilderness—the Book of Mormon people never entirely leave it. Wandering in the wilderness is at one and the same time for them both a type and a reality. One of their first patriarchs begins a great discourse by comparing his own times to “the provocation in the days of temptation while the children of Israel were in the wilderness” (Jacob 1:7), and recalls that Abraham in the *wilderness* offering up his son was the type of Christ being offered in the *world* (Jacob 4:5).

When Nephi spoke of his own wandering in terms of the Exodus: “I will also be your light in the wilderness; and I will prepare the way before you, if it so be that ye shall keep my commandments . . . ye shall be led towards the promised land” (1 Nephi 17:13), he was perfectly aware of the parallel, for he tells us that he “did liken all scriptures unto us, that it might be for our profit and learning” (1 Nephi 19:23). Hundreds of years later Mosiah referred to Nephi’s wanderings as a type and pattern in full effect

in his own day: "As they were unfaithful they did not prosper nor progress in their journey, but were driven back, and . . . were smitten with famine and sore afflictions" (Mosiah 1:17). A later prophet explaining this says, "They tarried in the wilderness, or did not travel a direct course, and were afflicted with hunger and thirst, because of their transgressions. . . . And now I say, is there not a type in this thing? For just as surely as this director did bring our fathers, by following its course, to the promised land, shall the words of Christ, if *we* follow their course, carry us beyond this vale of sorrow into a far better land of promise" (Alma 37:42-45; italics added).

Just as Lehi's descendants were constantly reminded, as Israelites are everywhere, of the sufferings and deliverance of their fathers in the wilderness of the Exodus, so they were reminded of later wanderings and deliverances in the wilderness of the New World:

Go and remember the captivity of thy fathers in the land of Helam, and in the land of Nephi; and remember how great things he has done for them (Mosiah 27:16).

Having been brought out of bondage time after time, and having been kept and preserved until now; and they have been prospered until they are rich in all manner of things (Alma 9:22).

It was the wandering in the wilderness that could teach the people better than anything else what they needed most to learn: the feeling of absolute and complete dependence on God at all times for all they had and were (Mosiah 4:21-30).

Quarantining the Wicked

The resemblance of one migration of God's people to another is not an accident, according to the Book of Mormon. In every age when the wicked reach a point of no return they are stopped from frustrating God's plan (which

allows men to be *righteous* as well as wicked if they so choose) by bringing about a forceful separation between the two. One might call it a form of quarantine:

The Father hath commanded me, and I tell it unto you, that ye were separated from among them because of their iniquity; therefore it is because of their iniquity that they know not of you. And verily, I say unto you again that the other tribes hath the Father separated from them; and it is because of their iniquity that they know not of them (3 Nephi 15:19-20).

Thus the Lord himself explains the principle on which these things are done. The flight from the wicked world and wandering in the wilderness is by no means a unique event, but takes place in every dispensation:

He has also brought our fathers out of the land of Jerusalem; and he has also . . . delivered them out of bondage and captivity, *from time to time* even down to the present day; and I have always retained in remembrance their captivity; yea, and ye also ought to retain in remembrance, as I have done, their captivity (Alma 36:29; italics added).

Though the righteous go into the desert, it is the wicked who are cut off and lost; it is they who are put under quarantine:

And not at any time hath the Father given me commandment that I should tell it unto your brethren at Jerusalem. Neither at any time hath the Father given me commandment that I should tell unto them concerning the other tribes of the house of Israel, whom the Father hath led away out of the land (3 Nephi 15:14-15).

It is the Jews at Jerusalem who are left behind and abandoned:

I go my way, and ye shall seek me, and shall die in your sins; whither I go, ye cannot come (John 8:21).

He leadeth away the righteous into precious lands, and the wicked he destroyeth, and curseth the land unto them (1 Nephi 17:38).

Such was always the Lord's way. When he brought Lehi out of Jerusalem, "no one knew about it save it were himself and those whom he brought out of the land." Exactly so did the Lord bring Moses and the people in secret out of the wicked land of Egypt, and Abraham fled by night and secretly from Ur of the Chaldees as Lot did from Sodom and Gomorrah, and so was the city of Enoch removed suddenly to an inaccessible place. And in every case, the wicked world thus left behind is soon to be destroyed, so that those who leave the flesh-pots and the "precious things" behind and lose all for a life of hardship are actually losing their lives to save them. It would be hard to say whether this pattern is more clearly set forth in the Old Testament or the New, but certainly it is most fully exemplified in the Book of Mormon.

The Flight from Babylon, a Type and a Reality

Lehi's flight from Jerusalem was more than an escape; it was a conscious and deliberate renunciation of a whole way of life: "I have charity for the Jew," Nephi announces, "I say Jew, because I mean them from whence I came" (2 Nephi 33:8); yet he will not teach his people the ways of the Jews as he knows them,

For I, Nephi, have not taught them many things concerning the manner of the Jews; for their works were works of darkness, and their doings were doings of abominations (2 Nephi 25:2).

I, Nephi, have not taught my children after the manner of the Jews (2 Nephi 25:6).

Even in certain temporal matters the Nephites "did not reckon after the manner of the Jews who were at Jerusalem; neither did they measure after the manner of the Jews"

(Alma 11:4). Why this deliberate break with a tradition which had been so carefully preserved through the ages and was yet to be preserved through many generations? Nephi's successor gives the Lord's explanation:

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

There comes a time when the general defilement of a society becomes so great that the rising generation is put under undue pressure and cannot be said to have a fair choice between the way of light and the way of darkness. When such a point is reached the cup of iniquity is full, and the established order that has passed the point of no return and neither can nor will change its ways must be removed physically and forcibly if necessary from the earth, whether by war, plague, famine, or upheavals of nature (Mormon 2:13-15). When the Chosen People do wickedly, according to a doctrine often stated in the Talmud, all nature suffers, and to save the world and restore the balance of good and evil, God destroys the old generation and raises up a new people in righteousness. Lehi's people were neither the first nor the last to be led into the wilderness to escape the wrath to come:

And as one generation hath been destroyed among the Jews because of iniquity, even so have they been destroyed from generation to generation according to their iniquities; and never hath any of them been destroyed save it were foretold them by the prophets of the Lord (2 Nephi 25:9).

Other parties before and after the Nephites have been led even to the New World; the Jaredites at the time of the great destruction in the days of the Tower, the people of

Zarahemla who "came out from Jerusalem at the time that Zedekiah, king of Judah, was carried away captive into Babylon" (Omni 1:15), and various communities on the islands of the sea:

As it says isles [in the plural], there must needs be more than this, and they are inhabited also by our brethren. For behold, the Lord God has led away from time to time from the house of Israel, according to his will and pleasure. And . . . the Lord remembereth all of them who have been broken off, wherefore he remembereth us also (2 Nephi 10:21-22).

The Wandering Continued in the New World

Nephi's wanderings in the wilderness, undertaken in the fullest awareness that they continued the traditions of the fathers, were resumed almost immediately upon arrival in the New World. This is an extremely important aspect of Book of Mormon history which is too often overlooked. These people did not regard their journey from Jerusalem to America simply as a transportation project to carry them from one settlement to another. They were travelers before they left Jerusalem, and they remained so forever after. Lehi calls the deserts of Arabia "the wilderness of mine afflictions" (2 Nephi 3:3), showing that to him the wilderness was both figurative and real. Hardly had his party landed in the New World when, Nephi reports, "The Lord did warn me, that I, Nephi, should depart from them and flee into the wilderness, and all those who would go with me. . . . And we did take our tents . . . and did journey in the wilderness for the space of many days" (2 Nephi 5:5-7). What Nephi describes here is an immediate continuation of their Old World wanderings; neither their ways nor their customs had had time to change before they were "fleeing into the wilderness" again, tents and all! And when Nephi's party finally settled down and founded communities and their descendants built cities, people went right

on fleeing from *them* into the wilderness, just as their fathers had from Jerusalem. (This theme is treated more fully below in Lesson 30.)

Next after Nephi, Jacob describes his people in terms of "the days of temptation while the children of Israel were in the wilderness" (Jacob 1:7); and this is more than mere imagery. That he is thinking in very concrete as well as figurative terms is brought out in one of the most moving passages not only in the Book of Mormon but of all the literature we have ever read:

And it came to pass that I, Jacob, began to be old; and . . . I conclude this record, declaring that I have written according to the best of my knowledge, by saying that the time passed away with us, and also our lives passed away like as it were unto us a dream, we being a lonesome and a solemn people, wanderers, cast out of Jerusalem, born in tribulation, in a wilderness, and hated of our brethren, which caused wars and contentions; wherefore, we did mourn out our days (Jacob 7:26).

The Nephites never ceased to think of themselves in those melancholy terms. Five hundred years after Jacob, Alma could write that his people were both blessed and sorrowful in their wandering state. Because of their isolation, he says, God gives them special revelation, and glad tidings "are made known to us in plain terms, that we may understand, that we cannot err; and this because of our being wanderers in a strange land; therefore, we are thus highly favored" (Alma 13:23). God, he says,

has been mindful of this people, who are a branch of the tree of Israel, and has been lost from its body in a strange land; yea, I say, blessed be the name of my God, who has been mindful of us, wanderers in a strange land (Alma 26:36).

Nephites and Lamanites Both Wander

If the Nephites continued their nomadic ways, so no

less did the Lamanites. From the first we find them "dwelling in tents, and wandering about in the wilderness" (Enos 1:20). At least four hundred years after those words were written, Alma tells us that "the more idle part of the Lamanites [most of the nation] lived in the wilderness, and dwelt in tents" (Alma 22:28). At the same time on the Nephite side we read how Mosiah was "warned of the Lord that he should flee out of the land of Nephi, and as many as would hearken unto the voice of the Lord should also depart out of the land with him, into the wilderness . . . and they were led by many preachings and prophesyings" (Omni 1:12-13). It is the Jerusalem pattern all over again. On more than one occasion an afflicted people "could find no way to deliver themselves out of bondage, except it were to take their women and children, and their flocks, and their herds, and their tents, and depart into the wilderness" (Mosiah 22:2). Sometimes a holy man like Samuel the Lamanite or Nephi the son of Helaman "departed out of the land, and whither he went, no man knoweth" (3 Nephi 1:3).

All these movements were religious in nature. Mosiah's people "were led by many preachings and prophesyings" in the wilderness. Such societies are met with often in the Book of Mormon. Alma founded such a group by the waters of Mormon (Mosiah 18) and moved about with them in the wilderness (Mosiah 23). At that particular time such movements into the desert seem to have been popular, many people being "desirous to become even as Alma and his brethren, who had fled into the wilderness" (Mosiah 21:31, 34), while Alma's people actually collided with another religious group settled in the waste—a community of refugee priests (Mosiah 23:31). Nephi, like Alma, built up communities in the wilderness (Helaman 16:4), and other groups practiced rebaptism in the wilderness (3 Nephi 7:24-26).

All this reminds us powerfully of the Qumran com-

munity of the recently discovered Dead Sea Scrolls and the peculiar type of Judaism that is represented. This we shall discuss presently, but what we wish to emphasize here is that the Book of Mormon deals with national, tribal, cultural, and military history only as incidental to its main theme, which is the doings of a small segment of the inhabitants of the New World, namely that minority of the faithful who continued to attempt to live the Law in its purity by escaping into the wilderness.

Questions

1. Why is a correct interpretation of the word "wilderness" essential to an examination or understanding of the Book of Mormon?
2. What is usually meant by "wilderness" in the Book of Mormon? The Bible? English?
3. What is the place of the wilderness in the religious traditions of the Nephites?
4. Was it a real wilderness or a "spiritual" one?
5. How does God "quarantine the wicked"? Why?
6. What comfort did the Nephites take in their wanderings?
7. Why did the Nephites continue their wanderings in the New World?
8. Why did the Lamanites? Were they more numerous than the city-dwellers?
9. What is the answer to the charge that the Book of Mormon is but an unimaginative repetition of the Bible? How does one explain recurrent situations and events in various dispensations?
10. In what things did Lehi's people make a break with the past? Why?
11. In what things did they retain and preserve their ties with the past? Why?
12. Why does the Lord not want us to be "at ease in Zion"? What is the meaning of the expression? See 2 Nephi 28:21.