



Type: Magazine Article

The Book of III Nephi

Author(s): James H. Anderson

Source: *Improvement Era*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (January 1924)

Published by: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

Page(s): 193–199

Abstract: This article states that the teachings in the New Testament Gospels and 3 Nephi are harmonious, and events recorded in the New Testament have found some historical parallels with events listed in the Book of Mormon. Further, the great earthquakes and other upheavals of recent decades are comparable to the three days of darkness in America during the time of Jesus' crucifixion.

THE BOOK OF III NEPHI

BY JAMES H. ANDERSON

To those who have given the book here referred to but casual attention, the title means little. Yet that book is one of the most remarkable ever put into print. A historical setting thereto is essential to a fair recognition of its value as a record, as the historical setting is necessary to a fair understanding of the lessons in the four gospels of the New Testament. For the words of this statement of cotemporary events for the Book of III Nephi, I have hoped that a more facile pen than mine would be employed; and but that I am called on to do so I would not now venture to write an intimation or even a skeleton thereof.

Remarkable in its clearness and additional light on the Savior's teachings as recorded in the New Testament, and its complete harmony therewith, this book ranks with the four gospels; to which, measured by its contents, there yet may be added the record of the Savior's ministry among the ten tribes and that of his visit to the Prophet Joseph Smith in latter times, all of these comprising a full scriptural quota of seven gospels bearing witness to Christ's ministry since his coming in the flesh.

For the style and matter of the book, no such direct and graphic narrative could have been written by other than an inspired participant in the events therein recorded. Therefore it is with a feeling of deep humility that I present the skeleton of a historical setting for contemplation by students of the book; in the hope that some benefit may come to the membership of the great Mutual Improvement Association organization which has included it in its reading course for the current season.

The Birth

It was the year B. C. 1. The "grandeur that was Rome" was at its zenith. Palestine was an obscure province of the empire of the Caesars. The great prosperity of the Jewish nation had passed into history. A cruel and relentless king, Herod, not of the royal house of David, ruled by sufferance of the emperor Augustus, and oppressed the people, laying upon them heavy taxes. The whole land was full of murmuring, and discontent, and dread. Deep down in every sincere Jewish heart was a secret hope; for the time was well nigh fulfilled when, according to their prophets, a king of the house of David, greater than David in battle, and more glorious than Solomon in all his glory, should be born to the nation. In all Palestine the whisper was passing from one drooping spirit to another, "Patience, the kingdom of Messiah is at hand."

It was the time of the Passover, and the people were gathered by

royal edict, "every man to the city of his own family," there to register for taxation. It was not safe to speak openly of the expected Messiah; but out among the hills and on the plains, with darkness shutting them in, the burdened people could while away the chilly hours with talking of passing events, and of that promised king who, their teachers said in secret, was soon to appear to crush their enemies.

Thus it was when, on the evening of April 5, according to our modern reckoning, shepherds were watching their flocks in Bethlehem's fields, and spending undisturbed moments in supplications to Israel's God. The night wore on into the small morning hours of April 6. The early dawn was approaching; the watchers were growing drowsy; and their talk had fallen into slow sentences. Suddenly, a great light, brighter than that of the sun which had sunken below the horizon hours ago, shone upon them with a strange splendor. They were filled with fear at the terrible, unknown glory. Quickly an angel, who had appeared in the unusual light as it streamed from the heavens, bade them to "fear not," and announced the birth of "a Savior, which is Christ the Lord."

At the same period of time, on the distant continent of America, then unknown to the people of the old world generally, and about seven and one half hours later than at Jerusalem in the day's reckoning, there was being enacted another wonderful scene of the heavenly splendor. The central point of habitation on the western hemisphere then was near the isthmus joining North and South America. Six hundred years previously a colony had left Jerusalem, under divine instruction. These people had increased in number from generation to generation, and had spread to the lands northward and southward. The time had arrived when, according to their prophets, there should be born in the flesh the Son of God, the promised Messiah.

The people were divided into two general groups. One, and this the more numerous, was plunged deeply into unbelief in the divine promises, and consequently was filled with the spirit of intolerance and cruel persecution toward those more devout. The other, though trusting in the divine word, yet was greatly depressed by the intention and threat of enemies to put them to death if the predicted heavenly sign should not materialize promptly.

April 5, B. C. 1, by our modern reckoning, had come. The promised sign was that there should be two days and a night between when there should be no darkness, and a new star should be visible. The leader of the imperiled believers was in dire distress, but his faith in the God of Israel did not weaken. All day long he pleaded before God in mighty prayer. The heavenly answer came: "On the morrow come I into the world." At the going down of the sun that evening, all was light as day, and continued so until morning, when the sun again rose in its usual course. A new star also appeared in the heavens, its brilliance such as had never before been seen. The faithful believers in the divine plan rejoiced. They knew that their

Redeemer was born, and that the great plan of salvation had entered its most glorious phase. God, the great Jehovah, was tabernacled in the flesh. The unbelievers of that time, foiled in their murderous purpose, were filled with amazement and dread.

Of the birth of the Babe of Bethlehem, not a secular historian has left a word of record; it was of too little significance from their point of view. Only in the word of God, written by holy men and sincere believers on both hemispheres, is it told of; and yet it is imperishably recorded by the events of every subsequent century in the world's history.

"Imperious Caesar, dead and turned to clay,
Might stop a hole to keep the wind away."

Not so with this child. Humbly born, his birthplace a stable and his cradle a manger, in a village in an obscure Roman province, his name outranks all those of the greatest men of the powerful and brilliant Roman empire, or of any other that the world has known or knows, and from his nativity are dated all the centuries which have followed: How truly prophetic: "The stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner"—Jesus, the Babe of Bethlehem, the Light of the World.

The Death

Thirty-three years passed away. In the Old World there were millions of people not of the children of Jacob, who also is named Israel; with none of these did the Savior pass his mortal life. His days were spent among "Judah and the house of Israel, his companions," and two-and-a-half tribes of Israel whose descendants had remained in Palestine.

The story of his ministry, his miracles, his sufferings, and his death, in the New Testament, is known to every student of sacred history. At his crucifixion there was a brief spell of a darkened afternoon, and subsequently a sharp earthquake shock marked by the rending of the veil of the temple at Jerusalem and the rolling of the stone from the mouth of the sepulchre where the body of Jesus had been laid. Three days from the crucifixion came the most wonderful and far-reaching miracle of all the ages; the resurrection of the crucified Redeemer, and the bursting of the bands of death for all mankind. A heavenly messenger made the announcement:

"Ye seek Jesus which was crucified. He is not here; for he is risen, as he said."

Not only did there come forth Jesus, the risen Christ, but other graves gave up their dead, "and many bodies of the saints which slept, arose," and "appeared unto many."

On the American continent, the latter part of the thirty-three years' period named witnessed wars and prevailing corruption among the people there, who mostly had crowded into the vicinity of the isthmus

joining North and South America. They were all of one race—a remnant of the house of Jacob. Their chief progenitor, head of the colony coming from Jerusalem 600 B. C., says he was of the tribe of Manasseh.

The commencing hour of the Savior's suffering on the cross is given in the New Testament as "the sixth hour," that is, twelve o'clock noon at Jerusalem, as we compute time. With the mass of dwellers on the western hemisphere, it was about seven-and-a-half hours earlier in the day, or about four-thirty a.m., just before the hour of dawn. With appalling vehemence and suddenness there burst upon that part of the earth the most awful storm of which history gives record. "All that ever was told of the loudest thunder, all that ever was seen of the most vivid lightning, fails to picture the terrific visitation." Fierce shocks of earthquake shattered mountain and plain, demolishing or burying villages and cities. Molten lava from great volcanoes consumed other cities with devastating flames. Still other populated centers along the sea coasts were engulfed by prodigious tidal waves.

Three hours did nature's fiercest carnage continue, changing the whole face of the land. Few cities escaped complete destruction. Darkness settled over all that section of the continent for possibly 300 miles or more either way from the center of the disturbance. This darkness continued the day of the storm, the next day, and the next, for approximately 50 hours, clearing somewhat during the night following the third day, so that it was the morning of the fourth day when the sun became visible.

During those three days, people who escaped with their lives "could feel the vapor of darkness," so dense was the element in the atmosphere which obscured the sun, the moon, and the stars by its impenetrable mist. In the midst of this scene came a miraculous heavenly voice to the terror-stricken survivors:

"I am Jesus Christ, the Son of God * * * I am the Life and the Light of the world."

With the resurrection of the Savior on the eastern hemisphere there also was a resurrection of numbers who had died; also on the western hemisphere "many saints did arise and appear unto many and did minister unto them."

This three days' darkness was local, yet reached over an extended area. Does the historian who records it present substantial natural cause for the remarkable phenomenon? In recent years there have been notable earthquakes and volcanic outbursts, although of much less violence than the one just referred to. In one of these in Alaska, in June, 1912, where but one volcano, that of Mount Katmai, was involved in the earthquake and upheaval, it is recorded in the *National Geographic Magazine*, for February, 1913, that midnight blackness in the daytime extended over several thousand square miles, lasting "for 60 hours at Kodiak, 100 miles from the volcano." The buildings of the navy wireless station on Wood island were struck by lightning

during the night of June 7, in the midst of the period of darkness, which "at the time was so intense that the flames could not be seen from the mission less than quarter of a mile away. Another instance of several that can be named if it were necessary, is that of Tomboro, on the island of Sumbawa, east of Java, when "darkness lasted for three consecutive days at a distance of over 300 miles." Krakatoa, near Sumatra, in 1883, Mayon, in the Philippines, in December, 1888, and Santa Maria, in Guatemala, Oct. 24, 1902, were of similar type, though less extensive in their effects.

In the year A. D., 1830, there was no possible human means by which the translator of the record that relates the events of A. D. 33 in the central part of the American continent, could have known that a condition-precedent to the three days darkness was the terrific upheaval in nature which he also recites. His only possible source of information was an actual history of that time—a history which he was translating by "the gift and power of God."

The Teachings

The three years' ministry of Jesus in Palestine, prior to his crucifixion, presents a code of instruction for a life of infinite scope. After his resurrection, the most notable lessons, as recorded in the New Testament, are his victory over death, and the immortality of mankind entabernacled in temples of flesh and bones. In visits for forty days, and appearances to a number of his disciples totaling less than a thousand, these lessons were visualized in most emphatic form, to every human sense. Then he "ascended on high" in culmination of his testimony of his triumph over the mortal sphere.

On the western hemisphere, the teachings which he had given in Palestine took on an even more impressive form, being reiterated by the resurrected, visible Christ as Redeemer and Lord. In many particulars the American record makes those teachings clearer and more specific than does the New Testament, yet not changed or added word affords the slightest shadow of conflict.

As might be reasonably expected when brought into activity by a resurrected, glorified Savior, the miraculous manifestations in the New World exhibit an inspiration and grandeur surpassing even the marvelous display of divine power in the miracles of Jesus as recorded by the historians of the New Testament. As illustration of this, note when the assembled multitude of about two thousand five hundred people brought little children for the Savior's blessing, and "angels descended out of heaven as if it were in the midst of fire; and they came down and encircled those little ones about; and they were encircled about with fire, and the angels did minister unto them."

There is yet another fact to be considered in connection with the teaching of Jesus as given in the New Testament. On the occasion when he passed over toward Tyre and Sidon, a "woman of

Canaan" besought from him a blessing. Her urgent manner called forth the response:

"I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

This is usually understood as referring to the Jews remaining in Palestine, as it did; for the record tells only of his ministry among the two tribes. But the latter were not all of "the lost sheep of the house of Israel." The Bible names three important divisions of these: "Judah and the house of Israel his companions," or the two tribes; "the remnant of Jacob," or a branch broken off, and apart from either of the others; and "Ephraim and the house of Israel his companions," or the remaining ten tribes.

The Jews were by no means the larger of these three divisions, and without visiting each of these divisions Jesus, by his own words, could not have completed the mission on which he was "sent," namely, to those "lost sheep of the house of Israel" other than the Jews. The historian of the Savior's visit to the western hemisphere gives the only record extant of the visit Jesus made to "the remnant of Jacob" in what is now known as America, and of his announced intention to visit the ten tribes who had disappeared into "the north countries" of the Old World. In this day we have the record of the visit of the Redeemer to two of the three divisions of the "sheep of the house of Israel;" that of the visit to the third division: the ten tribes, is now soon to be forthcoming, as stated in prophecy.

The Prophecies

Predictions as to future events which the historians of the New Testament record as having been made by the Lord Jesus have been receiving a measure of fulfilment in the history of the world ever since the days of his ministry in Palestine, and the fulfilment of these prophecies is being greatly augmented in the events of recent years, as they pertain to both the Old world and the New.

The record made in America, however, is plainer and more definite and detailed than that preserved to us in the Bible, particularly as it relates to the western hemisphere. For instance, in common human history the small area of the country known as Palestine is spoken of as "the promised land;" whereas America, a "land choice above all other lands," is at least equally suitable with the Holy land in its balmy days for "a land of promise" to chosen Israel. The voice of ancient prophecy proclaims a "new Jerusalem" in the latter days. The old Jerusalem is to be rebuilt; but though rebuilt, it is still the old Jerusalem in its location. But this record of the Savior's visit to the western hemisphere proclaims that the new Jerusalem is to be built in America, "the land choice above all other lands," and goes on to tell who actually shall build the city around the temple in Zion now designated by modern revelation—a work in which the Jews are not the foremost participants.

This fact is but one of the many in the record of the Savior's

ministry in this land which brings, to those who would be well informed on the meaning of the present portentous events, some realization of the imperative necessity of studying well the prophecies in this record and observing closely their corollary in the notable occurrences of today. Therefore, view it as we will, no one who would have a clear mental grasp of the "signs of the times" in this age can obtain the same satisfactorily, except by a close and intelligent reading of the Book of III Nephi, in connection with the events of current history.

Father and Mother and Child

Enshrined in the album of memory,
 Is the picture of mother's dear face;
 The vision appears in my reverie,
 As I turn the leaves backward—apace.
 'Tis a picture she gave me in childhood
 And stamped it on the film of the soul;
 Of devotion she gave her full measure,
 When her love let her life pay the toll.

There's a picture of father and mother,
 When I turn the leaves backward, I see;
 Encircled in a couplet together,
 As a father and mother should be;
 And I hear the dear Lord's benediction,
 On their service so constant and mild;
 For the unit of all His creation,
 Is a father and mother and child.

May I, in the album of memory,
 For like service in life find a place;
 May its leaves be turned backward by loved ones.
 Till they find in it their father's dear face,
 And may they find beside him another,
 Both enwreathed in a garland of love—
 The dear face of an angel—their mother—
 To safeguard them to mansions above.

Mesa, Arizona

M. A. STEWART.