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Source: *The Book of Mormon: Second Nephi, The Doctrinal Structure*

Editor(s): Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate, Jr.

Published: 1989

Page(s): 323-339



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Insights From the Early Years: 2 Nephi 28-30

Grant Underwood

From time to time Latter-day Saints hear an interpretation of scripture that is edifying, yet different from their own, and think, “That is an interesting idea; how did he/she come up with that?” They probably realize, with Nephi, that if scripture is to be for people’s “profit and learning,” it must be “liken[ed]” unto them (1 Nephi 19:23), and they probably also understand that different life circumstances permit different interpretive perspectives. In that spirit, our purpose here is to step back into the past and respectfully review the ways in which Saints during the lifetime of Joseph Smith understood and applied the words of Book of Mormon prophets. Aside from learning more about and from our pioneering predecessors, we shall also come to realize just how historically accurate Moroni’s statement was that the Lord showed unto him “that day when [the Book of Mormon] shall come forth” (Mormon 8:34). During the years before the Saints came to Utah, few portions of the Book of Mormon drew as much attention as “Chapter XII” of 2 Nephi, now known as 2 Nephi 28-30 (see Underwood, “Book of Mormon Usage,” for database). Early Mormons found these chapters, which will be the focus of this study, brimming with prophetic meaning for their day. They were impressed both by

the detailed descriptions of their age as well as by the grand visions of Israel's future which they encountered in these chapters.

Chapter 28

One early reference summed up chapters 28 and 29 with the words "State of the Gentiles in that day" (*References to the Book of Mormon*, p. i; hereafter *References*; see also Underwood "The Earliest Reference Guides"). As we shall see, the Saints were both comforted and motivated by Nephi's eloquent testimony of the apostate condition of Gentile Christendom. In their index to the first European edition of the Book of Mormon, Brigham Young and Willard Richards singled out 2 Nephi 28:3-4 with the summary that they "Teach with their learning & deny the Holy Ghost" (Book of Mormon 638). Remembering what sent Joseph Smith to the Sacred Grove and recognizing that many converts expressed similar concern over the multitude of competing sects, it is easy to see how such verses, by predicting the exact state of affairs in which the Saints found themselves, would have not only explained the religious world around them, but would have also confirmed the authenticity of the Book of Mormon.

The contrast between the "learning" of men and the "utterance" of the Holy Ghost apparent in these verses was particularly important to early missionary efforts. The Latter-day Saints proclaimed the restoration not only of true principles but also of divine power. The gifts of the spirit, such as prophecy, visions, healings, tongues, etc. were felt to be the right and privilege of every earnest seeker properly baptized. These were the 'signs following faith' promised in the Gospel of Mark. In 2 Nephi 28:5-6, Nephi predicts the Gentile response to this message of power: "If they shall say there is a miracle wrought by the hand of the Lord, believe it not; for this day he is not a God of miracles; he hath done his work." Ever since Tertullian failed to persuade

the late second-century Catholic church that denying contemporary revelation meant that “the Holy Spirit was chased into a book,” belief in plenary inspiration has been relegated to the minority fringes of Christianity (Shelley 80).

In 2 Nephi 28:7, Nephi continues prophetically to pan the “state of the Gentiles:” “Yea, and there shall be many which shall say: Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die; and it shall be well with us.” In verse 8, Nephi notes that others, while making a pretense at piety and recognizing that they may have to suffer briefly in the next life for their wrongdoings, will nonetheless go on committing sin, falsely assuming they will be saved anyway. General histories of early America amply confirm the presence of such attitudes (see Turner, Wilson and May). In the minds of the devout in the early 1800s, one of the most disturbing developments in the previous generation or two had been the rise of liberal religion or “deism,” as it was popularly labeled. By whatever name, denial of the miraculous in human history, including the rejection of a future resurrection and day of reckoning, seemed to threaten the very foundation of Christian morality. As Lehi had earlier remarked, where there is no “punishment affixed,” righteousness could not be brought to pass (see 2 Nephi 2:10).

Second Nephi 28:12 indicates that the teachers of such doctrines would have churches of their own. Early Latter-day Saints may have seen in these phrases allusions to the Universalist church, which was a popular, early nineteenth century denomination espousing belief in the ultimate salvation of all regardless of earthly behavior (see Miller). *References* (ii) labeled as “universalian” Nehor’s similar teaching “that all mankind should be saved at the last day, and that they need not fear nor tremble” as if their salvation hung in the balance. Instead they should “lift up their heads and rejoice; for the Lord had created all men, and had also redeemed all men; and in the end, all men should have eternal life” (Alma 1:4).

Whether it was understood as referring to “liberal” religion generally or Universalism particularly, the Book of Mormon takes quite seriously the fact that there will be a price to pay for ungodly living. Torment, hell, and condemnation are very much alive in the Book of Mormon and were very much alive early in this dispensation. Despite the portion of an 1830 revelation (D&C 19) redefining “eternal punishment” and “endless torment” as simply “God’s punishment,” without connotations of duration, Latter-day Saints, before the late Nauvoo years, generally maintained a traditional commitment to the reality of hell, the validity of postmortal punishment, and the occasional need for eternal retribution (Underwood, ““Saved or Damned”). As Oliver Cowdery remarked in answer to a Universalist preacher who visited Kirtland in 1835, “. . . if no such principle exists as damnation, and that eternal, . . . [God] has spoken nonsense and folly” (151). No matter how soothing the thought to liberal religionists, mercy, in that striking phrase from the Book of Mormon, could never be allowed to “rob justice.”

Later in chapter 28, Nephi included additional examples of apostate deception resulting from the liberal Christianity of Joseph Smith’s America. Early Mormon Robert Crawford singled out 2 Nephi 28:22: “And behold, others he [the devil] flattereth away, and telleth them there is no hell; and he saith unto them: I am no devil, for there is none—and thus he whispereth in their ears, until he grasps them with his awful chains, from whence there is no deliverance” (2 Nephi 28:22). Recent studies of nineteenth century theological controversies concerning hell and eternal punishment as well as the history of popular belief about Satan make clear that such thinking was definitely on the rise at the time of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon (see Rowell, Russel, and Turner).

Beyond irreligion, hypocritical religion was also felt by the Saints to be graphically foretold in Chapter 28. Charles B.

Thompson concluded his lengthy volume, *Evidences in Proof of the Book of Mormon*, with an appendix entitled “A PROCLAMATION AND WARNING TO THE GENTILES WHO INHABIT AMERICA.” At one point he declared, “wo, wo, wo unto the inhabitants in all this land,” and then quoted 2 Nephi 28:11-16 as his explanation (191, 231-32). These verses describe religionists who “rob the poor because of their fine sanctuaries,” “persecute the meek,” “wear stiff necks,” “are puffed up in the pride of their hearts,” “commit whoredoms,” “turn aside the just for a thing of naught,” and “revile against that which is good.”

In their 1841 index Young and Richards also cited the passage about “Rob[bing] the poor” (638). That they would have targeted such abuse seems natural when it is remembered that at the time they created the index they were living amidst the grovelling poverty of the manufacturing district of Manchester, England. Converts and investigators alike, whose working class slogan was “We want more bread and less Bibles, more pigs and less parsons” (Arrington 85) would have resonated with Nephi’s description of the oppression exercised by the clerical elite.

This rather dark picture of establishment Christianity may seem harsh to modern ears, but it was fully in keeping with the image of total apostasy so common to early Mormon literature and preaching. Furthermore, since jeremiads, or impassioned cataloguings of contemporary corruption, had been a staple of American life for nearly two centuries, people were less likely to be put off by such rhetoric. It was part of the catharsis before conversion. In early 1833, Joseph Smith composed his first description of the LDS faith for public consumption in a letter to the *American Revivalist and Rochester Observer*. “For some length of time I have been carefully viewing the state of things as now appear throug[h]out our christian Land and have looked at it with feelings of the most painful anxiety.” He went on to describe the “vail of stupidity which seems to be drawn over the

hearts of the people,” and asked in language reminiscent of the passage just quoted from the Book of Mormon, “Has not the pride highmindedness and unbelief of the Gentiles provoked the holy one of Israel to withdraw his holy spirit from them and send forth his Judgments to scourge them for their wickedness; this is certainly the case. . . . destruction to the eye of the spiritual beholder seemes to be written by the finger of an invisable hand in Large capitals upon almost evry thing we behold—” (Jessee 270-72, original punctuation and spelling retained).

This sobering prophetic analysis stood in sharp contrast to the ill-founded optimism of Christendom generally. As Nephi predicted in verse twenty-one, the cry would be heard “all is well in Zion, yea Zion prospereth.” Despite its usual modern application as an in-house warning to the Saints, the context for this verse is one which describes latter-day Gentile attitudes. Furthermore, and often unknown to modern Mormons, the word “Zion” was also in common usage among Protestant groups in Joseph Smith’s day as a synonym for the church or the cause of religion generally. With the rapid expansion of their foreign missions and the spread of domestic revivals during the Second Great Awakening in the early nineteenth century, Gentile churches did indeed confidently proclaim the prosperity of Zion or what they took to be the cause of God. The famous revivalist, Charles G. Finney, told a Rochester, New York, audience in the late 1820s that if believers would exert themselves, the earth could be Christianized and the Millennium brought on within three years (see Johnson and Ahlstrom).

The Latter-day Saints, however, knew better. As Sidney Rigdon remarked, “The ignorance of the religious teachers of the day never appeared more glaring in any thing, than in an attempt to create a Millenium by converting this generation” (163). With Joseph Smith, the spiritually enlightened knew that things were bad and that they were only going to get worse. Jesus said, and the Saints often reiterated, that as it was in the days of

Noah, so it would be in the days of the coming of the Son of Man (see Irving). Rather than widespread conversions, the Saints learned from Nephi that the latter-day followers of Christ would be “few” and that the “dominions” of his Church would be “small” “upon . . . the face of the earth” (1 Nephi 14:12). For the majority of the Anglo-American world, the future, though not predestined, was predictable. Parley P. Pratt quoted the first part of 2 Nephi 28:32 to the Methodist detractor La Roy Sunderland: “Woe be unto the Gentiles, saith the Lord God of Hosts; for notwithstanding I shall lengthen out my arm unto them from day to day, they will deny me” (*Truth Vindicated* 14).

A final declaration in 2 Nephi 28 that attracted attention was verse 31: “Cursed is he that putteth his trust in man, or maketh flesh his arm, or shall hearken unto the precepts of men, save their precepts shall be given by the power of the Holy Ghost.” Along with other Christian primitivists, W. W. Phelps found the creedalism of the mainline denominations distasteful and saw in this passage a pointed repudiation of such practices. “The world,” said he, “endeavors to worship the Lord by wisdom . . . and thousands risk their souls from year to year, on the say-soes, creeds and covenants of men, when it is written, Cursed is he that putteth his trust in man . . . [2 Nephi 28:31]” (“Church of Christ” 74). Amidst the bewildering babel of conflicting voices, man needed something authoritative—the voice of inspiration.

Chapter 29

On one of his many missionary tours, Heber C. Kimball wrote, “We delivered our testimony to many [ministers] who with one consent said ‘we have enough and need no more revelation;’ thus fulfilling a prediction of the Book of Mormon [2 Nephi 29:3]” (507). This passage seemed to be fulfilled at every turn of the corner in early Mormon experience. “The vanity, the unbelief, the darkness, and wickedness of this generation,” explained the editor of the *Messenger and Advocate*, “has caused

many to fulfill the predictions of Nephi” (“Beware of Delusion” 251). Predicted in prophecy, the book’s frequent rejection thus ended up promoting faith rather than sowing doubt.

In verses seven and eight Nephi reminds the Gentiles that there are more nations than one and that together the testimony of two nations is a witness to God’s divinity. Benjamin Winchester, an important early missionary and publicist in the Church, felt this passage was quite significant, especially for illustrating how the Jews would ultimately be converted. “There are many of the House of Israel,” he remarked, “that do not believe that Christ is the true Messiah . . . but when the Book of Mormon is presented unto them they will discover that it is the testimony of another nation that was secluded from those of the Eastern continent.” Winchester remarked that the Book of Mormon’s agreement with the Bible fulfilled Nephi’s prophecy of “the testimony of two nations” that have “run together, both affirming Christ to be the Son of God. This,” he noted, “will be a testimony that will not be easily dispensed with [by the Jews]; consequently they will search deep into the matter, and peradventure learn that Jesus is the true Messiah. Hence we see the utility of the Book of Mormon” (129). Significantly, a decade ago when proselyting lessons for the Jewish people were introduced, they proceeded on this very premise that the Book of Mormon, as Winchester early recognized, would be the special key to their conversion.

In the final portion of chapter 29, the early Saints found several other ideas that impressed them. “For I command all men,” declared the Lord in verse eleven, “both in the east and in the west, and in the north, and in the south, and in the islands of the sea, that they shall write the words which I speak unto them; for out of the books which shall be written I will judge the world, every man according to their works, according to that which is written” (v. 11). Brigham Young and Willard Richards, for example, called attention to this passage for its corroboration of the Biblical doctrine of accountability and judgment. A different

application of the same verse was made by *Times and Seasons* editor John Taylor, who used it to prove that since islands were specifically mentioned, there must be “a remnant of the house of Israel, somewhere on the Islands of the sea” (“Notice” 426). For those committed to the complete gathering of Israel, the elect were to be hunted out wherever they might be hidden.

Parley P. Pratt concluded the penultimate chapter of his classic *A Voice of Warning and Instruction to All People* by citing the closing verses of 2 Nephi 29. His chapter title—“THE DEALINGS OF GOD WITH ALL NATIONS IN REGARD TO REVELATION”—identifies his interpretive purpose. According to Pratt, God “has granted unto all the nations of the earth the privelege [*sic.*] of feeling after him and finding him . . . whether they were in Asia, Africa, Europe, or America; or even upon the islands of the sea. Now, we will suppose a case; what if any nation, in any age of the world, or in any part of the earth should happen to live up to their privileges; . . . what would they obtain? I answer, Revelation.” He continued, “. . . if they did obtain revelation, it was their privilege to write it; and make a record of the same, . . . and this record would be sacred . . . no matter whether it was written by the Jews, the ten Tribes, the Nephites, or the Gentiles” (193-94).

Just such a scenario is provided for in 2 Nephi 29:12, and verses 13 and 14 explain how each people would have the words of the others and that just as the house of Israel would be gathered home unto the lands of their possessions, so would God’s word also “be gathered in one” (v. 14). Thus after quoting the famous prophecy from Isaiah that “The knowledge of the Lord is to cover the earth, as the waters do the sea” (11:9), Pratt queried, “Now, I ask how this great overturn is to be brought about; and I know no better way to answer this question, than to quote the prophecy of Nephi” (*Voice of Warning* 201-02). He then cited the verses just discussed.

Chapter 30

To the uninitiated, early Mormon rhetoric occasionally sounds harsh, almost vindictive. This, however, is due in large part to the Saints' firm belief in the inevitable and complete fulfillment of God's word, including less than flattering scriptural descriptions of the wicked and their fate. It is also important to point out that theirs was no morbid monomania, for they also noticed the glimmers of hope embedded in scripture. *References* for example, in one of only three citations for the entire section under discussion, made certain, after the dismal scene of the previous chapters, to call attention to 2 Nephi 30:1-2 with the phrase "Mercy yet for the Gentiles" (i). Here Nephi cautions that "because of the words which have been spoken ye need not suppose that the Gentiles are utterly destroyed. For behold, I say unto you that as many of the Gentiles as will repent are the covenant people of the Lord."

From the beginning, the Saints showed interest in reports of Jewish conversions and emigrations to Palestine. Their interest was shared by most Protestant denominations and was particularly strong in Britain. There, by the 19th century, religious impulses mingled with political desires to shore up a waning Ottoman empire and generated considerable enthusiasm for the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine. When the apostles arrived in England in 1839-40, they found themselves in the midst of widespread discussion on the topic. Famed Christian Zionists such as Lord Shaftesbury as well as Jewish Sir Moses Montefiore were prominent in the effort to bring about the restoration of the Jews through human instrumentality (see Sharif). An observant millenarian like Parley P. Pratt could hardly miss the excitement of the times and included occasional reports of it in his England-based *Millennial Star*. The year before Pratt's arrival, British Secretary of the Admiralty and devout millenarian, Henry Innes, sent a "Memorandum to the Protestant Sovereigns" on "behalf of many who wait for the redemption of

Israel.” This document implored the European leaders to act as ancient Cyrus had and allow the Jews to return to Palestine, and it was published in all the prestigious papers of Britain. Pratt called attention to it in his paper, as well as to reports of Jews who had or who were about to convert to Christianity, and then remarked, “Thus is fulfilling a prediction of Nephi: ‘And the Jews shall begin to believe in Christ, and they shall begin to gather in upon the face of the land’ [2 Nephi 30:7]” (19).

In the early years following the Reformation, Protestant commentary was almost united in the belief that the conversion of the Jews would precede their gathering. By the eighteenth century, however, and especially in the 19th when Christian Zionism mixed with politics, spiritual restoration was no longer considered a prerequisite to territorial restoration. While both opinions could be found among the Saints, most went along with Wilford Woodruff, who wrote in his journal, “If the Jews ever go to Jerrusalem [*sic.*] they will not go as Jews but all Christians as Christ[']s body &c. &c.” (2:271). This also seems to be how Pratt was reading verse seven which juxtaposes the conversion and gathering of the Jews.

The restoration of Old World Israel, however, always took a back seat to the restoration of New World Israel, the Indians. During the lifetime of the Prophet Joseph Smith, one of the most frequently cited of all Book of Mormon passages was 2 Nephi 30:3-8. In answer to La Roy Sunderland’s *Mormonism Exposed*, Parley P. Pratt introduced these verses by declaring: “The Book of Mormon contains many Prophecies, yet future, with names, places and dates, so definite, that a child may understand; indeed, it is one of the peculiar characteristics of the Book of Mormon, that its predictions are plain, simple, definite, literal, positive, and very express, as to the time of their fulfillment. Notice a prediction of Nephi . . .” (*Truth Vindicated* 13). Among other events, the passage Pratt referred to foretells the coming forth of the Book of Mormon and its role in restoring the Lehite remnant to a knowledge of their true identity.

“The Indians are the people of the Lord,” wrote W. W. Phelps in his famous series of letters to Oliver Cowdery, “and the hour is nigh when they will come flocking into the kingdom of God, like doves to their windows; yea, as the book of Mormon foretells—they will soon become a white and delightsome people” (“Letter No. 11” 193). Reflecting on the passage describing how the Indians would gain a knowledge of their spiritual heritage through the Book of Mormon, Phelps enthused, “And how much is the joy of our hearts enlarged, when it is known the ‘poor Indians,’ are to be raised from their low estate, and miserable condition, by the *everlasting gospel*; even the fullness of the gospel contained in the Book of Mormon, and other books of God?” (193; emphasis in original).

As with the Jews, the early Saints also anticipated a territorial restoration for the Native Americans. From the revelations to Joseph Smith the Saints had learned that Zion was to be built in western Missouri, and portions of 3 Nephi were read to mean that the Lamanites would exercise a prominent role in building and settling the New Jerusalem. In this interpretive climate, the concurrent U. S. Government policy of relocating the Indians just west of the revealed Missouri site struck the Saints as too coincidental not to be providential. For those who could read the handwriting on the wall, it was clear that Jehovah was using Andrew Jackson just as he had used Cyrus the Great to facilitate the gathering of his people. Numerous comments to this effect are found in the Missouri-based *The Evening and the Morning Star*. “Last week,” wrote the editor in the December 1832 issue, “about 400, out of 700 of the Shawnees from Ohio, passed this place for their inheritance a few miles west, and the scene was at once calculated to refer the mind to the prophecies concerning the gathering of Israel in the last days. For the instruction of our readers, we make a quotation from the Book of Mormon” (Phelps, “The Indians” 54).

Aware that not all the Indians may have been happy recipients of such assistance, the editor earlier commented,

“Notwithstanding the Indians may doubt, or even fear the policy of the government of the United States, in gathering and planting them in one place, &c.—they may be assured, that the object is good, and they will soon be convinced that it is the best thing that has come to pass among them for many generations” (Phelps, “Remarkable Fulfillment” 32). Occasionally this grand vision of the restoration of Indian Israel could get a little carried away, as in a particular excerpt which Parley P. Pratt later deleted from the second and all subsequent editions of his *Voice of Warning*. Pratt urged the Indians to tolerate the Removal Act

as a kind of reward, for the injuries you have received from [the Gentiles], for the very places of their dwellings will become desolate; except such of them as are gathered and numbered with you; and you will exist in peace, upon the face of this land, from generation to generation. And your children will only know, that the Gentiles once conquered this country, and became a great nation here, as they read it in history; as a thing long since passed away, and the remembrance of it almost gone from the earth (191).

By the late Nauvoo years, however, the Mormons were disappointed with the actual results of Indian removal, and the partnership between God and government no longer seemed so apparent. “As to what the [other Christian] missionaries do for the Indians, they have their reward,” wrote John Taylor in *Times and Seasons*; “they are hirelings—All they have done, and all they will do, will be as a drop in the bucket” (“Indian Affairs” 829; emphasis in original). Lest readers get the wrong impression, Taylor continued,

That we may not be accused of a want of charity, we will state, no doubt, the government officers do what they consider humane and praiseworthy in removing the Indians; and the [C]hristian clergy suppose they are rendering God a little service in preaching to and teaching the rude sons of [the] forest; but from the results . . . it appears he has never given authority to any to act for him without direct revelation, it will be sufficient for our purpose, to say when the deliverer comes out of Zion, *he* will turn away ungodliness from Jacob (830).

This was the crux of the issue for the Latter-day Saints. “It will be seen,” explained Taylor, “that God, and not man, has the

power to bring Jacob to his glory again.” In support of this he goes on to quote 2 Nephi 30:3-6.

Conclusion

So what is to be learned from all this? How does a review of early understandings of the Book of Mormon broaden our horizons? If nothing else, we should have noticed that the Saints followed the admonition of Nephi to “liken” the scriptures unto themselves. That modern Mormons would not necessarily subscribe to every interpretation encountered in the literature of the 1830s and 40s is of no greater concern than the fact that in the process of creating contemporary relevance for their day, Joseph Smith and Paul occasionally used the same Old Testament passage differently. This leads to a second observation. When Moroni declared in Mormon 8:34, “The Lord hath shown unto me . . . that day when these things shall come forth among you,” he may have been more specific than some people realize. Our survey of early understandings of 2 Nephi 28-30 makes clear that the religious landscape prophetically described by Nephi for the time of the Restoration certainly matches the early nineteenth century with uncanny accuracy. Finally, we should note that while a given interpretation of scripture may bless a particular generation, it may not so serve a future one. Thus, we must not tether scriptural interpretation too tightly to the times but must remain responsive to the ongoing influence of continuing revelation. By so doing we will continue to view the Book of Mormon as the “most correct” book on earth and our greatest guide to drawing near to God.

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