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## Since Cumorah: New Voices from the Dust, The Testament of Lehi / Part I

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**Abstract:** This series argues that the changing attitudes of biblical scholars toward basic questions about scripture allow room for claims made by the Book of Mormon. It discusses external evidences, the primitive church, Lehi, Zenos, the olive tree, and the Dead Sea Scrolls. The tenth part begins a discussion of the testament of Lehi.

# SINCE CUMORAH

## NEW VOICES FROM THE DUST

BY HUGH NIBLEY, PH.D.  
PROFESSOR OF HISTORY AND RELIGION, BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

### *The Testament of Lehi / Part I*

● A search through fifty-odd apocryphal writings of recent discovery reveals the surprising fact that no theme enjoys greater prominence among them than that of the council in heaven held at the foundation of the world and the plan “laid down in the presence of the first angels” on that occasion.<sup>1</sup> The word “plan” (usually as *makhshavah* or *boule*) occurs with great frequency in these writings, but though it is often found also in the Bible, it is never translated as “plan” in the King James version, where, in fact, the word “plan” does not even appear.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand it appears no fewer than 24 times in the Book of Mormon.

Basic to the “plan” was the provision that man’s life on earth was to be a time of testing or probation (that word occurs 13 times in the Book of Mormon), in which every soul would be faced every day of his life with a choice between the two ways—the way of light and the way of darkness, or of life and death respectively.<sup>3</sup>

This theme, as fully set forth in the Book of Mormon, enjoys almost overwhelming predominance in the

newly found apocryphal writings,<sup>4</sup> and yet has no place in conventional Christian and Jewish theology, having been vigorously condemned by the doctors of both religions in the 4th and 5th centuries, since they would not tolerate any concepts involving preexistence of the spirit of man.<sup>5</sup> Hence is found the studious avoidance of such words as “plan” and “probation” in our translations of the Bible; to the contemporaries of Joseph Smith, these ideas were completely foreign, though we now know, thanks to documents discovered “since Cumorah,” that they were the very essence of early Christianity and Judaism.

Since these matters have been treated elsewhere, instead of doctrinal issues we shall consider here what is perhaps the most remarkable resemblance between the Book of Mormon and the newly discovered Apocrypha, namely the quaint and peculiar imagery both bodies of writing employ in discussing the plan. It is in their lavish but unfamiliar imagery that the writers of the Book of Mormon have, so to speak, left their finger-

prints all over everything. We have already shown how accurately the Book of Mormon depicts the actualities of life in the ancient East, both in Jerusalem and in the desert;<sup>6</sup> what we wish to do here is to take note of some of the many instances in which the literary figures of the book may be matched not only by the realities of life in the Old World, but especially by a corresponding imagery in the apocryphal writings.

Consider how the Book of Mormon begins. After a colophon in the Egyptian manner, formally correct in every detail,<sup>7</sup> we are plunged right into what may be called the Testament of Lehi. The choice of the “testament” form of literature and the strict adherence to all its conventions throughout the opening chapters of 1 Nephi are most remarkable. This is the way nearly all the patriarchs and prophets of Israel tell their private stories in the Apocrypha, that is, in works called “testaments,” which include admonitions to their sons and followers (usually given at the end of life), a recapitulation of God’s past mercy along with prophecies and warnings of things to come, and (however incongruous it may seem at first glance) an account of a vision in which the prophet was taken to heaven and saw God on his throne.<sup>8</sup>

Lehi starts right in with the heavenly journey, a vision in which “. . . he thought he saw God sitting upon his throne. . . .” (*Ibid.*, 1:8.) Here we are taken back to a council in heaven as a fitting prologue to a religious history. A decision is reached in the council and hailed

*The Book of Mormon depicts the actualities of life in the ancient East, both in Jerusalem and in the desert.*



with a great acclamation of joy, after which the session breaks up, various parties going about the business of carrying out their assignments in the implementation of the plan—the plan “prepared from the foundation of the world.”<sup>9</sup>

Here we glimpse a concept of heaven wholly alien to the conventional teachings of the Jewish and Christian doctors, who can think of nothing better than Athanasius’s picture of the meeting going on and on and on forever, with the choir never ceasing its hymn and the angels never relaxing from their attitude of praise. That concept comes from the few brief glimpses of heaven reported in the scriptures, cases in which inspired men have been allowed to look in for a moment in a brief flashback on what once happened above; this was to explain to them what happens here and to console them in their distress

by showing them that there is a divine plan behind everything and hence letting them know good men should not be impatient or dismayed when things seem to go wrong. This is a lesson taught in Job, John, and the *Thanksgiving Hymns* and *Battle Scroll* of the Dead Sea documents.<sup>10</sup>

The interesting thing about Lehi’s vision is that it carries through to the dismissal of the meeting, after which “. . . he saw one descending out of the midst of heaven, . . .

“And he also saw twelve others following him, and their brightness did exceed that of the stars in the firmament.

“And they came down and went forth upon the face of the earth. . . .” (*Ibid.*, 1:9-11.)

Now we all know that Lucifer fell “as a star from heaven,” and the *Book of Enoch* says that that prophet “saw many stars descend

and cast themselves down from heaven to that first star.”<sup>11</sup> There is in fact a great deal in the early Apocrypha about the coming down of fallen stars from heaven to circulate among men upon the earth.<sup>12</sup>

But this is matched in the same writings by the other side of the picture, the coming down to earth of stars for the salvation of men. Lehi reports that “. . . he saw one descending out of the midst of heaven, and he beheld that his luster was above that of the sun at noon-day.

“And he also saw twelve others . . . and their brightness did exceed that of the stars in the firmament.” (*Ibid.*, 9-10.) Ignatius of Antioch says that when Christ was born “there shone a star in heaven brighter than all the stars . . . and all the other stars, with the sun and the moon made a chorus to that

(Continued on page 645)





Since Cumorah  
(Continued from page 617)

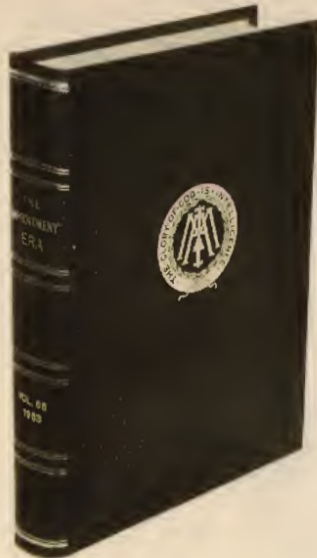
star."<sup>13</sup> Speaking of the star of Bethlehem, an early Apocryphon says "it was in the form of a star" that Michael guided the magi to Christ.<sup>14</sup> After long ages of darkness, says the *Testament of Judah*, "shall a star rise to you from Jacob in peace, and a man shall arise like the sun of righteousness, and the heavens shall be opened to him."<sup>15</sup> Or, as the *Testament of Levi* puts it, "Then shall the Lord raise up a new priest; . . . His Star shall rise in heaven as of a king . . . and the heavens shall be opened; I will bring light to the Gentiles."<sup>16</sup>

"The stars shone in their watches and were glad," says *II Baruch*, speaking of God's ministers as stars. "They shone with gladness unto him that made them," and gladly responded when he summoned them.<sup>17</sup> In the *Battle Scroll* the deliverer in war is called "the Star from Jacob,"<sup>18</sup> and in the *Zadokite Fragment* the leader of the sect in its wanderings is called simply "The Star."<sup>19</sup>

The author of the *Clementine Recognitions* resents the pirating of Christian ideas by the Zoroastrians, who call their prophet "the Living Star."<sup>20</sup> In one of the early Apocrypha, Mary says to the Apostles, "Ye are shining stars."<sup>21</sup> All this is imagery having nothing to do with star worship: the early Christians avoided the pitfalls of astrology into which the later churchmen fell when they abolished flesh-and-blood prophets and depersonalized God, leaving the heavenly bodies as the only means of communication between heaven and earth.<sup>22</sup> It is simply a conventional imagery, and the point to notice is the idea that chosen spirits which come down to minister to men upon the earth are conceived as circulating stars. This is the image behind the concept of the Seven Wise Men,<sup>23</sup> but the explicit situation depicted in Lehi's

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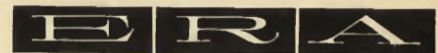
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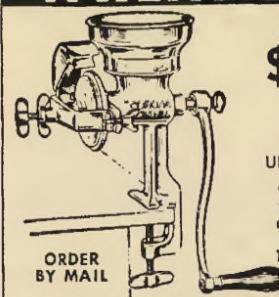
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vision is that peculiar to the early Apocrypha.

We have mentioned the Way of Light and the Way of Darkness as an expression of man's life as a time of probation. The contrast of light and dark is, as is well known by now, an obsession with the writers of the Dead Sea Scrolls, but no more so than with the writers of the Book of Mormon.<sup>24</sup> But since the contrast is a perfectly natural one and exceedingly common in religious literature, a more particular instance is in order to point up the common idiom of the Apocrypha

and the Book of Mormon.

"*These arrayed in white.*" Such an instance is the image of the white garment, specifically, the "three men in white." Recently Professor E. Goodenough has pointed out that the earliest known Jewish art represents "their great heroes . . . in white garments to symbolize their 'luminous' nature. . . . Another striking element . . . is the great prominence of groups of three figures, usually in this dress. . . . the choice of three was arbitrary, and the total number of scenes which represent a group of three seems



## EVERYTHING TOUCHES EVERYTHING . . .

RICHARD L. EVANS

Nearly a century ago John Muir wrote *My First Summer in the Sierra*, in which, looking at the great expanse of nature, he said: "No Sierra landscape that I have seen holds anything truly dead or dull, or any trace of what . . . is called rubbish or waste; everything is perfectly clean and pure and full of divine lessons. This . . . interest attaching to everything . . . the hand of God becomes visible; then it seems reasonable that what interests Him may well interest us. When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe."<sup>1</sup> This sentence deserves second consideration: "When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe." There is awesome evidence of the oneness of the universe, of an infinite Intelligence and Administrator, of God and his eternal plan and purpose. In a sense, nothing is insignificant. No person, no pattern is unimportant; no act is inconsequential; no word, no thought fails to be recorded, no prayer unheard; no need unnoticed. When we pluck up any flower, its roots are attached to all the earth, as is every rock that is cracked away from every crevice. All the glory and the beauty of the spring, the growth of a seed, the harvest, the miracle of birth, of the body's healing and renewing itself—all this and infinitely more adds its assurance of divine plan and purpose. All this gives faith and hope and peace, and overshadows sorrow and dissension, wars and wickedness, selfishness and deceit. And the meaning of it all is that we may become more like him who made us in his own image, with possibilities that are limitless and everlasting as we search for truth, with courage to accept it when we find it. God our Father seeks only our salvation, as the hearts of fathers turn to their children and children to their fathers and learn of this oneness and worth. God help us to find our oneness with him and with one another, with the peace that comes with repentance and the assurance that comes with being part of his great purpose ". . . to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man."<sup>2</sup> "When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe."

<sup>1</sup>John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra*.  
<sup>2</sup>Moses 1:39.

"The Spoken Word," from Temple Square, presented over KSL and the Columbia Broadcasting System, May 16, 1965. Copyright 1965.



quite beyond coincidence. . . . Philo himself made the vision of the 'three men' into a vision of the essential nature of God."<sup>25</sup>

The "three men" is a constantly recurring motive in the Apocrypha, and Cyrus Gordon has commented on the peculiar preoccupation of the early Hebrew epic with "triads of offices," celestial and earthly.<sup>26</sup> Enoch is conducted to heaven by "three who were clothed in white,"<sup>27</sup> and in *Jubilees* when the Lord descends to see the tower he is accompanied by two others as in Genesis 18.<sup>28</sup> In the newly found *Sayings of Moses* we learn that the Law was delivered not by Moses alone but by Moses and his two counselors, Eleazar and Joshua.<sup>29</sup>

When we read in the *Manual of Discipline* that "God through His Anointed One, has made us to know His holy Spirit," we are plainly dealing with three who speak to man.<sup>30</sup> According to the Mandaeen doctrine three celestial beings assisted at the creation and occasionally visited the earth; these were not the Godhead, however, but three messengers who later lived upon the earth as prophets.<sup>31</sup>

The Book of Mormon has a good deal to say about messengers in white. Lehi's desert vision opens with "a man, and he was dressed in a white robe," who becomes his guide. (1 Nephi 8:5.) He is shown "twelve ministers. . . . their garments . . . made white . . ." (*ibid.*, 12:10), followed by three generations of men whose "garments were white, even like unto the Lamb of God." (*Ibid.*, 12:11.) Soon after, Nephi also in a vision "beheld a man, and he was dressed in a white robe," this being John who was to come. (*Ibid.*, 14:19.)

" . . . there can no man be saved," says Alma, "except his garments are washed white. . . ." (Alma 5:21.) He tells how the ancient priesthood "were called after this holy order, and were sanctified, and their gar-

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ments were washed white through the blood of the lamb.

"Now they . . . [have] their garments made white, being pure and spotless before God. . . ." (*Ibid.*, 13:11-12.) But the most moving and significant passage is his formal prayer for the city of Gideon:

" . . . may the Lord bless you, and keep your garments spotless, that ye may at last be brought to sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and the holy prophets . . . having your garments spotless even as their garments are spotless, in the kingdom of heaven to go no more out." (*Ibid.*, 7:25.)

Here Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are *the* "three men in white."<sup>32</sup>

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>This was the theme of the second annual faculty lecture, given by the writer at Brigham Young University on March 17, 1965, under the title of *The Expanding Gospel*, now in the process of publication at the BYU Press.

<sup>2</sup>Almost always *makhshavah* can be rendered "plan" in Isaiah and Jeremiah e.g.: Isa. 55:8, 9; 59:7; 65:2; 66:18; Jer. 6:19; 18:12; 29:11; 11:19; 18:18; 49:20, 30; 50:4-5; and in some cases it definitely *should* be: Jer. 29:11; 51:29; cf. Ps. 33:11; Prov. 19:21; 20:18; 2 Sam. 14:14; Mic. 4:12.

<sup>3</sup>"There are two roads, one wide and one narrow," leading to two gates, where Adam sits to welcome his children into eternity, according to the *Testament of Abraham*, cited by K. Kohler, in *Jewish Quarterly Review*, 7 (1895), pp. 585f.

"All things have their opposites, good and bad: it is the good which is the foil and measure of the bad, and vice versa," according to *Sefer Yeshira*, VI, 2f; cf. *Zohar*, I, 23: "If God had not given men a double inclination to good and bad, he would be capable neither of virtue nor of vice, but as it is he is endowed with a capacity for both." Early Christian writings carry on the tradition; see H. Nibley, *The World and the Prophets*, pp. 168-170; which is also familiar from the Classical writers, e.g., Cicero, *De officiis*, I, 32, 118; Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 273ff.

<sup>4</sup>"O how great the plan of our God!" (2 Nephi 9:13) ". . . prepared for all men from the foundation of the world. . ." (1 Nephi 10:18.) It is "the great and eternal plan of deliverance from death" (2 Nephi 11:5; cf. Alma 12:24, 13:29f), opposed by the counterplan of the devil, "that cunning plan of the evil one!" (2 Nephi 9:28.) For the Jewish parallels, see A. Aalen, *Die Begriffe 'Licht' und 'Finsterniss' im AT, im Spätjudentum und im Rabbinismus*, (Videnskaps-Akad. Oslo, II, Hist.-Phil. kl., 1951, No. 1.)

<sup>5</sup>At that time "the familiar Two Ways were no longer the ways of light and darkness lying before Israel or the Church, but the Way of the Church itself . . . versus the way of the Opposition, whoever they might be," H. Nibley, in *Church History*, 30 (1961), p. 15.

<sup>6</sup>E.g., in *The Improvement Era*, 51 (April, 1948), pp. 202ff; 53 (Jan. to Oct. 1950), pp. 14ff; 56-57 (Nov. 1953 to July 1954), pp. 830ff; 64 (Feb. 1961), pp. 87ff.

<sup>7</sup>H. Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert* (Salt Lake City, 1952), pp. 17f. Reaching for a ready Egyptian text for illustration, we picked up the well-known *Story of the Shipwrecked Sailor*, which closes with the words, "Complete from beginning to end as found in the books of the able [lit. "excellent of fingers"] scribe Amoni, son of Amon'ah. . ." Though this colophon is not typical, it is interesting because of the Book of Mormon flavor of

the names of father and son.

<sup>8</sup>See *The Improvement Era*, 67 (1964), p. 974.

<sup>9</sup>The formula appears no less than ten times in G. Reynolds, *A Complete Concordance to the Book of Mormon* (1957), p. 563.

<sup>10</sup>Discussed at length in the source referred to above, note 1. Speaking of the *Battle Scroll*, Y. Yadin writes: "Its main purpose is to give courage to the Sons of Light—liable to despair because of their defeats—by telling them that this sequence of defeats and victories has been determined from time immemorial"; Y. Yadin, *The Scroll of the War of the Sons of Light against the Sons of Darkness* (Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 8.

<sup>11</sup>*I Enoch*, 86:3.

<sup>12</sup>Lucifer who fell "like a star from heaven" is the best-known example. But the most fully documented identification of fallen angels with fallen stars is in the ancient tradition of the Watchers, with their cult of the Morning Star; Tha'labi, *Qissas al-Anbiyah* (1340 A. H. ed.), pp. 35-37. For the background of this tradition, G. Widengren, in S. H. Hooke (ed.), *Ritual and Kingship* (Oxford, 1958), pp. 176f. Among the Maya "Venus, as morning star, was feared as bringing death, famine, and destruction to man"; E. Bacon, in S. Piggott (ed.), *Vanished Civilizations* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963), p. 163.

<sup>13</sup>Ignatius, *Ep. ad Ephes.*, c. 19.

<sup>14</sup>*Book of the Mysteries of Heaven and Earth*, fol. 17, in *Patrologia Orientalis*, I, 28.

<sup>15</sup>*Testament of Judah*, 24:1.

<sup>16</sup>*Testament of Levi*, 18:2-3.

<sup>17</sup>*Book of Baruch*, 3:34.

<sup>18</sup>*Battle Scroll (Milhama)*, xi, 6.

<sup>19</sup>*Damascus Covenant (Zadokite Fragment)*, 7 (19), 18f. A number of other such instances in the Jewish Apocrypha are cited by C. Rabin, *The Zadokite Documents* (Oxford, 1954), p. 30.

<sup>20</sup>*Clementine Recognitions*, IV, 38; for other references see note 10 in Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, I, 1327.

<sup>21</sup>*Gospel of Bartholomew*, in M. R. James, *The New Testament Apocrypha* (1953), p. 171.

<sup>22</sup>Clement of Alexandria, in *Patrologia Graeca*, 8:96.

<sup>23</sup>Barkowski, in Pauly-Wissowa, *Real-encyklopädie des Altertums*, IIA, 2247.

<sup>24</sup>See Reynolds', *op. cit.*, under "light" and "darkness"; in one verse, Alma 19:6, the word "light" occurs six times.

<sup>25</sup>E. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbolism in the Greco-Roman Period* (New York: Bollingen Series, 1953), I, 2-527.

<sup>26</sup>C. Gordon, *Before the Bible* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), pp. 16f.

<sup>27</sup>*Secrets of Enoch*, iii.

<sup>28</sup>*Jubilees*, 10:23.

<sup>29</sup>*Sayings of Moses*, I, 11f.

<sup>30</sup>A. Dupont-Sommer, *The Dead Sea Scrolls* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), p. 65.

<sup>31</sup>G. Widengren, in J. Leipoldt (ed.), *Religionsgeschichte des Orients . . .* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1961), p. 86. Tha'labi, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

<sup>32</sup>Goodenough, *op. cit.*, I, 26, notes that the identity of the three men in white varies considerably, not being confined to any particular three.

#### UNBURDENED

BY EVA WILLES WANGSGAARD

*(The story is told that one young woman of a handcart company was so astonished to see the size and possibilities of the new Salt Lake City, which suggested a population large enough to give a young and willing woman employment sufficient to make her own way, that she pushed her cart off the cliff and strode ahead.)*

*She climbed a cliff to gain a better view,  
A Mormon woman beautiful and young.  
Behind her, handcart stragglers were strung.  
On either side the Wasatch Mountains drew  
A cordon of mauve shadow-forms that grew  
To purple depths where solemn fir trees clung  
To rocky slopes. And woven in among  
Tall, white-barked trees, a silver stream shone through.*

*Her spirits, crushed beneath the tragedy  
Of snowbound weeks with hunger, cold, and death,  
Rose like a bird. A city lay below!  
She shoved her handcart off the cliff. Said she,  
"I'll not be needing that." A quick-caught breath  
And she strode on unhampered, eyes aglow.*