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The Apocrypha and the Book of Mormon

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In the light of the Dead Sea Scrolls, all the Apocryphal writings must be read again with a new respect. Today the correctness of Section 91 of the Doctrine and Covenants as an evaluation of the Apocrypha is vindicated with the acceptance of an identical view by scholars of every persuasion, though a hundred years ago the proposition set forth in the Doctrine and Covenants seemed preposterous. What all the apocryphal writings have in common with each other and with the scriptures is the Apocalyptic or eschatological theme. This theme is nowhere more fully and clearly set forth than in the Book of Mormon. Fundamental to this theme is the belief in a single prophetic tradition handed down from the beginning of the world in a series of dispensations, but hidden from the world in general and often confined to certain holy writings. Central to the doctrine is the Divine Plan behind the creation of the world which is expressed in all history and revealed to holy prophets from time to time. History unfolds in repeating cycles in order to provide all men with a fair and equal test in the time of their probation. Every dispensation, or "Visitation," it was taught, is followed by an apostasy and a widespread destruction of the wicked, and ultimately by a refreshing or a new visitation.

What Are the Apocrypha?

The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls has directed the attention of the learned as never before to the study of that vast and neglected field of literature known as the Apocrypha. The significance of these writings for Book of Mormon study will become apparent as soon as we consider what they are and what they say.

First, as to what the Apocrypha are. An apocryphal writing is one that had been accepted as inspired scripture

by *any* Christian or Jewish group at *any* time. When such texts are brought together and examined, they are found almost without exception to reveal all the characteristics of real scripture.¹ The manuscripts that contain them are just as old as and sometimes older than many of those of the canonical books, i.e., the books of the Bible; they are found in the same places and conditions; they were anciently put to the same uses; they talk about the same things in the same terms and make the same claim to divine origin. It is clear, for example, that the Qumran community considered the Book of Jubilees, the Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs, the Apocalypse of Baruch, the Assumption of Moses, the Psalms of Solomon, and many other writings just as sacred as anything in the Bible. So closely in fact do these documents resemble the scriptures and each other that to this day there is no agreement among their pious readers or among the specialists who study them as to what is really "apocryphal" in the Bible and what is really biblical in the Apocrypha. It is no wonder that scholars have been driven to distraction trying to decide how to classify the apocryphal writings. The key to the problem of the Apocrypha was given in 1833 in Section 91 of the Doctrine and Covenants:

Verily, thus saith the Lord unto you concerning the Apocrypha—There are many things contained therein that are true, and it is mostly translated correctly; there are many things contained therein that are not true, which are interpolations by the hands of men. . . . Therefore, whoso readeth it, let him understand, for the Spirit manifesteth truth; and whoso is enlightened by the Spirit, shall obtain benefit therefrom; and whoso receiveth not by the Spirit, cannot be benefited.

The Changing Attitude Towards Scripture

This was a shocking declaration at the time it was written and long afterward. The apocryphal writings contained in the Septuagint and Vulgate, for example, were regarded

as wholly inspired by a large section of the Christian world, but by most Protestants they were looked upon as purely human creations. Other Apocrypha were dismissed as the productions of diseased and undisciplined Oriental minds.² The thought that the Apocrypha might be both divinely inspired *and* corrupted by men seemed utterly contradictory for, as Augustine protested to Jerome, how could a book of which God was the author have any corruption in it at all or be anything but absolutely perfect? Unless it believes in revelation a church must, as Irenaeus insisted long ago, believe that its scriptures are absolutely perfect, otherwise no certitude is possible, all things being resolved in a conflict of opinion and speculation of men.³ Yet today both Catholics and Protestants not only accept new and revised translations of the Bible, but engage in the diligent compilation of new and changing editions of the "original" text! In Joseph Smith's day all Christians believed that the Bible was the only divinely dictated book in the world; the existence of a large and ancient literature that closely resembled the Bible both in form and content was largely ignored and its materials consigned to a wholly different category from that of the Bible. Yet the Jews never made such a distinction:

One cannot emphasize strongly enough the fact that, literally speaking, there are no apocrypha in the Jewish literature. . . . The idea of the Canon and, in consequence, the idea of books not forming part of that Canon, belongs exclusively to the Church and not to the Synagogue. . . . Not all the Books . . . in the Hebrew Bible share among the Jews the same authority. . . . Even the Prophets are not considered as having a binding legal force.⁴

The Christian Canon is a product of the post-Apostolic Church that had ceased to claim revelation. It is a late and artificial thing and the true church is not bound by it.⁵

What Do the Apocrypha Say?

Now as to what the Apocrypha say, it is true that they are full of bizarre and peculiar things. Such things by their very oddity can sometimes be traced back to their un-inspired sources and "the interpolations of men." But along with dubious information it is even more apparent that "there are many things therein that are true." In the Old Testament, New Testament, Jewish Apocrypha, Christian Apocrypha, and Dead Sea Scrolls we have five bodies of documents every one of which has numerous points of resemblance to all the other four. By the process of boiling them all down to those teachings which are shared by *all of them in common*, scholars hope, and often claim, to discover the original pattern of thought common to all of them, and in the end to reveal the true nature and origin of the gospel. What results from this process is always the same thing. The common denominator of *all* the apocryphal writings and all the scriptures is the "apocalyptic" or "eschatological" theme. There is no clearer or fuller exposition of this theme than the Book of Mormon.

The Apocalyptic Themes and the Book of Mormon

The best explanation of what "apocalyptic" is about may be had by considering the apocalyptic elements in that book. As we go we shall "control" each point by some reliable matter from the apocryphal writings.

1. *The Great Tradition*. In the lesson on *Churches in the Wilderness*,⁶ we saw that the Book of Mormon people always thought of the righteous as a single timeless community, preaching and believing the same gospel along with Moses and all the prophets, and Abraham, and those who were before Abraham, "since the very beginning of the world," and right down to the end of the world.

What all apocalyptic writers have in common, a recent study concludes, is the claim to be telling a story that was

given to man by revelation and was had among the most ancient prophets from the beginning; this history has been transmitted to the righteous down through all periods of time.⁷

2. *The Secret Teaching*. According to the Book of Mormon the knowledge possessed by the righteous prophets down through the ages has not been shared by the rest of the world. From time to time God has "sent angels, . . . conversed with men, and made known unto them the plan . . . prepared from the foundation of the world" (Alma 12:29-30; Moroni 7:22). Those who have believed in the plan have been few, and God has always hidden them away from the wicked.

In the scrolls we read that God caused the righteous "to discern and to know the Most High and the wisdom of the Sons of Heaven, and to understand the perfection of the way." But this knowledge is not to be divulged to or discussed with the outside world, "the children of the pit."⁸

3. *The Holy Book*. In every age the inspired prophets have put down their knowledge in books. "I have spoken to you concerning all things which are written, from the creation of the world," says Jacob to his people (2 Nephi 6:3). The Book of Mormon opens with Lehi "carried away in a vision" (1 Nephi 1:8), which is from its content a model of all apocalyptic visions; in the vision he reads from a book (1 Nephi 1:11-12). His son speaks of a sealed book in which "the revelation which was sealed shall be kept in the book until the own due time of the Lord; . . . for behold, they reveal all things from the foundation of the world unto the end thereof" (2 Nephi 27:10). The Lamanites were converted to the true religion specifically by being "taught the records and the prophecies which were handed down even to the present time" (Alma 23:5). Nephi tells us that his writing is directed to people of another age, living in the last days, "for their good I have written them" (2 Nephi

25:8). Lehi himself learns as much from the books as from direct revelation (2 Nephi 2:17), and these books contained the words "spoken by the mouth of all the holy prophets . . . since the world began" (1 Nephi 3:20).

"The apocalyptic writer," writes R. H. Charles, "professedly addressed his book to future generations. Generally directions as to the hiding and sealing of the book . . . were given in the text." The belief was that this practice had been obtained from the days of the earliest patriarchs.⁹

4. *The Plan*. As the books themselves are brought forth from time to time throughout the whole span of history, so the subject they deal with is always the Big Picture, God's Plan for the world from beginning to end. "God knowing all things . . . sent angels to minister unto the children of men" (Moroni 7:22), and himself "conversed with men, and made known unto them the plan . . . which had been prepared from the foundation of the world" (Alma 12:30). God sees all things "from eternity to all eternity, according to his foreknowledge" (Alma 13:7), and the purpose of all revelation is "to bring about his eternal purposes in the end of man" (2 Nephi 2:15).

According to R. H. Charles, all apocalyptic writing conceives of the whole of human history as being "determined from the beginning in the counsels of God."¹⁰ In the Serek Scroll we are told, "From God is the knowledge of all that exists or will exist. And before their existence he established [or prepared] all their design, and when they exist the manner of their operation as to the Plan of His Glory. They fulfill their functions and no changes are made therein."¹¹

5. *Revelation*. For all their devotion to the ancient books and the constant tradition, the people who cultivate apocalyptic literature always claim revelation in their own time. "We search the prophets," says Jacob at the beginning, "and we have many revelations and the spirit of prophecy; and having all these witnesses we obtain a hope"

(Jacob 4:6; cf. 1:6). "Is it not as easy," Alma asks, "at this time for the Lord to send his angel to declare these glad tidings unto us as unto our children, or as after the time of his coming?" (Alma 39:19). "Have miracles ceased because Christ hath ascended into heaven, and hath sat down on the right hand of God?" another prophet asks. "Nay, neither have angels ceased to minister unto the children of men" (Moroni 7:27-29).

Charles notes that every apocalyptic writing claims divine revelation, and that "the reality of the visions is to some extent guaranteed by the writer's intense earnestness and by his manifest belief in the divine origin of his message." Charles himself hesitates "to assume that the visions are a literary invention and nothing more," though he concludes that "there will always be a difficulty in determining what belongs to his actual vision and what to the literary skill or free invention of the author."¹²

Strictly speaking, in apocalyptic thinking prophecy is not the divination of the future but the awareness of a pattern. If you know the plot of a typical western drama, you can always tell how it's going to turn out, not because you are clairvoyant, but because the course of events is clearly prescribed by the characters and setting of the play. There are those among our teachers of religion today who say that God cannot know the future. To say that God can only know what is happening right now is as simple as to argue that he can only know what is happening right here. Many of the children of men journeying in this wilderness know neither where they have been or where they are going, yet to one viewing their movements from above it would all be perfectly clear. Even the poet knows we are marooned "on this bank and shoal of time," not because that represents the whole universe, but because that bleak and narrow view represents all we know about it.

6. *Time and Timelessness*. The plan and the true story of man's life on earth, being "eschatological," i.e., beyond the

limits of local time and space, is timeless. Abinadi can speak quite naturally of "things to come as though they had already come" (Mosiah 16:6), and Mormon can address unborn generations "as if ye were present, and yet ye are not" (Mormon 8:35). Yet as far as this earth is concerned everything is in terms of times and periods. The history of God's people is a *repeating cycle of events*—a dispensation of the visiting of angels and of God's conversing with men followed by an apostasy and in turn by a general destruction from which the righteous remnant are rescued by being led away. This you will find in 2 Nephi 9:2; 25:8-9 ("destroyed from generation to generation"); and in 2 Nephi 29:8-13. God speaks to every nation in its dispensation (Moroni 7:22, 24, 31). It was the nature of a "church of anticipation" to consider future events as present.

Today new emphasis is being placed on the concept of "prefiguration" in the early Jewish and Christian teachings, i.e., the idea that the history of one age or dispensation prefigures events in another. "This approach," writes Flusser, "which sees world history as an organic whole, is typical of the workings of the apocalyptic mind. To such a mind it is quite plausible, not only that the sons of Jacob predicted the future history of the nation, but also that their deeds had some direct bearing on the events of the author's lifetime, however many years later."¹³ "Everything liveth and abideth forever," says Sirach, but then he describes the earthly economy as a series of temporal visitations, each under a great patriarch, each having its heralds, its glorious manifestations, and its end in a fall and apostasy.¹⁴ It is all one story, however, which Enoch is declared to have read in "the book of all the deeds of mankind." The peculiar type of thinking that sees all the past and future as embodied in the present is nowhere more strikingly illustrated than in the Dead Sea document known as the Habbakuk commentary,¹⁵ and nowhere is the principle of scriptural interpretation embodied in that commentary more perfectly

described than in the words of Nephi in which he explains his own method of teaching in the wilderness: "I did liken *all* scriptures unto *us*, that it might be for our profit and learning" (1 Nephi 19:23; italics added).

7. *The Messiah*. The center and pivot of the whole plan of history is, of course, the Messiah in the Book of Mormon: "None of the prophets have written, nor prophesied, save they have spoken concerning this Christ" (Jacob 7:11). "All the prophets . . . ever since the world began—have they not spoken more or less concerning these things?" (Mosiah 13:33).

Compare this with the teaching of the Talmud: "All the prophets have prophesied of nothing save the days of the Messiah, that is, of the eternal order to come."¹⁶ Gunkel, before the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, found in the *pre-Christian* apocryphal writings frequent reference to a divine redeemer, a new heaven and a new earth, the millennial rule of the Lord in person on earth, a Messiah who is to come as a human being and yet be more than human, a carefully cultivated "Wisdom" literature, the doctrine of the resurrection of the flesh, the practice of baptism in water, the belief that the eighth day rather than the seventh is the holiest of days, the reports of a Lord who is meek and humble, despised and put to death, resurrected, ascended to heaven, and who visits the spirits in prison. Also he found in the apocalyptic writings the use of such baffling code-words as "water of life," "second death," "first Adam," etc., and a conception of cosmology and world history totally at variance with that of the official schools of the Jews and Christians.¹⁷ All this sort of thing has been brought to light by the studies of the past two generations.

8. *The Doctrine of Probation*. According to the Plan of Life and Salvation, fixed and determined before the foundation of the world, the earth was made to be a place of testing, men being free while here to choose the way of light or the way of darkness. The Book of Mormon has a great deal

to say about this. Our earth life is the "days of probation" (1 Nephi 15:31-32; 10:21), "and the days of the children of men were prolonged, according to the will of God . . . ; wherefore, their state became a state of probation, and their time was lengthened" (2 Nephi 2:21). "Walk in the straight path which leads to life, and continue in the path until the end of the day of probation" (2 Nephi 33:9). This life became a probationary state; a time to prepare to meet God; a time to prepare for that endless state . . . which is after the resurrection of the dead" (Alma 12:24). "This life is the time for men to prepare to meet God . . . [and to] improve our time while in this life. . . . If ye have procrastinated the day of your repentance, . . . behold, ye have become subjected to the spirit of the devil" (Alma 34:32-33, 35). What we do during this brief time of probation will determine our state forever hereafter; the effect of the plan being "everlasting, either on the one hand or on the other — either unto . . . peace and life eternal, or unto the deliverance . . . into captivity" (1 Nephi 14:7).

This theme is treated at length in the *Serek* Scroll, sometimes in the very words used in the Book of Mormon. According to this source the operation of the plan on this earth takes place in set dispensations. Every man is tested and rewarded by the test of the particular period in which he lives, some coming sooner, some later, but all in their properly appointed time. Every man will be tested in the situation of his particular dispensation, but whatever he earns, whether great or small, is for keeps.¹⁸ This is exactly the doctrine of Alma 13:3 and 1 Nephi 14:7. What we do in this life will determine our status forever and ever. In the scrolls the newly baptized member is admonished "in his times to walk perfect in all the ways of God as he has commanded for the set seasons of his appointed times."¹⁹ The teaching of the community, moreover, is for all types of men, "for all the kinds of their spirits in their characteristics, for all their deeds in their time-cycles and for vis-

itations of their smitings, while the limited time of their prosperity shall last."²⁰ For the next passage we shall follow Brownlee's translation, lest we appear to be overdoing things:

In these [two spirits] are the families of all mankind . . . according to the inheritance of each, whether much or little, for all the *period* or the *ages*. For God has set them in equal parts until the *last period*. . . . Now God through the mysteries of his understanding and through his glorious wisdom has appointed a *period* for the existence of wrong-doing; but at the *season of visitation* he will destroy it forever.²¹

There is no more emphasized doctrine in the Apocrypha, especially the Christian Apocrypha, than the teaching of the *Two Ways*, the Way of Light and the Way of Darkness. We have seen Nephi counseling his people to "walk in the straight path which leads to life . . . until the end of the day of probation" (2 Nephi 33:9). Constantly the Book of Mormon people are told to choose between life and death, with emphasis on the fact that man is placed on this earth in the peculiar position of being able to choose either good or bad as long as he is here: "Remember that ye are free to act for yourselves — to choose the way of everlasting death or the way of eternal life" (2 Nephi 10:23; cf. Helaman 14:30-31; Alma 12:29, 31; Alma 13:3 ff.; 42:27-28; 1 Nephi 14:7). The closest parallels to these passages are extremely abundant in the apocryphal literature.²² Thoroughly characteristic is also the Book of Mormon emphasis on the "light" (2 Nephi 3:5; 1 Nephi 17:13; Jacob 6:5; Alma 19:6, which mentions "light" six times in one verse). This is also very "Johannine."²³

9. *The Doctrine of Apostasy*. From the first, according to the apocalyptic concept of history, men have chosen the darkness rather than the light. This teaching receives great emphasis in the Book of Mormon, where a constantly re-

curring event is the apostasy of God's church from the way of righteousness. Such general apostasies are described in Alma 62:44-46; Helaman 4:11-12, 21-23; 3 Nephi 7:7; 4 Nephi 1:27-31, 38-46. Behind this is the general weakness of the human race and "the nothingness of the children of men" (Helaman 12:4-7), which make this world inevitably the kingdom of darkness and the dominion of Satan, "which comes by the cunning plans which he hath devised to ensnare the hearts of men" (Alma 28:13). For the devil has *his* plan, which opposes God's plan for the human race—"that cunning plan of the evil one!" (2 Nephi 9:28). Just so, in the Dead Sea Scrolls the wicked, who are perfectly free to do as they choose, reject God's plan, preferring one of their own, for as might be expected, the devil counters God's plan with a parallel plan:

The self-willed go the way of their own heart, wandering after his heart and his own eyes and according to the plan [or counsel] of his own devising and his own gods.²⁴

By the king of darkness go astray all the sons of righteousness and all their sins and trespasses and iniquities and the perversity [transgressions] of their deeds are under his government, according to the secret plan of God, until the end that he has decreed. And all their smittings [buffetings] and the set period of their afflictions [are] in the government of his judgments. But all the spirits of his election [or testing] are for teaching the sons of Light.²⁵

The ways of the wicked shall be crooked in the kingdom of perversion until the set time of judgment that has been fixed.²⁶

The church is to work with the wicked, protesting, provoking, and where possible correcting, so it may be a "witness against all who transgress the Law."²⁷ Nevertheless, the plan remains hidden to those who are in darkness and is to be known only "by those who fear the spirit of self-will."²⁸

All who go the way of evil . . . who seek not the Lord nor try to find his truth, in the secret things have fallen away. . . . They shall bring upon themselves great judgments for eternal destruction without remnant.²⁹

Man is always falling away; from Eden to the present moment the human race is in revolt. The chosen people themselves regularly fall from grace and must be called to repentance. "Because of the shedding of blood," says the Talmud, "the holy house [the temple – the same expression is used in the scrolls] is destroyed, and God withdraws [literally, 'takes back up'] his presence from Israel." Then it quotes Numbers 35:33: "But if you defile it [the land], you shall not dwell in it either. Because of whoredom and idolatry and the neglect of due offerings the world is visited by desolation [literally 'banishment']; the people are swept away from it and others come and settle down in their place."³⁰ Some of the Tanaim say that the end of the blessed age when God gave revelations to men came in the days of Hosea, others in the days of Hazael, others that "since the days of Elijah" men have been without the ancient blessing, and still others from the days of Hezekiah.³¹ But all are agreed that the Lord does withdraw and *has* withdrawn his spirit, and that in keeping with a clearly stated general principle. God lets his spirit descend upon the people when they are righteous and "takes it back up again" when they are not.³²

10. *The Apocalypse of Woe.* Since the world is the domain of Belial, it is doomed in the end to destruction – but only in the final end. The image most commonly invoked by the word "apocalyptic" is that of the great destruction of the world, but that comes only at the consummation of times. Meantime there are many ends.³³ We see that from the Book of Mormon. The saints can only expect persecution "in the domain of Belial," but must not weaken for that reason. "Thus shall they do," says the rule, "year by year for all the days of the rule of Belial."³⁴ There shall surely come a

“time of refreshing,” we are told in the scrolls even as in the New Testament (Acts 3:19), but meantime the world “shall roll itself in the ways of evil, in the sway [or government] of iniquity, until the established judgment of the set time.” This is precisely the teaching of the *Didache* and the *Pastor of Hermas*, the two most important Christian Apocrypha.³⁵

All apocryphal traditions, according to Gunkel, in view of the wickedness of the world tell of “a series of plagues, occurring in strictly ordered periods, by which, however, the human race remains unconverted, and goes right on sinning until the final and most terrible of all bring corruption and destruction.” Pending this final consummation in each of these “ordered periods,” God sends light into the world by revealing the Great Plan in its fullness to chosen prophets, who call the world to repentance and bear testimony to it, that its blood may not be on their heads. Each of these visitations, as they are called, sees the general rejection of the Gospel Plan by the human race, followed by a general apostasy of those who did accept it, save for a faithful remnant who are removed from the scene. Finally when the number of spirits has been fulfilled, a culmination of wickedness is followed by a culminating destruction, after which in the last and greatest visitation of all, the Messiah comes personally to rule upon the earth.³⁶

These and other teachings, set forth with great power and clarity in the Book of Mormon, make up the substance of the apocryphal as well as the scriptural teaching, but their great importance for the understanding of the true nature both of Christianity and of Judaism has only begun to be appreciated. With the new discoveries the Apocrypha must be read in a wholly new context that gives them a new meaning and importance. Even the Bible must now be viewed in the light of new knowledge; but especially the Book of Mormon must undergo a change of status. Apocalyptic ideas, as is well known, have flourished

among groups of religious enthusiasts, Christian and non-Christian, in every age, but in only one source do we find the full and consistent picture of the old eschatology that scholars today are reconstructing from many pieces of evidence, and that source is the Book of Mormon.

Questions

1. What are the Apocrypha?
2. How has the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls enhanced their importance?
3. What has been the attitude of the Christian world towards the Apocrypha? Of the Latter-day Saints? (D&C 91).
4. What fundamental teachings do the Apocrypha and the Scriptures have in common?
5. Wherein do they differ?
6. What is "apocalyptic"?
7. What teachings common to all apocalyptic writings are also found in the Book of Mormon, regarding the Great Tradition? The secret teaching of the gospel? The sealing and transmission of sacred records? The divine Plan? Continued revelation? Time and history? The Messiah? This life as a probation? The Two Ways? Apostasy and restitution?
8. Do the Latter-day Saints believe that God has infinite foreknowledge? Did the Nephites?
9. Does the predominance of apocalyptic themes in the Book of Mormon support or weaken its claims to authenticity? What was the status of the Apocrypha in Joseph Smith's day?
10. What apocalyptic themes are particularly popular with revivalists? What apocalyptic themes do they ignore? Which of these are most emphasized in the Book of Mormon?