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Christ in the Book of Mormon

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The Book of Mormon professes to be a translation of some golden plates given to Joseph Smith by an Angel of God. This heavenly being had lived on the American continent fourteen centuries before, and been raised from the dead. The Prophet, then an unlearned youth, translated this record by means of what was known anciently as "urim and thummim."

This book gives an abridged history of two ancient peoples — the Jaredites and the Lehites.

The Jaredites came to this continent, under divine guidance, from the region of the Tower of Babel. They were part of the Dispersion of Tongues. Their leaders were Jared and his brother, Mahonri Moriancumr. Roughly speaking, the Jaredites lived in what we now call America from about 2,000 B. C., to about 600 B. C. Here they became a numerous people, and here, through a series of bloody battles among themselves, they became extinct as a nation. Under the American sky, therefore, arose, developed, and fell one of the great, if unknown, nations of antiquity.

The Lehites were Jews from Jerusalem. Their leader was a minor Hebrew prophet named Lehi, and his little colony of about twenty persons, men and women, he brought to the Americas, under divine guid-

ance, a hundred years or so before the Jaredites made their sanguinary exit from the human stage. That would be about six hundred years before Christ. On the new continent, after the death of their leader, the Lehites divided into two nations — the Nephites and the Lamanites. The leaders of these factions were Nephi and Laman, sons of Lehi. The longer these two peoples lived, the farther apart they were in all that makes for civilized life. For the Nephites had a literature, knew how to read and write, practiced agriculture, smelted ore, and held to the religion of their forefathers, the Jews. The Lamanites, on the contrary, were a barbarous people, living a nomadic life, often on the fruits of the chase, and had neither a literature nor a religion. It was the descendants of these barbarians that Columbus, Cortez, and Pizarro met on the shores of the New World.

After his resurrection from the dead and his ascension into heaven, our Savior appeared in person to the inhabitants of this continent, who received him and his teachings more generously and believingly than their contemporaries in Palestine. And here he established a church, with the same officers, principles, and ordinances as characterized the organization in Galilee. Then, for per-

haps four centuries, the two peoples lived as one under the Christian rule of life. Early in the fifth century, however, differences arose, wars took place, and division increased, with the result that American civilization was once more submerged in barbarism.

Thus, according to the Book of Mormon, the continent of America was occupied successively by two races, from about two thousand years before Christ to about four hundred years after Christ — an unbroken period of twenty-four centuries.

Meantime, what was going on in the Old World across the sea?

We need not here concern ourselves with the rise and fall of such nations as the Babylonians, the Chaldeans, the Medes and Persians, the Assyrians, the Greeks, and the Romans, all contemporaneous with the Jaredites, for they left mankind no spiritual inheritance. But the Israelites, contemporaries of both the Jaredites and the Lehites, must be considered, since they gave us the greatest of all religions—a religion that was *revealed* as contradistinguished from one that was merely *evolved*. And so our theme resolves itself into the question, How does the view of Christ in the Book of Mormon compare with that in the Bible?

Latter-day Saints agree with most biblical students that the Jehovah of the Old Testament is the Christ of the New. What, then, was the Hebrew conception of Jehovah?

Well, first of all, Jehovah was a person, not an immanence. Man was made in his image, physical as well

as moral and spiritual. Then, in the second place, Jehovah was exacting in the matter of personal righteousness. It was Jehovah who gave the Ten Commandments amid the thunderings of the sacred mount. To steal, to lie, to commit adultery, to bear false witness — all this was wrong. The laws regulating human slavery were the highest ever followed in any nation, ancient or modern, higher than that in the United States before Lincoln's time.

That was one aspect of Jehovah. Unfortunately there was another. For sometimes he was capricious, vengeful, cruel. Once, according to the record, he caused "two she-bears to come out of the wood and tear forty and two little children," who had made fun of the prophet Elisha. Occasionally he changed his mind with respect to the stiff-necked people whom he had brought out of bondage in Egypt. His anger could be appeased by the blood of a sacrifice. One time he punished an entire generation for sins committed by their foreparents four centuries earlier. And on not a few occasions he slew with a devastating hand whole populations, including women and children.

Of course, Jehovah, as we know, was not quite like that, but some of the ancient Israelites thought he was. Their minds were probably not capable of grasping and retaining the higher conception of his character. In general, however, their notions of deity underwent alterations for the better. Hosea thought of him in terms of a father dealing with his children, and Isaiah viewed

him as a dispenser of justice among the nations.

Such was the conception of Jehovah held by the people of whom the Old Testament speaks. Let us now turn to their contemporaries across the sea in the Americas, of whom the Book of Mormon tells.

Both the Jaredites and the Nephites came to know Christ through direct revelation to them. Accordingly their conception of him was exceedingly clear and convincing.

Moriancumr, the man who came to the American continent from the Tower of Babel, had an open vision of the Christ before the Incarnation. This Jaredite prophet, therefore, knew him as a person, as one who would in due time take upon himself a body of flesh and bone, as a Savior, a Redeemer. He knew him, too, not as a harsh, cruel being, but as kindly, compassionate. Coming before the time of Abraham, yet it is a distinct advance over the conception of the descendants of Abraham.

Among the Nephites of the period prior to the Incarnation the idea of the Christ is even fuller.

First of all, they knew Jesus by name. To them he was not Jehovah, but Christ. Says one of their prophets, "He shall be called Jesus Christ." This was more than a hundred years before the birth of the Savior.

Secondly, the Nephites knew him as a Savior, a Redeemer. "Behold," says another of their prophets, a contemporary of Jeremiah, "he cometh in six hundred years after the time my father left Jerusalem, and

he yieldeth himself into the hands of wicked men to be crucified."

Thirdly, to the Nephites he was tender, sympathetic, forgiving. "He cometh," says a prophet, "that salvation might come unto the children of men, even through faith in his name. His blood atoneth for the sins of those who have fallen by the transgression of Adam."

Finally, the Nephites looked upon Christ as God. "I would that ye should understand," says the prophet Abinadi, "that God himself shall come down among the children of men, and shall redeem his people. Because he dwelleth in the flesh, he shall be called the Son of God."

That, however, is not all. Through six hundred years of Nephite history the idea of Christ, the Redeemer and Savior, runs like a thread of gold in woven cloth. It was present in the thought of the entire nation, as well as in that of the prophets, even when it was ignored in their lives. The prophets of the Nephites were as insistent as the prophets of the Old Testament on personal and national righteousness. As a matter of fact, there was a Christian Church in America before Christ. This was nearly one hundred and fifty years prior to the opening of the Christian Dispensation. The Nephite prophets never lost sight of this picture of the Christ or neglected an opportunity to keep it before the eyes of their people.

Of this pre-Christian era, we may say, then, I think, that the peoples of the Book of Mormon had a clearer view of Jesus, a more adequate conception of his true character,

than the Israelites had of the Jehovah of the Old Testament.

And now we come to the post-Christian period. The record of this, in Palestine, is to be found in the New Testament; that of the Nephites of the same period, in the Book of Mormon. It is necessary here, however, to call attention to only two points.

First there is the idea of Jesus as God.

In the New Testament the conception of Christ as God is not so clear as to remove all doubt. If one wishes evidence of this ambiguity, one has only to consider that some Christians of our own time, who base their beliefs on the New Testament, nevertheless deny the divinity of Jesus. To them he is merely the Great Teacher. Involved in this notion of Christ is the doctrine of the Atonement, the saviorship of our Lord. Involved in it, also, is the doctrine of resurrection from the dead, with the Christian conception of individual, conscious survival after death. Such a religion is for this world only.

No such creed could arise out of the Book of Mormon. At least, it could not arise among those who accepted that book as the word of God. For in that volume there is not the slightest ambiguity, uncertainty, vagueness, on the subject. Jesus is God. This positive declaration occurs over and over again. He is the Redeemer of the world. He is the Son of God. He created man and the world. All this is explained in the Book of Mormon with such explicitness, simplicity, and plain-

ness as cannot possibly be misunderstood.

The second point concerns the character of Jesus, as brought out in the New Testament and the Book of Mormon.

In the Four Gospels Jesus is represented as infinitely wise, just, sympathetic, compassionate, understanding. Indeed, it would seem that nothing more could be desired in a God, and were we not reassured on the point, it would be impossible to believe that the Christ of the New Testament and the Jehovah of the Old Testament could be one and the same person.

Nevertheless, what has not inappropriately been called the Fifth Gospel has something to add to even this picture of the Christ.

Among the Jews Christ met only resistance. Even his disciples, on occasions, felt something akin to unbelief in his tremendous claims. Some of those who followed him from place to place were looking for only "loaves and fishes." Jesus knew this. Jewish authorities incessantly hounded him, obstructed his work, and in the end brought about his death. In some towns, as the record tells us, he "could do no miracle."

Among the people on this hemisphere, on the other hand, he met with only sympathy, understanding, and a desire to be taught. It is only natural to suppose, therefore, that under such conditions he should unstop the wells of his divine abundance and reveal his nature to the full. And that is exactly what he did. He prayed with the multitude, he wept with them, he blessed their

children, and angels ministered to them in the sight of the people. When the time came for him to leave them, he appeared loath to go. There is no more tender passage in all sacred literature than that in which Jesus talks to and blesses the little children. No such scene could have taken place among the unsundering Jews.

Such, then, is the enlarged conception of Jesus Christ, his character, and his mission, as held by the Jaredites and the Nephites, in comparison with that entertained by their contemporaries in Palestine. It is this conception, together with the spirit which, in consequence, saturates the Book of Mormon, that has "so powerfully and lastingly" influenced those who believe in it.

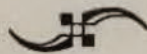
In every literary work there is a spirit, and this spirit gives a book its character. Accordingly, a book is good or bad to the extent and in proportion that its spirit is good or bad. As a rule, it is impossible to place one's finger on any passage and to say, "The spirit of the book is here." The spirit of the book, on the contrary, is not here or there, but everywhere. It is a matter of saturation. The upshot of it is to be found in the way one feels and acts after reading it. It is so in the Book of Mormon.

The spirit of the Book of Mormon is deeply religious. More than that, it is deeply Christian. No one can read the volume open-mindedly and not be convinced of that.

The spirit of the Book of Mormon is therefore serious. This follows of necessity. Life is not one continuous round of pleasure, certainly not of physical pleasure. "Man is that he may have joy," and joy is a thing of the spirit, not of the body.

The spirit of the Book of Mormon is illuminating, revealing, fraught with great insight into life and the ways of God. It lifts one out of the quagmire of materialism into the clear atmosphere of things eternal. In the light which it sheds on our pathway we see the road ahead farther and more clearly.

The spirit of the Book of Mormon, finally, is the spirit of power, spiritual power. It constructs, builds, creates. It is bouyant, sustaining. This is why its influence on those who believe in it has been wholesome, creative. This is why Martin Harris and Secretary Wallace could say what they did, that the Book of Mormon created a civilization here and opened up a great American frontier.



Love Labor: For if thou dost not want it for food, thou mayest for physic. It is wholesome for thy body, and good for thy mind. It prevents the fruits of idleness, which many times comes of nothing to do, and leads too many to do what is worse than nothing.—JOHN WOOLMAN