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Lauri Hlavaty

Introduction

Central to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and to the great work of the Lord that has begun to roll forth is a community of believers who possess a sound knowledge of the scriptures. If we are to read the scriptures the way Brigham Young taught us—to read them as though we stood in the place of those who wrote them (*Journal of Discourses* 7:333)—it is important for us to understand the spiritual environment of these ancient men. For this reason we should be familiar with the religion of Moses, which is central to our comprehension of the Old and New Testaments, for it is infused in them. Indeed, it is infused into the restored gospel. It should surprise no one that the keystone of our religion, the Book of Mormon, is crucial to our understanding of the religion of Moses, for it contains the gospel of Jesus Christ in its most plain and therefore precious written form. “Behold, my soul delighteth in proving unto my people the truth of the coming of Christ,” Nephi tells us, “for, for this end hath the law of Moses been given.” Furthermore, he explains that “all things which have been given of God from the beginning of the world . . . are the typifying of him” (2 Nephi 11:4). Twenty-five centuries later Joseph Smith taught that “though there were different dispensations, yet all things which God communicated to His people were

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calculated to draw their minds to the great object, and to teach them to rely upon God alone as the author of their salvation” (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* 61; hereafter *TPJS*). Therefore the religion of Moses is evidence of our Heavenly Father’s concern for his children because it was an implement used to teach the gospel to many of his children in the house of Israel.

Before we proceed, we must clarify our definitions. First, the term “religion of Moses” is used here to define the gospel as it was taught by Moses to his rebellious followers. This includes all doctrines, beliefs, covenants, sacrifices, and rituals associated with it. The “religion of Moses” is a constructed term and is not used in the scriptures, but it is used here because the second term, “law of Moses,” is confusing. In the scriptures, “law of Moses” is often synonymous with the carnal commandments, which are only a part of the religion of Moses. But it can also refer to the Pentateuch, and it sometimes means the religion of Moses as a whole. It is difficult, with any given scriptural reference to the law of Moses, to know exactly which definition is being used. In addition, the term in our day carries to us a negative implication of something lifeless.

Our third term is “covenant of Moses,” which refers to the part of the religion of Moses that was not done away with at Christ’s advent. This terminology comes from 3 Nephi 15:8, where Christ states that “the covenant which I have made with my people is not all fulfilled; but the law which was given unto Moses hath an end in me.” Following his example, we distinguish the covenant of Moses from the law of Moses, which together constitute the religion of Moses.

To further define the religion of Moses, a few brief statements follow. The religion of Moses:

1. is of divine origins, being given by Jehovah;
2. is administered by the Aaronic Priesthood, which means that adherents have access to Aaronic Priesthood functions and ordinances, such as baptism;
3. is the gospel without the Melchizedek Priesthood;

4. contains some additions to the gospel, usually called carnal commandments (this is what we usually think of when we think of the law of Moses);
5. is the medium or environment through which the covenant of Moses is taught, particularly to the Old Testament and Book of Mormon peoples, which is another reason why it is important for us to understand;
6. is, in its purity (that is, without the man-made additions), recognizable to us as truth.

The religion of Moses is *not*:

1. a laundry list of commandments, because the Lord does not give laundry lists; nor
2. the ritualistic stiffness accompanied by the letter-of-the-law mentality we often attribute to it—it didn't start out that way, and never was the Lord's intention.

The Religion of Moses Is Curious to Us

“The Church is the same wherever you go!” I grew up hearing this from returning vacationers and from missionaries reporting their missions. And I understood what they meant. They didn't mean that the same hymns were sung elsewhere—though they were—or that everyone used the same lesson manuals, or that everyone thought the same. They meant the gospel felt the same wherever they went. This resulted from the presence of the Holy Spirit, which is the universal way we recognize the things of God. It's the same when you learn something new or see something from a new slant, and suddenly it all makes sense. You know it's right, because it feels right and is consistent with other glimpses of truth that you've had. Therefore it is puzzling that the religion of Moses seems foreign or irrelevant to us. We are a people who have familiarity with the higher law, and one would think that the lower law, which comes from the

same source, would not be a stranger who baffles or bores us. It should feel right, just as our own teachings do.

There are, I think, two reasons why the religion of Moses might seem strange to us. First of all, many distortions, omissions and additions have occurred in the law and its primary record, the Bible. The Bible in its present form is not what it once was. "I believe the Bible as it read when it came from the pen of the original writers," said Joseph Smith. "Ignorant translators, careless transcribers, or designing and corrupt priests have committed many errors" (*TPJS* 327). And referring to the first letter in the Hebrew Genesis, he once taught, "the *Baith* was not originally put there when the inspired man wrote it, but it has been since added by an old Jew" (*TPJS* 371). The Book of Mormon, with typical succinctness, tells us why such changes have occurred: "And all this have they done that they might pervert the right ways of the Lord, that they might blind the eyes and harden the hearts of the children of men"; "also many covenants of the Lord have they taken away" (1 Nephi 13:27, 26). And thus we see, as Mormon would say, that the religion of Moses as recorded in the Old Testament is now imperfect, making it necessary to defer to the Book of Mormon in order to understand it.

Not only has the Bible been changed, but the religion of Moses itself has been added to. On more than one occasion Christ himself severely criticized the Pharisees, the conservative religious leaders of the day. He called them hypocrites, blind fools, snakes, perverters of the law, and murderers of prophets. The tongue-lashing recorded in Matthew 23 came not only because of their personal unrighteousness, but because they changed the law. The proliferation of fences around the original commandments had ossified and corrupted the law, leaving less room for the spiritual aspects of the religion. This tragedy is played out for us in the New Testament, where we see Christ, the Giver of the law, rejected by many who were living the religion of Moses—the schoolmaster that was to bring them to their Messiah.

In spite of this, Christ corrected the woman of Samaria while conversing with her at the well. She asserted that the

religious beliefs of the Samaritans were as good as those of the Jews. He countered, saying, “Ye worship ye know not what: we know what we worship: for salvation is of the Jews” (John 4:22). The religion of Moses was the authorized religion; it was still the carrier of God-given commandments and covenants.

The second reason the religion of Moses is difficult for us to grasp is that cultural differences exist between modern Mormons and ancient Jews. Their revelations came specific to their way of life and were understood through their own cultural context, as are ours. From Doctrine and Covenants 1:24 we learn that “commandments . . . were given unto my servants in their weakness, after the manner of their language, that they might come to understanding.” Nephi teaches a similar concept: “For the Lord God giveth light unto the understanding; for he speaketh unto men according to their language, unto their understanding” (2 Nephi 31:3). Thus, the Lord instructs his children in ways they can understand, not only in their own language, but in their own dialect and according to their own culture. He would not use a graduate-school vocabulary when addressing a 14-year-old boy, nor would he employ Albanian sayings to instruct a Cherokee.

The Hebrews lived long ago, but the gap of time separating us is not as great as the cultural chasm that separates the East from the West. Modern western men and women who live in urban or suburban settings and buy food from sanitized supermarkets are probably steeped in their own culture and might find it difficult to bridge the gap and learn of God from their ancient siblings.

The Covenant of Moses

The precious core of the religion of Moses is the God-given covenant around which the rest revolves. As we know, our Heavenly Father defines his relationship with his children through covenants, and the covenant of Moses is no exception, although it is quite different from the covenant that we are familiar with, which is the covenant of Christ. Under the covenant of

Moses there is no promise of individual blessings, nor is there any promise of eternal salvation. These promises belong to the higher covenant and to the ordinances that are possible through the Melchizedek Priesthood. Just as the Aaronic Priesthood is concerned with spiritual preparation and administration of temporal affairs, so is the covenant of Moses mainly concerned with this world. It is designed to bring about a moral people. With the covenant of Christ, our Heavenly Father's statement of his promise is something like this: "If you keep my commandments and know my Son, you shall be like me and you may live with me forever." It is designed to produce a spiritual being. The covenant of Moses, on the other hand, is more like this: "If you keep my commandments, I will take care of you." The covenant of Moses, like the Aaronic Priesthood, was received without an oath—that is, no eternal promises were exchanged in connection with its reception (see *TPJS* 318-19). The covenant of Moses is beautifully expressed in Leviticus: "If ye walk in my statutes, and keep my commandments . . . I will give you rain in due season, and the land shall yield her increase. . . . I will give peace in the land, and ye shall lie down, and none shall make you afraid. . . . And I will walk among you, and will be your God, and ye shall be my people" (Lev 26:3, 4, 6, 12). There are two significant insights we can glean from this passage. The first is that the covenant of Moses is a promise for temporal salvation. The second is not so obvious and is what makes the covenant of Moses different from "modern" covenants. The "you" that Jehovah is addressing here is plural. (This shows up clearly in Hebrew, but can be ambiguous in modern English.) Normally covenants are one-on-one. I covenant with my Heavenly Father to do a, b, and c, and he rewards me with x, y, and z. But the covenant attendant to the religion of Moses functions differently. This is not a one-on-one covenant, but a covenant that is made with a community. Although the worship practices of the Nephites were strikingly different from those of the Israelites, Nephi, Jacob, Abinadi, and Alma tell us they worshipped "according to the law of Moses" (2 Nephi 5:10; Jacob 4:5; Mosiah 13:27; Alma 25:15).

We can therefore assume that Book of Mormon statements of the covenant of Moses are community promises as well and not individual blessings. King Benjamin is thus explaining a promise of temporal salvation for a community when he says “all that he requires of you is to keep his commandments; and he has promised you that if ye would keep his commandments ye should prosper in the land” (Mosiah 2:22). This is a critical concept. When a Book of Mormon prophet says (and many of them do), “If you keep my commandments you will prosper in the land,” he does not mean that every single person who keeps the commandments will prosper; individuals will still have challenges and difficulties, for that is part of our mortal experience. He means if the people of the community live the commandments, the community will be a prosperous one.

The Book of Mormon vividly portrays the outcome of keeping or breaking the covenant of Moses. We clearly see the roller-coaster pattern where prosperity plunges into economic chaos and war and rises again to peace and prosperity. Mormon explains that spiritual infractions cause hard times and repentance causes peace, for communities and for individuals. The Nephite nation bears silent testimony of the ramifications of keeping or breaking their covenants. The Lord takes his covenants seriously.

This covenant is the pearl of the religion of Moses. But the oyster and the shell of the religion of Moses are also worthy of our attention, and now this discussion will focus on several other aspects of the religion which are positive and good and part of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

A Rational Belief

We live in a rational world today. Because of this, it is difficult for us to appreciate the rationality of the religion of Moses. But if we consider the world in which the Israelites lived, we discover this is one of the great strengths of their religion. The Israelites were always surrounded by people they interacted with, many of whom were wealthier than they and came from lands

that were politically and militarily superior. Many also had more advanced technical skills. These characteristics made foreigners admirable and worthy of imitation to many Israelites. Owing to this, foreigners who continually dealt with Israel—whether Egyptian officials, Assyrian soldiers, or Canaanite neighbors—were able to exert much influence over them, including religious influence. This was always a problem for the Israelites. Their prophets warned them not to worship the gods of others, but they did anyway. The Israelite captivities of 721 and 586 BC bear testimony of their disobedience and disregard for their covenants.

The foreign religions that influenced Israel were very different from our own. Generally speaking, the religious beliefs of the ancient Near East consisted of what we call superstitions. Their religious practices included not only sacrifice, but charms, curses, rituals, and incantations. Magic and worship were often synonymous. The realm of spirits and demons was very much a part of everyday life. For example, an Egyptian mother, fearful that a spirit might harm her child during the night, might utter the following:

Mayest thou flow away, he who comes in the darkness and enters in furtively, with his nose behind him, and his face reversed, failing in that for which he came! . . . I have made his magical protection against thee out of *clover*—that is what *sets an obstacle*—out of onions—what injures thee—out of honey—sweet for men, (but) bitter for those who are yonder—out of the *roe* of the *abdu*-fish, out of the jawbone of the *meret*-fish, and out of the backbone of the perch (Pritchard 328; emphasis in original).

The mother could rest easier, believing her child safe from the unseen.

Chanting the proper words and acting out the proper motions were thought to net the desired results; this was true of worship activities as well. However, living the religion of Moses was to teach them the proper way they must approach Jehovah. No magic or mystical contemplation would bring them to their God; to earn his pleasure they were to do daily what he demanded, whether they were praying, eating or working. Theirs was a rational religion. They were forced, to some extent, to think about

it, and through the years this gave birth to a mode of thinking, a way of viewing the world that was different from their neighbors.

The “Taste-Good” Teachings

While giving a discourse on the nature of God, Joseph Smith observed, “This is good doctrine. It tastes good. . . . I know it is good; and when I tell you of these things which were given me by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, you are bound to receive them as sweet, and rejoice more and more” (*TPJS* 355). There are many facets of the religion of Moses that taste good to us because they are part of the everlasting gospel; we could not begin to discuss them all here. One must read the Book of Mormon and the Old Testament, preferably with the help of the Spirit, to sense the goodness and the love for God which emanates from the religion of Moses. Theoretically, any part of the gospel not specifically designated as a Melchizedek Priesthood privilege or ordinance is part of the religion of Moses. Therefore, most elements of the gospel as we know it would be familiar to someone living the lesser law. For instance, baptism, a function of the Aaronic Priesthood, would be part of the religion of Moses, while receiving the gift of the Holy Ghost, which requires a Melchizedek Priesthood ordinance, is not. Adherence to most of our teachings and commandments is possible without the higher priesthood, but for our purposes we shall list only a few of the “taste-good” teachings offered by the religion of Moses.

According to Bruce R. McConkie, the religion of Moses was given for the purpose of teaching the chosen people “to bridle their passions, to overcome the lusts of the flesh, to triumph over carnal things, and to advance to the place where the Spirit of the Lord could have full flow in their hearts” (435). In other words, it teaches self-discipline to its adherents.

It also teaches concern for others. Because the covenant was a community affair, there was a collective responsibility for correct behavior. The benevolent treatment of strangers was encouraged. Parents were to teach their children to love the Lord,

to keep his commandments, and to support their neighbors in doing so. Christ reiterated this unselfish concern for others when he taught, “Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets” (Matt 7:12; 3 Nephi 14:12).

In addition, it teaches love for God. Some of the most beautiful and Christ-like exhortations and counsels are those taught to people living the religion of Moses. Consider these two examples from Deuteronomy:

And now, Israel, what doth the Lord thy God require of thee, but to fear the Lord thy God, to walk in all his ways, and to love him, and to serve the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul, to keep the commandments of the Lord, and his statutes, which I command thee this day for thy good? Behold, the heaven and the heaven of heavens is the Lord’s thy God, the earth also, with all that therein is. Only the Lord had a delight in thy fathers to love them, and he chose their seed after them, even you above all people, as it is this day. Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no more stiffnecked (10:12-16).

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord: And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up (6:4-7).

These majestic verses remind us of another contribution. We can learn from the inspiration that comes from the dignity and beauty of the poetry itself. We can sense peace and calmness, and the love that we feel for our God can deepen when the spirit of these words touches our hearts. While the Book of Mormon instructs us with a plainness that we simply cannot misunderstand, the Old Testament gives a gift of words that fashion unrivaled spiritual beauty.

Teachings like these, the faith of the Jews, and the inherent rationality of the religion, have helped make Judaism a strong and viable entity to this day, surviving through the millennia as a religious tradition and as a people. The Nephites, in contrast, were

often more righteous and seem to have had more access to the Melchizedek Priesthood, but they have vanished from the earth.

Living the religion of Moses has created a particular world view, in which the temporal nature of the covenant of Moses is apparent. According to Jacob Neusner:

The Jew has been taught to engage realistically in the world's tasks, to do so with a whole heart, yet without the need, or even the power, to regard completion of those tasks as the threshold of a final and completed fulfillment of history. Because of its mode of thinking, Judaism teaches men to take seriously the wide range of worldly problems without expecting that in solving them—provisionally, let alone finally—they might save the world (11).

The Carnal Commandments

While keeping in mind all these things that were going right for the religion, we must now examine modern revelation's criticisms of it. Section 84 of the Doctrine and Covenants informs us that when the Melchizedek Priesthood was taken away, changes were made in the way Israel worshiped, changes that were independent of the loss of priesthood. These changes, the carnal commandments, were additions and variations on the commandments that remained with Israel. Joseph Smith tells us: "It is said again, in Gal. iii:19, that the law (of Moses, or the Levitical law) was 'added' because of transgression. What, we ask, was this law added to, if it was not added to the Gospel? It must be plain that it was added to the Gospel, since we learn that they had the Gospel preached to them" (*TPJS* 60). But we should not assume that the additions, or carnal commandments, were a revealed replacement, given by Moses just before he was gone. It is more likely that the changes were made gradually and the Mosaic law grew into its recognizable form, which is an exquisite elaboration rooted in God-given commandments. This hybrid creation was perennially nourished by giving the mind priority over the heart, and it was watered by not observing the covenant; therefore, it was not exactly what it could have been. Jacob writes:

But behold, the Jews were a stiffnecked people; and they despised the words of plainness, and killed the prophets, and sought for things that they could not understand. Wherefore, because of their blindness, which blindness came by looking beyond the mark, they must needs fall; for God hath taken away his plainness from them, and delivered unto them many things which they cannot understand, because they desired it. And because they desired it God hath done it, that they may stumble (Jacob 4:14).

Abinadi tells us that the Jews couldn't grasp their religion "because of the hardness of their hearts; for they understood not that there could not any man be saved except it were through the redemption of God" (Mosiah 13:32). In the course of time the variations became more important than the theme and finally, in the minds of those not spiritually inclined, grew wild and overpowered the original commandments. It was because of the carnal commandments, so called to distinguish them from the God-given commandments, that Paul and Christ criticize the law of Moses so harshly, and why Nephi is selective in what he teaches his people about the Jews. It was the carnal commandments that angered the Lord, so that "in his wrath" he directed that they continue until the meridian of time (D&C 84:27). This is also why we distinguish between the law and the covenant of Moses, for the implications of each are quite different.

It must be stressed that the real culprit here, as Jacob and Abinadi state, was the unbelief and lack of spirituality that spawned their development rather than the carnal commandments themselves. By themselves they were not harmful, but were "to keep them in remembrance of God and their duty towards him" (Mosiah 13:30). These observances are contained in the Pentateuch.¹ For our purposes, we shall generalize them into two main categories: those codified to define social behavior and those intended to ritualize worship practices, particularly sacrifices.

The carnal commandments concerned with social behavior function as a legal code: that is, they define proper behavior and

¹ See Ex 20:2-17; 22:1-23; all of Lev; Deut 5:6-21; and Deut 12-16 for the Ten Commandments and primary portions of the Old Testament law code.

direct procedure in case of crime or injustice. Their purpose is to maintain stability and well-being within the community, and they tend to show how one should implement in any number of circumstances the Ten Commandments and the commandment to love one's neighbor. For instance, they illustrate how children should behave, how slaves and animals should be treated, and how killers should be dealt with. The rationality inherent in the religion of Moses often presents itself by giving a justifying motive for a commandment, thus idolatry isn't just forbidden, it is forbidden for a reason—because “I the Lord thy God am a jealous God” (Ex 20:5). Also, a benefit of the doubt emerges occasionally. For instance, if a man violates a betrothed woman outside of a town, he is to die, because death is the accepted punishment for adultery, but the woman is spared, because she might have cried for help in vain, with no one around to hear her (Deut 22:25-27).

The legal code also defines the ritualization of sacrifice, which was the principal act of worship among the Israelites. Animal sacrifice was originally established by God with Adam and Eve: “And he gave unto them commandments, that they should worship the Lord their God, and should offer the firstlings of their flocks, for an offering unto the Lord” (Moses 5:5). The original explanation for sacrifice was that it was in “similitude of the sacrifice of the Only Begotten of the Father” (Moses 5:7). By historic times sacrifice had become a widespread religious ritual, and peoples in contact with the Israelites were familiar with it. But the fundamental message—that sacrifice is a type of things to come—had been lost.

The Nephites, however, seemed to have no problem keeping the perspective of the law of sacrifice. To our knowledge they never elaborated it the way the Israelites did. No procedural explanations of sacrifice are present in the Book of Mormon, and only three instances of animal sacrifice are recorded. The first and second (1 Nephi 2:7; 5:9) were performed by Lehi in the wilderness in order to give thanks to God for his family's deliverance. The third was performed when king Benjamin gathered

the people at the temple in Zarahemla and “took of the firstlings of their flocks, that they might offer sacrifice and burnt offerings according to the law of Moses” (Mosiah 2:3). Lehi and Amulek taught that sacrifice was a reminder of the great and last sacrifice of Jesus Christ (2 Nephi 2:7; Alma 34:14). Sacrifice as practiced by the Nephites seems consistent with what Adam was taught.

But sacrifice as recorded in the Old Testament seems to have diverged from the simple ordinance that had once been practiced. Perhaps owing to the Jews’ spiritual blindness explained by Jacob and Abinadi, changes were introduced, and sacrifice became more elaborate. For instance, sacrifices were only to be done at the temple altar. Several kinds of sacrifice developed and were therefore described in the Pentateuch: sometimes the sacrificial victim was completely consumed by fire, and sometimes its blood was sprinkled around the altar and only a portion of the animal was burned, the rest divided between the priest and the sacrificer and then eaten. The acceptable animals were male cattle, sheep, and goats, perfectly formed and healthy. Poor people, however, could substitute birds, but only turtledoves or pigeons (see Lev 1). Wheat, corn, oil, and wine were also acceptable, sometimes as preliminary offerings and in some circumstances as a substitute for animals (see Lev 2). It was this elaboration of sacrifice that constituted an addition to the gospel, not sacrifice per se.

When we compare Israelite sacrifice with Nephite sacrifice and the earlier Adamic sacrifice, it is clear to see how the Israelite practice differed from the other two. When we recall the statements of Jacob and Abinadi citing the Israelites’ hardness of heart, and the Lord’s edict that the law of carnal commandments was to remain with the Jews until the meridian of time because he was angry with them (which he refers to in D&C 84:27), we should not insist that the elaboration of sacrifice was something that pleased Jehovah. It would hardly make sense for him to be angry with the Jews because of the carnal commandments if he had lovingly revealed them. The question that remains for us is this: Did the Israelites completely disregard their God and blatantly

change the ordinance, or was it more a situation similar to Joseph Smith's gaining permission to give the manuscript to Martin Harris, where Deity acquiesces to man's agency? Perhaps the question is academic: allowing people to do what they want and giving them what they want essentially amount to the same thing.

The carnal commandments discussed here, those pertaining to social behavior and the law of sacrifice, are only part of the religion of Moses. The bulk of the commandments and doctrines that comprise the religion of the Israelites are God-given and timeless, practiced before the age of Moses as well as today.

The Law of Circumcision

A study of the religion of Moses would not be complete without a discussion of circumcision, for it was and is the sign of the covenant in Judaism. The ceremony in which an eight-day-old infant is circumcised is called a *b' rith*, which is the Hebrew word for covenant. Anciently the word also could mean "contract" or "treaty," and was used when a political agreement was signed by two kingdoms. Establishing such an agreement was referred to as "cutting" a treaty. Perhaps the cutting away of the foreskin became fixed in the vocabulary as a metaphor for making any kind of agreement. In any event, there was a strong correlation between circumcision and covenant. It seems strange to us that God would institute and perpetuate a covenant with circumcision, and it therefore piques our interest. What was the authority, purpose, and symbolism of circumcision?

We know that circumcision was practiced anciently by many Near Eastern people and not just the house of Israel; the nearby Philistines were an exception. Anthropologists tell us that the practice evolved as a coming-of-age ritual that was performed before marriage, not in infancy (de Vaux 1:47). The first scriptural reference to circumcision is Genesis 17:10, when it was established as the token of the covenant God made with Abraham. Thus, circumcision is not a token of the Mosaic covenant only,

but a token of the covenant instituted before the Melchizedek Priesthood was taken away. Whether or not Abraham was familiar with the practice beforehand is unclear, but it is clear that he was not circumcised until the Lord commanded.

The Joseph Smith Translation of Genesis 17 tells us why circumcision was instituted:

And God talked with [Abraham], saying, My people have gone astray from my precepts, and have not kept mine ordinances, which I gave unto their fathers; and they have not observed mine anointing, and the burial, or baptism wherewith I commanded them; but have turned from the commandment, and taken unto themselves the washing of children, and the blood of sprinkling; and have said that the blood of the righteous Abel was shed for sins; and have not known wherein they are accountable before me. . . . And I will establish a covenant of circumcision with thee, and it shall be my covenant between me and thee, and thy seed after thee, in their generations; that thou mayest know for ever that children are not accountable before me until they are eight years old (vv 4-7, 11).

Therefore, circumcision is a positive replacement for the erroneous doctrines that had surfaced and a sign to remind the people that children are not accountable until they are eight. Moroni corroborates this curious doctrine in the only Book of Mormon passage that mentions circumcision:

Listen to the words of Christ, your Redeemer, your Lord and your God. Behold, I came into the world not to call the righteous but sinners to repentance; the whole need no physician, but they that are sick; wherefore, little children are whole, for they are not capable of committing sin; wherefore the curse of Adam is taken from them in me, that it hath no power over them; and the law of circumcision is done away in me. And after this manner did the Holy Ghost manifest the word of God unto me; wherefore . . . I know that it is solemn mockery before God, that ye should baptize little children (Moroni 8:8, 9).

It is interesting that chapter 2 of Abraham, in which the Abrahamic covenant is again discussed, does not mention circumcision at all. It does, however, reiterate the fact that Abraham's posterity—the seed of his body—would be partakers of this covenant. This is perhaps why circumcision, rather than a pierced ear or tattooed arm, was the emblem of the pre-Christ covenant with Abraham.

And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse them that curse thee; and in thee (that is, in thy Priesthood) and in thy seed (that is, thy Priesthood), for I give unto thee a promise that this right shall continue in thee, and in thy seed after thee (that is to say, the literal seed, or the seed of the body) shall all the families of the earth be blessed, even with the blessings of the Gospel, which are the blessings of salvation, even of life eternal (Abr 2:11).

Circumcision was, it seems, also a reminder of the eternal promises of the Abrahamic covenant. The responsibilities of priesthood, too, are inherent in the Abrahamic covenant, which is why its token of circumcision was by nature only applicable to males. Therefore, circumcision functioned as a sign of covenant, an indictment against erroneous doctrines, and as a reminder of eternal or Melchizedek Priesthood blessings; it was to be done away with at the coming of Christ (although the Saints in Palestine struggled with this for a time). It, like animal sacrifice, was part of the gospel before and after the Mosaic dispensation, and continued until the meridian of time.²

Book of Mormon Instruction

The Book of Mormon allows us to read the religion of Moses in a different light. Its teachings about “the law” are nothing like the Old Testament’s; “no more like than an apple to an oyster,” to quote Thomas More. Three Book of Mormon prophets (Nephi, Jacob, and Abinadi) are particularly enlightening on the religion of Moses, and we defer to them now.

The night Nephi struggled over whether or not to kill Laban, there were three factors that persuaded him to go with it. First, he recalled that the Lord had promised him that his posterity would be included in a covenant similar to that of Moses: “Inasmuch as thy seed shall keep my commandments, they shall prosper in the land of promise” (1 Nephi 4:14). Second, he

² A fourth scriptural reference to circumcision is the curious passage in Exodus 4, where the Lord is angry at Moses, apparently for not circumcising his son or being circumcised himself (Ex 4:24-26). Evidently circumcision had fallen out of use by the Hebrews at this time.

reasoned that “they could not keep the commandments of the Lord according to the law of Moses, save they should have the law” (1 Nephi 4:15). Third, the Lord had commanded him to kill Laban and had made it possible for him to do so. Nephi’s commitment to God deepened considerably with this act of faith, which was partly predicated on the importance Nephi saw in obtaining Moses’ law. Years later, when in their promised land, Nephi found it necessary to separate his followers from his brothers. When settled, they “observe[d] to keep . . . the commandments of the Lord in all things, according to the law of Moses” (2 Nephi 5:10), thus beginning their own tradition of living the religion of Moses. Nephi wanted his people to know that

notwithstanding we believe in Christ, we keep the law of Moses, and look forward with steadfastness unto Christ, until the law shall be fulfilled. For, for this end was the law given; wherefore the law hath become dead unto us, and we are made alive in Christ because of our faith; yet we keep the law because of the commandments. And we talk of Christ, we rejoice in Christ, we preach of Christ, we prophesy of Christ, and we write according to our prophecies, that our children may know to what source they may look for a remission of their sins. Wherefore, we speak concerning the law that our children may know the deadness of the law; and they, by knowing the deadness of the law, may look forward unto that life which is in Christ, and know for what end the law was given. And after the law is fulfilled in Christ, that they need not harden their hearts against him when the law ought to be done away (2 Nephi 25:24-27).

Jacob continues in the footsteps of his brother. His writings too are filled with potent testimony of Christ. It is Jacob who gives us the intent and result of the religion of Moses the most plainly, exposing its beauty and its power: “[The prophets of the brass plates] believed in Christ and worshiped the Father in his name, and also we worship the Father in his name. And for this intent we keep the law of Moses, it pointing our souls to him. . . . Wherefore, we search the prophets” (Jacob 4:5, 6).

Jacob explains that the Jews’ failure was caused by their spiritual blindness, and he prophesies that they will reject Christ when he comes. It seems that their disastrous results with the

religion of Moses made Jacob aware that some might question why the Nephites were living it. He explains that “for this cause [ie, that the religion of Moses points people in the direction of Christ] it is sanctified unto us for righteousness, even as it was accounted unto Abraham in the wilderness to be obedient unto the commands of God in offering up his son Isaac, which is a similitude of God and his Only Begotten Son” (Jacob 4:5).

Jacob also records his debate with Sherem the anti-Christ. Sherem is well-educated and seemingly well-informed about the law; he seems curiously closer to the Old World tradition than the New. His criticism is that the religion of Moses had become too Christ-centered: “And ye have led away much of this people that they pervert the right way of God, and keep not the law of Moses which is the right way; and convert the law of Moses into the worship of a being which ye say shall come many hundred years hence. . . . [T]his is blasphemy” (Jacob 7:7). Sherem confronts Jacob, asks for a sign, is converted, confesses, and then dies. Jacob and his Christ emerge victorious. This account provides us with a dramatic word picture that illustrates and emphasizes Jacob’s teachings, particularly those in Jacob 4:5, 6, and 14. It is as if Sherem were a representation of the Jews who loved the religion of Moses for its own sake, and Jacob were a representation of the Nephites who loved it because it led them to Christ. Just in case there is still any doubt in the reader’s mind as to who was correct, Jacob tells us he was supported by deity in the debate: “But behold, the Lord God poured in his Spirit into my soul, insomuch that I did confound him in all his words” (Jacob 7:8).

Abinadi comes on the scene many generations later, and continues the Nephite tradition of teaching that the religion of Moses is a vehicle to bring people to Christ. He lives among a people who have separated themselves from the main body of Nephites and who are terribly uninformed about their own religion. The priests of king Noah claim they teach the religion of Moses, but when pressed they state that salvation comes from the Mosaic law. Abinadi realizes that converting these people is

next to hopeless, so he begins with the basics—he quotes to them the first and second of the Ten Commandments, and accuses them of neither living nor teaching them. The priests pronounce him mad, and with an awesome dignity Abinadi delivers the message he had been sent to deliver. We are told that “his face shone with exceeding luster, even as Moses’ did while in the mount of Sinai, while speaking with the Lord” (Mosiah 13:5). This is a masterful image that connects Abinadi’s state of spirituality with that of Moses, especially considering the topic of discussion. Abinadi’s message was that salvation does not come by the law alone—“were it not for the atonement, which God himself shall make for the sins and iniquities of his people, that they must unavoidably perish, notwithstanding the law of Moses” (Mosiah 13:28).

He explains that the children of Israel missed the point of their religion because they could not understand the concept of atonement. Atonement is a concept that requires the Spirit for understanding; the intellect doesn’t do very well on its own when contemplating things of the Spirit. But the Spirit is helpless when the heart won’t listen, and Abinadi reiterates Jacob, teaching that spiritual deafness was the chronic disorder that infected the Jews, “for they understood not that there could not any man be saved except it were through the redemption of God.” To prove his point Abinadi continues,

For behold, did not Moses prophesy unto them concerning the coming of the Messiah, and that God should redeem his people? . . . Even all the prophets who have prophesied ever since the world began—have they not spoken more or less concerning these things? Have they not said that God himself should come down among the children of men, and take upon him the form of man, and go forth in mighty power upon the face of the earth? (Mosiah 13:32, 33, 34).

The most striking characteristic of the Nephite view of the religion of Moses, as taught by Nephi, Jacob, and Abinadi, is its ardent Christianity. These prophets are bold in teaching that the law must have a focus and that focus is Christ and his atonement. They teach that the law is a type of things to come, that Moses knew it, and that the Jews failed to see this because they were

spiritually hardened. They are so insistent in their message that misunderstanding it is difficult, if not impossible. The Book of Mormon prophets tell us they are living the religion of Moses, even though their record doesn't seem very Mosaic. But their record is, in fact, very Mosaic. While the rituals, procedures, and carnal commandments never surface, the covenant of Moses is everywhere present. The Book of Mormon stresses the covenant of Moses and underplays the law. The Old Testament, in contrast, makes a great play of the law, while only a careful reading brings out the covenant.

Conclusion

This paper was written in the pursuit of a better understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ. I have come away from it with added respect for the religion of Moses and its adherents on both continents. My *modus operandi* has been to examine the religion of Moses in light of what the Book of Mormon prophets have to say about it. When this is done, a new perspective emerges, a very Christ-centered one. It is not the purpose of this paper to berate anyone, and I am in no way putting black hats on the Israelites and white ones on the Nephites. This is not the judgment seat, and even if it were, traditions are not judged there, only individuals, based on what they know. Nephi, Jacob, and Abinadi said harsh things about the Jews, just as they said harsh things against their own people—and I am convinced they would say harsh things against us, given the opportunity. They were prophets whose task was calling people to repentance and preaching of Christ.

What relevance does the religion of Moses hold for us today? There is a treasure chest full, but there are two points that I would like to emphasize: (1) the gospel is unchanging in its purpose—no matter what the dispensation or whether the Melchizedek (or Aaronic) Priesthood is available, its purpose is to bring individuals to a belief in Jesus Christ; and (2) the covenant of Moses is the Lord's way of providing for his children's

temporal salvation—then and now. If we keep the commandments he will take care of us.

It is my testimony that the Book of Mormon is true. It is my prayer that we may live its precepts and become happier people. May we be more like Jacob and his people, and may we be able to say what he said:

Wherefore, we search the prophets, and we have many revelations and the spirit of prophecy; and having all these witnesses we obtain a hope, and our faith becometh unshaken, insomuch that we truly can command in the name of Jesus and the very trees obey us, or the mountains, or the waves of the sea (Jacob 4:6).

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