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The Beginnings of Christianity in the Book of Mormon

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Kent P. Jackson

There is no question that the gospel of Jesus Christ is central to the Book of Mormon. The title page affirms that the book was written, among other reasons, “to the convincing of the Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the Christ, the Eternal God, manifesting himself unto all nations.” This phrase identifies the Book of Mormon’s two main teachings, or witnesses, that Jesus is indeed the Christ and that he is also the Eternal God. The Book of Mormon bears a powerful testimony to both.

One aspect of the significance of the Book of Mormon is the fact that it is a Christian testimony coming from a time when the knowledge of Christ was limited in the world. God has not always allowed a full understanding of gospel principles to be had among the people of the earth, even among those of the house of Israel. From the days of Moses to the days of Christ, Israel was denied priesthood and gospel blessings that are reserved for the faithful. Because of rebellion against God, the Israelites were restricted in their opportunities and in their knowledge (see D&C 84:23-27; JST, Exodus 34:1-2). Yet the Lord did not

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leave them without a measure of true religion; the law of Moses and its authority of the Aaronic Priesthood were given to the Israelites until they could live in accordance with the higher principles and blessings of the gospel of Christ. Alma taught: "He that will harden his heart, the same receiveth *the lesser portion of the word*; and he that will not harden his heart, to him is given *the greater portion of the word*, until it is given unto him to know the mysteries of God until he know them in full. And they that will harden their hearts, to them is given *the lesser portion of the word until they know nothing concerning his mysteries*" (Alma 12:10-11; emphasis added). Rebellion leads to loss of opportunities, and ancient Israel, through much of its history, suffered the consequences of its rebellious behavior by having much of the message of the gospel withdrawn.¹

The Book of Mormon is a powerful witness of these principles. In it we follow the history of one family of Israelites which proved itself worthy to be blessed with great light and knowledge concerning Christ. Just as the passage quoted above from Alma teaches, when Lehi's descendants were righteous the heavens were opened to them and they learned of Christ. Even a superficial comparison of the content of the Book of Mormon with that of the Bible enables one to see that the level of understanding concerning sacred things was greater among Lehi's descendants than among the people from which they came.² With the separation of Lehi and his family from their native society came a revelation—perhaps more accurately a *restoration*—of gospel principles that were unknown to the mainstream of their countrymen. The records of Lehi, Nephi, and Jacob on the small plates of the Book of Mormon contain sufficient information to demonstrate that with the prophetic callings of Lehi and his sons a restoration of the gospel took place.³

In this study I shall examine some of the key passages and historical events that recount the revelation of Christianity to the family of Lehi.

The Call of Lehi

According to chapter 1 of 1 Nephi, when Lehi was preaching in Jerusalem his message followed the pattern familiar from Old Testament prophets of his time. The thrust of his message concerned the fact that Jerusalem would be destroyed soon and its inhabitants taken away because of their wickedness. According to Nephi, his father was one of “many” prophets in Jerusalem who preached the same message at that time.⁴ In addition to that, Lehi saw in vision “God sitting upon his throne,” “One descending out of the midst of heaven,” and also “twelve others following him” (1 Nephi 1:8-10). The one sitting on the throne is identified as God, but the others—including the “One” who descends—are not identified in that chapter of Nephi’s record. The first of those who descended gave Lehi a book, which he was commanded to read. Nephi made only brief observations regarding its content: Lehi read in it “concerning Jerusalem—that it should be destroyed, and the inhabitants thereof; many should perish by the sword, and many should be carried away captive into Babylon” (1 Nephi 1:13). This is typical of the writings of the other Judahite prophets in Lehi’s generation.⁵

Nephi did not tell us more about the content of the book, but he mentioned that his father was greatly moved as he continued to read and see it in vision. He proclaimed the greatness of the Lord in not allowing those who would come unto God to perish (1 Nephi 1:14). Perhaps Lehi was making reference then to the fact that his own group would be saved from the coming destruction, or perhaps he spoke on a deeper level of God’s power to save from sin. When Lehi preached to the Jews the message that he learned from his visions, he testified of two things: first, that the inhabitants of Jerusalem were wicked and would be destroyed, and second, in Nephi’s words, “of the coming of *a Messiah*, and also the redemption of the world” (1 Nephi 1:19; emphasis added). For these pronouncements Lehi was persecuted, and the Jews attempted to kill him (1 Nephi 1:20).

Nephi’s report of his father’s first vision and its consequences is intriguing. He mentions “One descending

out of the midst of heaven” as though his identity were unknown at the time. Latter-day Saints today would have no hesitation in identifying him as Christ. Since Nephi clearly knew much of Christ when the record was written, his ambiguity on the subject, or that of his father, must have been deliberate.⁶ Perhaps Nephi was telling his readers that his father did not know at the time who the “One descending” was. This is not unlikely, since it is not until 1 Nephi 10 that Lehi began to instruct his children on the topic of Jesus’ mission, giving them information that he had received in later revelations.

As Nephi further related the preaching of his father that followed his first vision, he mentioned that Lehi spoke plainly of one whom he called “a Messiah.” The term *a Messiah*, without a definite article “the,”⁷ is very uncharacteristic of the writing of Nephi, who later wrote of Christ with tremendous force, clarity, and directness. It seems reasonable that Nephi’s writing was intended to convey Lehi’s limited perspective at the time with regard to Christ, his mission, and his identity.

A Vision of Christ

First Nephi 10 paints for us a picture of the unfolding of the knowledge of Christ to Lehi and his people. In this chapter Lehi related to his group things that he had learned through revelation, particularly in the dream that is reported in chapter 8. Nephi’s paraphrase of his father’s teachings contains indefinite articles and in nonspecific references—as Lehi was revealing new and marvelous things to his children. Nephi’s summary in verse 4 is instructive: “Yea, even six hundred years from the time that my father left Jerusalem, *a prophet* would the Lord God raise up among the Jews—even *a Messiah*, or, in other words, *a Savior* of the world” (1 Nephi 10:4; emphasis added). In the next verse Nephi mentioned Jesus again, using the following words: “*this Messiah*, of whom he had spoken, or *this Redeemer* of the world” (1 Nephi 10:5; emphasis added). The power of Christ’s atonement is introduced in the next verse for the first time in the Book of Mormon: “Wherefore, all mankind were in a lost and in a

fallen state, and ever would be save they should rely on *this Redeemer*" (1 Nephi 10:6; emphasis added).

Thus in recounting these early revelations, Nephi used such terms as "a Messiah," "this Messiah," "a prophet," "a Savior of the world," and "this Redeemer"—all in obvious reference to Christ. Nephi's reason for using such language is apparent. These are precisely the kinds of words that one uses with reference to an individual or a concept that is being introduced for the first time. It appears that such was the case with the knowledge of Jesus Christ and the nature of his mission, which were being revealed as new ideas to Lehi and his sons. Nephi, the careful and sensitive historian, preserved the integrity of the event with this kind of language, even though his report of it was written at least three decades later.

It was over forty years after Lehi left Jerusalem that Jacob was visited by an angel who told him that the Messiah's name would be "Christ" (2 Nephi 10:3; see also 2 Nephi 25:19)—the first reference to that name in the Book of Mormon. That name is used very frequently thereafter, for a total of 315 times in the Book of Mormon. The name "Jesus" is not introduced in the Book of Mormon until 2 Nephi 25:19, in a context more than forty years after Lehi's departure from Jerusalem. There Nephi taught that "according to the words of the prophets, and also the word of the angel of God, his name shall be Jesus Christ." Beginning with this first reference, the name "Jesus" is found in common use in the Book of Mormon, and it appears a total of 161 times.

In 1 Nephi 10:7, Nephi began the report of his father's teachings of the mortal works of the Savior, beginning with the ministry of John the Baptist, who would baptize the Messiah (1 Nephi 10:9). Lehi taught his children that the gospel would be preached to the Jews; they would slay "the Messiah, who should come," after which he would rise from the dead. Nephi himself pointed out that "the Messiah who should come" would be the Son of God, giving us the first reference to the paternity of Christ in the Book of Mormon (1 Nephi 10:17).⁸

The Testimony of Nephi

Because Nephi was anxious to see the same things that his father had seen in vision, a vision similar to that of his father was opened to him (1 Nephi 14:29). In addition to giving the interpretation of individual items in Lehi's dream, Nephi's report of his vision provided an expanded prophecy of the future and gave a fuller and deeper interpretation of what Lehi witnessed. The most important part of Nephi's vision was his testimony of the mission of Christ. Nephi's visionary witness of Jesus must have been of extreme significance for him and for his people in later generations. The information concerning the Savior that was revealed to him, Lehi, and Jacob during the early years of their ministries probably formed the foundation for later Nephite and Lamanite belief in Christ's mortal works. Unfortunately, as the subsequent history of their people attests, not all Book of Mormon people believed their message.⁹

Nephi's vision of Christ includes information concerning his mortal coming in Palestine and his glorified coming in the Americas. Adding to the things that had been made known by his father, Nephi taught the following concerning Christ: he would be the Son of God, born to Mary (1 Nephi 11:13-21); he would minister "in power and great glory," blessing the lives of others (1 Nephi 11:24, 28, 31); he would be followed by the Twelve Apostles (1 Nephi 11:29); he would be judged and slain by the Jews (1 Nephi 11:32-33); in the Americas there would be destruction preceding his coming (1 Nephi 12:4-5); he would then appear in glory (1 Nephi 12:6); twelve Nephite disciples would be called (1 Nephi 12:7-10); and three generations of righteousness would follow his appearance (1 Nephi 12:11-12). Because of these things that were revealed concerning Jesus, the Book of Mormon peoples who believed in him were really *Christians*. Their record, therefore, is "Another Testament of Jesus Christ."

The Testimony of the Prophets

As is apparent in several passages, Lehi's and Nephi's

sources of information concerning the mission of Christ were not restricted to revelation and visitations of angels. Lehi and his family members learned of Christ as well through reading the revelations of earlier prophets found on the brass plates. The prophet Zenos's record appears to have been a major written source for Nephi's knowledge of Christ.¹⁰ From it Nephi learned the following: Christ would be buried in a sepulchre. There would be "three days of darkness, which should be a sign given of his death unto those who should inhabit the isles of the sea, more especially given unto those who are of the house of Israel" (1 Nephi 19:10). The Lord would "visit all the house of Israel at that day"—the righteous with his voice and the wicked with his vengeance (1 Nephi 19:11-12). The people of Jerusalem would be scattered because they crucified the Lord, only to be gathered again in the last days when they would accept him (1 Nephi 19:13-15). In the writings of Zenock, Nephi read that the Lord would be "lifted up," and in Neum's record it was foretold that Christ would be crucified (1 Nephi 19:10). But more fully to persuade his people "to believe in the Lord their Redeemer," Nephi read to them from the writings of Isaiah (1 Nephi 19:23), and he reproduced several chapters of Isaiah's words in his own record.

The Testimony of the Book of Mormon

Lehi and his descendants were separated from their Israelite brethren for a special mission, and the testimony which they left for us in their sacred record has blessed the lives of millions of people and will bless the lives of many millions more. The revelation of the gospel of Jesus Christ to Lehi and his sons was the revelation of the gospel to us in the last days. It is significant that the Lord began his latter-day work by bringing into the hands of Joseph Smith a ready-made volume of testimony for Christ. There is no greater testimony for the Lord Jesus Christ than the Book of Mormon. Not only does it bear testimony to the atoning mission of Jesus in mortality, but it also testifies that he is in fact "the Eternal God" (title page), "the God of our fathers, . . . the God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and the

God of Jacob” (1 Nephi 19:10), “the Lord Omnipotent who reigneth, who was, and is from all eternity to all eternity, . . . the Father of heaven and earth, the Creator of all things from the beginning” (Mosiah 3:5, 8), “the very Eternal Father of heaven and of earth, and all things which in them are; . . . the beginning and the end, the first and the last” (Alma 11:39).

Notes

1. For a summary of some of the evidence, see Kent P. Jackson, “The Law of Moses and the Atonement of Christ,” in *Studies in Scripture, Volume 3: The Old Testament—Genesis to 2 Samuel*, ed. Kent P. Jackson and Robert L. Millet (Sandy, Utah: Randall Book Co., 1985), pp. 153-54, 156-59.

2. It is not unreasonable to conclude that the prophets in ancient Israel knew and understood the gospel. While Doctrine and Covenants 84:23-27 tells us that the Melchizedek Priesthood was withdrawn from Israel in Moses’ day, Joseph Smith taught that the *prophets* of Israel did hold it; see *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1976), pp. 180-81. Ancient Israel’s sacred record, written as it was in a time when gospel blessings were not available to all, offers only a few precious passages that speak of Christian doctrine as known in the Church today. Even the Joseph Smith Translation offers little evidence of a widespread or complete understanding of Christianity in the dispensation of Moses.

3. One major problem that one encounters in analyzing the gospel education that Lehi, Nephi, and Jacob received is the nature of the record in which our information is contained: the small plates of Nephi. Nephi wrote that he began his record keeping by making the large plates, which probably happened more than ten years after his family left Jerusalem. He reported that he wrote on them his father’s record, their journeys in the wilderness, and his and his father’s prophecies (1 Nephi 19:1). Thirty or forty years after the departure of Lehi’s family, Nephi made the small plates and wrote on them the record that we have in 1 and 2 Nephi (see 2 Nephi 5:28-34). Our information concerning Lehi’s and Nephi’s early visions thus comes from a record written at least thirty years after many of the events that it describes. In writing his record on the small plates it is likely that Nephi drew from his memory of the events, his father’s written record, his own earlier record on the large plates, and the inspiration of the Holy Ghost. And it is likely that Nephi’s descriptions of those early events reflect his more mature, seasoned, and broadened perspective of later years. For a convenient summary of the sources and structure of the Book of Mormon, see Eldin Ricks, *Story of the Formation of the Book of*

Mormon Plates (Salt Lake City: Olympus Publishing Company, 1966), pp. 1-7.

4. We know of the following who were roughly contemporary with Lehi: Huldah (2 Kings 22:14-20), Jeremiah, Obadiah, Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah.

5. Compare, for example, Huldah in 2 Kings 22:15-17; Jeremiah in Jeremiah 5:1-10; Habakkuk in Habakkuk 1:1-10; and Zephaniah in Zephaniah 1:1-18.

6. For the nature of Nephi's report of his father's experiences, see S. Kent Brown, "Lehi's Personal Record: Quest for a Missing Source," *BYU Studies* 24(Winter 1984): 19-42.

7. In English the definite article is "the," and the indefinite articles are "a" and "an."

8. Brown, p. 36, n. 43.

9. See the arguments of Sherem in Jacob 7:1-21; Korihor in Alma 30:6-60; and the Zoramites in Alma 31:8-17.

10. For comments on Zenos's contributions, see Bruce R. McConkie, "The Doctrinal Restoration," in *The Joseph Smith Translation: The Restoration of Plain and Precious Things*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Robert L. Millet (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1985), pp. 17-18; *A New Witness for the Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1985), pp. 558-59, 563.