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Lesson I. The Book of Mormon

Editor(s): Mary Connelly Kimball

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Abstract: The Book of Mormon—The Records—Manner of keeping the records—The two sets of plates—The custodians of the records—Mormon's abridgment—The divisions of the Book—The books of the hierarchy— The books of the monarchy—The books of the republic—The record of the Jaredites—The Essential Character of the Book—The inspiration of the Book—The Book of Mormon and the Bible—The inspiration of the abridgment—The God consciousness of the keepers of the records—The nature of the themes—Development and progress in the teachings—The fullness of the Gospel to the Nephites.

GUIDE DEPARTMENT.

Teachings of the Book of Mormon.

LESSON I.

THE BOOK OF MORMON.

It is interesting to know that the native races of the Americas practiced the art of writing for untold ages before the coming of the Europeans, and that they kept records of both their religious and their secular history. True, no complete history of the aborigines of America, written by the hand of a native author, can now be found. That fact does not prove, however, that such a history was never written. On the contrary, it is well known that when the Spaniards went to Mexico, there were in that land many collections of invaluable records containing the histories of the past. Most of these records were written upon a kind of paper, which had come generally into use. But the books were destroyed by Spanish vandalism. Then, when the Spanish priests came as missionaries after the conquest there was a still greater destruction of such old books as could be found.

"The Franciscan and Dominican fanatics, whose learning and religion, consisted of ignorance and bigotry, hoped to exterminate among the people all recollection of their former history, ideas, and religious customs."^a

Hence the wholesale destruction by fire of the libraries of the aborigines. But there were libraries; and there were historians and keep-

ers of the records officially appointed.

"It should be known that in all the commonwealths of these countries, in the kingdoms of New Spain and elsewhere, among other professions duly filled by suitable persons was that of chronicler and historian. These chroniclers had knowledge of the origin of the kingdoms, and of whatever related to religion and the gods, as well as to the founders of towns and cities. They recorded the history of kings, and of the modes of their election and succession; of their labors, actions, wars, and memorable deeds, good and bad; of the virtuous men or heroes of former days, their great deeds, the wars they had waged, and how they had distinguished themselves; who had been the earliest settlers, what had been their ancient customs, their triumphs, and defeats. They knew, in fact, whatever pertained to history, and were able to give an account of all past events. * * * These chroniclers had likewise to calculate the days, months, and years; and though they had no writing like ours, they had their symbols and characters through which they understood everything; and they had great books, which were composed with such ingenuity and art that our characters were really of no great assistance to them. Our priests have seen these books, and I myself have seen them likewise, though many were burned at the instigation of the monks, who were afraid they might impede the work of conversion."^b

Now, while it is interesting to know these facts, it is not at all sur-

^aBaldwin, *Ancient America*, p. 189.

^bLas Casas, quoted in *Ancient America*, pp. 187, 188.

prising to find the art of history-making practiced by the native races of America. The peoples of Central America, of Mexico, of North America, and of South America, who were discovered by the Europeans in the dawn of our modern life, were all descended from the Lamanites and Nephites of Book of Mormon days. The Nephites understood well how to keep records of their national history. They had also the record of the Jews. During the thousand years of their national existence, they collected a large library of historical records. Fortunately for us, a record of the history of the Nephites has been preserved. In the providence of God, it was so hidden that it escaped the vandalism of both the soldier of fortune and the priest.

The Book of Mormon, translated from the original plates by Joseph Smith under the inspiration of God, is an abridgment of the many records made and preserved by the Nephites.^c When we read the Book of Mormon we read then a kind of text-book of Nephite history and doctrine compiled from the original sources, much as a school-book on Ancient History is compiled from the inscriptions, tablets, manuscripts, and what not, found in the ancient world. Yet, we are not wholly ignorant of what the original sources were. Indeed, a small part of the Book of Mormon is one of the original sources itself, and from it we learn concerning the others. Nephi, the great founder of the Nephite nation, made with his own hands a set of metal plates, or sheets, upon which he engraved the record of his father and an account of his own life.^d This record

forms the basis and the beginning of all Nephite history. After some thirty years, however, Nephi was commanded by the Lord to make another set of smaller plates on which to record particularly things of a spiritual nature.^e The first set of plates we know as the larger plates of Nephi; the second set we know as the smaller plates of Nephi.

The smaller plates were not continued long after the death of Nephi. From Nephi they passed into the hands of Jacob, and from him in turn to Enos, Jarom, Omni, Amaron, Chemish, Abinadam, Amaleki, and Benjamin the king. Amaleki was the last of these worthies to engrave a record on the small plates. He closes his history thus: "These plates are full. And I make an end of my speaking."^f This was a little over four hundred years after Lehi left Jerusalem. Thereafter the small plates were preserved in the archives with the large plates which were continued from generation to generation, until the fall of the Nephites. A translation of the small plates—an unabridged^g and unaltered original source—forms now the first one hundred and fifty-seven pages of the Book of Mormon.

The larger plates of Nephi presumably were added to and continued. When one set was filled, another set was made. Thus, volume was added to volume until a veritable library of historical records had accumulated. The last official chronicler to whom the historical library came was Mormon. Mormon conceived the happy thought of compiling an abridged history—a text-book of Nephite life and thought—which should retain

^cBook of Mormon, Title-page.

^dI Nephi 1:17.

^eII Nephi 5:30; I Nephi 9:1-6.

^fOmni, v. 30.

as far as possible the inspiration of the original writers. Mormon carried this enterprise almost to completion. Moroni, the last of the Nephites, finished the work his father had begun. With this abridged history of the Nephites, Mormon bound also the smaller plates of Nephi, which had been closed by Amaleki.

Thus were the records of the Nephites kept, and thus was the Book of Mormon prepared. What now are the divisions of the book as we have it in our inspired English translation. First, there are two very important parts. When the Prophet Joseph began to translate Mormon's abridgment of Nephite history he started of course at the beginning of that abridgment. He would have continued naturally to the end, and we should have had a complete translation of all Mormon's abridgment. It happened, however, that when the work was well under way Martin Harris lost the manuscript translation. Then, rather than to translate again the text that he had once gone over, the Prophet laid aside all of Mormon's abridgment of Nephite history up to the reign of King Benjamin, and turned, under the inspiration of the Lord, to the small plates of Nephi. These he translated in full. Then he returned to the abridgment and translated that to the end of Nephite history. Thus it happens that the first part of the Book of Mormon consists of the unabridged small plates of Nephi, whereas the second part consists of the abridgment of Mormon. Then there are other divisions. There are fifteen so-called books in the Book of Mormon, each one named after its original author. Besides, the books of First and Second Nephi may be called the books of the hierarchy. The books from Jacob

to Mosiah inclusive may be called the books of the monarchy. The remaining books of Nephite history—from Alma to Moroni inclusive—may be called the books of the Nephite republic. Finally, the Book of Ether records the history of the rise and fall of the Jaredites, a nation that had dwindled before the Nephites had grown to importance. It is obvious, then, that the Book of Mormon may be variously divided into parts, according to the viewpoint of the student.

Knowing now, *how* the Book of Mormon came to be, we may well ask *what* it claims to be. At first thought, the Book of Mormon seems to be a history—a text-book of ancient Nephite life. So it is; but it is also more than that. If the Book of Mormon were merely an historical record, it could have very little more interest for us than any other ancient history. But there is something peculiar about the Book of Mormon. The chroniclers and historians—the keepers of the records—that were appointed during the making of Nephite history were something more than mere official chroniclers. They were men of God, and prophets. They wrote history under the inspiration of the Spirit of God. They gave to history a spiritual coloring. In short, they wrote history from the viewpoint of God's dealings with men—a kind of secular and ecclesiastical history combined. Consequently, the Book of Mormon is not merely a record of wars and political achievements. It is mainly a record of the spiritual rise, decline, and fall of a large nation, and devotes considerable space to the explanation of Christian doctrines. The Book of Mormon compares then with the Bible. It is exactly the same kind of book. The original writers in both cases were inspired.

The only difference in spirit between the books is this: The later copyists and translators of the Bible were not specially and divinely called men, and often lacked entirely divine inspiration in their work; whereas Mormon was a prophet of God and was divinely inspired in his work of abridgment, and Joseph Smith, also, was a prophet of God, and accomplished the translation of the book under divine inspiration.² To begin with, then, it is claimed for the Book of Mormon that it is a record made, preserved, and translated, by divine inspiration.

Next it may be noted that there is what may be called a conspicuous God-consciousness present with the Book of Mormon writers, and that the themes on which they write are inspired by that God-consciousness. To Nephite historians, God is a reality. He is no idle product of the imagination, nor is He merely the outgrowth of some form of family worship. Moreover, God is to the Nephites a tangible person, and is in very deed, not figuratively, the father of men. He speaks directly to His children when need arises, and He sends special messengers to declare His word. Always is God present through the power of His inspiration; and always the Nephite historians expound Christian doctrine from the viewpoint of this nearness of God, this presence of His spirit, and the reality of spiritual things. And in the inspired record of God's dealings with the Nephites, the historians show, too, how the teachings of the Christ grew, and developed, and progressed, among the people, till the Christ came in person to minister to them. Finally, the Book of

Mormon, recording the dealings of God with the Nephites, expounds also the fulness of the Gospel as it was taught to the Nephites. In no other one ancient record is the Gospel stated so fully and so simply.

It is purposed to study in this year's lessons the most important of the teachings of the Book of Mormon.

LESSON OUTLINE. . . .

- I. The Book of Mormon.
 1. The Records.
 - a. Manner of keeping the records.
 - b. The two sets of plates.
 - c. The custodians of the records.
 - d. Mormon's abridgment.
 2. The divisions of the Book.
 - a. The books of the hierarchy.
 - b. The books of the monarchy.
 - c. The books of the republic.
 - d. The record of the Jaredites.
 3. The Essential Character of the Book.
 - a. The inspiration of the Book.
 - b. The Book of Mormon and the Bible.
 - c. The inspiration of the abridgment.
 - d. The God consciousness of the keepers of the records.
 - e. The nature of the themes.
 - f. Development and progress in the teachings.
 - g. The fullness of the Gospel to the Nephites.

QUESTIONS.

1. When did the native races of the Americas begin to practice the art of writing?
2. What records were found in America by the Spaniards?
3. On what kind of material were these records written?
4. What became of the books found by the Spaniards?
5. How were the chroniclers appointed amongst the kingdoms of New Spain?
6. From whom were the native races of the Americas descended?
7. What became of the records of the Nephites?
8. What is the Book of Mormon?
9. What were the large plates of Nephi?
10. What were the small plates of Nephi?

²Read the testimonies of the witnesses.

11. What became of the small plates?
12. What became of the large plates?
13. What is Mormon's "abridgment?"
14. How did the record of the small plates get into the Book of Mormon?
15. What are the two principal divisions of the Book of Mormon?
16. How many "books" are there in the Book of Mormon?
17. Name the books of the hierarchy.
18. Name the books of the monarchy.
19. Name the books of the republic.
20. What is the Book of Ether?
21. What does the Book of Mormon claim to be?
22. To what extent is God present with the writers of the Book of Mormon?
23. In what measure was the Gospel taught to the Nephites?

LESSON II.

THE FATHER IN HEAVEN.

There is perhaps no other quality of the Book of Mormon more striking than the God-consciousness of its historians and prophets. To them the God of heaven was an ever-present fact. Whether they moved in the field or in the forest, or attended to their duties in religion or in commerce, the great, eternal God overruled the affairs of men. In His providence men lived and died. In the unfolding of His plans, nations rose and fell. According to the divine economy, the world and all that has place therein, were governed and controlled to the accomplishment of the divine purpose. And the existence and the overruling watchcare of the Father in heaven were real. The fact was accepted with unwavering confidence—a confidence in which even the suspicion of doubt found no place. The fact was preached with firm conviction to the unbelieving. Witness the simple preaching of Ammon to King Lamoni:

"Now Ammon being wise, yet harmless, he said unto Lamoni, Wilt thou hearken unto my words, if I tell thee by what power I do these things? and this is the thing that I desire of thee.

"And the king answered him, and

said, Yea, I will believe all thy words; and thus he was caught with guile.

"And Ammon began to speak unto him with boldness, and said unto him, Believest thou that there is a God?

"And he answered, and said unto him, I do not know what that meaneth.

"And then Ammon said, Believest thou that there is a Great Spirit?

"And he said, Yea.

"And Ammon said, this is God. And Ammon said unto him again, Believest thou that this Great Spirit, who is God, created all things which are in heaven and in the earth?

"And he said, Yea, I believe that he created all things which are in the earth; but I do not know the heavens.

"And Ammon said unto him, the heavens is a place where God dwells and all his holy angels.

"And king Lamoni said, Is it above the earth?

"And Ammon said, Yea, and he looketh down upon all the children of men; and he knows all the thoughts and intents of the heart: for by his hand were they all created from the beginning.

"And king Lamoni said, I believe all these things which thou hast spoken. Art thou sent from God?

"Ammon said unto him, I am a man; and man in the beginning, was created after the image of God, and I am called by his Holy Spirit to teach these things unto this people, that they may be brought to a knowledge of that which is just and true;