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4

Robert J. Matthews

The purpose of these yearly symposia is to demonstrate, book by book, the important things the Book of Mormon says to the people in the last days. As you know, the Book of Mormon was written specifically and pointedly for our time. The principles needed for salvation anciently are the same principles needed now. Likewise, the way of apostasy in ancient times is a pattern of apostasy in our day. The Book of Mormon shows how apostasies occur, and the terrible effects that apostasy has in the lives of individuals as well as in groups such as political governments and churches. Men such as Sherem, Nehor, and Korihor are notable examples of individual apostates in the Book of Mormon, and it clearly demonstrates their pride and sophistry. These were intellectual giants, but they were spiritually undeveloped and each fell victim to the cunning of the devil who captured them with an appeal to their carnal and natural desires.

The particular focus of this paper is on group apostasy—the apostasy of a people—which is described and explained in the book of Helaman. In this book we read of the immense damage that came to almost an entire people in just one generation and left them ripened for destruction. In the book of Helaman we read what happens in the Church when people who once were righteous begin to slip into unrighteousness, and we see how

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quickly they lose the strength and wisdom they once had from the Lord. We read also of what happens to a nation when government officials succumb to the temptations for unrighteous power, wealth, and pride.

The book of Helaman graphically illustrates the swift downfall of a people. Covering a short period of 52 years, it shows the rapid change of values and erosion of standards, and presents the alarming transition of a culture that occurred between the time of the book of Alma and the book of 3 Nephi. It is alarming because it happened so quickly. And remember, this is not a novel. This is a record of people who lived and died in the Western Hemisphere. They were real people, and these events really happened. The record is preserved for us to read as a warning.

We are familiar with the account in 3 Nephi, chapters 8 and 9, telling of the great destructions, storms, earthquakes, tempests, lightnings, fires, and darkness, during which the more wicked part of the people were slain. This destruction, so the record states (3 Nephi 9), was sent from God because of their iniquity. The book of Helaman chronicles the rapid decline of their culture into the decadent situation that caused the Lord to remove them from the face of the earth.

The book of Helaman is a record of extremes and of opposites. Among the righteous are Helaman, who was the son of Alma; his sons Nephi and Lehi and Samuel the Lamanite. These men are as righteous and holy as any men we know. At the same time there are Kishkumen, Gadianton, and the Gadianton robbers. These men are as wicked as any we know. During the half-century covered by the book of Helaman there are times of miraculous conversions to the gospel of Jesus Christ, with tens of thousands coming into the Church. On the other hand, there are major problems within the Church because of pride, and there are many dissenters from the Church. In the government, in the short space of 40 years, there are five chief judges slain, four of them by the stealth and intrigue of those who belong to a secret organization with oaths and covenants

designed to protect the guilty from detection. And the fifth chief judge was slain because the government did not provide adequate defenses, due to internal strife. We will read of these events directly from the book itself, for our own words would not be as explicit as is the scripture.

The Decline of Free Government

We shall read a few examples of what happened to the civil government during this time.

1. Because of internal turmoil and conflict, the Nephite state neglected to provide adequate defenses, and the attacking Lamanite army easily conquered the city of Zarahemla. Here are the words:

And it came to pass that because of so much contention and so much difficulty in the government, that they had not kept sufficient guards in the land of Zarahemla; for they had supposed that the Lamanites durst not come into the heart of their lands to attack that great city Zarahemla.

But it came to pass that Coriantumr did march forth at the head of his numerous host, and came upon the inhabitants of the city, and their march was with such exceedingly great speed that there was no time for the Nephites to gather together their armies.

Therefore Coriantumr did cut down the watch by the entrance of the city, and did march forth with his whole army into the city, and they did slay every one who did oppose them, insomuch that they did take possession of the whole city.

And it came to pass that Pacumeni, who was the chief judge, did flee before Coriantumr, even to the walls of the city. And it came to pass that Coriantumr did smite him against the wall, insomuch that he died. (Hel 1:18–21)

2. Because of the general lawlessness it was impossible to maintain order, for citizens had no respect for law, order, or authority. It was a time when the majority of the people chose evil.

And it came to pass that . . . , Nephi delivered up the judgment-seat to a man whose name was Cezoram.

For as their laws and their governments were established by the voice of the people, and they who chose evil were more numerous than they who chose good, therefore they were ripening for destruction, for the laws had become corrupted.

Yea, and this was not all; they were a stiffnecked people, insomuch that they could not be governed by the law nor justice, save it were to their destruction. (Hel 5:1–3)

3. Because those of the secret combinations seduced the people by flattery, and used the system to get themselves duly elected or appointed to the important positions of Nephite government, it was possible for them to practice great wickedness under the protection of the state:

And it came to pass on the other hand, that the Nephites did build them up and support them, beginning at the more wicked part of them, until they had overspread all the land of the Nephites, and had seduced the more part of the righteous until they had come down to believe in their works and partake of their spoils, and to join with them in their secret murders and combinations.

And thus they did obtain the sole management of the government, insomuch that they did trample under their feet and smite and rend and turn their backs upon the poor and the meek, and the humble followers of God.

And thus we see that they were in an awful state, and ripening for an everlasting destruction.

And it came to pass that thus ended the sixty and eighth year of the reign of the judges over the people of Nephi. (Hel 6:38–41)

While all of this was happening, the prophet Nephi was away on a mission tour. When he returned to Zarahemla from the land northward, he was startled and saddened to see how quickly the manner of the people had changed.

And seeing the people in a state of such awful wickedness, and those Gadianton robbers filling the judgment-seats—having usurped the power and authority of the land; laying aside the commandments of God, and not in the least aright before him; doing no justice unto the children of men;

Condemning the righteous because of their righteousness; letting the guilty and the wicked go unpunished because of their money; and moreover to be held in office at the head of government, to rule and do according to their wills, that they might get gain and glory of

the world, and, moreover, that they might the more easily commit adultery, and steal, and kill, and do according to their own wills—

Now this great iniquity had come upon the Nephites, in the space of not many years. . . . (Hel 7:4–6)

Seeing this great and rapid change in the affairs of the people was a shock to Nephi.

The Secret Murders of Four Chief Judges

Here is a summary of the murders of four chief judges: Pahoran (51 BC); Cezoram (26 BC); the son of Cezoram (26 BC), and Seezoram (about 23–20 BC).

Pahoran, 51 BC

Now when those people who were desirous that [Paanchi] should be their governor saw that he was condemned unto death, [and that Pahoran was appointed by the voice of the people] therefore they were angry, and behold, they sent forth one Kishkumen, even to the judgment-seat of Pahoran, and murdered Pahoran as he sat upon the judgment-seat.

And he was pursued by the servants of Pahoran; but behold, so speedy was the flight of Kishkumen that no man could overtake him.

And he went unto those that sent him, and they all entered into a covenant, yea, swearing by their everlasting Maker, that they would tell no man that Kishkumen had murdered Pahoran.

Therefore, Kishkumen was not known among the people of Nephi, for he was in disguise at the time that he murdered Pahoran. And Kishkumen and his band, who had covenanted with him, did mingle themselves among the people, in a manner that they all could not be found. . . . (Hel 1:9–12)

Cezoram, 26 BC

And it came to pass that in the sixty and sixth year of the reign of the judges, behold, Cezoram was murdered by an unknown hand as he sat upon the judgment-seat. (Hel 6:15)

Son of Cezoram, 26 BC

And it came to pass that in the same year, that his son, who had been appointed by the people in his [father's] stead, was also murdered. And thus ended the sixty and sixth year. (Hel 6:15)

Seezoram, between 23–20 BC

There is a dramatic account of the murder of Seezoram and of Nephi's public announcement and detection of the murderer. In exhorting the Nephites because of their wickedness, Nephi says:

Yea, even at this time ye are ripening, because of your murders and your fornication and wickedness, for everlasting destruction; yea, and except ye repent it will come unto you soon.

Yea, behold it is now even at your doors; yea, go ye in unto the judgment-seat, and search; and behold, your judge is murdered, and he lieth in his blood; and he hath been murdered by his brother, who seeketh to sit in the judgment-seat.

And behold, they both belong to your secret band, whose author is Gadianton and the evil one who seeketh to destroy the souls of men. (Hel 8:26–28)

Because the people did not at first believe what Nephi said, they sent five men to investigate. When these five reached the judgment seat, they saw that the judge had fallen and was lying in his own blood. They then believed Nephi, not only in his prediction about the death of the judge, but they also decided that all the words of Nephi were true, even those about the judgments that were soon to come upon them.

However, a complication developed: some of the people said that Nephi had conspired with these five men to deceive the people, whereupon, the five were put into prison. Some of the judges thought that this whole event was contrived so as to make Nephi look like a prophet, a great man chosen of God. Some of the judges accused Nephi of having agreed with someone to murder the chief judge and they put him in prison. They offered him money and promised him his life if he would confess his scheme and identify the man. At this point Nephi said to them:

Behold I say unto you: Go to the house of Seantum, who is the brother of Seezoram, and say unto him—

Has Nephi, the pretended prophet, who doth prophesy so much evil concerning this people, agreed with thee, in the which ye have murdered Seezoram, who is your brother?

And behold, he shall say unto you, Nay.

And ye shall say unto him: Have ye murdered your brother?

And he shall stand with fear, and wist not what to say. And behold, he shall deny unto you; and he shall make as if he were astonished; nevertheless, he shall declare unto you that he is innocent.

But behold, ye shall examine him, and ye shall find blood upon the skirts of his cloak.

And when ye have seen this, ye shall say: From whence cometh this blood? Do we not know that it is the blood of your brother?

And then shall he tremble, and shall look pale, even as if death had come upon him.

And then shall ye say: Because of this fear and this paleness which has come upon your face, behold, we know that thou art guilty.

And then shall greater fear come upon him; and then shall he confess unto you, and deny no more that he has done this murder.

And then shall he say unto you, that I, Nephi, know nothing concerning the matter save it were given unto me by the power of God. And then shall ye know that I am an honest man, and that I am sent unto you from God.

And it came to pass that they went and did, even according as Nephi had said unto them. And behold, the words which he had said were true; for according to the words he did deny; and also according to the words he did confess.

And he was brought to prove that he himself was the very murderer, insomuch that the five were set at liberty, and also was Nephi.

And there were some of the Nephites who believed on the words of Nephi; and there were some also, who believed because of the testimony of the five, for they had been converted while they were in prison. (Hel 9:26–39)

Pacumeni, who was also a chief judge, had earlier been slain in battle due to the neglect of the government, brought about by internal difficulties, as we have already noted (Hel 1:21). Governmental problems were great and life was in turmoil.

Even a Good Form of Civil Government Fails in Times of Wickedness

Helaman 5:2–3 contains a very significant concept pertaining to civil government that we would do well to notice and read

again, even though we have referred to it earlier. The passage reads as follows:

For as their laws and their governments were established by the voice of the people, and they who chose evil were more numerous than they who chose good, therefore they were ripening for destruction, for the laws had become corrupted.

Yea, and this was not all; they were a stiffnecked people, insomuch that they could not be governed by the law nor justice, save it were to their destruction. (Hel 5:2–3)

In other words, in a democracy or a republic when the majority of the people desire wickedness and become more numerous than they who choose righteousness, the people can no longer be governed by law or by justice. This principle applies to our own form of constitutional government. We who live in the United States tend to feel that we would always be protected by the Constitution. However, some experienced political scientists and jurists have said that if the day ever comes that the majority favor that which is morally wrong, we as a people would not be safe—even with the Constitution. Here are some reasons why.

Direct democracy is impractical in a large population, so representatives appointed by the voice of the people are necessary. The principle of popular sovereignty is perhaps the most important fundamental of our government. Concerning this matter Elder Dallin H. Oaks, speaking in Provo, Utah, in 1987, at a Freedom Festival honoring the United States Constitution explained:

The people are the source of government power. . . . God gave the power to the people, and the people consented to a constitution that delegated certain powers to the government. Sovereignty is not inherent in a state or nation just because it has the power that comes from force of arms. . . . The sovereign power is in the people. . . . *Popular sovereignty necessarily implies popular responsibility.* . . . There is divine inspiration in the fundamental underlying premise of this whole constitutional order. All the blessings enjoyed under the United States Constitution are dependent upon the rule of law. . . . The rule of law is the basis of liberty. (72–73; emphasis added)

Later in the same year, Elder L. Tom Perry, speaking on 17 September 1987 at a Brigham Young University assembly honoring the Constitution of the United States, quoted extensively from Elder Oaks' address, and also noted the need for morality and righteousness in order to preserve our political freedom. In making this point Elder Perry quoted President John Adams, as saying: "We have no government armed with power capable of contending with human passions, unbridled by morality and religion" (27–35). Elder Perry added, "We are facing this situation to a degree in the world today. Therefore, we have the responsibility to remain unspotted from the world, to be upright and honest in all our dealings, to *set the example*" (34).

John Adams often expressed his conviction that a nation's liberty is ultimately dependent upon the morality of the people. President Adams is quoted as saying: "[The Constitution] was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other" (Nelson 101).

When king Mosiah was about to establish the system of judges among the Nephites in 92 BC, he discussed the matter of doing business by the voice of the people:

Now it is not common that the voice of the people desireth anything contrary to that which is right; but it is common for the lesser part of the people to desire that which is not right; therefore this shall ye observe and make it your law—to do your business by the voice of the people. (Mosiah 29:26)

But what happens if and when the majority desires that which is wrong? King Mosiah explained in the next verse:

And if the time comes that the voice of the people doth choose iniquity, then is the time that the judgments of God will come upon you; yea, then is the time he will visit you with great destruction even as he has hitherto visited this land. (27)

The point that is made here is that the *form* of government may not be as important in obtaining and maintaining freedom as is the *attitude* of the people who are governed. What the

majority desire long enough they will eventually obtain, and even good laws cannot permanently protect a people if the majority desire things unsupportive of freedom. King Mosiah also said that if all people were righteous, a kingdom would be entirely satisfactory, but since all are not so, a system of judges and representative government is safer. We should here observe that the government of heaven, which has perfect freedom and liberty, is a kingdom—the celestial kingdom—not the celestial democracy or celestial commonwealth.

Frances J. Grund, a European by birth and a keen observer of American life in the nineteenth century, was impressed with the morality of early U.S. citizens, but also spoke of the danger that could come to our nation if the majority of the people departed from integrity, honesty, and morality:

I consider the domestic virtue of the Americans as the principal source of all their other qualities. It acts as a promoter of industry, as a stimulus to enterprise, and as the most powerful restrainer of public vice. It reduces life to its simplest elements, and makes happiness less dependent on precarious circumstances; it ensures the proper education of children, and acts, by the force of example, on the morals of the rising generation: in short, it does more for the preservation of peace and good order, than all the laws enacted for that purpose; and is a better guarantee for the permanency of the American government, than any written instrument, the constitution itself not excepted.

No government could be established on the same principle as that of the United States, with a different code of morals. The American Constitution is remarkable for its simplicity; but it can only suffice a people habitually correct in their actions, and would be utterly inadequate to the wants of a different nation. Change the domestic habits of the Americans, their religious devotion, and their high respect for morality, and it will not be necessary to change a single letter in the Constitution in order to vary the whole form of their government. The circumstances being altered, the same causes would no longer produce the same effects; and it is more than probable, that the disparity which would then exist between the laws and the habits of those whom they are destined to govern, would not only make a different government desirable, but absolutely necessary, to preserve the nation from ruin. (Grund 71–72)

What this all means is that the majority rules, but sometimes the majority is not morally right. And when it is not morally right,

the governmental structure that once protected the righteous then protects the wicked in their wickedness.

We thus see how the Nephite government even under the reign of the judges, which was a form of free government with provision to control and limit the influence of unrighteous and ambitious judges and other citizens, succumbed to the Gadian-ton robbers. It was because “their laws and their governments were established by the voice of the people” (Hel 5:2), and when the majority desired that which was not right, a condition was created in which the people could no longer be governed by the law. It appears that we are faced with that situation, to a degree, in the world today, and perhaps that is the reason there is so much internal strife and so much difficulty in promoting the general welfare of the people. Remember, the wickedness that is spoken of is a rejection of the gospel of Jesus Christ. If such a condition continues long enough, the power and authority of God will eventually intervene and destroy that nation as was the case of the destruction in 3 Nephi.

Difficulties in the Church Among the Nephites

Let us now read some of the major passages that relate to the troubles that arose in the Church during the book of Helaman.

1. Nephite church members who once had superior strength and wisdom given from God degenerated and became weak.

Now this great loss of the Nephites, and the great slaughter which was among them, would not have happened had it not been for their wickedness and their abomination which was among them; yea, and it was among those also who professed to belong to the church of God.

And because of this their great wickedness, and their boastings in their own strength, they were left in their own strength; therefore they did not prosper, but were afflicted and smitten, and driven before

the Lamanites, until they had lost possession of almost all their lands. . . .

And they saw that they had become weak, like unto their brethren, the Lamanites, and that the Spirit of the Lord did no more preserve them; yea, it had withdrawn from them because the Spirit of the Lord doth not dwell in unholy temples—

Therefore the Lord did cease to preserve them by his miraculous and matchless power, for they had fallen into a state of unbelief and awful wickedness; and they saw that the Lamanites were exceedingly more numerous than they, and except they should cleave unto the Lord their God they must unavoidably perish.

For behold, they saw that the strength of the Lamanites was as great as their strength, even man for man. And thus had they fallen into this great transgression; yea, thus had they become weak, because of their transgression, in the space of not many years. (Hel 4:11, 12, 24–26)

2. They no longer believed in the miracles associated with the gospel of Jesus Christ, and as a consequence of their apostasy, the people made “a mock of that which was sacred, denying the spirit of prophecy and of revelation” (Hel 4:12).

3. Many dissented from the Church, which began to fail in its purpose and mission.

And in the fifty and first year of the reign of the judges there was peace also, save it were the pride which began to enter into the church—not into the church of God, but into the hearts of the people who professed to belong to the church of God— . . . And it came to pass that the fifty and second year ended in peace also, save it were the exceedingly great pride which had gotten into the hearts of the people; and it was because of their exceedingly great riches and their prosperity in the land; and it did grow upon them from day to day. (Hel 3:33, 36)

And it came to pass in the fifty and fourth year there were many dissensions in the church, and there was also a contention among the people, insomuch that there was much bloodshed. . . .

And because of their iniquity the church had begun to dwindle; and they began to disbelieve in the spirit of prophecy and in the spirit of revelation; and the judgments of God did stare them in the face. (Hel 4:1, 23).

It would be well to note here that about 50 years previous, the prophet Alma had warned the Nephites that if they were to

fall into transgression they would be destroyed by the Lord. Here are his words:

For he will not suffer you that ye shall live in your iniquities, to destroy his people . . . after having had so much light and so much knowledge given unto [you] of the Lord [your] God;

Yea, after having been such a highly favored people of the Lord; yea, after having been favored above every other nation, kindred, tongue, or people; . . .

Having been visited by the spirit of God; having conversed with angels, and having been spoken unto by the voice of the Lord; and having the spirit of revelation, and also many gifts, the gift of preaching, and the gift of the Holy Ghost, and the gift of translation;

. . . having been saved from famine, and from sickness, and all manner of diseases of every kind; and they having waxed strong in battle, that they might not be destroyed; having been brought out of bondage time after time, and having been kept and preserved until now; and they have been prospered until they are rich in all manner of things—

And now behold I say unto you, that if this people, who have received so many blessings from the hand of the Lord, should transgress contrary to the light and knowledge which they do have . . . it would be far more tolerable for the Lamanites than for them.

For behold, the promises of the Lord are extended to the Lamanites, but they are not unto you if ye transgress. . . . (Alma 9:19–24)

Alma's words were about to be fulfilled in the books of Helaman and 3 Nephi.

4. The Lamanites, being more righteous than the Nephites, sent missionaries to the Nephites (Hel 5:49–52; 6:1–9).

5. Nephi persuaded the Lord to withhold the rain, which caused a famine, and the people began to repent (Hel 11:1–21).

6. The Lord sent Samuel the Lamanite to warn the Nephites against their wickedness, and to announce the signs of Christ's birth and of his death (Hel chapters 13–16).

As additional evidence of the unbelief and apostasy, the record states that some "began to depend upon their own

strength and upon their own wisdom” (Hel 16:15), and refused to accept the doctrine of Christ, saying:

That it is not reasonable that such a being as a Christ shall come; if so, and he be the Son of God, the Father of heaven and of earth, as it has been spoken, why will he not show himself unto us as well as unto them who shall be at Jerusalem?

Yea, why will he not show himself in this land as well as in the land of Jerusalem?

But behold, we know that this is a wicked tradition, which has been handed down unto us by our fathers, to cause us that we should believe in some great and marvelous thing which should come to pass, but not among us, but in a land which is far distant, a land which we know not; therefore they can keep us in ignorance, for we cannot witness with our own eyes that they are true. . . .

And notwithstanding the signs and the wonders which were wrought among the people of the Lord, and the many miracles which they did, Satan did get great hold upon the hearts of the people upon all the face of the land.

And thus ended the ninetieth year of the reign of the judges over the people of Nephi.

And thus ended the book of Helaman, according to the record of Helaman and his sons. (Hel 16:18–20, 23–25)

As Samuel the Lamanite points out, it is the nature of us mortal, fallen beings to praise those who flatter us, and to reject the prophets who warn us and who could have helped us.

Apostasy and Total Cultural Degeneration Can Occur in One Generation

Three times the book of Helaman makes the point that all of these tragic circumstances, both in the government and in the Church, came upon the people in a very short time. The civilization, honor, dignity, happiness, order, wisdom, strength, and character of a once righteous nation can be wasted and lost in one generation. Here are the passages:

. . . And thus had they fallen into this great transgression; yea, thus had they become weak, because of their transgression, in the space of not many years. (Hel 4:26)

And it came to pass that all these iniquities did come unto them in the space of not many years, insomuch that a more part of it had come unto them in the sixty and seventh year of the reign of the judges over the people of Nephi. (Hel 6:32)

Now this great iniquity had come upon the Nephites, in the space of not many years; and when Nephi saw it, his heart was swollen with sorrow within his breast; and he did exclaim in the agony of his soul:

Oh, that I could have had my days in the days when my father Nephi first came out of the land of Jerusalem, that I could have joyed with him in the promised land; then were his people easy to be entreated, firm to keep the commandments of God, and slow to be led to do iniquity; and they were quick to hearken unto the words of the Lord—

Yea, if my days could have been in those days, then would my soul have had joy in the righteousness of my brethren. (Hel 7:6–8)

Why does destruction occur so quickly? Because the people lose the Spirit and fail to teach their children the doctrine of righteousness and to worship Jesus Christ. The rising generation will not know the history and the doctrine unless they are taught. And if not taught the doctrine, children are unprepared to cope with life's greatest problems. People need a reason not to commit sin; the gospel gives us that reason.

Conclusion

What does all of this portend for us, and what lessons could we learn from the book of Helaman? Perhaps it is this:

1. Since the Book of Mormon was written for our time and the Lord would have known that the same kinds of dangers and threats to the Church and to the government would exist in our day, we have been given a pattern showing how a previous people fell victim.

2. Being warned of the problems, and seeing what occurred to the Nephites, we ought to be especially desirous not to have it happen to us, either in the Church or in the government.

3. The pattern in the book of Helaman shows the symptoms of apostasy: confusion, distress, fear, turmoil, strife,

seduction, deceit, unhappiness, famine, and sorrow. These are accompanied by a lack of belief in spiritual gifts such as prophecy and revelation which are always found in the gospel of Jesus Christ. These symptoms appear in individuals and also among groups.

4. If we detect the symptoms in our twentieth century culture such as a lack of respect for authority, the assassination of public officials, a lack of trust in the doctrines of Jesus Christ, or a cessation of miracles, we should be concerned. If we see spiritual things being replaced by rationalism, humanism, materialism, and skepticism, with many dissenters from the Church, we may be assured that the same forces are at work among us that were at work among the ancient Nephites. It is as the Lord warned the Church in 1831: "Beware of pride, lest ye become as the Nephites of old" (D&C 38:39).

5. And last of all, we learn from the Book of Mormon that a great civilization can be lost in a very short time—in this case, in the short space of 50 years, largely because the children were not taught the right things, leaving the rising generation adrift in a sea of wickedness.

We can be assured that in our day the same results will follow the same causes, as was the case anciently.

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