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Author(s): Rodney Turner

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Rodney Turner

Introduction

President Ezra Taft Benson has repeatedly stated that the Book of Mormon was written for our day (*The Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson* 58-65; hereafter *TETB*). The most compelling issues confronting our bewildered world were anticipated by the Lord, and they form the inspired content of the Book of Mormon. The winds of opinion blow from every direction. What is ultimately right? What is ultimately just? What ultimately matters? The Book of Mormon answers these questions as it forges the things of time and the things of eternity into one great truth. This truth is the way—the only way—to genuine peace and happiness in this life, and salvation in the life to come.

The need for the Book of Mormon grows by the day as the tempo of our times accelerates toward the prophesied polarization of good and evil (see D&C 1:35-36; 38:11-12). Certainly no generation since the Flood has had a greater need for one particular message in this latter-day scripture: the vital importance of personal morality both before and during marriage. President Benson has said, “The plaguing sin of this generation is sexual immorality” (*TETB* 277; “Cleansing the Inner Vessel” 4). Unchastity and marital infidelity have become virtually pandemic in the Western world. While these sins are by no means new,

Rodney Turner is emeritus professor of Ancient Scripture at Brigham Young University.

historically they have been preponderantly male vices. But no more. Now millions upon millions of females are demanding equality in them, as well as in most everything else, and are joining their male counterparts in such behavior.

Our moral environment is far more polluted than our physical environment. It seems as though good and evil are being homogenized out of existence by a generation largely led by “foolish and blind guides” (Hel 13:29). What was once whispered in shame is now electronically shouted from the housetops as the famous and the foolish appear on television to parade their sins, like so many medals, before laughing, applauding audiences. Every aspect of modern communication seems to have been appropriated by Satan to legitimize the everlastingly illegitimate. It is imperative that Latter-day Saints view these times from a gospel perspective and follow the counsel of our prophet by taking warning from the teachings—and the fate—of an earlier generation of Americans, the Nephites.

Immorality in the Book of Mormon

The Book of Mormon hardly mentions the purity of the marital relationship except in a very general way. Fidelity is simply assumed. While unchastity is cited in connection with other sins, only Jacob, Alma, and Jesus discuss the problem at any length (see Jacob 2:31-33; 3:5-7; Alma 39:3-14; 3 Nephi 12:31-32). In each instance the issue is unchastity on the husbands' part. Wives are mentioned either in connection with concubines or with children, but again, only in general terms. We find a similar situation in the words of Jesus in the Four Gospels. There, the purity of the marital relationship seems to be included with all other human relationships. Being so, it is covered by the two great commandments: love of God and love of neighbor. Certainly one's closest neighbor is one's wife or husband.

The Ten Commandments constituted the basic, general moral code of the Nephites, as it did for the rest of Israel. The

law of Moses was reflected in the inspired law of Mosiah—the governing law of the Nephites in times of righteousness (see Mosiah 29:11-15; Alma 11:1; Hel 4:22). Describing the law of Mosiah, Mormon wrote that every man was free to believe as he chose, “but if he murdered he was punished unto death; and if he robbed he was also punished; and if he stole he was also punished; and if he committed adultery he was also punished; yea, for all this wickedness they were punished” (Alma 30:10).

Parenthetically may I add that we, too, have laws against various forms of immorality; but all too often they are written on the wind. An unenforced law has no practical existence; it is only a facade of justice. Worse, not enforcing a law tends to cloud the legitimacy of all laws. For example, the popular argument that capital punishment should be abolished because it does not deter murder is specious. But even if this were the case, the real issue is not deterrence, but justice. If failure to deter crime warrants abolishing a given law, God should revoke the Ten Commandments since countless millions of men and women violate them every day! As yet, however, he hasn’t seen fit to do so. Law serves to define the parameters of appropriate behavior. It is not meant to ensure conformity.

But to return to the point. The vast majority of statements on moral behavior in the standard works deal with violations of the law of chastity.¹ Those in the Book of Mormon, unlike some incidents in the Old Testament, are (with one possible exception) never described in any detail. Book of Mormon terminology is even less jarring than some in the Bible. For example, in referring to prostitutes, the Book of Mormon uses the words *harlot* and *harlots* (a total of four times) rather than the harsher Anglo-Saxon biblical term *whore*, which is used in the Book of Mormon only in reference to the great and abominable church, as it is in the book of Revelation.

¹ In the Book of Mormon, Jacob and Jesus are the only ones to refer specifically to adultery as such. The last reference is by Christ in his restatement of the Sermon on the Mount (see 3 Nephi 12:27-28, 32).

Abominations

The plural word *whoredoms* (used 27 times) is the general Book of Mormon term for unchastity in all of its forms. *Abominations* is a broader term and covers every thought, deed, and attitude that is offensive to a God who “cannot look upon sin with the least degree of allowance” (Alma 45:16; D&C 1:31). All mankind is guilty of abominations. Whether we call it sin, iniquity, wickedness, evil, or what have you, it is all abomination; it is all reflective of a carnal mind and, therefore, of ungodliness.

Harlotry

It is apparent that to some extent harlotry, or prostitution, existed among the Nephites at certain periods of their history. However, there are only two specific instances actually cited in the Book of Mormon. The first is in connection with king Noah and his priests in the land of Nephi about 150 BC. Mormon writes that king Noah “spent his time in riotous living with his wives and concubines; and so did also his priests spend their time with harlots” (Mosiah 11:14). In confronting the king and his priestly supporters, the prophet Abinadi asked: “Why do ye commit whoredoms and spend your strength with harlots?” (Mosiah 12:29).

The second instance involves Alma’s young missionary son Corianton who, while engaged in the ministry, succumbed to the wiles of a popular harlot named Isabel “who did steal away the hearts of many” (Alma 39:4). She appears to have been an outcast from polite Nephite society since her home was in “the land of Siron, among the borders of the Lamanites” (Alma 39:3). This need not mean that she was a Lamanite or that she lived among them. It is more likely that she lived among other harlots in a notorious district of the land. Hence Alma’s counsel to Corianton: “Suffer not the devil to lead your heart away again after those wicked harlots” (Alma 39:11).

It is noteworthy that harlotry per se is not mentioned in connection with the Lamanites. Jacob's commendation of them in the late sixth century BC ("Behold, their husbands love their wives, and their wives love their husbands" [Jacob 3:7]) was in sharp contrast to the whoredoms which he accused the Nephites of committing. Spiritually benighted though they were, the early Lamanites had one vital, redeeming virtue: fidelity in marriage. And this virtue rendered them "more righteous" (Jacob 3:5) in God's sight than their enlightened Nephite brethren who had the gospel, the church, and prophets to guide them.

Indeed, it was because of their superior spiritual blessings that the Nephites stood the more condemned. "For of him unto whom much is given much is required; and he who sins against the greater light shall receive the greater condemnation" (D&C 82:3). Because of this principle, no one today faces so severe a judgment as do the Latter-day Saints. The Lord not only judges the sin, but also the spiritual context in which it is committed. This was the basis for the Prophet Joseph Smith's sincere self-characterization: "I do not want you to think that I am very righteous, for I am not, God judges men according to the use they make of the light which He gives them" (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* 303; hereafter *TPJS*). Sin is measured against the light in which it is committed. Hence the Lord's condemnation of those early Latter-day Saints who were "walking in darkness at noon-day" (D&C 95:6).

Although the Nephites were repeatedly denounced for their immorality, there is but a single, somewhat ambiguous reference to such misconduct on the part of the Lamanites. In a proclamation by their then-converted king, he admonished (did not accuse) his people to avoid all sins, including adultery (Alma 23:3). Of course, it is very unlikely that all of the Lamanites observed the law of chastity, but it appears that sexual immorality was not one of their dominant, pervasive sins.

Even at the close of the record where Mormon graphically describes the degenerate behavior of both the Nephite and the Lamanite armies during the final battles between those two

peoples, it was the Nephites, not the Lamanites, who raped and murdered captive women (see Moroni 9:7-10). Sexual immorality was essentially a Nephite crime and remained so until their final destruction.

Thus, in the Book of Mormon the charge of whoredoms is leveled against the enlightened groups, the Jaredites and the Nephites, but not the Lamanites. And because the early Lamanites kept the commandment against plural marriage, concubinage, and whoredoms, Jacob told the Nephites that “the Lord God will not destroy them; and one day they shall become a blessed people” (Jacob 3:6). While this promise was fulfilled in a measure when the resurrected Redeemer appeared in AD 34, its greater fulfillment awaits his glorious return in these latter days.

The Three Greatest Sins

Obviously some sins are more abominable, more destructive of spirituality, more alienating from the Lord, than others, but all take their toll (see Alma 26:24; 41:11). The three “most abominable,” or taking the greatest toll, are identified as such only in the Book of Mormon and only by the prophet Alma. He declared them to be (in order of gravity) denying the Holy Ghost, murder, and sexual immorality.

To deny the Holy Ghost is to deny the undoubtable witness of the third member of the Godhead. It is the ultimate blasphemy. Consequently, as Alma told young Corianton, it is “a sin which is unpardonable” (Alma 39:6). It is unpardonable because it is a total repudiation of pure knowledge, perfect light. The Prophet Joseph Smith said that to commit this sin, a man “must receive the Holy Ghost, have the heavens opened unto him, and know God, and then sin against him” (*TPJS* 358). Thus it is willful rebellion against that rare and priceless truth one has received through the Holy Ghost when the heavens are opened and all doubt concerning the divinity and mission of Jesus Christ disappears (see *TPJS* 357-58).

It is unpardonable rather than unforgiveable because the one committing it is apparently incapable of repenting. Said Joseph Smith: “After a man has sinned against the Holy Ghost, there is no repentance for him” (*TPJS* 357-58). And where there is no repentance, there is no pardon, and where there is no pardon, there is no salvation.² To commit this ultimate offense is to become a knowing traitor to God. It is to be an unregenerate, incorrigible liar. “Wo unto the liar, for he shall be thrust down to hell” (2 Nephi 9:34). Such individuals are sons of perdition who, having partaken of the very essence of Lucifer, are sealed up to him as surely as the sons of God are sealed up to Christ. Remaining forever unrepentant, Lucifer and his companions will, following the last judgment, “remain filthy still” (D&C 88:35, 102).

Murder, the deliberate, cold-blooded killing of another without any justification whatsoever, is repentable and, therefore, eventually forgiveable. However, the redemptive blood of Christ is not available to those who, aware of God’s law, have maliciously shed the blood of innocence. For such, deliverance comes only after they have personally atoned—in some manner, and for some length of time—for the crime.³ That is why Alma said, “Whosoever murdereth against the light and knowledge of God, it is not easy for him to obtain forgiveness” (Alma 39:6).⁴ No, “it is not easy,” but, unlike the sin against the Holy Ghost, it is possible. David had the hope that his soul would not remain in hell (see Ps 16:10; 86:13; *TPJS* 339). In other words, eventually

² The Doctrine and Covenants draws a distinction between those who obtain eternal life and those who suffer eternal damnation. The latter, which I judge to be sons of perdition, “cannot be redeemed from their spiritual fall, because they repent not” (D&C 29:44; compare 88:32-35).

³ Speaking of murderers the Prophet said, “Such characters cannot be forgiven, until they have paid the last farthing. The prayers of all the ministers in the world can never close the gates of hell against a murderer” (*TPJS* 189; compare 339, 359).

⁴ Note that Alma refers to those who “murdereth against the light and knowledge of God.” Those Lamanites who were converted by the sons of Mosiah and repented of the murders they had committed were assured of eternal life because they had lacked a knowledge of God and had murdered in savage ignorance (see Alma 24:9-16). This is an example of the principle that the degree of culpability is relative to the degree of understanding.

David would be saved in spite of his callous murder of his faithful captain, Uriah, with whose wife David had committed adultery. All such repentant murderers are heirs of salvation.

When Corianton became involved with the harlot Isabel, his father Alma, whose own early life had been tarnished with sin (see Mosiah 27:8; Alma 36:5-14), told the errant missionary: "Know ye not, my son, that these things are an abomination in the sight of the Lord; yea, most abominable above all sins save it be the shedding of innocent blood or denying the Holy Ghost?" (Alma 39:5). Unchastity, in any of its expressions, is the third greatest sin because of the spiritual devastation it produces: alienation from the Spirit, the clouding of one's own spiritual identity and sense of worth, and the crippling contamination of those human relationships—marriage and parenthood—which the Lord designed to fulfill and perfect the soul. These losses will prove far more ruinous and lasting than any possible pregnancy or physical disease unless sincere repentance is forthcoming.

Today's hue and cry over AIDS, rather than the gross misconduct that is usually responsible for it, is a perfect example of what Mormon called the "sorrowing of the damned, because the Lord would not always suffer them to take happiness in sin" (Mormon 2:13; see also Hel 13:29). But modern sinners demand that modern science do just that; they claim as their right freedom from consequences, the suspension of the cause-effect principle when it interferes with their desires.

The three sins cited by Alma share a common element: they violate the principle of life (Turner 144-50). The sin against the Holy Ghost makes the perpetrator a knowing, willing accessory to the crucifixion of the Son of God. Such persons are far more guilty of the Lord's death than the high priest Caiaphas and his fellow conspirators who brought it to pass. For with the truths of heaven blazing in their minds they have "crucified him unto themselves and put him to an open shame" (D&C 76:35).

In murder, a living soul is "put asunder" by forcing the spirit to abandon its lawful home. Its mortal probation is cut short and its God-given agency compromised. Ending a life is a prerogative

belonging only to God and those whom he authorizes to exercise it in behalf of organized society.

Unchastity tampers with the very fountain of life, the celestial principle which sets the gods apart from all other resurrected beings: the power of endless lives. In one respect, this power makes God God. Thus sexual immorality strikes at his very nature and glory. The power of procreation is a talent (in the sense of Christ's parable), a stewardship temporarily and conditionally granted mortals to provide physical bodies for the spirit children of our divine Parents. If this "talent" is abused or repudiated, the offenders, having "buried" it, may well forfeit it forever. Indeed, of the entire human race, comparatively few will possess this most precious of exalting talents in the life to come.

Thank God for prophets who stand guard over chastity. Thank God for President Spencer W. Kimball who, speaking for all prophets, said: "God is the same yesterday, today, and forever, and his covenants and doctrines are immutable; and when the sun grows cold and the stars no longer shine, the law of chastity will still be basic in God's world and in the Lord's church" (*The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball* 265).

Plural Marriage

The Book of Mormon has been cited by those who, in the main, do not really believe in it, as an argument against the "notorious" LDS doctrine of plurality of wives. Let us consider the problem in its historical setting.

While no specific information is provided, modern revelation states that plural marriage was practiced by the earliest patriarchs, meaning, presumably, Adam and/or his sons and grandsons, "from the beginning of creation" (D&C 132:38). However, the first identifiable polygynist in the Bible was Lamech, a great-great-great-grandson of Cain. He had two wives, Adah and Zillah (Gen 4:19). They despised him and betrayed his secret murder of his own great-grandfather, Irad. Like Cain, his

fellow murderer, Lamech became a fugitive from justice and a vagabond in the earth (see Moses 5:42-54).

Jaredite Polygyny

The Jaredites of the Book of Mormon arose a century or so after the Flood. It is possible, though by no means certain, that at least some in the early colony were polygynists (the brother of Jared had 22 sons and daughters [Ether 6:20]). In any event, polygyny was definitely practiced in the first half of their approximately two-thousand-year-plus history. One of their earlier kings, Riplakish, was not unlike the later Solomon. He burdened his people with heavy taxes, built numerous large buildings with forced labor, had “many wives and concubines . . . [and] did afflict the people with his whoredoms and abominations” (Ether 10:5-7). Jaredite polygyny was not restricted to royalty. Moroni recorded that in the final fratricidal war of the Jaredites every man kept his sword in hand “in the defence of his property and his own life and of his wives and children” (Ether 14:2).

Old Testament Polygyny

Abraham, who lived about 2000 BC, is the first righteous polygynist identified in the Old Testament. He had one wife, Sarah, and at least two concubines, Hagar and Keturah.

A word about concubinage. Concubines were not mistresses or prostitutes, they were lawful wives—usually captive slaves or foreigners—who had legitimacy but not full honor. Their children enjoyed no rights of inheritance.⁵ It was a case of social inferiors becoming part of a man’s family.

Concubinage reflected the realities of the ancient world. It was a lesser law for a lesser time. In viewing those times the issue

⁵ For example, Abraham sent Hagar and her son Ishmael away with no inheritance (Gen 21:14). Following Sarah’s death Abraham married Keturah, by whom he had six sons, but we read: “And Abraham gave all that he had unto Isaac. But unto the sons of the concubines, which Abraham had, Abraham gave gifts, and sent them away from Isaac his son, while he yet lived, eastward, unto the east country” (Gen 25:5-6).

is not what was ideally right or wrong, fair or unfair, but what was workable. If concubinage was a relative evil, it was the lesser of evils; better a concubine than a woman alone, or a harlot. That the Lord justified his servants in having concubines—and he did—is no proof that he viewed the practice as more than a necessary, albeit unfortunate aspect of an imperfect order of things.

The patriarchs who followed Abraham, notably Isaac and Jacob, were also polygynists. The law of Moses (introduced about 1300 BC) acknowledged the legitimacy of the practice (Moses himself had at least two wives [see D&C 132:38]). But polygyny on an extended scale was introduced into Israel by Saul's successor, David (see 2 Sam 5:13). Solomon, his son by Bathsheba, caught the spirit of the practice with a vengeance and acquired seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines. In this Solomon the Wise proved a fool, for "his wives turned away his heart" (1 Kings 11:3). Solomon introduced idolatry into Israel and thereby set the stage for Israel's subsequent bondage and dispersion.

The Nephites and Polygyny

Although the law of Moses permitted wives and concubines, the Lord forbade the practice for the house of Joseph in the Promised Land, in the Americas. This was probably in part because of its historic abuses, but also because the basis for such marriages did not exist in Lehi's colony.

The Nephites did not practice slavery, nor did they take female captives and make wives of some of them as had their Israelitish ancestors even in the days of Moses.⁶ As for the many war-produced widows found at times among the Nephites, the

⁶ The law of Moses specifically permitted Israelites to marry captive women (Num 31:9; Deut 21:11). The Lamanites took women and children as prisoners of war, and on several occasions placed their Nephite captives in virtual servitude (see Mosiah 7:15; 9:12; Alma 58:30).

policy was to care for their temporal needs rather than to marry them (see Mosiah 21:10, 17; Moroni 9:16).

Jacob's Denunciation

Following the death of Nephi (about 540 BC), pride and the “grosser crime” (see Jacob 2:22) of whoredoms appeared for the first time among the Nephites. Certain men “began to grow hard in their hearts, and indulge themselves somewhat in wicked practices, such as like unto David of old desiring many wives and concubines, and also Solomon, his son” (Jacob 1:15).

Jacob, Nephi's younger brother, was instructed by the Lord to denounce this evil in its incipiency. Only some Nephites were actually engaged in polygyny; others probably contemplated doing so, while still others remained “pure in heart.” So it was a mixed audience—as such groups usually are—that Jacob addressed. The heart of his message on the subject was as follows:

This people begin to wax in iniquity; they understand not the scriptures, for they seek to excuse themselves in committing whoredoms, because of the things which were written concerning David, and Solomon his son. [Today, it is Joseph Smith and Brigham Young.]

Behold, David and Solomon truly had many wives and concubines, which thing was abominable before me, saith the Lord.

Wherefore, thus saith the Lord, I have led this people forth out of the land of Jerusalem, by the power of mine arm, that I might raise up unto me a righteous branch from the fruit of the loins of Joseph.

Wherefore, I the Lord God will not suffer that this people shall do like unto them of old.

Wherefore, my brethren, hear me, and hearken to the word of the Lord: For there shall not any man among you have save it be one wife; and concubines he shall have none;

For I, the Lord God, delight in the chastity of women. And whoredoms are an abomination before me; thus saith the Lord of Hosts (Jacob 2:23-28).

Jacob did not proclaim a new doctrine. He told the Nephites: “Ye know that these commandments were given to our father, Lehi; wherefore, ye have known them before” (Jacob 2:34; see also 3:5).

The effort to introduce forbidden practices and to justify them by appealing to scriptural precedents was clearly out of order. It was so then, and it is so now. If ancient scripture does not justify disobedience to the counsel of the Lord's living prophet, how can modern historical examples do so? The Lord's people are bound by the commandments given them through the prophet of their day, not those of an earlier time. They are accountable to the prophets they raise their hands to sustain. President Benson has said, "The living prophet is more important to us than a dead prophet. . . . Beware of those who would pit the dead prophets against the living prophets, for the living prophets always take precedence" ("Fourteen Fundamentals in Following the Prophet" 27). Where obedience is concerned, dead prophets belong to the dead.

Thus Jacob cut to the heart of the matter. What prominent men did and what the Lord approved could be two very different things. Further, no man was justified in deviating from the commandments of the Lord for his time because of the commandments of the Lord to others in another time.

Plural Wives Not Wrong Per Se

In saying that "whoredoms are an abomination before me" (see Jacob 2:28), the Lord was not equating the principle of plural marriage with whoredoms or declaring that all such marriages—including those of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—are abominable in his sight. He was denouncing the abuse of a sacred principle, not the principle itself.

But what is abominable to him in any form of marriage is when the relationship is motivated by lust, or when it robs one's wife of her personhood and reduces her to the level of a thing to be used, mistreated, manipulated, or whimsically abandoned. In that regard, some monogamous marriages among us are abominations.

When wives are neglected, subjected to physical or verbal abuse, to emotional trauma, or to humiliating and degrading

conduct by their husbands, the spirit of chastity in them is violated. For chastity is more than a sexual matter, it is also a state of mind, heart, and spirit toward one's whole being. The very soul is at issue.

On the part of husbands, the spirit of chastity implies a conscious commitment to the physical, spiritual, and emotional well-being of their wives and of all women. When a woman is rendered a mere object, a piece of chattel, the spirit of chastity leaves her. She does not feel toward herself as she has the right to feel.

For example, Mormon wrote to his son Moroni that certain Nephites had made captives of Lamanite women "and after depriving them of that which was most dear and precious above all things, which is chastity and virtue—And after they had done this thing, they did murder them in a most cruel manner, torturing their bodies even unto death; and after they have done this, they devour their flesh like unto wild beasts, because of the hardness of their hearts; and they do it for a token of bravery" (Moroni 9:9-10).

Such barbarism is probably unparalleled in all history. These Lamanite daughters, though robbed of their physical virginity, died virtuous and innocent in God's eyes. Because, in truth, virtue cannot be taken, it must be willingly given. So these girls were no less chaste and pure of soul because of being violated, but they had been deprived of the spirit of chastity, of their God-given feelings of dignity and worth as human beings. Their own holy of holies in the temples of their spirits had suffered defilement—an "abomination of desolation." It was in this sense that their chastity and virtue were stolen from them. Can anyone doubt that the all-too-prevalent crime of rape is nothing less than a form of spiritual murder? It was this crime—albeit less vicious in degree—that the Lord declared an abomination among the Nephites.

Those who sought to "indulge themselves," as Jacob expressed it, in plural wives were not motivated by a caring love and concern for these women, but rather by pride and lust in their

hardened hearts (see Jacob 1:15-16). For was there not a connection between the sin of pride in consequence of their material wealth and their “grosser crime” (see Jacob 2:22) of whoredoms? Not only could they afford wives and concubines, they reasoned, but their very status in society warranted them. Citing the conduct of David and Solomon, who were also wealthy and prominent, was designed to cloak their actions with moral approval.

But the consequences of all such infidelity were vividly described by Jacob: “Ye have broken the hearts of your tender wives, and lost the confidence of your children, because of your bad examples before them, and the sobbings of their hearts ascend up to God against you. And because of the strictness of the word of God, which cometh down against you, many hearts died, pierced with deep wounds” (Jacob 2:35). How many hearts die today because of marital infidelity and insensitivity?

Jacob’s message seems to have had the desired effect. Other than the aberrant case of king Noah, polygyny was apparently stamped out for all time among the Nephites. He tells us: “And now I, Jacob, spake many more things unto the people of Nephi, warning them against fornication and lasciviousness, and every kind of sin, telling them the awful consequences of them” (Jacob 3:12).

Nevertheless, Jacob’s prophetic warning that unless the Nephites repented the Lamanites “shall scourge you even to destruction” (Jacob 3:3) was fulfilled. In the third century BC, prior to that destruction, king Mosiah led the righteous remnant of the Nephites from the land of Nephi northward to the land of Zarahemla (Omni 1:12-14; compare Jacob 3:4). The fall of the first Nephite civilization suggests that harlotry and other evils—if not polygyny—finally took their toll. Modern prophets have warned of a similar fate for an unrepentant America.

An Apparent Contradiction

Critics have been quick to point out the apparent contradiction between Jacob's denunciation of plural wives and concubines (Jacob 2:23-28) and the subsequent defense of both by Joseph Smith (D&C 132:1, 30, 37-39). How can plural marriage be "abominable" in the Book of Mormon and a righteous principle associated with heaven's highest rewards in the Doctrine and Covenants?

Joseph Smith Knew Moral Law

First, let us grant the Prophet some common sense and at least a modicum of integrity. He was certainly aware of Jacob's teachings in the Book of Mormon (published in 1830) when he first learned of the doctrine of plural marriage (before or in 1831). His initial inquiry of the Lord concerning polygyny in the Old Testament probably came about in connection with his labors on his inspired revision of the Bible—starting with Genesis where the lives of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are recorded. This labor began in the summer of 1830.

Secondly, the Prophet was also aware of the moral law of the Church revealed in February 1831 in which the Lord instructed: "Thou shalt love thy wife with all thy heart, and shalt cleave unto her and none else" (D&C 42:22). In March 1831 the Lord added that it was "lawful that he [any man] should have one wife" (D&C 49:16).

Joseph Smith was also aware of God's strong condemnation in August of the same year of adultery among the Saints: "And verily I say unto you, as I have said before, he that looketh on a woman to lust after her, or if any shall commit adultery in their hearts, they shall not have the Spirit, but shall deny the faith and shall fear. Wherefore, I, the Lord, have said that . . . the whoremonger, and the sorcerer, shall have their part in that lake which burneth with fire and brimstone, which is the second death" (D&C 63:16-17). In October he gave Apostle William E.

McLellin a personal revelation which told him the following: “Commit not adultery—a temptation with which thou hast been troubled” (D&C 66:10).

Was Joseph Smith a fool or a hypocrite in all of this? Did he publicly denounce, in the name of Jesus Christ, immoral practices he was privately contemplating? The foregoing pronouncements were made in the same time frame in which he first received the answer to his question on plural marriage in Old Testament times. Thus it was by revelation that Joseph Smith learned that the restriction on the Nephites was neither universal nor absolute.

David and Solomon

Still, it may be argued, in the Book of Mormon God condemns David and Solomon for having “many wives and concubines” (see Jacob 2:24), while in the Doctrine and Covenants he says, “I, the Lord, justified my servants Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as also Moses, David and Solomon, my servants, as touching the principle and doctrine of their having many wives and concubines” (D&C 132:1). How can both statements be true?

The answer, I believe, is that in the Book of Mormon the Lord was speaking specifically of two men who had been cited by the Nephites in defense of their own misbehavior. However, in the Doctrine and Covenants, the Lord, speaking generally, alluded to all those polygynists in the Old Testament about whom Joseph had made inquiry, including David and Solomon.

These men were justified in “the principle” of having additional wives given them by authorized servants of God. “Abraham received all things, whatsoever he received, by revelation and commandment” (D&C 132:29). He “received concubines, and they bore him children; and it was accounted unto him for righteousness, because they were given unto him” (D&C 132:37). But such was not always the case with David and Solomon. They committed abominations when they took wives

not given them by those holding the sealing power. Their sheer excessiveness and their indifference toward the Lord's duly authorized servants brought them under condemnation.

In Doctrine and Covenants 132, Christ speaks of the "principle and doctrine of [his servants] having many wives and concubines" (v 1). But how many is "many"? Presumably, the prophets cited in verse one had many of each. Yet Abraham had but one wife and two known concubines, and Isaac had but one wife and no concubines insofar as the Old Testament has recorded. Jacob had two wives and two concubines, and Moses had two known wives and no known concubines.⁷ David, on the other hand, had a large but unspecified number of wives and concubines. Solomon, as previously noted, had a thousand. Plainly, in referring to "many wives and concubines," the Lord was speaking of a general principle applying only to those he cited.

Insofar as his ancient servants' being justified in taking plural wives, the Lord told Joseph Smith: "In nothing did they sin save in those things which they received not of me" (D&C 132:38). David did not receive Bathsheba from the Lord. His adulterous relationship with her, followed by his murder of her husband, Uriah, cost Israel's king his exaltation. His lawful wives were forfeited and sealed to another unidentified man (D&C 132:39).

Thus, although Jacob denounced Nephite polygynists in the strongest terms, it is clear that he did not make an absolute statement on the subject for all times and all peoples. He knew that plurality of wives was a divine principle, hence the addendum in Jacob 2:30: "For if I will, saith the Lord of Hosts, raise up seed unto me, I will command my people; otherwise they shall hearken unto these things." What "things"? Jacob's teachings on monogamy. How else would the Lord raise up a more numerous people unto himself save it were by magnifying the monogamous principle

⁷ Since wife and concubine are often used as interchangeable terms, Moses' Ethiopian wife (Num 12:1) was probably a concubine.

of marriage into plurality of wives even as he had done with Abraham? (see Abr 1:2; D&C 132:34). But it was not for the Nephites, or any later individual or group, to presume to expand the principle; the Lord would command. He alone would determine when conditions warranted its introduction and what its manner of implementation would be.

And when he did so, it would not be in a dictum to the world, but to “my people” (Jacob 2:30). They alone, a holy people, would be permitted to perpetuate and expand the doctrine of marriage (whether monogamous or plural) into eternity. For, as stated before, marriage is a celestial talent which can only be retained by celestial men and women. Those who bury it by unworthiness, abuse, or neglect will be saved, but single, worlds without end (see D&C 132:17).

Nor, I believe, will there ever be concubinage again. Those lesser times with their lesser laws are gone forever. Every sealed woman is a full wife with access to every right and blessing enjoyed by her sisters. For the Lord has revealed that the purpose of plural marriage is not to gratify the lusts or ambitions of men, but to magnify celestial women. It is to recognize their divine right to self-fulfillment, worthy husbands, and honorable motherhood; and to thereby raise up a holy posterity to themselves and to their God. Eternal marriage (whichever form) is the only way the immortality and eternal life of man and woman—the endless work of God—can continue (see D&C 132:63; Moses 1:38-39).

Relative Laws

The attempt to circumscribe God’s moral sphere of action, to delimit what he can and cannot do, or, as the Prophet Joseph put it, “to set up stakes and set bounds to the works and ways of the Almighty” (*TPJS* 320), is characteristic of Spiritless men and religions. The very diversity in the natures and conditions of people requires diverse application of the laws and commandments leading to salvation. This means that while certain specific commandments may be binding on one people under a given

system of law, they are not necessarily binding on another people subject to a different system of law.⁸ For example, the spiritual law of Christ (the gospel) was binding on God's people from the time of the antediluvian patriarchs to the time of Joseph, while the carnal law of Moses was not imposed on their descendents until a thousand years after the Flood. Not only this, but changing circumstances within a given system may call for the modification or revocation of a former commandment and the introduction of a new one (see for example, D&C 56:3-4).

Such occurred when the doctrine of plural marriage was introduced by Joseph Smith. In a letter written justifying such marriages, he wrote:

That which is wrong under one circumstance, may be, and often is, right under another. God said, "Thou shalt not kill;" at another time He said, "Thou shalt utterly destroy." This is the principle on which the government of heaven is conducted—by revelation adapted to the circumstances in which the children of the kingdom are placed. Whatever God requires is right, no matter what it is, although we may not see the reason thereof till long after the events transpire (*TPJS* 256).

If we understand the Prophet's words, we can understand why the Nephites were forbidden to have plural wives and why the early Latter-day Saints were enjoined to do so. The time to "raise up seed unto me" (see Jacob 2:30) came with the Latter-day Saints, not the Nephites. Much of the leadership of the Church has been drawn from just that seed. Many members of the Church today are also products of plural marriage. So the temporary need was met and the commandment suspended. Of course, there are still eternal needs yet to be met, so in due time the Lord will speak again on the subject.

Joseph Smith, the Prophet

If Joseph Smith was a true prophet, and he was, the Church is obliged to accept all that he received from the Lord, both in the

⁸ Varying but harmonious systems of law are found throughout all organized existence (see D&C 88:37-39).

Book of Mormon and in those revelations which followed. We have no human basis for redefining the meaning, much less determining the validity, of any of the revelations given the Lord's anointed. Yet there are some prominent writers in the Church today—self-appointed ark-steadiers—who have presumed to do just that. But only a new revelation can qualify or set aside another revelation. And we cannot receive revelation for those to whom we are subordinate. The Prophet Joseph stated: “I will inform you that it is contrary to the economy of God for any member of the Church, or any one, to receive instruction for those in authority, higher than themselves” (*TPJS* 21; see also 214-15). Consequently, only a prophet can qualify the words of a previous prophet—and that, only when inspired to do so.

In being commanded to take wives for eternity, the Prophet Joseph Smith was instructed to “do the works of Abraham” (D&C 132:32), not the works of David or Solomon. And because Joseph did the “works of Abraham,” he became a son of Abraham and, therefore, an heir of the blessings of Abraham. In receiving the more sure word of prophecy (D&C 131:5), the Prophet was told: “For I am the Lord thy God, and will be with thee even unto the end of the world, and through all eternity; for verily I seal upon you your exaltation, and prepare a throne for you in the kingdom of my Father, with Abraham your father” (D&C 132:49). If Joseph Smith was esteemed by Jesus Christ to be worthy of exaltation, he should be esteemed by every Latter-day Saint to be worthy of his prophetic calling.

Conclusion

In referring to his own record, Nephi wrote: “And it speaketh harshly against sin, according to the plainness of the truth; wherefore, no man will be angry at the words which I have written save he shall be of the spirit of the devil” (2 Nephi 33:5). The Book of Mormon is speaking to us today. Are we listening? It is commanding us. Are we obeying? We cannot plead ignorance

or confusion for its message is presented clearly and unmistakably, in the language of virtue. Although it deals at times with unsavory themes, it does not do so in a prurient manner. The impure is treated purely.

Indeed, in discussing problems of immorality, the Book of Mormon is far more discreet than the Old Testament. The Old Testament as we have it is a product of many minds reflecting the religious and cultural character—the ethos—of an ancient people. Much of it was written by unknown chroniclers of Israel's history.⁹ Because it recounts in some detail certain rather unsavory events, and contains graphic metaphors by some of the prophets, it has even been accused of being salacious. While the accounts are forthright, they are not salacious; unlike pornography they are not told in a manner to promote prurient thoughts and feelings. In its defense, I quote from Paul who said: "Unto the pure all things are pure: but unto them that are defiled and unbelieving is nothing pure; but even their mind and conscience is defiled" (Titus 1:15).

Actually, specific accounts of immorality are comparatively few in the Old Testament when we recall that it covers a span of four millennia and was written over a period of about nine hundred years. Contrast its ten or so incidents with the steady stream of stories of adultery, rape, and perversion appearing in our news media every day!

Those who gave us the Book of Mormon were clearly sensitive and circumspect in their accounts. This is a testimony of the sensitivity and purity of mind, not only of the original prophets who wrote and abridged it, but also of the prophet who translated it. Joseph Smith was a virtuous man. Out of the abundance of his heart he spoke the sanctifying word of the Lord. The Book of Mormon is not only a witness of the prophetic calling of Joseph, but of his moral character as well. No unclean mind

⁹ With the qualified exception of the five books of Moses (the Pentateuch) and the 16 books named for the prophets, beginning with Isaiah and ending with Malachi, the authors of the 39 books comprising the Old Testament are completely anonymous.

produced the Book of Mormon or the Doctrine and Covenants or the Pearl of Great Price. I say this because Joseph Smith has been maligned and vilified from the very beginning by enemies both in and out of the Church. Since 1945, biographies and articles on his life, written by supposedly loyal members of the Church, as well as admitted apostates, have been published in ever-increasing numbers. Some of the more sensational—and therefore more popular—contain subtle (and sometimes not too subtle) innuendos that the Prophet’s personal moral behavior left much to be desired. This is a demeaning lie.¹⁰ It demeans the Prophet, but more especially it demeans the Lord who raised him up. A holy God does not, and is not obliged to, use unholy prophets to accomplish his righteous purposes.

The life of Joseph Smith is reflected in his writings, both public and private. As he was the first witness of the heavenly origin of the Book of Mormon, so is the Book of Mormon an unassailable witness of the virtue, integrity, and divine appointment of Joseph Smith. Their common testimonies pertaining to the law of chastity flow forth from God, the “fountain of all righteousness” (Ether 12:28). May we all drink from that fountain so that when we stand before the judgment bar of the Almighty we, too, may be found worthy of the eternal blessings of a virtuous life.

¹⁰ Brigham Young, who knew Joseph Smith as well as any man during those critical years between 1832 and 1844, said in later years: “I never preached to the world but what the cry was, ‘That damned old Joe Smith has done thus and so.’ I would tell the people that they did not know him, and I did, and that I knew him to be a good man; and that when they spoke against him, they spoke against as good a man as ever lived” (*JD* 4:77).

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