

Study Notes

Lesson 2: Jarom, Omni, Words of Mormon

The Book of Jarom departs sharply from the intensely personal tone of the Book of Enos, Jarom's father. Jarom makes no reference to himself, except to mention that he is *not* going to say anything about his prophesying or his revelations, thereby revealing that he *had* revelations and that he *did* prophesy. Rather than speak of his personal experience he gives us a birds-eye view of Nephite society.

The Small Plates

To begin with, Jarom tells us that the Small Plates of Nephi upon which he wrote (engraved) were, in actual fact, small plates. "And as these plates are small, ...it must needs be that I write [only] a little." (Jarom 2) And again, as he ends, "And I, Jarom, do not write more, for the plates are small." (Jarom 14) We already have been told by his grandfather, Jacob, that "[we] cannot write but a little of [our] words, because of the difficulty of engraving our words upon plates." (Jacob 4:1) Whether the Small Plates were small in dimensions or small in number or both, we can't be entirely sure, but Jarom implies that they were running out of room.

Nephi explains how the Small Plates came about. First, in 1 Nephi 19:1-4, he says that in the new world they found gold, silver and copper ore. Soon after their arrival, the Lord commanded him to make plates and engrave upon them the story of his father and what had happened to their group thus far. Lehi kept records of some sort and Nephi had those before him to use. He says he "did engraven the record of my father, and also our journeyings in the wilderness, and the prophecies of my father; and also many of mine own prophecies..." (1 Nephi 19:1) The Lord wanted the record engraved on metal plates because he knew that these records must last for thousands of years to fulfill their purpose.

We read that Nephi was commanded to make a second set of plates sometime after he separated from his antagonistic brothers and their group (2 Nephi 5:30-33). Apparently this second set contained fewer plates than the first plates, which had been created to keep a detailed history of the people. Nephi says that this second set of plates were for recording "that which is pleasing unto God." (2 Nephi 5:32) Earlier he refers to these plates as an "account...of the ministry of my people." (1 Nephi 9:3)

Thus the same years in Nephite history were being written about in two different records, one being kept by the kings (the large plates) and the other being kept by the prophets and their descendants (the small plates). This duplication later saved the day when the first 116 pages of the Book of Mormon manuscript were lent to Martin Harris by Joseph Smith, and he lost them (See D&C 10). What was lost was the first 116 pages of the "large plates" version of Nephite history. Because the record also contained the small plates version of those same years, all was not lost. And on the plus side we have the great spiritual writings of Nephi, Lehi and Jacob.

From the first verse of the Book of Mormon—from 1 Nephi 1:1—to the last verse of Omni—what you are reading is just what was 'engraved' upon these Small Plates of Nephi. They are not an abridgement. You get exactly what the writers wrote¹.

When Nephi became too old, he turned the small plates over to his younger brother, the prophet Jacob, to continue the task. Jacob wrote many wonderful spiritual pages and then turned the record to his son Enos. And Enos gave them to his son, Jarom.

The Law of Moses in the New World

One of the important things shown in the Book of Jarom is the type of religion practiced by the Nephites. These people were a break-off from the Old Testament Jewish nation. They went to great trouble to take with them the brass plates that contained the five Books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Deuteronomy, Numbers and Leviticus. These were their guidelines for law and worship. And sure enough, we see this reflected in Jarom. He notes that during the two hundred years since the Nephites left the land of Jerusalem, they "observed to keep the law of Moses...They profaned not; neither did they blaspheme. And the laws of the land were exceedingly strict." He mentions "prophets, priests, and teachers"² (Jarom 11) and so we would expect that they had the same priestly system of sacrifice set forth in Leviticus. He also tells us specifically that the people kept the Sabbath day holy, a key commandment that provided religious identity to the Jewish nation and presumably, to the Nephites also. As we will see later in our next study of the first three chapters of Mosiah, there are even clues in the record that the people kept the feasts and holy days of the Jews.

¹ Nephi wrote his own words in 1st and 2nd Nephi. He also included some teachings of his father Lehi and his brother Jacob. We should not suppose that because these books are named after Nephi they only contain his words.

² There were no Levites on the boat from the Old World with Lehi's family, and as you remember, the priesthood had been instituted under Moses as a priesthood of lineal descent. Only those from the tribe of Levi held the priesthood that allowed them to officiate in temple sacrifices, etc. We learn, however, from 2 Nephi 6:2 and Jacob 1:18 that Nephi ordained Jacob and Joseph, his brothers, to be priests. Though we wish we had more details, we can assume that God allowed this so the Nephites could fully practice their religion.

There is one important difference however, between the Law of Moses as practiced in the Old World and the Law of Moses in the New World. Jarom hints at this difference in the second verse of his book. He excuses himself for not having written more, saying, "For what could I write more than my fathers have written? For have not they revealed the plan of salvation?" Certainly no Old Testament prophet ever used such a phrase. Here is an entirely new perspective.

Jarom goes on to explain in verse 11, "...the prophets, and the priests, and the teachers, did labor diligently...teaching the law of Moses, and the intent for which it was given; persuading them to look forward unto the Messiah, and believe in him to come as though he already was. And after this manner did they teach them." This was certainly not the way things were taught in Old Testament Judaism. The Jews of Christ's day were so attached to the Law of Moses for the Law of Moses' sake alone, that when Jesus came among them, they rejected Him, the very Messiah the law was supposed to point them to.

Many critics of the Book of Mormon have said that the frankly Christian doctrine in the book of Mormon shows Joseph Smith is the author. You can't have a book, they say, that talks about being born again before the Christian church was even established by Christ. Latter-day Saints reject that claim. If Jesus Christ was the Savior of all mankind, obviously that had to be *God's plan* before it ever happened. We see prophetic evidence of this in the Bible. For example in Isaiah 53 there are references to someone "wounded for our transgressions," who "shall bear their iniquities." The apostle John calls Jesus "the lamb slain from the foundation of the world." (Rev 13:8) If God knew what He was going to do from the foundation of the world, surely He could reveal it ahead of time to his prophets. The Plan existed from before the foundations of the earth were laid. And the reason the Nephites knew so much about this plan was that God revealed it to Nephi.

The Plan Foretold

The simple explanation for the Book of Mormon prophets having a "pre-Christian" knowledge of the Savior is that God showed the whole thing to Nephi and Nephi recorded it. Go back to 1 Nephi 8 and you will find an account of Lehi's dream of the Tree of Life. In chapter nine Nephi inserts a small chapter about the difference between his large plates (history) and small plates (ministry). He says, "Wherefore, the Lord hath commanded me to make these plates for a wise purpose in him, which purpose I know not. But the Lord knoweth all things from the beginning; wherefore, he prepareth a way to accomplish all his works among the children of men; for behold, he hath all power unto the fulfilling of all his words." In chapter ten, Nephi records some prophecies that Lehi made to his family about a coming Messiah who would be a "redeemer of the world" and would save all mankind from their "lost and fallen state." He predicted that this Messiah would be born among the Jews, would baptize beyond Jordan and would eventually be "slain" by the Jews.

The dream of the tree of life and Lehi's subsequent words about a Messiah were riveting to Nephi. This man had a thirst for the things of God; his reaction to the words of his father was a deep desire to see the same things. Chapter 11 begins, "After I had desired to know the things that my father had seen, and believing that the Lord was able to make them known unto me, as I sat pondering in mine heart I was caught away in the Spirit of the Lord, unto an exceedingly high mountain, and the Spirit said unto me: ...what desirest thou? And I said: I desire to behold the things which me father saw."

Nephi's Christianity Download

His desire is granted and he sees his father's dream of the tree of Life, but with an interesting twist. Interspersed with views from the dream is a Technicolor widescreen version of the life of Christ. He sees the whole thing. He sees the nativity with the Virgin Mary holding the infant Jesus; he sees Jesus walking and talking with men and women along the roads of Palestine, and people kneeling at his feet; he sees Him healing people and raising them from the dead. He also sees the 12 apostles, the crucifixion and the resurrection.

The Old Testament is filled with clues about Christ's coming ministry. But they are just that—clues. These are things like references in the Psalms to the soldiers giving Christ vinegar to drink and casting lots for his robe. If you comb carefully through the Old Testament you come up with an impressive lot of such coincidental references that make a good case for Christ as the Messiah. But Nephi did not have to rely on clues. He was literally shown the whole thing.

Because of this, and because Nephi was the founder of Nephite culture, both the civic and religious aspects of it, that culture was indelibly marked with a pre-Christian era Christianity. It is inevitable that this would result in differences between Nephite culture and Jewish culture. For example, the great sin of Israel and Judah was idol worship copied from the heathen nations around them. Nephite prophets never hint that their people had this problem, charging them instead with loving their wealth and fine clothes as if these things were idols. Neither did the Nephites become worshippers of the Law of Moses like the Jews of Christ's day. This saved them from the Pharisaic attitudes that the Jews in Palestine developed, such as counting the number of steps they could take on the Sabbath, etc. Nephite prophets always taught that the Law of Moses was not sufficient to save people and that there would need to be an infinite atonement made by a Savior of the world.

The Law's Familiar Shortcoming

The law, even when scrupulously lived, cannot make people truly righteous. That is why Jarom's writings include the seeming contradiction that the people were righteous, that is, they kept the laws of God such as those in the Ten Commandments, and yet, at the same time, they were stiff-necked and hard-hearted. Their righteousness was partly a function of their civic laws, which were "strict" and reflected the laws for society given to Moses. They probably had stiff penalties against opening for business on the Sabbath! This strict approach explains their horror at the Lamanite custom of drinking the blood of beasts, something expressly forbidden in the Law of Moses.

So while they had the Law, and even some understanding that the Law was given to point them forward to a coming Messiah, they did not, as a society, have the change of heart, the new birth, necessary to true righteousness. They were going through the motions but were carnally-minded, not spiritually-minded people. In the Book of Ezekiel, God tells the prophet how disappointed He is in His people who are now captive in Babylon. He says He looks forward to the day when "a **new heart** ... will I give you, and a **new spirit** will I put within you: and I will take away the stony **heart** out of your flesh. 26 And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, ... and do them." (Ezek. 36:26-27) The message of Christ is that the inner attitudes and thoughts that make up our hearts are just as important as our outward actions and need changing from the inside out. Going through the motions is not enough.

Do you remember how Laman and Lemuel resisted leaving Jerusalem, protesting that Lehi was being judgmental; the Jews, they said, weren't a wicked people, but were a righteous people because they kept the Law of Moses. (1 Nephi 17:22) God saw through their outward law keeping. Like Laman and Lemuel, the stiff-necked people Jarom wrote about did not love God but instead, loved the things God had given them.

Jarom writes about one important advantage the Nephites had over the Jews of the old world. They had righteous leaders who "did labor diligently, exhorting with all long-suffering the people to diligence; teaching the law of Moses, and the intent for which it was given; And it came to pass that by so doing they kept them from being destroyed upon the face of the land; for they did prick their hearts with the word, continually stirring them up unto repentance." (Jarom 11-12) If their kings had been wicked, they would have been in the same sorry state as the Jews in Israel.

The Book of Omni

Jarom turns the plates over to his son Omni, to continue the task of recording any noteworthy religious happenings among the people. We go quickly at this point through 4 writers in only 11 verses that cover over 100 years. These were not long-winded men. Neither were they all prophets. Omni declares that he is a "wicked man". We see that all during these years the Nephite and Lamanite nations were warring with each other—the Lamanites acting, as had been prophesied, as a "scourge" to the Nephites.

We should not skip lightly over these verses without asking ourselves how God "scourges" us. What things has He brought into your life to pull you up short and remind you that you are slipping away from walking in total obedience to His will? He is too good a parent to let us wander off without trying to get our attention and turn us back to Him. Often that comes by something that humbles us or distresses us. It is up to us whether we take the hint or not. It is our own choice that determines whether our suffering brings us closer to God or further away.

Amalecki

Amalecki is interesting. It is he who records an important hinge point of Nephite history: the Nephite King, Mosiah the first, is "warned of the Lord that he should flee out of the land of Nephi, and as many as would hearken unto the voice of the Lord should also depart out of the land with him, into the wilderness." (Omni 1:12) They take with them the precious records and other holy things that were kept by the kings: the Liahona (2 Nephi 5:12) and the sword of Laban (W of M 1:13). They are led to a land where they find another people—both the land and the people in it called by the name of Zarahemla, their leader.

The ancestors of these people had come out from Jerusalem at about the same time as Lehi and his family. But without a comparable record to the brass plates they had drifted from their religious moorings. Zarahemla seems to have recognized the blessings inherent in having a prophet as a leader and he steps aside and lets Mosiah be made king over the combined nation of Nephites and Zarahemla-ites. Because the text is silent we can only wonder at the story not being told. We can infer that Zarahemla was a good man because he was able to let go of the reins of power when it was in the best interest of his people. Perhaps he was old, and had been wondering who would be the next king. It will be interesting to some day have the whole story.

Amalecki also gives us the first mention of a third population group found in the Book of Mormon, the Jaredites, though they are not yet identified by that name. Amalecki calls them the people of Coriantumr. By the time we meet up with them, their population has largely been destroyed. The book of Ether tells the story. We also find that the Lamanites have discovered the Nephites new country and resumed their old warfare. Amalecki ends his words by telling us that he was turning the records over to Mosiah's son, King Benjamin, because the plates were full and he had no children to give them to.

The Words of Mormon

The editorial comments known as “The Words of Mormon” are a flash forward about 500 years to 385 A.D., just before the final destruction of the Nephites. Mormon describes for us a little of his process in abridging the records down to the single volume we know as the Book of Mormon. In the middle of this abridging process he discovered the small plates with their sermons and prophecies of Christ. He says that he decided to include these records “for a wise purpose; for thus it whispereth me, according to the workings of the Spirit of the Lord which is in me. And now, I do not know all things; but the Lord knoweth all things which are to come; wherefore, he worketh in me to do according to his will.” (W of M, v.7)

The idea is that fGod knows what He is doing and why He is doing it. He knows everything that is to come and how everything will turn out. It is remarkable to see the faith of a man like Mormon who essentially saw everything turn out badly and all his family and friends killed, yet who still had faith! He knew that God could still bring victory out of a story that seemed to end in defeat. He knew that things aren't over until they are really over, and the story of his own people wasn't over yet, no matter how things appeared.

Do you have that kind of faith in your defeats? Can you trust God to bring about the ultimate good of those you love and care about? The gospel of Jesus Christ is a gospel of second and third and fourth chances. As we saw in the case of Enos and Jacob, true followers of God are those who don't give up and continue to seek for blessings for themselves and their people because they have faith that God will not give up on them. The faith of Mormon is one of the greatest examples in all scripture of trusting God in all things.