

STUDY NOTES

Lesson 8: Mosiah Chapters 15-17

*And the Father and I are one.
I am in the Father and the Father in me;
and inasmuch as ye have received me,
ye are in me and I in you.
Doctrine and Covenants 50:43*

*And the saints rejoiced in their redemption,
and bowed the knee and acknowledged the Son of God as their Re-
deemer and Deliverer from death and the chains of hell.
Doctrine & Covenants 138:23*

THEOLOGY LESSON

This part of the text sails upon deep doctrinal waters. The speech of Abinadi before King Noah is filled with complex concepts. He emphasized the understanding of the Messiah as a Redeemer or, as it is said in Hebrew, a “Go-el,” or kindred-redeemer. This concept was familiar to Old Testament cultures but is foreign to our own. Then he taught about the nature of the Godhood—not easy to understand then and still not easy today. Following his final witness to Noah and his priests, the prophet was martyred by fire.

To begin with, there is not a more difficult question in all of Christendom than the understanding of how God the Father and God the Son are related to each other and to the very concept of God itself. The reason there are creeds in Christendom at all is that the Emperor of the Roman Empire in the 4th century, Constantine, wanted to use religion to unify his realm and, with so many different concepts of what God was, the Christian religion was dividing people, not unifying them.

Therefore Constantine called hundreds of the bishops of the church together in a place called Nicea and told them that they could not go home until they had come up with a single, simple statement of Christian belief about God that everyone would be “ordered” to believe¹! Jesus Christ himself in his own lifetime offended the common Jewish understanding of the nature of God and was killed for saying that he was the Son of God and implying that He himself was God².

Every morning and every night, believing Jews repeat “the Shema,” the most central and important prayer of Judaism.³ It is found in Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and it begins like this: “Hear oh Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One.” In Hebrew this consists of six words, which I will do my best to transliterate for an LDS audience. “Shema Yisrael, Adonai eloheynu Adonai echad” (emphasis on the bold-text syllables). Due to the ambiguities of the Hebrew language, Deut. 6:4 can actually be translated in more than one way. Several modern Bible translations render it: “Hear Oh Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord *alone*.”⁴ The Jews however, keep to the old way.

If you want to try and say the Shema in the traditional Jewish way, you must stand to show you are bearing sacred testimony, and you must cover your eyes with your right hand as you speak. You must say it distinctly and loud enough to be clearly heard, for you are repeating the central tenet of the Jewish faith. With this as background, perhaps we can understand a little better why the Jews of Palestine in Jesus’ day did not accept him as both Messiah and “God himself,” as Abinadi called him. Changing a basic ideological construct is so difficult.

After the coming of Christ, it was easy for Christians to see that there was a Father and there was a Son, because Jesus walked among them and taught them such things as, “For I have not spoken of myself; but the Father which sent me, he gave me a commandment, what I should say, and what I should speak.” (John 12: 49) Jesus spoke continually of himself and his father as different persons, persons who were related to one another in a certain way. He spoke of praying to his father and receiving things from His father. He also spoke of coming

¹ This was the origin of the Nicene Creed.

² When He said, “Verily I say unto you, before Abraham was, I Am,” He was using the exact words of Exodus 3:14 with which Jehovah had identified Himself to Moses. “Then they took up stones to cast at Him.” (John 8:58-59)

³ Deuteronomy 6:4 is the first and best known sentence of the greater prayer known as the Shema, which includes the verses 5-9 of Deuteronomy 6. It is recited alone or in company with two related prayers: Deuteronomy 11:13-21, and Numbers 15:37-41.

⁴ New Living Translation; also The New International Version, The New King James Version and the English Standard Version put these words in a footnote as an optional translation.

from the Father and returning back to His father. But the Jews at the time of his coming had no such understanding. God to them was Jehovah, the One God of the Old Testament. They did not think of God as having a son, or of there being three Gods in one "Godhead." To them, God is One, "Echad!" Two was one God too many.

ONE GOD

It is a truism that it is hard for people to change a deeply held belief. This particular belief, that there was one and only one God, was certainly a deeply held belief. It is also true that God was considered by the Jews to be so holy and so much higher than mortal man (think of the God who parted the Red Sea and thundered His voice from the top of Mt. Sinai!) that they did not even write out or say his Name except on holy occasions. To think that this mighty God, El Shaddai or God Almighty, was not one but two was unthinkable. To think that God Almighty had a son in human form was blasphemy. To think that Jesus would claim to be one with God the Father was reason to threaten to kill him. And perhaps the biggest argument against Jesus being divine in their eyes was that he was crucified by Rome. This was a shameful death and it was the highest heresy in their minds to claim that one so executed could be "God himself." (Mosiah 13:34)

You can see how highly charged the word "one" was in Jewish thinking. In Mark 12:28 we have recorded the question of a scribe to Jesus. He asked, "Master, which is the first commandment of all?" Latter-day Saints know the answer is "To love God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, etc." This is from Deuteronomy 6:5. Yet Jesus actually began his answer with Deuteronomy 6:4, the all-important Shema. He said, "The first of all the commandments is, Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord; And thou shalt love the Lord thy God, with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength." (Mark 12:29)

THE CHARGE OF BLASPHEMY

This concept of God as One was so central to Judaism, that when Jesus spoke of God as His father and then said, "I and my Father are one," they "took up stones again to stone him." Jesus then asked them which of his good works they wanted to stone him for. They answered, "For a good work we stone thee not; but for blasphemy; and because thou, being a man, makest thyself God." (John 10:33-33)

To try and understand the complex nature of God, we have to realize that the truth is not easy to put into a single sound bite. The truth about God is layered and multi-faceted. But the Jews did have a sound-bite—the Shema—and it consisted of the single layer of truth that God is One. That, however, was only part of the bigger picture. God *is* One, but there is a way in which He is also Two, even Three, when we include the Holy Ghost.

God had given bits of the truth through the years, building one concept on another. As the song says, "First the blade, and then the ear, then the full corn shall appear." (Come, Ye Thankful People, # 94) Before coming to an understanding about the nature of God that includes the truth that there are more than one persons who can have claim to the title "God," the people first needed to understand the central unity of the Godhead.

Remember, the Israelite nation was surrounded by cultures that worshipped many Gods. There were various gods of nature, national gods, animal gods, etc. Before the Israelites could understand the complexities of how the different personages that were God related to each other, they first had to understand that their God was not like the various deities of the Gentile nations. Think of what you know of Zeus and Mercury and Apollo and Pan. These gods had different personalities, goals and projects. They had separate temples and forms of worship and people could choose their favorites among them. All this false idolatry had to be rooted out of the minds of God's people, the nation of Israel, and that started with the simple truth that unlike the false gods of the nations, the true God is unified, is One.

FATHER AND SON

Not only do Abinadi's words shake up the beliefs of the King and his priests, they may do the same to us. When Abinadi says of the Redeemer that "God himself shall come down among the children of men," and "he shall be called the Son of God, ...being the Father and the Son," well, we scratch our heads. This is not our usual language. But the Book of Mormon is clear on this. In Ether 3:14 Christ says this of himself: "Behold, I am he who was prepared from the foundation of the world to redeem my people. Behold, I am Jesus Christ. I am the Father and the Son. In me shall all mankind have life, and that eternally, even they who shall believe on my name; and they shall become my sons and my daughters."

One solution would be to do what the early Christian creeds did and say it is just all a great mystery and they are three beings in one. But after Joseph Smith's First Vision⁵, that option is not open to us. They may be one but they are not one in body or substance. They each have their own body. So how is it that Christ can say

⁵ 1 Nephi 1 contains what we might call Lehi's First Vision, in which he sees God the Father sitting on a throne and Christ being the One sent down to do the will of the Father on earth. This was one of the things that allowed Bk of M prophets a correct understanding of God.

he is the Father and the Son? Well, first he acts in both those roles. Just as the fathers of our children are both a father and a son, so is Christ. Sometimes he is acting in his role as a Son, and sometimes he is acting in his role as a Father.

There is one further way that Christ is both Father and Son. God the Father has given all power to his Son. He is not jealous of his power and seeking to retain greater power for himself. He chose to make Jesus Christ equal in power to himself. After his resurrection Christ said, "All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth." (Matthew 28:18) And in Colossians we read that "it pleased the Father that in him should all fulness dwell." (Colossians 1:19) Christ then has been deputized, or authorized to speak as the Father, since he has no less power or authority now than the Father has, because the Father gave it to him.

That is good news for us, because it means that, incredibly, the Father and the Son are not only willing to redeem the children of men from their fallen state in bondage to sin, but they go so much further. Most of us are happily relieved to know that instead of hell we are going to heaven because of Jesus' atonement. Even in the world most people would be happy with heaven and a harp. But the truth is so much more astounding and wonderful than that; the divine Father and Son are willing to share their power and authority *with us*, lifting **us up to their level**. "And he that receiveth me receiveth my Father; And he that receiveth my Father receiveth my Father's kingdom; therefore all that my Father hath shall be given unto him. (D&C 84:37-38) When we think of the ways that Jesus and the Father are one, the great joy and hope and promise of that is that we too may become one with them. It is a humbling thought that we should be heirs through Christ to such promises.

As we said at the beginning of this discussion, an understanding of the Godhead is deep doctrine and we do not pretend to have searched the depths of it. But neither do we think it wise to not even try to understand how these truths affect us. Let us study and ponder the scriptures in humility, always remembering "That all men should honor the Son, even as they honor the Father. He that honoreth not the Son, honoreth not the father which hath sent him." (John 5:23)

ABINADI'S TESTIMONY OF GOD

Which brings us to the prophet Abinadi's discourse on the nature of God. The priests of king Noah were nominally teaching the Law of Moses. They had the same understanding of God that the Jews in Palestine did. God was one. King Benjamin had added new truth to his people's understanding of God⁶, telling them that an angel had announced to him that there would be a Savior born into the world, who would be crucified for the sins of mankind. However, these priests of Noah had not heard any of that. Their fathers had left Zarahemla before Benjamin's speech. Abinadi was teaching them principles that were new to them when he spoke of God himself coming down to earth and taking on human form. This must have sounded as shocking to them as it was to the Jews. He used the prophecies of Isaiah to "prove" the truth of his words, but the wicked priests were past feeling, and the Holy Ghost could not testify of the truth of Abinadi's words to such hard hearts.⁷

It is interesting that the wicked priests used much the same accusation against Abinadi as the Jews who wanted to stone Jesus used against him. Abinadi testifies that God is going to come to earth as a man, who will be called Christ, and he will be crucified and then resurrected. He ends his testimony by saying, "Therefore, if ye teach the law of Moses, also teach that it is a shadow of those things which are to come—Teach them that redemption cometh through Christ the Lord, who is the very Eternal Father. Amen." Immediately King Noah commands that Abinadi be put to death.

The reason? "For thou hast said that God himself should come down among the children of men; and now, for this cause thou shalt be put to death unless thou wilt recall all the words which thou hast spoken evil concerning me and my people." You see how the charge of blasphemy is made against the idea of God becoming man, or man claiming to be God. It is the same. But this quote from Mosiah 16 also shows the hypocrisy of evil, for if Abinadi had not testified against their personal sins, they would have left him alone. In this he is a type of the Savior, who also angered the unrighteous religious leaders of his day by testifying of their wickedness.

GOD AS OUR GO-EL, OR KINSMAN-REDEEMER

Abinadi also emphasizes another doctrine that was understood and well accepted by people living the Law of Moses. He used the word "redeem" or some form of it, 12 times in chapters 15 and 16. Moses had built a society as well as a worship system. The social institutions God established through him were remarkably effective for guiding the Israelite nation. They were all based on the principle that God "owned" Israel. He himself had

⁶ While it is true that Nephi received similar revelations, it is not clear that they were ever widely known by the common people, who continued to practice the Law of Moses as their regular form of worship.

⁷ With the exception of Alma, of course, who was touched by the Holy Ghost and though Abinadi never knew it, would become a prophet himself.

redeemed, or paid a price for Israel by taking her out of bondage in Egypt by miraculous deliverance. Because of that, God considers Israel to be His. As we read in Leviticus: "For unto me the children of Israel are servants; they are my servants whom I brought forth out of the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God." (Leviticus 25:55)

The word redeemer could refer to God himself, who had redeemed his people out of bondage in Egypt, but it had another, more mundane meaning in Israelite culture. A redeemer, "Go-el" in Hebrew, was also the word for a kinsman who had an obligation to help out one of his family who had fallen on hard times. There was no welfare system and there were no poorhouses in Israel. These institutions were later attempts to deal with poverty in modern nations. In Israel, if one found oneself unable to pay one's debts, there were a few options. The debtor could mortgage the family land holdings, and if that was not available or if there was further misfortune, they could sell themselves or a family member into indentured servitude to pay the debt. But at any time a close kinsman, a brother, uncle, etc., could step forward and pay the necessary price to redeem the land or redeem the person from servitude. Here is one reference to this practice among many in the Old Testament: "After that he is sold he may be redeemed again; one of his brethren may redeem him." (Leviticus 25:48)

The word redeem is used today when one has taken something to a pawnshop, like a wedding ring or a musical instrument to raise cash. But if the person who sold their precious possession can raise the necessary funds later, they can buy it back. Human beings are effectively in Satan's pawnshop. "For your iniquities ye have sold yourselves," we are told in Isaiah 50:1. Jesus Christ acts as our Go-el, our kinsman redeemer, to pay the price to get us out of bondage. The story of Ruth in the Bible is all about this principle. Ruth and Naomi are widows and have sunk into poverty with no way out. The scripture refers to Boaz as their Go-el, their redeemer, because by marrying Ruth he rescued them both from poverty and childlessness and provided them with a future.

From now on when you see the word redeemer used as a description of what Jesus Christ did, remember that it was familiar to Israelites because their culture provided for "redeemers" to keep the people from going back into bondage, and because Jehovah's redemption of his people from slavery in Egypt was a familiar basic part of their religious understanding. Like Naomi and Ruth, we have a close kinsman willing to pay the price to free us.