

Scriptural Perspectives on How to Survive the Calamities of the Last Days

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“And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come” (Matt. 24:14). That is an established pattern: hard upon the preaching of the gospel comes its rejection followed by destruction and darkness. Each time, it is called the end of the *aeon*, the age or dispensation. This description appears most plainly in Joseph Smith’s inspired rendering of the so-called Little Apocalypse, the twenty-fourth chapter of Matthew, in which the end of the world is described three times.

First the Lord prophesies “great tribulation on the Jews, and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, such as was not before sent upon Israel . . . no, nor ever shall be sent again upon Israel” (JS–M 1:18; compare Matt. 24:21). It was a true prophecy; never were the Jews so completely obliterated as in the days of the Apostles (A.D. 70 and A.D. 130). And yet this was “only the beginning of the sorrows which shall come upon them” (JS–M 1:19)—the beginning of two thousand years of persecution. Time and again they were on the verge of extinction and only one thing saved them: “And except those days should be shortened, there should none of their flesh be saved” (JS–M 1:20). There is no point to foretelling woes from which there is no deliverance, and the Lord does not leave the people helpless but tells them specifically what they are to do.

In the first place those who lived in the Judean area were to do what they had always done in such an emergency: they were to flee to the mountains containing hundreds of caves and gorges a few short miles from the city (see JS–M 1:13). But, unlike the other times, they were under no conditions to go back to the city again; no one was to “return to take his clothes” (JS–M 1:14–15); it was not to be the usual return to the city after the trouble had passed; there were no arrangements whatsoever for returning. The Lord gave fair warning that pregnant women should be got out of the city before it was too late. They were not to wait for winter, which would be a bad time to flee; and of course things should be so arranged as not to flee on the Sabbath (see JS–M 1:16–17).

So it was foretold and so it happened. The Lord then describes the next End, the end of the Church, which is to take place “after the tribulation of those days which shall come upon Jerusalem” (JS–M 1:21). At that time

people will come claiming to have the gospel, but they are not to be believed. The Saints, “who are the elect according to the covenant, “will be led astray by “false Christs, and false prophets” (JS–M 1:22; see also 1:21). To prepare them for this cruel blow which must come to pass, the Lord is giving them an explanation ahead of time—“see that ye be not troubled. . . . Behold, I have told you before” (JS–M 1:23–24). The next verse anticipates the secretaries of the desert and the secret conventicles which flourished in the second century; the Saints were to join none of them—“Wherefore, if they shall say unto you: Behold, he is in the desert; go not forth: Behold, he is in the secret chambers; believe it not” (JS–M 1:25).

Next comes the restoration of the gospel; some vivid imagery is used. First, “the morning breaks, the shadows flee”, “for as the light of the morning cometh out of the east, and shineth even unto the west, and covereth the whole earth” so should it be in the time of “the coming of the Son of Man” (JS–M 1:26). Now comes one of the most disturbing parables in the Bible, which in the true context as given here is perfectly clear. The manner of the Gathering we are told will be in the same miraculous and mysterious way as the gathering of eagles to a carcass lying in the desert—they appear suddenly and inexplicably in the four quarters of the sky and come together from vast distances to that single spot (see JS–M 1:27). Just as the breaking of the light from the east describes the manner of the Restoration, with no reference to geography, so this passage describes the manner of the Gathering—no other comparison is implied in introducing such an unsavory object as a carcass.

It will be a terrible time with “wars, and rumors of wars” (JS–M 1:28), the world unrest; “nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there shall be famines, and pestilences, and earthquakes” (JS–M 1:29). “And again, because iniquity shall abound, the love of men shall wax cold” (JS–M 1:30). Yet at that very time “this Gospel of the Kingdom shall be preached in all the world, for a witness unto all nations, and then shall the end come” (JS–M 1:31). A thick pall of dust and smoke shall cover the earth, “the sun shall be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light” (JS–M 1:33). The generation in which these things happen will see the final end (see JS–M 1:34): unlike the other great destructions, this one involves the entire globe when “all the tribes of the earth mourn” (JS–M 1:36). Then the Son of Man shall come, but first “he shall send his angels before him with the great sound of a trumpet” for a last gathering—“and they shall gather together the remainder of his elect from the four winds” (JS–M 1:37). “As it was in the days which were before the flood”, it will be business as usual right up until the end, which shall come suddenly and unexpectedly—“they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage; and knew not until the flood came, and took them all away; so shall also the

coming of the Son of Man be” (JS–M 1:42–43). Again an interesting comparison occurs when the Lord likens himself to a thief in the night; there are no criminal connotations, but the metaphor is used purely to describe the *manner* of his coming—it will be a complete surprise. How does one prepare for it, then? One does not. Jesus makes it very clear that the only preparation is to live every day as if the Lord were coming on that day. In striking contrast to the Jerusalem situation, he gives no specific instructions but explains that “then shall be fulfilled that which is written, that in the last days, two shall be in the field, the one shall be taken, and the other left; two shall be ginding at the mill, the one shall be taken, and the other left” (JS–M 1:44–45), which means that there is no point in devising ingenious schemes for survival. There is but one real course to escape. What you should do is to watch yourself at all times (see JS–M 1:46); to be found doing good all the time (see JS–M 1:49); to not act as if it were going to be business as usual indefinitely, as if the great event belonged to a vague and indefinite future (see JS–M 1:51). The one thing you can be sure of is that it will be “in such an hour as ye think not” (JS–M 1:48). So the only preparation is to do what? To abstain from taking advantage of others, oppressing the poor, and living in luxury (see JS–M 1:52).

Each of these ends is expressly called the end of the world with the explicit statement of what is meant by the expression “the end of the world” (JS–M 1:4; see also 1:31, 55). This is followed by the most important explanation of all, namely, that the end of these dispensations is not the destruction of the globe, for “the end of the earth is not yet, but by and by” (JS–M 1:55), that is, at some unspecified future date. Just as we do not believe that the creation of the world was the instantaneous beginning of everything, neither do we suppose a Star Wars ending. What we are plainly told is that the phrase *End of the World* refers expressly to the destruction of the wicked. So who are the “wicked,” and how are they to be “destroyed”? The book of Mormon is the complete handbook on the subject. Twenty times it tells us of the great overburn and each time assures us that while the wicked shall burn as stubble the righteous need not fear. The question that concerns us, then, is not how such a miracle can be arranged—that is quite beyond our imagination at present—but who are the righteous and who are the wicked? We may think we have an easy answer to that one, but it is not the answer that the scriptures give us.

The righteous are whoever are *repenting*, and the wicked whoever are not repenting. “Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee” who gave thanks to God that he was not a crook or a lecher, that he fasted twice a week, paid a full tithe, and was very strict in his religious observances. All this was perfectly true. The other man was a tax collector and rather ashamed of some of things he had done, and instead of thanking God by

way of boasting, he only asked God to be merciful to him, a sinner (see Luke 18:10–13). The surprise is that the sinner was the righteous one—because he was repenting; the other one who “exalteth himself shall be abased”—because he was not repenting (Luke 18:14). None but the truly penitent are saved, and that is who the righteous are (see Alma 42:22–24).

What do you repent of and how do you repent? It is all a matter of *seeking*: when you repent you turn from seeking some things to seeking others. What you seek are the desires of your heart, as Alma says, and by them alone you will be judged (see Alma 41:3). “Now the cause of this iniquity of the people was this—Satan had great power, unto the stirring up of the people to do all manner of iniquity, and to the puffing them up with pride, tempting them to seek for power, and authority, and riches, and the vain things of the world” (3 Ne. 6:15). The condition is first laid out by Nephi and often repeated throughout the Book of Mormon: all who seek “to get gain, and all who are built up to get power over the flesh, and those who are built up to become popular in the eyes of the world, and those who seek the lusts of the flesh and the things of the world, and to do all manner of iniquity; yea, in fine, all those who belong to the kingdom of the devil are they who need fear, and tremble, and quake; they are those who must be brought low in the dust; they are those who must be consumed as stubble; and this is according to the words of the prophet” (1 Ne. 22:23). The first commandment given to the restored Church was “seek not for riches but for wisdom” (D&C 6:7, 11:7), the Lord well knowing what most people are prone to seek. We need not expand on how those four things are inseparably joined “in one specious and glittering mass,” as Gibbon says of the Romans; the appeal of the primetime TV show would be defective and our joy would not be full if any of the four were lacking in “Dallas,” “Dynasty,” or “Falconcrest.”

The Nephites of old had their own idea of who were righteous and who were wicked, as we do, which conveniently avoided the necessity of repentance until they were forced to it by violent events. And we are warned to “beware of pride, lest ye become as the Nephites of old, “who, the same verse tells us, sought the wrong kind of riches—that was their wickedness (D&C 38:39).

Very well, what do the righteous seek? Isn’t “wisdom” rather vague? The righteous in the Book of Mormon sought to live “after the manner of happiness” (2 Ne. 5:27), and in at least five instances succeeded. It is their example we should follow, but I don’t think we will until we get rid of our own definition of who are “the good guys” and who are “the bad guys.”

All the writers in the Book of Mormon are worried men. Nephi ends his days disappointed, discouraged, and saddened. He had once led a society that lived “after the manner of happiness,” but all that has changed.

Wherefore, now after I have spoken these words, if ye cannot understand them it will be because ye ask not, neither do ye knock; wherefore, ye are not brought into the light, but must perish in the dark.

And now I, Nephi, cannot say more; the Spirit stoppeth mine utterance, and I am left to mourn because of the unbelief, and the wickedness, and the ignorance, and the stiffneckedness of men; for they will not search knowledge, nor understand great knowledge, when it is given unto them in plainness, even as plain as word can be.

. . . It grieveth me that I must speak concerning this thing. (2 Ne. 32:4, 7–8)

His last words show us the old Nephi, upright, passionate, obedient till the last: “These words shall condemn you at the last day. For what I seal on earth, shall be brought against you at the judgment bar; for thus hath the Lord commanded me, and I must obey” (2 Ne. 33:14–15). If Nephi’s last words are neither happy nor hopeful, the first words of Jacob, to whom he turns over the record, are positively alarming; he begins on a note of “great anxiety,” because he has been shown what is going to happen (see Jacob 1:5). Jacob and his descendants are religious leaders, not kings, working to forestall a growing trend, trying to “persuade all men not to rebel against God” (Jacob 1:8). Already under Nephi the Second (see Jacob 1:11), they begin “to grow hard in their hearts,” indulging “somewhat” in Solomon’s luxurious vices and “lifted up somewhat in pride”—that “somewhat” still leaves the door open to repentance (Jacob 1:15–16). But they do all this under the guise of sanctity, justifying themselves by the scriptures (see Jacob 2:23). Jacob is very reluctant to speak about this sort of thing; he “shrinks with shame” at it (Jacob 2:6). But things are definitely getting worse: “This day (I) am weighed down with much more desire and anxiety for the welfare of your thoughts, how that ye are beginning to labor in sin” (Jacob 2:3, 5). At the launching of a new civilization which is to last for a thousand years, things must not get out of hand and Jacob is desperate to control the situation. He is plainly embarrassed to bring up the sins, wickedness, crimes, and abominations under which the people are beginning to labor (see Jacob 2:5–6, 9–11).

Just what are these vices, we begin to wonder, and the answer is loud and clear: “This is the word which I declare unto you, that many of you have begun to search for gold”; they have not been opposed in this, he tells them, for God means the riches of the promised land to be enjoyed (Jacob 2:12). But what he does not like is the invidious comparison of a competitive economy: “*Because* some of you have obtained more abundantly than that of your brethren ye are lifted up in the pride of your hearts. . . . Ye suppose that ye are better than they” (Jacob 2:13; emphasis added). It is inequality that the prophets deplore throughout the Book of Mormon; pride stands at the head of every one of those many lists of crimes that

beset the society. Above all, this reverence for wealth will not do, Jacob tells the people; do they have any idea how contemptible this thing is in God's sight? If they value his opinion, they will not set up their own artificial scale of values (see Jacob 2:16). There is nothing wrong with having plenty, but let's all be rich! "Be familiar with all and free with your substance, that they may be rich like unto you" (Jacob 2:17). Then comes a classic on equality: "Ye were proud in your hearts, of the things which God hath given you, what say ye of it? Do ye not suppose that such things are abominable unto him who created all flesh? And the one being is as precious in his sight as the other" (Jacob 2:20–21).

With seeking for wealth goes a "grosser" attendant vice of licentious living (see Jacob 2:22–23). God does not bring people to the promised land for a repeat of the Old World follies; here he is determined to "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" (Jacob 2:25–26). God's people may never enjoy the luxury of living after the manner of the world (see D&C 105:3–5). The promised land is a testing ground offering both great opportunity and corresponding risk: "Wherefore, this people shall keep my commandments risk, saith the Lord of Hosts, or cursed be the land for their sakes" (Jacob 2:29). In the Old World are civilizations which were ancient at the time Lehi left Jerusalem, and they still survive, but of those in the land of promise were are told that when they are ripe in iniquity, when the cup is full, they shall be swept off from the land. Compared with other continents this one has no history, no surviving cultures, though far and wide civilizations whose identities remain a mystery have left their ruins and their scattered descendants.

The Nephites always fancied themselves to be good people because the Lord had brought them to the land of promise and accordingly they styled their enemies as the wicked. And indeed the enemy was a real and constant element in all their operations. The dangerous illusion that the populace may be classified simply as the good guys (our side) and the bad guys (their side) becomes the main theme of the book of Jacob, as of the Book of Mormon itself. While Jacob spares no words in describing the wickedness and depravity of the Lamanites, he can declare of his own people at that early date: "Behold, ye have done greater iniquities than the Lamanites" (Jacob 2:35). Where does that leave us? With a polarized world that emerges in Jacob 3:

Except ye repent the land is cursed for your sakes; and the Lamanites, which are not filthy like unto you, nevertheless they are cursed with a sore cursing, shall scourge you even unto destruction.

And the time speedily cometh, that except ye repent they shall possess the land of your inheritance. . . .

Behold, the Lamanites your brethren, whom ye hate because of their filthiness and the cursing which hath come upon their skins, are more righteous than you. . . .

. . . the Lord God will not destroy them, but will be merciful unto them. (Jacob 3:3–6)

So later: “I will not utterly destroy them, but . . . concerning the people of the Nephites: If they will not repent, and observe to do my will, I will utterly destroy them” (Hel. 15:16–17). Bad guys? You “persecute your brethren because ye suppose that ye are better than they” (Jacob 2:13). As Isaiah told the Jews at Jerusalem, it is not for them to decide who are God’s people—that is for God to decide (see Isa. 1:12).

Throughout the Book of Mormon the wicked have a perfectly beautiful self-image, to which Jacob now refers: “A commandment I give unto you, which is the word of God, that ye revile no more against them because of the darkness of their skins; neither shall ye revile against them because of their filthiness; but ye shall remember your own filthiness, and remember that their filthiness came because of their fathers,” while “your filthiness, (may) bring your children unto destruction” (Jacob 3:9–10). Even Nephi in his youth recognizes and combats the natural tendency to put oneself on the right side: “Yea, why should I give way to temptations, that the evil one have place in my heart to destroy my peace and afflict my soul? Why am I angry because of mine enemy? Awake, my soul! No longer droop in sin. Rejoice, O my heart, and give place no more for the enemy of my soul. Do not anger again because of mine enemies” (2 Ne. 4:27–29). He recognizes that no matter how vicious his enemies are they are not responsible for his condition. We cannot repent for our enemies—what do we know about their personal lives? *Repent* is a reflexive verb—“I do repent me.” I can sorrow for the wickedness of another, but I cannot repent of it unless I have caused it. For Nephi, the perennial tension is laid down as a condition of life for his people, “And inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments, ye shall prosper, and shall be led to a land of promise; yea, even a land which I have prepared for you; yea, a land which is choice above all other lands. And inasmuch as thy brethren [the Lamanites] shall rebel against thee, they shall be cut off from the presence of the Lord. . . . For behold, in that day that they shall rebel against me (fulfilled in Jacob 3:3), I will curse them even with a sore curse, and they shall have no power over thy seed except they shall rebel against me also. And if it so be that they rebel against me, they shall be a scourge unto thy seed, to stir them up in the ways of remembrance” (1 Ne. 2:20–21, 23–24). Thus it is God’s intention to keep the “bad guys” in place permanently, and it is of no use for the Nephites to try to get rid of them, since they can be rendered harmless by the Nephites’ righteousness. The same message is given to Jacob’s son Enos: “I will visit thy

brethren according to their diligence in keeping my commandments. I have given unto them this land, and it is a holy land; and I curse it not save it be for the cause of iniquity” (Enos 1:10). With this goes a vivid description of just how thoroughly bad the Lamanites are; every effort of approach or conciliation by the Nephites is rebuffed, “Our labors were vain; their hatred was fixed, and they were led by their evil nature that they became wild, and ferocious, and a blood-thirsty people . . . and they were continually seeking to destroy us” (Enos 1:20)—perfect typecasting for the bad guys. And yet Enos declares that this dangerous confrontation is exactly what the Nephites need! They will not behave themselves without being thoroughly scared and admonished: “Nothing save it was exceeding harshness, preaching and prophesying of wars, and contentions, and destructions, and continually reminding them of death” has the desired effect of “stirring them up continually to keep them in the fear of the Lord” (Enos 1:23). The prophecy of Nephi is being fulfilled: “They shall be a scourge unto thy seed, to stir them up in remembrance of me; and inasmuch as they will not remember me, and hearken unto my words, they shall scourge them even unto destruction” (2 Ne. 5:25). Isn’t that all a bit severe? Not with “a stiff-necked people, hard to understand” (Enos 1:22). Jarom, the son of Enos, tells how “the prophets of the Lord did threaten the people of Nephi, according to the word of God, that if they did not keep the commandments, but should fall into transgression, they should be destroyed from off the face of the land”; and Jarom explains 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 1:10,12)—Nephi’s formula again.

Strictly speaking, there are no good guys: “All men that are in a state of nature, or I would say, in a carnal state, are in the gall of bitterness and in the bonds of iniquity; they are without God in the world” (Alma 41:11). Hence, “this is my doctrine . . . that the Father commandeth all men, everywhere, to repent and believe in me” (3 Ne. 11:32). It is as pointless, then, to ask who are the good guys and who are the bad guys as it is to ask who should repent. The answer is always the same: I am the sinner, and I must repent. How much? Until like the Son of Man, I am “full of grace and truth” (2 Ne. 2:6). When will that be? Not in this life! Here, all one can hope for is a passing grade. Jacob’s warnings of destruction take on an ominous note when his son Enos prays to the Lord that “if it should so be, that my people, the Nephites, should fall into transgression, and by any means be destroyed” that their record be preserved for the Lamanites (Enos 1:13, 16). The most hopeful thing that Enos’s son Jarom can say for his own people is that “God is exceedingly merciful unto them, and has not as yet swept them off from the face of the land,” in spite of “the hardness of their

hearts, and the deafness of their ears, and the blindness of their minds, and the stiffness of their necks” (Jarom 1:3). Are the Lamanites, then, so deserving? At that time, Jarom tells us, they “loved murder and would drink the blood of beasts” (Jarom 1:6). The best Jarom can hope for is to postpone the tragic end, and many righteous people among the Nephites set themselves to the task: “The prophets of the Lord did threaten the people of Nephi, according to the word of God, that if they did not keep the commandments, but should fall into transgression, they should be destroyed from off the face of the land” (Jarom 1:10).

Why this constant insistence on destruction—can’t the people simply be punished or corrected? The ceaseless labors of prophets, priests, and teachers are all that “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 1:12). Apparently the severe penalty clause for those who fail to meet conditions of survival in the promised land comes with the territory.

And who are the righteous in this land of backsliding Nephites and depraved Lamanites? The answer is written all over the Book of Mormon—the righteous are whoever are *repenting*. “I say unto you that as many of the Gentiles as will repent are the covenant people of the Lord; and as many of the Jews as will not repent shall be cast off; for the Lord covenanteth with none save it be with them that repent” (2 Ne. 30:2). Nephi is repeating a lesson given earlier to his brethren Laman and Lemuel, who assumed that they were the good guys and that the traditional enemies of Israel, the Amorites who formerly inhabited the land, were the bad guys. “Not at all!” says Nephi:

Do ye suppose that the children of this land, who were in the land of promise, who were driven out by our fathers, do ye suppose that they were righteous? Behold, I say unto you, Nay.

Do ye suppose that our fathers would have been more choice than they if they had been righteous? I say unto you, Nay. Behold, the Lord esteemeth all flesh in one; he that is righteous is favored of God. But behold, this people had rejected every word of God, and they were ripe in iniquity; and the fullness of the wrath of God was upon them; and the Lord did curse the land against them, and bless it unto our fathers; yea, he did curse it against them unto their destruction, and he did bless it unto our fathers. (1 Ne. 17:33–35)

The same land is blessed and cursed depending entirely on how the people behave. “And he leadeth away the righteous into precious lands, and the wicked he destroyeth, and curseth the land unto them for their sakes” (1 Ne. 17:38). And now Nephi tells them it was the Jews’ turn to come under the curse: “And now, after all these things, the time has come that they have become wicked, yea, nearly unto ripeness; and . . . the day must surely come that they must be destroyed” (1 Ne. 17:43).

Laman and Lemuel, being patriots, weren't having any of that; for them the Jews were ipso facto the good guys: "And we know that the people who were in the land of Jerusalem were a righteous people; for they kept the statutes and judgments of the Lord, and all his commandments, according to the law of Moses; wherefore, we know that they are a righteous people; and our father hath judged them" (1 Ne. 17:22). It is this very argument to which Isaiah gives such a stinging rebuke. Jarom's son Omni admits that he is a wicked man and has spent his time fighting Lamanites rather than keeping "the statutes and the commandments of the Lord as I ought to have done" (Omni 1:2). Omni's son, Amaron, announces the fulfillment of the prophecy in his own day when:

The more wicked parts of the Nephites were destroyed.

For the Lord would not suffer, after he had led them out of the land of Jerusalem and kept and preserved them from falling into the hands of their enemies, yea, he would not suffer that the words should not be verified, which he spake unto our fathers, saying that: Inasmuch as ye will not keep my commandments ye shall not prosper in the land.

Wherefore, the Lord did visit them in great judgment; nevertheless, he did spare the righteous that they should not perish. (Omni 1:5-7)

How is it possible to be so selective in times of war and confusion? It is done by the process of leading the righteous away. When the lights go out and the grandson of Amaron reports that there is "no revelation save that which has been written, neither prophecy" in his day (Omni 1:11), then the righteous man Mosiah is "warned of the Lord that he should flee out of the land of Nephi" (Omni 1:12), taking any who will go with him—it is Lehi all over again, another society of Saints in the wilderness.

Mosiah becomes a king in the land of Zarahemla where his son, the righteous King Benjamin, is able to establish the semblance of a decent society by using "much sharpness because of the stiffneckedness of the people," speaking "the word of God with power and with authority" (W of M 1:17). At the time he hands over the crown to his son King Mosiah at the conventional great assembly of the nation, a *panegyric* is held after the manner of the ancients everywhere: "I have not commanded you to come up hither to trifle with the words which I shall speak," he tells them (Mosiah 2:9). Benjamin is the idol of his people to whom his courage and skill have brought victory and prosperity. The meeting is in an ecstasy of patriotic fervor. But what does the king do? He studiously throws cold water over every spark of national pride. When he sees that in response to his words "they had fallen to the earth, for the fear of the Lord had come upon them" (Mosiah 4:1), he congratulates them on being awakened "to a sense of your nothingness, and your worthless and fallen state" (Mosiah 4:5). "Believe that ye must repent of your sins and forsake them, and humble yourselves

before God. . . . I would that ye should remember, and always retain in remembrance, the greatness of God, and your own nothingness, and his goodness and long-suffering towards you, unworthy creatures, and humble yourselves even in the depths of humility” (Mosiah 4:10–11).

Why this relentless suppression of every impulse to self-congratulation? It is to prepare the people’s minds to receive the doctrines of the Atonement and the Redemption, which otherwise appear strange and alien to prosperous people, and to prepare them to receive the Covenant. Only those who are aware of their lost and fallen state can take the mission of the Savior seriously, and before one can embrace it in terms of the eternities it must be grasped on the level of common everyday reality—Benjamin’s people know that they are in real danger of good deal of the time and, thanks to his teachings, know that there is only one way they can get through. And now he wishes to bring home to them the need for a Savior and Redeemer as something even more real and urgent than holding off the Lamanites. Their righteousness must be put to a very practical test: “Ye will administer of your substance unto him that standeth in need. . . . Perhaps thou shalt say: The man has brought upon himself his misery; therefore I will stay my hand, and will not give unto him of my food, nor impart unto him of my substance” (Mosiah 4:16–17). Justifying busy acquisition by equating it with righteousness is a great sin (compare Alma 4:6), and unless one who commits it “repenteth of that which he hath done he perisheth forever,” for he has denied our common dependence on God “and hath no interest in the kingdom of God. For behold, are we not all beggars?” (Mosiah 4:18–19). He wants them to realize that this dependence applies at every level: “If God . . . doth grant unto you whatsoever ye ask that is right, in faith, believing that ye have one to another” (Mosiah 4:21). The essence of Benjamin’s preaching is to purge the people, if possible, of their flattering self-image as good guys.

It is in the time of Benjamin’s son Mosiah that Zeniff is sent on patrol to spy out the weak points of the Lamanite defenses, “that our army might come upon them and destroy them—but when I saw that which was good among them I was desirous that they should not be destroyed” (Mosiah 9:1). For this treason the leader of the patrol, “being an austere and a blood—thirsty man (a real commando) commanded that I should be slain” (Mosiah 9:2)—mustn’t be soft on the bad guys! After all, Zeniff tells us the Lamanites really “were a lazy and an idolatrous people; therefore they were desirous to bring us into bondage” (Mosiah 9:12). What is more, they “taught their children. . . . an eternal hatred towards the children of Nephi” (Mosiah 10:17). How can you deal with such people? That problem is solved in the proper way at a later time by the mightiest warrior of the Nephites, the great Ammon.

One might expect Ammon, the super-swordsman of the Book of Mormon to whom no man or platoon of men can stand up, to wade in and teach the Lamanites a lesson; so when he proposes to go with a few companions among the Lamanites as a missionary everybody “laughed us to scorn,” as he reports it. “For they said unto us: Do ye suppose that ye can convince the Lamanites of the incorrectness of the traditions of their fathers, as stiffnecked a people as they are; whose hearts delight in the shedding of blood; whose days have been spent in the grossest iniquity; whose days have been spent in the grossest iniquity; whose ways have been the ways of a transgressor from the beginning? Now my brethren, ye remember that this was their language” (Alma 26:23–24). Of course everybody is for standard solution: “Let us take up arms against them, that we destroy them and their iniquity out of the land, lest they overrun us and destroy us”—the only realistic solution (Alma 26:25). But not for the mighty Ammon! “We came into the wilderness not with the intent to destroy our brethren, but with the intent that perhaps we might save some few of their souls” (Alma 26:26). And so the terrible warrior “traveled from house to house,” patiently suffering every privation, “relying . . . upon the mercies of God,” teaching the people in their houses and in their streets, being “cast out, and mocked, and spit upon, and smote upon our cheeks; and we have been stoned and bound with strong cords, and cast into prison. . . . And we have suffered all manner of afflictions, and all this, that perhaps we might be the means of saving some soul” (Alma 26:28–30). And that is the way you deal with the bad guys.

The result of that effort is a body of coverts who accept Ammon’s own philosophy, who “buried their weapons of war, and they fear to take them up lest by any means they should sin” (Hel. 15:9), the righteous people of Ammon, who spend their days repenting of the murders they had committed as acts of war and refusing to fight the bad guys under any circumstances (see Alma 24:5–30).

When Abinadi comes with the usual message—“except they repent I will utterly destroy them from off the face of the earth” (Mosiah 12:8)—the people of King Noah say Abinadi is crazy, because they are the good guys:

And now, O king, what great evil hast thou done, or what great sins have thy people committed, that we should be condemned of God or judged of this man?

And now, O king, behold, we are guiltless, and thou, O king, hast not sinned. . . .

And behold, we are strong, we shall not come into bondage, or be taken captive by our enemies; yea, and thou hast prospered in the land, and thou shalt also prosper” (peace and prosperity, standing tall all the way). (Mosiah 12:13–15)

In reply, Abinadi points out that while being actively religious they are doing the two things so fervidly condemned by Jacob, “If ye teach the law of Moses why do ye not keep it? Why do ye set your hearts upon riches? Why do ye commit whoredoms and spend your strength with harlots, yea, and cause this people to commit sin?” (Mosiah 12:29).

We must not forget those Book of Mormon super-good guys, the Zoramites—hard working, independent, fiercely patriotic, brave, smart, prosperous Zoramites—strictly attending their meetings and observing proper dress standards. What a perfectly wonderful self-image! “Holy God, we believe that thou hast separated us from our brethren. . . . We believe that thou hast elected us to be thy holy children. . . . And thou hast elected us that we shall be saved, whilst all around us are elected to be cast by thy wrath down to hell; for the which holiness, O God, we thank thee. . . . And again we thank thee, O God, That we are a chosen and a holy people” (Alma 31:16–18). To Alma, these quintessentially good guys are the wickedest people he has ever known: “O Lord God, how long wilt thou suffer that such wickedness and infidelity shall be among this people? O Lord, wilt thou give me strength, that I may bear with mine infirmities. For I am infirm, and such wickedness among this people doth pain my soul” (Alma 31:30). And yet instead of condemning them he prays God to give him strength to bear his afflictions among them (see Alma 31:33), because “their souls are precious” (Alma 31:35). And in what does the “gross wickedness” of these people consist? In this, that “they cry unto thee, and yet their hearts are swallowed up in their pride. Behold, O God, they cry unto thee with their mouths, while they are puffed up, even to greatness, with the vain things of the world. Behold, O my God, their costly apparel . . . and all their precious things which they are ornamented with; and behold, their hearts are set upon them, and yet they cry unto thee and say—We thank thee, O God, for we are a chosen people unto thee, while others shall perish” (Alma 31:27–28).

The prophet Nephi makes the same charge against the people of Zarahemla: “Ye have set your hearts upon the riches and the vain things of this world, for the which ye do murder, and plunder, and steal, and bear false witness against your neighbor” (Hel. 7:21). But God is not going to put up with it; he is withdrawing his protection:

The Lord will not grant unto you strength, as he has hitherto done, to withstand against your enemies.

For behold, thus saith the Lord: I will not show unto the wicked of my strength, to one more than the other, save it be unto those who repent. . . . It shall be better for the Lamanites than for you except ye shall repent.

For behold, they are more righteous than you, for they have not sinned against that great knowledge which ye have received; therefore the Lord will

be merciful unto them; yea, he will lengthen out their days and increase their seed, even when thou shalt be utterly destroyed except thou shalt repent. (Hel. 7:22–24)

How often does this have to be repeated? Why do you think such great pains and sufferings have been experienced to get the message of the Book of Mormon through to us? Nephi goes on, “Yea, wo shall come unto you because of that pride which ye have suffered to enter your hearts, which has lifted you up beyond that which is good because of your exceedingly great riches!” (Hel. 7:26).

In the twelfth chapter of Helaman the demoralizing effect of riches on society is stated as a general rule: “At the very time when he doth prosper his people . . . then is the time that they do harden their hearts” (Hel. 12:2). Why do they do it?—“O how great is the nothingness of the children of men”—thus is their beautiful self-image rebuffed (Hel. 12:7).

Jesus Christ, visiting the Nephites, personally sees to it that the preaching of Samuel the Lamanite be included in the record, from which it had been omitted, perhaps because Samuel is an alien or speaks too frankly:

For this cause hath the Lord God caused that a curse should come upon the land, and also upon your riches, and this because of your iniquities.

. . . ye do cast out the prophets, and do mock them. . . .

And now when ye talk, ye say: If our days had been in the days of our fathers of old, we would not have slain the prophets; we would not have stoned them, and cast them out.

Behold ye are worse than they; for as the lord liveth, if a prophet come among you and declareth unto you the word of the Lord, which testifies of your sins and iniquities, ye are angry with him, and cast him out and seek all manner of ways to destroy him; yea, you will say that he is a false prophet, and that he is a sinner, and of the devil, because he testifieth that your deeds are evil. (Hel. 13:23–26)

They want to be told that they are the good guys and so when a man comes and tells them not what is wrong with Zarahemla but what is right with Zarahemla they will “say that he is a prophet” and reward him with large sums of money “because he speaketh flattering words unto you, and he saith that all is well, then ye will not find fault with him” (Hel. 13:27, 28).

Giddianhi the robber leader, insists that his followers *are* the good guys who are only trying to protect their sacred rights and property against the bad guys, “because of the many wrongs which ye have done unto them” (3 Ne. 3:4). He is the chief of the large and powerful “secret society of Gadianton; which society and the works thereof I know to be good; and they are of ancient date and they have been handed down unto us” (3 Ne. 3:9). The chief is merely trying to “recover their rights and government,” lost to them “because of your wickedness in retaining from them their

rights” (3 Ne. 3:10). It is the rigid tribal morality of the Mafia. The shining hero of the Book of Mormon is Moroni: “if all men had been, and were, and ever would be, like unto Moroni, behold, the very powers of hell would have been shaken forever; yea, the devil would never have power over the hearts of the children of men” (Alma 48:17). You do not expel evil from “the hearts of the children of men” by shooting them or blowing them up or torturing them—the Inquisition operated on that theory. Nor can “the powers of hell be shaken” by heavy artillery or nuclear warheads. The devil does not care who is fighting or why, as long as there is fighting; “[the devil] is the father of contention, and he stirreth up the hearts of men to contend with anger, one with another.” “Behold, this is not my doctrine, to stir up the hearts of men with anger, one against another; but this is my doctrine, that such things should be done away. Behold, verily, verily, I say unto you, I will declare unto you my doctrine . . . that the Father commandeth all men, everywhere, to repent and believe in me” (3 Ne. 11:29–32). There is no possibility of confrontation here between Good and Bad. This is best shown in Alma’s duel with Amlici. The Amlicites are described as coming on in all the hideous and hellish trappings of one of our more colorful rock groups, glorying in the fiendish horror of their appearance (see Alma 3:4–6). Alma on the other hand is the “man of God” (Alma 2:30) who meets the monster Amlici “with the sword, face to face” (Alma 2:29), and of course wins. Yet the Nephites consider that debacle to be “the judgments of God sent upon them because of their wickedness and their abominations; therefore they were awakened to a remembrance of their duty” (Alma 4:3). The moral is that whenever there is a battle both sides are guilty.

Nobody knows that better than Moroni, whose efforts to avoid conflict far exceed his labors in battle. When he sees trouble ahead, he gets ready for it by “preparing the minds of the people to be faithful unto the Lord their God” (Alma 48:7). His military preparations are strictly defensive, and he is careful to do nothing that will seem to threaten the Lamanites; all of his battles are fought on Nephite soil (see Alma 48:8–10). We are repeatedly reminded that Moroni is “a man that did not delight in bloodshed” (Alma 48:11). By him “the Nephites were caught to defend themselves against their enemies, even to the shedding of blood if it were necessary; yea, and they were also taught never to give an offense, yea, and never to raise the sword except it were against an enemy, except it were to preserve their lives” (Alma 48: 14). Any thought of preemptive strike is out of the question; Moroni even apologizes for espionage, for if they only have sufficient faith God will “warn them to flee, or to prepare for war, according to their danger; And also, that God would make it known unto them whither they should go to defend themselves. “This is a great load off their minds “and his [Moroni’s] heart did glory in it; not in the shedding of blood but in doing good, in

preserving his people, yea, in keeping the commandments of God, yea, and resisting iniquity” (Alma 48:15–16). Resisting iniquity where? In the only place it can be resisted, in their own hearts. Not only is a preemptive strike out of the question but Moroni’s people have to let the enemy attack at least twice before responding, to guarantee that their own action is purely defensive (see Alma 43:46). The highest compliment that Alma can pay Moroni is “Behold, he was a man like unto Ammon” (Alma 48:18), who, as we have seen, renounced all military solutions to the Lamanite problem.

Later it is the decision of the Nephites, after a series of brilliant victories, to take the initiative against the Lamanites and “cut them off from the face of the land” that makes a conscientious objector of Mormon, their great leader, who “did utterly refuse from this time forth to be a commander and a leader of this people” (Morm. 3:10–11). “And when they had sworn by all that had been forbidden them by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, that they would go up unto their enemies to battle, and avenge themselves of the blood of their brethren [a perfect John Wayne situation], behold the voice of the Lord came [to Mormon] saying: Vengeance is mine, and I will repay” (Morm. 3:14–15). So Mormon, from being top brass, becomes a detached observer and reporter for our express benefit, “I did stand as an idle witness. . . . Therefore I write unto you, Gentiles, and also unto you, house of Israel” (Morm. 3:16–17). He explains that the fatal mistake of the Nephites was to take the offensive: “And it was because the armies of the Nephites went up unto the Lamanites that they began to be smitten; for were it not for that, the Lamanites could have had no power over them” (Morm. 4:4). Then comes the bottom line: “But, behold, the judgments of God will overtake the wicked; and it is by the wicked that the wicked are punished; for it is the wicked that stir up the hearts of the children of men unto bloodshed” (Morm. 4:5). The battle is not between Good and Bad—the wicked shall destroy the wicked.

Mormon places the Nephites and the Lamanites side by side for our benefit. As the war between them continues, each sinks deeper and deeper into depravity. First, after a Nephite victory, are four years of peace devoted not to repentance but to warlike preparations as the Lord removes his beloved disciples from among the Nephites because of the wickedness and unbelief. The Lord even forbids Mormon to preach repentance, which preaching will now do no good “because of the hardness of their hearts the land was cursed for their sakes” (Morm. 1:17). They have passed the point of no return. The people have begun to worry and seek safe investments, to “hide up their treasures in the earth.” But the Dow Jones keeps going down as their riches “became slippery, because the Lord had cursed the land, that they could not hold them, nor retain them again” (Morm. 1:18). It is interesting that amid all this military fury riches still hold the number

one position in their minds. Then, as at the end of the Antique World, total lack of security forces people to turn in desperation to “sorceries, and witchcrafts, and magics” (Morm. 1:19)—they feel haunted, helpless, surrounded by demons. “The land was filled with robbers”; insecurity is total but “notwithstanding the great destruction which hung over my people, they did not repent . . . and it was one complete revolution throughout all the face of the land” (Morm. 2:8). Then come those awful words, “and I saw that the day of grace was passed with them” (Morm. 2:15). Though Mormon relents under extreme pressure and leads the army to more victories (see Morm. 5:1), “nevertheless the strength of the Lord was not with us; yea, we were left to ourselves” (Morm. 2:26). After all the Lord has done for them, the poor fools “did not realize that it was the Lord that had spared them, and granted unto them a chance for repentance”—his arm is still stretched out (Morm. 3:3).

Meanwhile, what are the bad guys up to? The Lamanites have been sacrificing Nephite women and children (see Morm. 4:15), yet “notwithstanding this great abomination of the Lamanites, it doth not exceed that of our people,” who practice cannibalism “for a token of bravery” (Moro. 9:9–10). When things reach this state, Mormon says: “I pray unto God that he will spare thy life, to witness the return of his people unto him, or their *utter destruction*; for I know that they must perish except they repent” (Moro. 9:22; emphasis added). “O the depravity of my people! They are without order and without mercy” (Moro. 9:18). Mormon plays for the people he had loved and led, though he knows his prayer cannot be answered (see Morm. 3:12). “And if they perish it will be like unto the Jaredites, because of the willfulness of their hearts, seeking for blood and revenge” (Moro. 9:23).

And all this is meant for us: “These things must surely be made known. . . . A knowledge of these things must come unto a remnant of these people, and also unto the Gentiles,” by being “hid up unto the Lord that they may come forth in his own due time” (Morm. 5:8–9, 12). As to Mormon’s own people, the Lord has reserved their blessings, which they might have received in the land, for the Gentiles who shall possess the land (see Morm. 5:19). But they will have another chance, for “after they have been driven and scattered by the Gentiles, behold, then will the Lord remember the covenant” (Morm. 5:20). Then it will be our turn to be concerned: “And then, O ye Gentiles, how can ye stand before the power of God, except ye shall repent and turn from your evil ways?” (Morm. 5:22). That hardly describes us as good guys; there is only one hope for us: “I prayed unto the Lord that he would give unto the Gentiles grace,” says Moroni, “that they might have charity”—that is the only thing that can save us, unilateral generosity; if I expect anything in return for charity except the happiness of the recipient, then it is not charity. The Lord’s

answer to Moroni is chilling: “The Lord said unto me: If they have not charity it mattereth not unto thee” (Ether 12:36–37). Mormon was shown our generation, which he describes with photographic accuracy: “Behold, I speak unto you as if ye were present, and yet ye are not. But behold, Jesus Christ hath shown you unto me, and I know your doing” (Morm. 8:35). He then proceeds to describe a people immensely pleased with themselves: “There are none save a few only who do not lift themselves up in the pride of their hearts, unto the wearing of very fine apparel, unto envying, and strifes, and malice, and persecutions, and all manner of iniquities”—the high-living fiercely competitive crime-ridden world of the 1980s. And then to the heart of the matter: “For behold, ye do love money, and your substance, and your fine apparel, and the adorning of your churches [Communists do not adorn churches], more than ye love the poor and the needy, the underprivileged to “pass by you, and notice them nor,” while placing high value on “that which hath no life” (Morm. 8:36, 37, 39). All the meanness and smugness of our day speaks in that phrase; and these very self-satisfied, church-conscious, and wicked people are about to be destroyed by war: “Behold, the sword of vengeance hangeth over you; and the time soon cometh that he avengeth the blood of the saints upon you, for he will not suffer their cries any longer” (Morm. 8:41).

We have nor mentioned the case of the Jaredites; it should hardly be necessary to tell the story of Shiz and Coriantumr, each obsessed with the necessity of ridding the world of his evil adversary. Both sides were exterminated. Not many years ago all of this Book of Mormon extravaganza belonged even for Latter-day Saints to the world of pure fantasy, of things that could never happen in the modern civilized world—total extermination of a nation was utterly unthinkable in those days. But suddenly even within the past few years a very ancient order of things has emerged at the forefront of world affairs; who would have thought it—the Holy War! the ultimate showdown of the Good Guys with God on their side versus the Godless Enemy. It is the creed of the Ayatollah, the Jihad, Dar-al-Islam versus Dar-al-Harb, the Roman *ager pacatus* versus the *ager hosticus*. On the one side *Deus vult*, on the *Bi’smi-llah*; it is a replay of the twelfth century, the only way the “good people” can be free, that is, safe, is to exterminate the “bad people” or, as Mr. Lee counsels, to lock them up before they do any mischief—that alone will preserve the freedom of “us good people.”

And now there is even talk of Armageddon with Gog and Magog, the two giants of the North, ending in extermination. There are those who insist that we are the good guys fighting the bad guys at Armageddon, but there is no such affair in the scriptures, where the only actual fighting mentioned is when “every man’s sword shall be against his brother”—the wicked against the wicked. Then God intervenes with pestilence, “hailstones, fire, and

brimstone” (Ezek. 38:21, 22), with much slaughter, but no mortal army has a hand in it. In the New Testament version it all happens after the Millennium, when fire comes out of heaven and destroys the army besieging the Saints, but there is no mention of a battle anywhere (see Rev. 20:7–10). We have seen that for us there is only one way to prepare for the great events ahead, and that is to be found doing good when the Lord comes, with no one taking advantage of temporary prosperity “to his fellow-servants, and to eat and drink with the drunken” (JS–M 1:52).

Mormon’s message to us is not without a word of hope and advice: “Behold, I speak unto you as though I spake from the dead; for I know that ye shall have my words. . . . Give thanks unto God that he hath made manifest unto you our imperfections, that ye may learn to be more wise than we have been” (Morm. 9:30–31). His address is expressly to the inhabitants of “this land” into whose hands “this book” shall come—specifically, it is meant for us.

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