

## An Apocalyptic Warning from the Book of Mormon

# LAST CALL

By Hugh Nibley

THE MESSAGE OF THE BOOK OF MORMON IS THAT Jesus is the Christ. On the truth of that proposition depends our only hope for eternal life, and without that we are going nowhere, as many a wise man now assures; life becomes absurd, much ado about nothing, "a tale told by an idiot," etc. First and foremost, the Book of Mormon preaches the Gospel but it supports its presentation with strong evidence. It tells us frankly on the title page that its intent is to *show* and to *convince*. To convince is to overcome resistance—that is the object; and the method is to show, to demonstrate by evidence. The woman at the well harkened to the Lord's message and urged the other villagers to do so because he told her all about herself, things that only she knew (John 4:6-30). So it is with the Book of Mormon; its message is the Gospel, but as an inducement to consider the doctrine seriously an impressive historical superstructure has been erected.

Let us forego the discussion of the doctrinal and spiritual part and in the limited space given confine ourselves to the historical, though both parts deliver the same message.

But is it history? Until specific sources are available one way or the other, can you tell me why it should not be treated as history? Here, a very young man (or somebody in the 1820s, perhaps the most barren and desolate decade in scholarship) has offered to present us with a complex history of a civilization covering a thousand years, and neglecting no major aspect of the human comedy from beginning to end. The author assures us that this is all history, and he has written it all out for us. This, by the rules of textual criticism, puts the ball in our court: The writer has done an awful lot of work, and it is now up to us to show that his work is not what he says it is.

Today, Egyptologists admit how very close to nothing at all is known about the ancient Egyptians, even though we have thousands of pages of their writings to read. But Egypt is our town, a crowded pageant of familiar faces, compared to the vast and

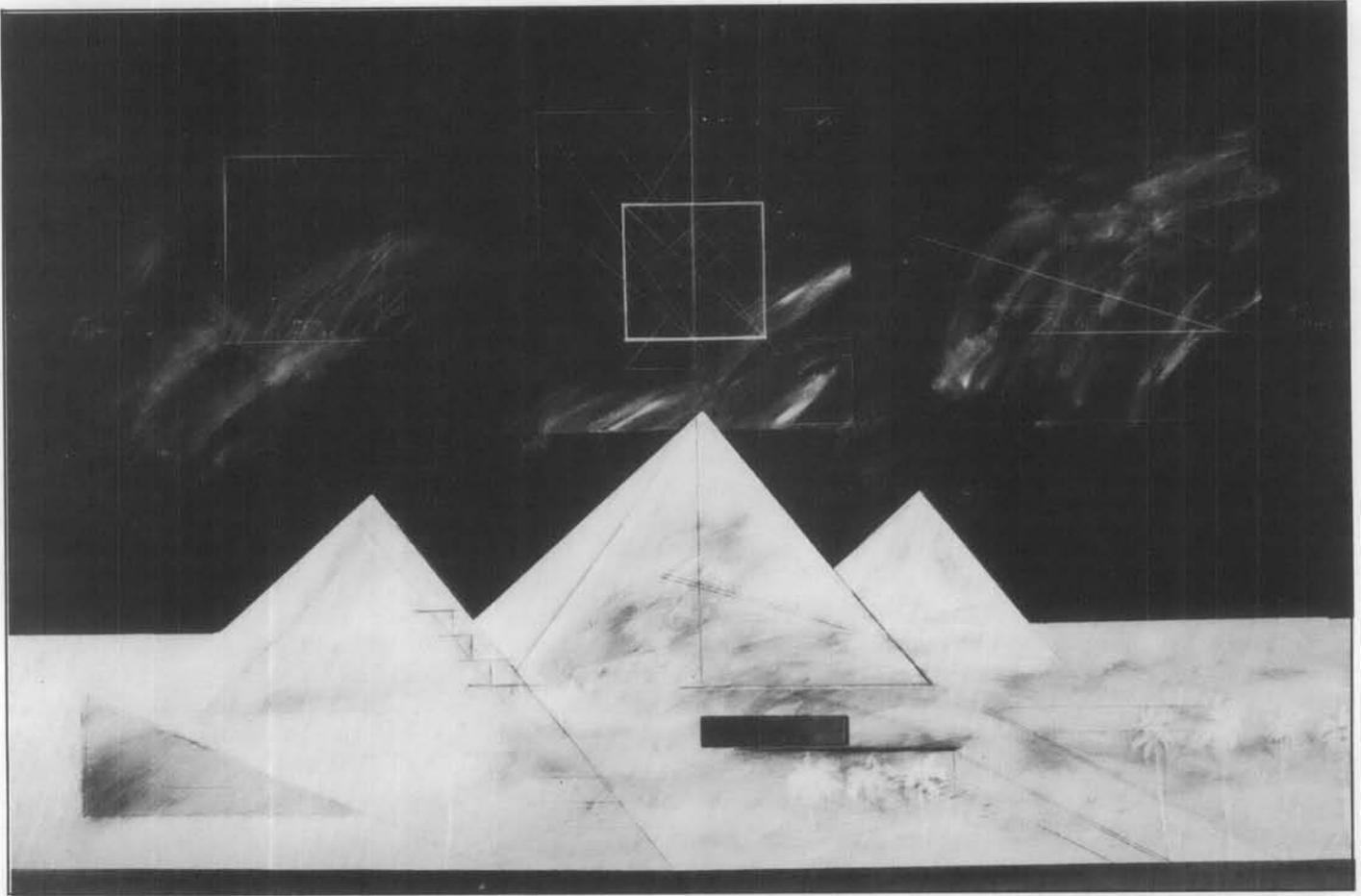
total blank of the canvas which still awaits the portrait of the Americas of a mere thousand years ago. Do you think anyone is qualified at this time to tell the world just what went on and did not go on in that most lost of lost worlds?

For example it is only since 1960, as Klaus Koch has shown, that we have seen "the rediscovery of apocalyptic."<sup>1</sup> The most significant form of that ancient literature is the *Himmelsreise der Seele*, [*The Ascension of the Soul to Heaven*] or as it is now somewhat pompously called the *psychanodia*. The existence of the genre was first demonstrated by Martin Haug in 1872. The last 25 years have seen the emergence of two "psychanodic" heroes who quite overshadow all the others, namely Enoch and Abraham. Joseph Smith was only 23 years old when he produced the Book of Enoch and the Book of Mormon; the latter opens with the most perfect model of an ascension (*Himmelsreise*).<sup>2</sup> We find the righteous man in a doomed and wicked world supplicating God, carried aloft in an ascension in which "he thought he saw God sitting upon his throne" (1 Nephi 1:8); he returns to earth, and begins to teach the people, who mock him and threaten his life; he retires to the desert with a faithful following in the expectation of founding a pious colony in the wilderness.

We have space to consider only certain specialized but supremely important aspects of Book of Mormon history. I have treated several others in some detail in the light of more recent findings: the crisis in Jerusalem (illustrated by the Lachish letters);<sup>3</sup> nomadic life in the deserts of Arabia (as reported by mid-nineteenth century and twentieth century travelers);<sup>4</sup> the communities of sectaries in desert retreats (as described in the Dead Sea Scrolls);<sup>5</sup> ancient religious rites, ordinances and ceremonies (depicted in documents found since the mid-nineteenth century);<sup>6</sup> ancient warfare (in the light of personal experience);<sup>7</sup> proper names (from lists supplied by archaeology in Palestine and Egypt).<sup>8</sup> etc., etc. But if such a performance was beyond the capacity of anyone living in the 1820s, what is even more fantastic is the picture painted by the Book of Mormon of another world entirely, even more removed from the imagination of anyone living in 1830, namely our own world of the 1980s. And this is the world with which the Book of Mormon is primarily concerned.

---

HUGH NIBLEY is a professor emeritus of ancient studies at Brigham Young University. This article is based on a transcript of a talk given at the 1986 Sunstone Theological Symposium in Salt Lake City.



For over a century Mormons promoted the Book of Mormon as the story of the Indians. "Wouldn't you like to know where the American Indians came from?" my missionary companions used to ask the factory workers and peasants of Europe, who couldn't have cared less. Why have we ignored the book's own insistent and repeated statements on why it was written and to whom it is addressed? The first chapter is a prologue set in the Old World which bluntly states the argument: "There came many prophets, prophesying unto the people that they must repent, or the great city Jerusalem must be destroyed" (1 Nephi 1:4). In the last chapter of the Book of Mormon we find the identical proposition repeated for another and a distant people—a proud civilization which must repent or be destroyed (Moroni 10). In between the beginning and the end, the proposition is repeated more than a hundred times. "Destruction" is repeated some 513 times in the book, and "repentance," 385 times. "Destroy" is used in the proper sense as *de-struere*, to break down and scatter the elements, to smash the structure.<sup>9</sup>

A society on the brink of destruction is not a safe place to linger, and so we are immediately introduced into the *Rekhabite* motif: "Come out of her, oh my people! Partake not of her sins lest ye partake of her plagues" (cf. Jeremiah 35). After the Ascension of Lehi, he does what other prophets did after such an

experience and takes off into the wilderness. The Rekhabites were contemporaries of Lehi who did just that, and the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls shows us that such things actually did happen repeatedly.<sup>10</sup> The flight from Egypt, of course, had set the example, and to it the Book of Mormon preachers, like those in ancient Israel, often refer and compare themselves. The First Psalm dramatizes the situation by comparing the righteous to a fruitful tree of life and the evil man to a barren plant; the one follows paths known to God, the other gets lost in the sand.

The Rekhabite move is repeated again and again in the Book of Mormon. Not long after the arrival of the family of Lehi in the New World, when the tension became unbearable between Nephi and his elder brothers, "the Lord did warn me, that I, Nephi, should depart from them and flee into the wilderness, and all those who would go with me" (2 Nephi 5:5). Even so, "Mosiah...being 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...did according as the Lord had commanded him" (Omni 1:12-13). From his community in turn, others broke off and disappeared into the wilderness (Omni 1:27-30). Likewise, Alma founded his pious colony at the Waters of Mormon, a wild place (Mosiah 18:4), and when later his church had been absorbed by a local kingdom, his people "gathered their flocks together" and while the guards slept "Alma and his people

departed into the wilderness” (Mosiah 24:18, 20). After the title of liberty was raised, many Lamanites gave up everything and went over to join the devout and peaceful society of the Ammonites (Alma 62:27). Even so, the Latter-day Saints given the choice between Missouri and Illinois or the desert chose the wilderness.

So here we have two sharply divided societies to whose irreconcilable views there is only one solution—separation. But the trouble with idealistic communities fleeing from the wicked world is that they take their tensions with them. In the desert, trouble within the family, which began in the city, only gets worse. Laman and Lemuel side with the people at Jerusalem: “We perish if we leave Jerusalem,” they said. “You perish if you stay,” said Nephi, because there isn’t going to be any Jerusalem. How does he know? “I have seen a vision” (2 Nephi 1:4). That is just what is wrong, say Laman and Lemuel. Here they are being led by the “foolish imaginations” of “a visionary man”—a *piqqeakh*, one who sees things that others do not—to give up “the land of their inheritance, and their gold, and their silver, and their precious things,” and for what? “To perish in the wilderness” (1 Nephi 2:11). Jerusalem offered Laman and Lemuel wealth, social position, the security of a great city with strong alliances (1 Nephi 2:13). What is more, righteousness was on their side: “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” (1 Nephi 17:22). It was their father who was off base; what did he and Nephi have to offer but “great desires to know the mysteries of God” (1 Nephi 2:16)? Feelings ran so high that the brothers went so far as to conspire to remove Nephi and his father from the scene.

The hopeless impasse was an anguish of soul to the father and son who received comfort and encouragement in inspired dreams, in which the high life and hunger in the sands become an allegory of the perennial choices before us. That is how Nephi explains it. Fashionably dressed beautiful people, partying in the top-priced upper apartments and penthouses of a splendid high-rise, have fun looking down and commenting on a bedraggled little band of transients eagerly eating fruit from a tree in a field (1 Nephi 8:10-27). “The great and spacious building,” Nephi explains, “was the pride of the world” (1 Nephi 11:36), or rather it is the “vain imaginations...of the children of men” (1 Nephi 12:18). Which is the real world? There is no possibility of enjoying the ambience of both, for “a great and terrible gulf divideth them” (1 Nephi 12:18); the choice was narrowed when that “great and spacious building...fell, and the fall thereof was exceeding great.... Thus shall be the destruction of all nations, kindreds, tongues and people, that shall fight against the twelve apostles of the Lamb” (1 Nephi 11:36).

This great dichotomy is the perennial order of the world, “opposition in all things,” a symmetry as natural as that which pervades all matter; but it is a *broken* symmetry. Without the Rekhabite principle, the Book of Mormon would be nothing but a *vates malorum*, a wail of despair without hope. What breaks the

symmetry is the indeterminate principle as stated by Heisenberg and also by Moroni in his final reflection on the fate of the Nephites: “The devil...inviteth and enticeth to sin, and to do that which is evil continually. But behold, that which is of God inviteth and enticeth to do good continually” (Moroni 7:12-13). Powerful forces exerting equal pull in opposite directions. What breaks the symmetry? The free will of the individual. The nation may go to hell, but the individual does not have to. Almost every leading character in the Book of Mormon is one who breaks with the establishment and goes his way. So Moroni explains, “Wherefore, take heed...that ye do not judge that which is evil to be of God, or that which is good and of God to be of the devil. For...it is given unto you to judge, that ye may know good from evil...as the daylight is from the dark night” (Moroni 7:14-15). In the end this broken symmetry is the hope of salvation.

But God has more to offer those who break with the world than “wearying in a land of sands and thorns.” The wilderness is only a transition, a difficult exercise of disengaging from the fashion of the world: “He did straiten them in the wilderness with his rod” (1 Nephi 17:41). Beside the “mysteries of God” there was more awaiting the faithful, “ye shall prosper, and be led to a *land of promise*...which I have prepared for you; yea, even a land which is choice above all other lands” (1 Nephi 2:20, italics added). “He leadeth away the righteous into precious lands, and the wicked he destroyeth, and curseth the land unto them for their sakes” (1 Nephi 17:38). The idea is biblical—the promise to Abraham—and also classical, as we see in Tyrtæus and the Aeneid.<sup>11</sup> It is the normal product of times of hardship and migration, when wandering tribes seek happy homelands, which finds its culmination in the hope of America.

This is the “choice land above all other lands” since the Flood, reserved for the New Jerusalem and the “remnant of the house of Joseph...like unto Jerusalem of Old” (Ether 13:2,6-8). But God placed the promise upon it “in his *wrath*” (Jacob 1:7; Alma 12:35; Ether 1:33; 2:8; 15:28; italics added). Why that of all things? Because his patience was at an end when men had defiled all the other lands in the glorious and beautiful world he had given them. He would set apart a place where he would stand for no nonsense; there men would be given such freedom as nowhere else, and could enjoy such prosperity as nowhere else. But in return for this liberty certain ground rules have to be observed. Perfect liberty means that you can go as far as you want, free of many of the age-old hampering restraints imposed by man; since this is a place of testing, that is the purpose of leaving everyone pretty much on his own. But when the inhabitants abuse that freedom until they “are ripened in iniquity” their presence will be no longer tolerated; “when the fullness of his wrath should come” they will be “swept off,” suddenly and completely (Ether 2:8). As it was in the days of Noah, it shall be business as usual, right up until the last moment, for it is “not until the fullness of iniquity” is matched by “the fullness of his wrath,” which “cometh upon them when they are ripened in iniquity” that they will be abruptly terminated (Ether 2:8-10). God was angry when he laid down these conditions: “These are my thoughts upon the land which I shall give you for your inheritance; for it shall be a land

choice above all other lands.” And these are the thoughts: “that my Spirit will not always strive with man; wherefore, if ye will sin until ye are fully ripe ye shall be cut off from the presence of the Lord” (Ether 2:15). This promise is conveyed to us for our special benefit: “And this cometh to you, O ye Gentiles, that ye may know the decrees of God—that ye may repent, and not continue in your iniquities until the fullness come, that ye may not bring down the fullness of the wrath of God upon you as the inhabitants of the land have hitherto done” (Ether 2:11). It is Moroni’s prophetic warning to stop doing what we are doing. Fullness and ripeness: when the cup is full it can no longer be diluted; when the fruit is ripe it can only rot—there is no point to continuing the game. But up to that point all is permitted.

“Promised Land” has a nice upbeat sound that we like very much, but the great promise is worded as a curse: “Thus saith the Lord God—Cursed shall be the land, yea, this land, unto every nation, kindred, tongue, and people, unto destruction, which do wickedly, when they are fully ripe...for this is the cursing and the blessing of God upon this land” (Alma 45:16). When Lehi’s party had barely left Jerusalem, Nephi had a vision in which he “looked and beheld the land of promise.” And what did he see? “A mist of darkness on the face of the land of promise,” and horrible destruction and desolation (1 Nephi 12:4). Obviously one is not home free when he has set foot upon the land of promise. Quite the opposite; from then on he must watch his step and control the impulse to do whatever he pleases and “have it all.” For “God has sworn in his wrath” that what went on in other lands should not go on here. There are nations that were old when Nephi left Jerusalem and whose cultures and languages, customs, manners, and traditions still survive. They have all paid a high price in human suffering as they go along from folly to folly and disaster to disaster, but they are still there. It is not so in the New World, where great civilizations vanish without even leaving us their names and where no high civilization has survived. It is significant that with all the warning and promising only one penalty is ever mentioned, and only one means of avoiding it. “Prophets, and the priests, and the teachers, did labor diligently...and...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 to repentance” (Jarom 1:11-12). The penalty is destruction; the deliverance, repentance.

To avoid the destruction of the righteous with the wicked, God effects “a division of the people,” the Rekhabite phenomenon, the awful gulf, etc. It is the division between two ways of life, but it does divide the good guys from the bad guys into discrete societies. It is convenient to imagine all the righteous in one camp and the wicked in another, and this has been the usual and comfortable interpretation of the Book of Mormon—it is the good guys versus the bad guys. But this is exactly what the Book of Mormon tells us to avoid. God plays no favorites. Nephi rebukes his brothers for believing that because they are Jews they are righteous; God does not judge by party, he tells them; a good man is good and a bad one bad, according to his own behavior,

“Behold, the Lord esteemeth all flesh in one; he that is righteous is favored of God” (1 Nephi 17:35). Family and race and nationality account for nothing. “God is mindful of every people, whatsoever land they may be in; yea, he numbereth his people” (Alma 26:37). He numbers them as his own, not as being on one side or the other of a boundary, “the Lord doth grant unto all nations...to teach his word...all that he seeth fit that they should have” (Alma 29:8). Nephi finds the answer to the question, who are the bad guys? Where is the real enemy? In himself. It is his own weakness that makes him frustrated and angry, he says. Why should he take it out on others? (2 Nephi 4:26-35). Though others may be seeking his life, his escape is to follow the path that God has shown him, “a way for mine escape before mine enemies!” It is not for him to settle the score with them: “I will not put my trust in the arm of flesh; for I know that cursed is he that putteth his trust in the arm of flesh. Yea, cursed is he that putteth his trust in man or maketh flesh his arm” (2 Nephi 4:33-34). He is to tell the people who their real enemy is. The Lamanites are not the problem: “And the Lord God said unto me: They shall be a scourge unto thy seed, to stir them up in the remembrance of me; and inasmuch as they will not remember me, and hearken unto my words, they shall scourge them even unto destruction” (2 Nephi 5:25). Did the wickedness of the Nephites make the Lamanites any less wicked or less dangerous? On the contrary, it made them more dangerous because God had planned it that way. As long as the Nephites behaved themselves the Lamanites “curse[d]...with a sore curse...shall have no power over thy seed except they shall rebel against me also.” God means to keep them in place right to the end as “a scourge unto thy seed, to stir them up in the ways of remembrance” (1 Nephi 2:23-24). The Lamanites “have not kept the commandments of God” and have “been cut off” (Alma 9:14). Nevertheless, “the Lord will be merciful unto them and prolong their existence in the land” (Alma 9:16), “but...if ye [Nephites] persist in your wickedness...your days shall *not* be prolonged in the land, for the Lamanites shall be sent upon you...and ye shall be visited with utter destruction” (Alma 9:18-19).

The Book of Mormon goes to great lengths to describe just what a wicked society looks like and how it operates, with enough examples to type it beyond question, and with clinical precision it describes the hysteria that leads to its end.<sup>12</sup> It also tells us how to recognize a righteous society, usually presenting the two types to us in close proximity. With these two images firmly in mind we are told why this presentation is being given, for whose benefit, and why it is so singularly important. The authors do not ask us to make comparisons and see ourselves in the picture, because that would be futile: the wickeder the people are the more they balk at facing their real image and the more skillful they become in evading, altering, faking and justifying. So the book does not tell us to make the comparison—it does it for us, frankly and brutally. The Book of Mormon does not need to tell us what the wickedness of Jerusalem consisted of, since we have that in the Bible. The first display of evil is in the ambition

of Laman who stirred everyone's hearts to anger by accusing Nephi of thinking "to make himself a king and a ruler over us" (1 Nephi 16:38), which is exactly what Laman was aspiring to do (1 Nephi 17:44, 3:28-29). But the prime evil quickly emerges and persists throughout the book. Nephi, following Isaiah, explains the situation with the Jews, "for because they are rich they despise the poor...their hearts are upon the treasures; wherefore, their treasure is their god" (2 Nephi 9:30). "And they that are rich...puffed up because of their learning, and their wisdom, and their riches—yea, they are they whom he despiseth" (2 Nephi 9:42). That must be the all time put down.

Nephi's brother Jacob took over the leadership when the whole community was affected by the virus they had brought from Jerusalem: "You have obtained many riches; and because some of you have obtained more abundantly than that of your brethren...ye suppose that ye are better than they.... [God] condemneth you, and if ye persist in these things his judgments must speedily come unto you....O that you would rid you from this iniquity and abomination" (Jacob 2:13-16). In Alma's day, good conscientious people, "because of their exceeding riches ...which they had obtained by their industry [the work ethic, no less]...were lifted up in the pride of their eyes....The people of the church began...to set their hearts upon riches...that they began to be scornful, one towards another" (Alma 4:6-8). The result was "great inequality among the people...that Alma...seeing all their inequality, began to be very sorrowful" (Alma 4:11-15). "Will ye persist," he cried, "in the wearing of costly [not beautiful but always costly] apparel, and setting your hearts...upon your riches? Yea, will ye persist in supposing that ye are better one than another" (Alma 5:53-54). "And thus we see how great the inequality of man is because of sin and transgression" (Alma 28:13). The Book of Mormon describes the declension by which that mentality inevitably led to "wars and contentions among the Nephites...an awful scene of bloodshed" (Alma 28:9-10).

Needless to say, advocates were not lacking to justify and even sanctify such behavior. Korihor, a contemporary of Alma, rallied the people of property to free themselves from the oppressive restraints of sacral government. "foolish performances," he said by which "this people bind themselves...that they might not lift up their heads" (Alma 30:23). Thanks to the government, said he, people "durst not enjoy their rights and privileges." In particular, "they durst not make use of that which was their own lest they should offend their priests" (Alma 30:27-28); his appeal was for freedom from restraints "laid down by ancient priests" (Alma 30:23), freedom to follow the natural order in which "every man prospered according to his genius, and that every man conquered according to his strength; and whatsoever a man did was no crime" (Alma 30:17). The bottom line was the common-sense creed, "when a man was dead, that was the end thereof," all accounts settled, all charges dropped, all moral objections canceled. This was good news to the beautiful people, "causing them to lift their heads in wickedness," enjoying unlimited criminal and sexual license, "leading away...women, and also men, to commit whoredoms" (Alma 30:18)—a plain but discreet way of hinting at rampant homosexuality.

When a long war was followed by a post-war boom, there arose a dissension among them, and they would not give heed to the words of Helaman and his brethren: "But they grew proud, being lifted up in their hearts, because of their exceeding great riches; therefore, they grew rich in their own eyes, and would not give heed to their words" (Alma 45:24). Taking advantage of this backlash, one Amalickiah rode the wave to greatness. He is something of a standard type in the Book of Mormon; quite a charmer, "a man of many flattering words," who "led away the hearts of many people" (Alma 46:10). Of large and imposing presence (Alma 46:3), he was shrewd and calculating, "a man of cunning device" (Alma 49:11), and perfectly cynical—"he did not care for the blood of his people" (Alma 49:10). He had solid support among "those who were in favor of kings,...those of high birth, and they sought to be kings; and they were supported by those who sought power and authority over the people" (Alma 51:8). He wrought infinite mischief, as an example, Moroni reflects, of "the great wickedness of those who are seeking for power and authority" (Alma 60:17). It was this "iniquity...for the cause of your love of glory and the vain things of the world" (Alma 60:32) that plunged the Nephites into that terrible war, and "caused so much bloodshed among ourselves"; it was all due to "the desire [for] power and authority which those king-men had over us" (Alma 60:16).

The parallel path to power was that of organized crime. Kishkumen also aspired to head the government and began by employing the talents of one Gadianton, "exceedingly expert...in his craft" which was to "carry on the secret work of murder and of robbery" in a businesslike and professional manner (Helaman 2:4). Though their first plan failed, the campaign continued and clever public relations "seduced the more part of the righteous" to invest in their numerous projects, "come down to believe in their works and partake of their spoils." Thus "the Nephites did build them up and support them, beginning at the more wicked part of them," but then growing ever more respectable "until they had overspread all the land" (Helaman 6:38). When "the Nephites...did turn into their own ways, and did build up unto themselves idols of their gold and their silver" (Helaman 6:31), it became an easy matter to swing elections in favor of the society, and put its people in office, especially filling the judgeships and getting complete control of the law courts; from then on they could make legal whatever they chose to do. Speaking of the days of Moroni, Mormon observes that it was the lawyers and judges who started laying "the foundation of the destruction of this people" (Alma 10:27). So with the public "in a state of...awful wickedness" (Helaman 4:25), the combine "did obtain the sole management of the government"; and the first thing they did was to "turn their backs upon the poor and the meek, and the humble followers of God" (Helaman 6:39). In control of the nation's wealth, "in the space of not many years" (Helaman 6:32), the Gadianton society had become perfectly respectable, "filling the judgement-seats...Condemning the righteous...letting the guilty and the wicked go unpunished because of their money...held in office [perpetually]...to rule and do according to their wills, that they might get gain and glory of the world" (Helaman 7:4-5). It all goes



back to one thing, the line of ambitious men who beguile the public and aim at absolute power, and always start out by "seeking for gain, yea, for that lucre which doth corrupt the soul" (Mosiah 29:40). Among such men were religious promoters like Nehor, who engaged in "the spreading of priestcraft through the land...for the sake of riches and honor" (Alma 1:16), or the wicked King Noah, who "placed his heart upon riches" (Mosiah 11:14). There is one phrase occurring some fifteen times in the Book of Mormon that starts the alarm bell ringing and the red lights flashing; the fatal words are "They set their hearts on riches." If you can have anything in this world for money, well, money is what you want; how you get it, as the Roman satirist says, is not too important as long as you keep things respectable by keeping your murders secret—another main theme of the Book of Mormon.

Nephi ended his days in deep discouragement: "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" (2 Nephi 32:7). His brother Jacob takes up on an even more alarming note. In their frontier condition his people had taken to the barbarian custom of collecting wives, concubines and the spectacular loot that barbarians love. We should note here that the savage Lamanites who lived by raiding and plunder sought exactly the same things as the supposedly more civilized Nephites did—the whole lot of them "set their hearts on riches." Three hundred years after Christ, both the "people of Nephi and the Lamanites had become exceedingly wicked one like unto another" (4 Nephi 1:45). Who were the barbarians when "the people of Nephi began to be proud in their hearts, because of their exceeding riches, and become vain like unto their brethren, the Lamanites" (4 Nephi 1:43)? Love and display of wealth, as Plutarch tells us in his first Moral Essay, is the characteristic mark of the barbarians.<sup>13</sup> It is not surprising that "the robbers of Gadianton did spread over all the face of the land" with business booming everywhere—"gold and silver did they lay up in store in abundance, and did traffic in all manner of traffic" (4 Nephi 1:46). The work ethic paid off only too well when the "laborer in Zion" labored for money (2 Nephi 26:31), and "the hand of providence...smiled upon [them]" (Jacob 2:13).

The prosperity in the time of good king Mosiah produced a spoiled generation of smart-alecks, "many of the rising generation...did not believe"; actually, "they were a separate people as to their faith...even in their carnal and sinful state" (Mosiah 26:1-4). The sons of Alma and Mosiah were among that alienated generation; it took an angel to convert them, but the tradition never ceased out of the land (Mosiah 26:4). King Mosiah, to undertake reforms and make the country "a land of liberty," insisted that "this inequality should be no more in this land" and suggested a system of judges to equalize things (Mosiah 29:32). Under Alma the church was an ideal community (Alma 1:26-28), but the rest of the society indulged in the usual catalogue

of wrong-doing: “envyings and strife; wearing costly apparel; being lifted up in the pride of their own eyes;...lying, thieving, robbing, committing whoredoms, and murdering, and all manner of wickedness” (Alma 1:32). All the excitement of a highly competitive society, a night of prime time TV. There are four things that can lead to certain destruction according to both Nephis: the desire for gain, for power, for popularity, and for “lusts of the flesh”—the lifestyles of the rich and famous (1 Nephi 22:23; 3 Nephi 6:15).

After the war with Amlici, the people repented and prosperity returned, whereupon “the people of the church began to wax proud, because of their exceeding riches...which they had obtained by their industry” (Alma 4:6). “Many...were sorely grieved for the wickedness which they saw...[as] the people of the church began to be lifted up in the pride of their eyes, and to set their hearts upon riches” (Alma 4:7-8). The usual competitive escalation of unpleasantness followed, “yea, there were envyings, and strife, and malice, and persecutions, and pride, even to exceed the pride of those who did not belong to the church” (Alma 4:9). When “Alma saw the wickedness of the church...thus bringing on the destruction of the people, [and when] he saw the great inequality among the people,...seeing all their inequality, [he] began to be very sorrowful” (Alma 4:11-12, 15). He laid down all his great offices of state, realizing that all the power and authority of the highest political and military (Mosiah 29:42; Alma 2:16) offices which he had held would not correct the evil, and spent the rest of his days preaching repentance (Alma 4:19-20): “Yea, will ye persist in supposing that ye are better one than another;...And will ye persist in turning your backs upon the poor, and the needy, and in withholding your substance from them?” (Alma 5:54-55). Things got worse and there was a nasty war. Ammon was told by the Lord to save the people of Ammon who wanted no part of the business. “Get this people out of this land that they perish not....And they gathered together all their people...and...flocks and herds, and departed into the wilderness” (Alma 27:12-14). The Rekkhabite solution was still the only way out. The Ammonites missed the tremendous battle that ensued and the great lamentation that followed: “And thus we see,” says Alma, “how great the inequality of man is because of sin and transgression, and the power of the devil, which comes by the cunning plans...to ensnare the hearts of men” (Alma 28:13). Need we go on?

What does a righteous society look like? Far less spectacular than the wicked, it keeps a low profile; a healthy body is not aware of the ailing organs that provide the interest, conversation and titillation of a hypochondriac world. “Happy is the people whose annals is a blank!” says Voltaire. “What a drag!” says the overstimulated TV libertine. From the outside, the righteous society looks empty and boring to those who have not the remotest conception of what may go on inside. Alan Watts points this out in an essay in which he finds that the obscuring wall between the two worlds is simply money.<sup>14</sup> For those on either side of the veil it is the other side, naturally, that is not real, only

our side is real. However, there are certain guidelines to what is a good society, though mostly given in negative terms—those who keep the ten commandments are praiseworthy for what they do *not* do. Jacob gives us some rules: “Think of your brethren like unto yourselves, and be familiar with all and free with your substance, that they may be rich like unto you” (Jacob 2:17)—it is not the wealth but the inequality that does the damage. Of unequal distribution he says, “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 2:21). Benjamin recognizes the same danger of acquisitiveness: “I...have not sought gold nor silver nor any manner of riches of you; Neither have I suffered...that ye should make slaves of one another....And even I myself, have labored with mine own hands that I might serve you” (Mosiah 2:12-14). “For behold, are we not all beggars? Do we not all depend upon the same Being...for all riches which we have of every kind?” (Mosiah 4:19). And when Alma organized his church, “they were all equal, and they did all labor...And they did impart of their substance, every man according to that which he had” (Alma 1:26-27). The main theme is obvious: “For thus saith the Lord: Ye shall not esteem one flesh above another, or one man think himself above another” (Mosiah 23:7). “I desire that the inequality should be no more in this land...but I desire that this land be a land of liberty, and every man enjoy his rights and privileges alike” (Mosiah 29:32). For this reason, Mosiah laid down the kingship in favor of a system of judges, as a more equalitarian order (Mosiah 23:7). But the great obstacle to freedom was not government, but money; to maintain their liberty, Alma’s people “were all equal, and they did all labor, every man according to his strength” (Alma 1:26). (How could they be equal in wealth, we ask today, if no two of them were equal in strength?) Under the law of Mosiah and the judges, “there was no law against a man’s belief; for it was strictly contrary to the commands of God that there should be a law which would bring men on to unequal grounds” (Alma 30:7). “Now if a man desired to serve God, it was his privilege...but if he did not believe in him there was no law to punish him” (Alma 30:9), or to put him at a disadvantage, for the idea was that “all men were on equal grounds.” So even Alma, the high priest and chief judge of the land allowed people to go around preaching atheism. The righteous can only preserve their liberty by remembering the words of the patriarch Jacob, in all humility considering themselves despised and rejected in the manner of the youthful Joseph (Alma 46:24-27). Moroni calls upon his people to recognize their position as the meek and humble of the world, “we, who are despised” (Alma 46:18) by those whose “pride and nobility” he denounces (Alma 51:17, 18-21).

Alma begins his book with a happy picture. After a long war and great suffering, the people had learned their lesson, and here we have a picture of a righteous society: “And thus they were all equal, and they did all labor every man according to his strength. And they did impart of their substance, every man according to that which he had, to the poor, and the needy, and the sick, and the afflicted; and they did not wear costly apparel” (Alma 1:27). “Through the preaching of Ammon,” many Lamanites “became a

righteous people”—and here we have another important criterion of righteousness—“they did lay down the weapons of their rebellion” (Alma 23:7). And “there was not one soul among all the people who had been converted unto the Lord who would take up arms against their brethren; nay, they would not even make any preparations for war” (Alma 24:6). They repeatedly refer to all their former battles as murders (Alma 24:9-11; 27:8). When such groups got into trouble, Ammon recommended the Rekhabite solution—they “departed out of the land, and came into the wilderness” and carried on as “perfectly honest and upright in all things....And they did look upon shedding the blood of their brethren with the greatest abhorrence” (Alma 27:14, 27-28).

When the Lord appeared among the people he established his order of things, thereby demonstrating that it is not impossible for human beings on this earth to live after such an order without being bored by inactivity or lack of excitement. Fourth Nephi gives us the description of the model society:

The people were all converted to the Lord, upon all the face of the land, both Nephites and Lamanites, and there were no contentions and disputations among them, and every man did deal justly one with another. And they had all things common among them; therefore there were not rich and poor, bond and free, but they were all made free...continuing in fasting and prayer, and in meeting together oft both to pray and to hear the word of the Lord....And...there was no contention in the land, because of the love of God which did dwell in the hearts of the people. And there were no envyings, nor strifes, nor tumults, nor whoredoms, nor lyings, nor murders, nor any manner of lasciviousness; and surely there could not be a happier people....There were no robbers, nor murderers, neither...Lamanites nor any manner of -ites; but they were in one, the Children of Christ....And how blessed they were!” (4 Nephi 1:2-3, 12, 15-18).

Does this sound tame? The wicked flaunt their riches and their learning in the highly visible manner; “they are they whom he [God] despises.” To be righteous they must “consider themselves fools before God, and come down in the depths of humility” (2 Nephi 9:42), with no photo opportunities whatever. What counts is long suffering and patience—very low profile and non-spectacular; to call attention to one’s patience is to be impatient, “the Lord...trieth their patience and their faith” (Mosiah 23:21). In fact, the whole program culminates in “a sense of your nothingness” (Mosiah 4:5). To discover that one is nothing is the first step in breaking loose; when you have done that, says Benjamin, “ye shall always rejoice, and be filled with the love of God.” Yes, but what do you *do* to fill the time? “Ye shall grow in the knowledge of the glory of him that created you” (Mosiah 4:12). And what is that glory? Intelligence, the greatest fun of all, with no room for invidious comparison, rivalry and jealousy, that characterize the competitive business and professionalism, since truth alone is the object (Mosiah 4:13-16). In the end, we have no choice; Moroni prescribes the cure: “I give unto men weakness....I will show unto the Gentiles their weakness...that faith, hope and charity bringeth unto me....If the Gentiles have not

charity...[I will] take away their talent” (Ether 12:27-28, 35). There is no other way than to be “meek and lowly in heart,...have charity; for if he have not charity he is nothing,...cleave unto charity, which is the greatest of all,...the pure love of Christ....Pray unto the Father...that ye may be filled with this love...that ye may become the sons of God” (Moroni 7:44-48). This is Moroni’s summary of the situation.

We have ample material for an operational definition of righteousness and wickedness. One does not need to compose graduated lists of sins in the manner of the Jesuits. “I cannot tell you all the things whereby ye may commit sin,” says King Benjamin “for there are diverse ways and means, even so many that I cannot number them” (Mosiah 4:29). The same applies to deeds of righteousness, whether an act is a sin or a good deed depends on the state of mind of the person who does it. The Book of Mormon gives us the touchstone of righteousness, which is *repentance*. The test of righteousness or wickedness is not one of location, a matter of being in one camp or the other, but of *direction*, as Ezekiel tells us (Ezekiel 18:26), one who has a low score in doing good, if he repents and does an about face, is counted as righteous, while one who has a long record of good deeds, if he turns around, has joined the wicked (Ezekiel 18:27). The person on the top step facing down, is in worse condition than one on a bottom step facing up.

But isn’t there a difference of degree? Not at all: is it not all the more reprehensible for the righteous person to backslide, and all the more commendable for the rascal to turn righteous? The Book of Mormon is full of examples on both sides: “Therefore, blessed are they who will repent,...for these are they that shall be saved” (Helaman 12:23). And Nephi assures us that “all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people shall dwell safely in the Holy One of Israel if it so be that they will repent” (1 Nephi 22:28). Indeed, “the days of the children of men were prolonged” for the express purpose “that they might repent while in the flesh; wherefore, their state became a state of probation, and their time was lengthened” (2 Nephi 2:21). This was done to give everyone the fullest opportunity, “for he gave commandment that all men must repent; for he showed unto all men that they were lost, because of the transgression of their parents” (2 Nephi 2:21). Christ’s first pronouncement to the Nephites was, “I bear record that the Father commandeth all men, everywhere, to repent and believe in me” (3 Nephi 11:32). To carry on at all “we must call upon thee” “because we are unworthy before thee; because of the fall our natures have become evil continually” (Ether 3:2). Only little children are exempt from the command of constant repentance (Mosiah 3:21). Even the poor and despised must watch themselves and constantly correct their ways (Mosiah 4:24).

Does one person need repentance more than another? Until we have reached the shore, no one is home safe; a swimmer can drown 50 feet from the shore as easily as a mile from it, and in this life, none have reached the shore, for it is a probation right up until the last. Only one who is like the Son of Man “full of grace and truth” (2 Nephi 2:6) may be exempt from repentance. While the great storm and earthquake were raging, the people were still given a chance to repent, “Wo unto the inhabitants of the whole



earth, except they shall repent" (3 Nephi 9:2). "O ye house of Israel whom I have spared, how oft will I gather you as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, if ye will repent....But if not, O house of Israel, the places of your dwellings shall become desolate" (3 Nephi 10:6-7).

This ongoing exercise that lasts all our lives is strictly a private affair. Repentance is an intransitive or rather a reflexive verb; you cannot repent another or for another or make another repent. In every single prophecy and promise of destruction in the Book of Mormon, there is a repent clause added. Repentance and repentance alone can save a land cursed with "workers of darkness and secret combinations." But if they accept repentance, that means "never [to] be weary of good works, but to be meek and lowly in heart; for such shall find rest to their souls" (Alma 37:31-34). The long and puzzling story of the olive orchard in the fifth chapter of Jacob seems to present an endless combination of tactics to preserve the orchard. The point is that any combination is possible; God will try any scheme general or local to redeem the people. It is the plasticity of the thing that is impressive; sixteen times the trees are given a last chance to get growing again, there is no end to the Lord's patience. This is Nephi's message also to the Gentiles: "Therefore, cheer up your hearts and remember that ye are free to act for yourselves" (2 Nephi 10:23); this is still the time of probation, nothing is final. Christ "hath power given unto him from the Father to redeem them from their sins because of

repentance" (Helaman 5:11). There were times when mass repentance turned history around, when the Nephites were completely converted (3 Nephi 5:1), and the robbers all rehabilitated (3 Nephi 6:3), but such times follow only upon great upsets, overthrows and defeats, for without strong pressure what man is going to repent who thinks things are going his way? It usually amounts to being "awakened...out of a deep sleep" (Alma 5:7), and what is more annoying than being awakened out of a deep sleep?

In the need to rationalize their ways, it is not enough for the guilty to justify their position; it must be sanctified. There's a wonderful account in the Book of Mormon that shows how that is done. It is Alma's report on the Zoramites, which tells us how the vilest people he had ever known managed to project an image of extreme righteousness loudly proclaiming themselves as "a holy people" (Alma 31:18), while their thoughts "were on their riches" (Alma 31:24-28). Independent, proud, enterprising, hard working, very prosperous, zealous in religious observances, including strict dress standards, brave and aggressive, the Zoramites in their time were the meddling catalyst that spread violence and war everywhere, even persuading the youth of the land to join up with the Gadianton robbers in order to embarrass the Nephites (3 Nephi 1:29).

Why does the Book of Mormon have so much to say about war, incidentally? Because it's the story of our own time. I have

often heard generals deplore the awfulness of war, but the commander who really hates it is Captain Moroni. He is worthy of closer attention because he's the one who is held up as the model of military macho to LDS youth. Repeatedly, in the long account of Moroni, Alma reminds us that he did not "glory in...the shedding of blood" (Alma 48:16) as others do. His Nephites fought only when obliged to "contend with their brethren" (Alma 43:14) and only if they were "not guilty of the first offence, neither the second" offence (Alma 43:46), to say nothing of preemptive strikes. They celebrated their victories not by getting drunk but with fasting and prayer (Alma 45:1). "If all men had been like...Moroni..." says Alma (Alma 48:17). Well, who was he like? and just what was he like? "He was a man like unto Ammon" (Alma 48:18). It was Ammon's people who refused to make war under any circumstances (Alma 26:32-34).

How did Moroni go about making war? First of all the people humbled themselves, "they were free from wars and contentions among themselves." War was not a solution to internal unrest. They were reluctant "to contend with their brethren,...sorry to take up arms against the Lamanites, because they did not delight in the shedding of blood,...and...they were sorry to be the means of sending so many of their brethren out of this world" (Alma 48:20-23). When Moroni had immobilized a guard house with a gift of wine, he refused to follow up the ruse because he said it would be an "injustice" to perform a shameful act of taking advantage of a drunken enemy (Alma 55:19). Moroni was especially keen to watch for any slightest tendency of the enemy to give up; he was hypersensitive to that moment in the battle when the enemy falters, and the instant that came, when he sensed they were weakening, he would propose a stop to the fighting to talk things over (Alma 52:37-38). "We do not desire to be men of blood" (Alma 44:1), he tells them on the battlefield; "ye are in our hands, yet we do not desire to slay you...We have not come...that we might shed your blood for power" (Alma 44:1-3). "We would not shed the blood of the Lamanites, if they would stay in their own land. We would not shed the blood of our [Nephite] brethren if they would not rise up in rebellion and take the sword against us. We would subject ourselves to the yoke of bondage if it were requisite with the justice of God" (Alma 61:10-12). He detested the power game that some men play; "I seek not for power," he says often, "but to pull it down. I seek not for the honor of the world" (Alma 60:36). He thinks more kindly of the Lamanite invaders than of the ambitious men on his own side. He says it is "the tradition of their fathers that has caused their hatred...while your iniquity is for the cause of your love of glory and the vain things of the world" (Alma 60:32). He fought against people being "known by the appellation of kingmen...and the pride of those people who professed the blood of nobility...they were brought down to humble themselves like unto their brethren" (Alma 51:21). Inequality, that was the enemy in Moroni's eyes. When he raised the Title of Liberty it was to teach his people to think of themselves and the poor and outcast of Israel (Alma 46:18, 23-24), not as a proud army with banners. Reminding them that the rent garment could very well be their own condition (Alma 46:21), if they tried to match the enemy's own

machismo.

Moroni's behavior gives point to the question, "Who is the enemy?" The most clear cut case of good guys fighting bad guys is Alma's duel with Amlici—right out of *Star Wars*. "Alma being a man of God...was strengthened, insomuch that he slew Amlici with the sword" (Alma 2:30-31). It came down to a single duel between the two leaders. Yet Alma taught the people right on the spot and they believed it. He said it "was the judgments of God sent upon them because of *their* wickedness and *their* abominations" that brought the whole thing on (Alma 4:3, italics added). It wasn't the good guys fighting the bad guys at all. What kind of victory for the winners was it when "every soul had cause to mourn" (Alma 4:3)? Alma decided to preach to the enemy, as did Ammon who rejected the stock argument for military interventionism: "Let us take up arms against them...lest they overthrow and destroy us" (Alma 26:26). We have to sweep them from the lands or they'll destroy us if we don't. In enemy territory, as you know, Ammon was "cast out and mocked and spit upon, and smote upon [his] cheeks" (Alma 26:29). He overruled the powerful reflexes to hit back which you certainly would expect of the mightiest warrior of his time, which Ammon was. He would not do that; he said we just kept hoping that "perhaps we might be the means of saving some" (Alma 26:30). In that he was brilliantly successful.

Mormon also knew the futility of military operation, and he had lots of experience. When the army of Mormon, flush with new victory, started settling the Lamanite question once and for all under the noble call to "avenge...the blood of their brethren," he left his command and "utterly refused to go up against [his] enemies." Revenge, he said, was the one thing God would absolutely not tolerate (Mormon 3:9-16). For once that starts, there is no ending. Mormon shows us military and power completely out of control, practicing the usual atrocities, requisitioning everything for themselves while "many old women do faint by the way and die" (Moroni 9:16). Who were they defending? "My people," he says, "they are without order and without mercy,...past feeling,...[worse than] the Lamanites....I pray...[for] their utter destruction" (Moroni 9:18-22). He's the one who has "loved" and "led them" (Mormon 3:12) for all those years; now, he prays for their destruction unless they repent (Moroni 9:22). But always repentance is open right unto the end. The fog and horror of battle pursue us right up to the end—the nation completely in arms at Cumorah with trained, experienced warriors, all a splendid sight marching forward. Alas, there's nothing heroic about it. How could they have been such fools? Pity was Mormon's only reflection on the splendid sight (Mormon 6:17-22). His last word to the survivors in the land is that they must lay down their arms and never take them up again for they will never prevail by force. The only way they can prevail, he says (Mormon 7:3), is by repenting. Cumorah was no solution, the war went right on among the victors. Moroni's only comfort upon the earth is that "the hand of the Lord hath done it" (Mormon 8:8). And his word to us is, "Therefore, he that smiteth shall be smitten again, of the Lord. Behold what the scripture says—man shall not smite, neither shall he judge" (Mormon 8:19-20). That

is the lesson of Cumorah: The calamities of the Nephites are due to their own wickedness. It was their quarrellings, and...contentions,...murderings,...plunderings,...idolatry, whoredoms...abominations...which brought upon them their wars and their destructions" (Alma 50:21).

Why does Moroni, vigorously pruning the record to make room for only what there is space for, insert his own long abridgment of the record of the Jaredites? He tells us why: What is going on in the world today, that's what the picture is. The Jaredites were plagued by that Asiatic tradition of kingship that required that a ruler should rule everything.<sup>13</sup> Where a kingship or office itself is sacred, what is in the king's interest is moral and what is against the king's interest is immoral. As Cicero says, speaking of the ruling class in Rome, "everything becomes a pure power play." Any man who is strong enough can grab the power any way he can. The proof of his deserving it is that he has it. So we reach the final showdown in the story of the Jaredites. We find "war upon all the face of the land, every man with his band fighting for that which he desired" (Ether 13:25), every soldier of fortune out for himself. And "there were robbers, and in fine, all manner of wickedness upon all the face of the land" (Ether 13:26). As "every man did cleave unto that which was his own, with his hands, and would not borrow, neither would he lend" (Ether 14:2). Everyone for himself; this is free enterprise come to its conclusion. And "every man kept the hilt of his sword in his right hand, in the defense of his property and his own life and of his wives and children" (Ether 14:2). It all ends up in the family shelter. And the result: "All the people upon the face of the land were shedding blood, and there was none to restrain them" (Ether 13:31). It can actually come to that. War settles everything by a neat polarization: everything evil on one side and everything good on the other. No problem remains for anybody on either side but to kill people on the other side. So when Shiz set out with that noblest of intentions to "avenge himself" of the blood of his brother (Ether 14:24), his host forcibly recruited everyone who was not grabbed up by the other side. Shiz and Coriantumr are both obsessed with the paranoid conviction of an ever threatening enemy whose rule of evil can only end with his extermination. The most significant thing about this polarization, of course, is that it puts an end once and for all to any thought of repentance, in which lies the only hope for survival and peace and leads in the end to the Book of Mormon phenomenon which until recently I thought was quite fantastically impossible—not just improbable—over-imaginative, and which some authorities in Washington still insist is unrealistic, namely: the "utter destruction" of *both* contestants in the war (Ether 11:20; Moroni 9:22). It nearly happened with the Nephites and Lamanites, and it did happen with the Jaredites.

**T**o whom is all this addressed? To whom it may concern. And whom does it concern? To whom it may apply. In the midst of describing the plots and combinations of the Jaredites, Moroni pauses to explain, "I, Moroni, am commanded to write these things that evil may be done away, and that...Satan may have no

power upon the hearts of the children of men,...that they may be persuaded to do good continually" (Ether 8:26). Notice that the program is entirely positive; it has to do with persuasion to do good, and appeals to their hearts, not the mangling of their bodies. The book is addressed to a people very much in need of repentance: "And then, O ye gentiles, how can ye stand before the power of God, except ye shall repent and turn from your evil ways?" (Mormon 5:22). "He hath made manifest unto you our imperfections, that ye may learn to be more wise than we have been" (Mormon 9:31). The Lord in person spoke to the Nephites: "I command you that ye shall write these things after I am gone,...that these sayings which ye shall write shall be kept and shall be manifested unto the Gentiles" (3 Nephi 16:4). Nephi says, "I have spoken plainly to you, that ye cannot misunderstand. And the words which I have spoken shall stand as a testimony against you; for they are sufficient to teach any man the right way" (2 Nephi 25:28). "I, Mormon, do not desire to harrow the souls of men [by] casting before them such an awful scene of blood" (Mormon 5:8). Why, then, does he dwell on these pictures when he says he has no desire to do this? He says "but I...[know] that a knowledge of these things must come to the remnant of these people, and also unto the Gentiles, who the Lord hath said should scatter this people" (Mormon 5:8-9). "Wherefore, O ye Gentiles, it is wisdom in God that these things should be shown unto you, that thereby ye may repent...and suffer not that these murderous combinations shall get above you, which are built up to get power and gain [money, not ideology, is the motive] and the work, yea, even the work of destruction come upon you...even the sword of...justice...shall fall upon you, to your overthrow and destruction if ye suffer these things to be" (Ether 8:23). Specifically, we are told to look out for one fatal symptom, the thing that has "caused the destruction of [the Jaredites]...and also the destruction of the people of Nephi," and will surely do the same for whatsoever nation in the future shall come under the control of the "secret combinations to get power and gain" (Ether 8:21-22).

The time came when the prophets did the only thing left for them to do: They "mourned and withdrew" (Ether 11:13). And Mormon was forbidden to write anymore for them, but for us he directs his writings to another people living far in the future (Moroni 1:4): "I speak unto you as if ye were present, and yet ye are not. But...I know your doing...[for] Jesus Christ has shown you unto me" (Mormon 8:35). Make no mistake about it, as the politicians say, it is our generation being described, when the manipulations of the combinations, far and wide, shed the blood of husbands and cause widows and "orphans to mourn, [be assured that] the sword of vengeance hangeth over you" (Mormon 8:40-41). "Wherefore, O ye Gentiles, it is wisdom in God that these things should be shown unto you,...that thereby ye may repent of your sins, and suffer not...these murderous combinations...which are built up to get power and gain—and the work, ...even the work of destruction come upon you...the sword of justice of the Eternal God shall fall" (Ether 8:23). Notice, first he says the sword of vengeance hangs over you because of the things you have done, and then the sword of justice (you deserve it) "shall fall upon you, to your overthrow and destruction if ye shall

suffer these things to be" (Ether 8:23). So the great takeover is to be followed by the "great overburn." Now that phenomenon is mentioned more than thirty times in the Book of Mormon, when the wicked are burned as stubble and a vapor of smoke covers the earth (1 Nephi 22:15, 17-18, 23; 3 Nephi 10:13-14; 25:1; Mormon 8:29). "And thus commandeth the Father that I should say unto you: At that day when the Gentiles shall sin against my gospel...and shall be lifted up in the pride of their hearts above all nations, and above all people of the whole earth, and shall be filled with all manner...of hypocrisy, and murders, and priest-crafts, and whoredoms, and of secret abominations; and...shall reject the fullness of my gospel, behold, saith the Father, I will bring the fullness of my gospel from among them" (3 Nephi 16:10). Fortunately, that has not happened. "There shall be great pollutions upon the face of the earth; there shall be murders, and robbing, and lying, and deceivings, and whoredoms" and as to the morality of it all, "there shall be many who...say, Do this, or do that, and it mattereth not,...But wo be unto such" (Mormon 8:31). "Wo be unto the Gentiles,...For notwithstanding...they will deny me; nevertheless, I will be merciful unto them,...if they will repent" (2 Nephi 28:32, emphasis added).

And so the timely reminder to the Church is this: Do not "suppose that ye are more righteous than the Gentiles...For...ye shall...likewise perish;...ye need not suppose that the Gentiles are utterly destroyed" (2 Nephi 30:1). The Church is in the same danger as the Gentiles: "Wo be unto him that is at ease in Zion! Wo be unto him that crieth: All is well!" (2 Nephi 28:24-25). Here we see how the label of Zion has been processed in a smooth soft-sell by broadcasting: "All is well in Zion; yea, Zion prospereth, all is well...the devil cheateth their souls, and leadeth them away carefully down to hell" (2 Nephi 28:21). That's the business of advertising, to cheat and to lead carefully.<sup>16</sup>

"When ye...receive this [word], repent all ye ends of the earth" (Ether 4:17-18). Whatever course they take, "all this shall stand as a testimony against the world at the last day" (Ether 5:4). The Gentiles will have their innings; they will be "lifted up by the power of God above all other nations, and prevail against the other inhabitants of the land" and so forth. But "the Lord God will not suffer...the Gentiles [to] utterly destroy" them (1 Nephi 13:30). But when that time is finished, "Wo be unto the Gentiles." Then it will be their turn, "if it so be in that day they harden their hearts" (1 Nephi 14:6). After the Gentiles take over completely and remove all rivals, then they become the endangered ones: "And then, O ye Gentiles, how can ye stand before the power of God, except ye...repent and turn from your evil ways?" (Mormon 5:22). For then, "the Lord God shall cause a great division among the people, and the wicked he will destroy...by fire" (2 Nephi 30:10).

About 200 years after Christ visited the people, they became tired of intellectual integrity and self-control and opted to give up the law of consecration. From then on everything went in a fatal declension, each step of which has been duly marked and described in the Book of Mormon.

First they became *privatized*. They no longer had "their goods

and their substance...[in] common" (4 Nephi 1:25). Then they became *ethnicized* as they "taught [their children] to hate" the Nephites and Lamanites they had been playing with (4 Nephi 1:39). Then they became *nationalized* by serving the careers of ambitious men. Then they became *militarized*, from the need for large scale security when mutual trust gave way to self-interest. And they were *terrorized* as shrewd men saw the advantages of organized crime. Then *regionalized* as people began to form various combinations for protection and profit, entering through business relations with the criminal society and even sharing in their profits. Then *tribalized* as they finally succeeded at the urging of various powerful interests in abolishing the central government completely. Then *fragmentized* into paramilitary groups, wandering bands, family shelters, and so forth. Then *polarized*; to check the general disorder and insecurity, great armies were formed around competent leaders by forced recruitment or conquest. And *pulverized* as the great armies smashed each other and left the land utterly desolate. It is left for a future generation to take the final step and become *vaporized*. Viewing the state of the land at the American bicentennial, President Spencer W. Kimball declared himself "appalled and frightened" by what he saw and in this and in his last published address he quoted many of the passages we have just cited from the Book of Mormon.<sup>17</sup> Now, President Ezra Taft Benson issues an inspired appeal to make Book of Mormon an object of our most intense concern.<sup>18</sup> Suddenly, we find ourselves there: scenes and circumstances that not long ago seemed as distant as Nineveh and Tyre suddenly come to life about us. Could Joseph Smith have made all this up?

## NOTES

1. *Ratlos vor der Apokalypth* (Gütersloh: Mohr, 1970), 11-12.
2. The Ascension Motif is discussed, for example, in Hugh Nibley, *Since Cumorah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret 1967), 212-13; Blake T. Ostler, "The Throne-Theophany and Prophetic Commission in 1 Nephi: A Form-Critical Analysis," *Brigham Young University Studies* 26 (Fall 1986): 67-95; and John W. Welch, "The Calling of a Prophet," in *1 Nephi: The Doctrinal Foundation* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft and BYU Religious Studies Center, 1988).
3. The Lachish Letters are discussed, for example, in Hugh Nibley, "Dark Days in Jerusalem," in *Book of Mormon Authorship*, Noel B. Reynolds, ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft and BYU Religious Studies Center, 1982), 103-121; and "The Lachish Letters: Documents from Lehi's Day," *Ensign* (December 1981): 48-54.
4. See *Lehi in the Desert and the World of the Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1952), passim; reprinted in the *Collected Works of Hugh Nibley*, volume 5.
5. See Hugh Nibley, "Churches in the Wilderness," in *Nibley on the Timely and the Timeless* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft and BYU Religious Studies Center, 1978): 155-186; *An Approach to the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1957), 113-63.
6. See, for example, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 178-89; *Since Cumorah*, 198-226.
7. *Since Cumorah*, 328-70.
8. *Lehi in the Desert*, 20-36.
9. *Lehi in the Desert*, 241.
10. Jeremiah 35:1-10, 16, 18. The Rekhabites are discussed, for example, in *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 123; "Churches in the Wilderness," 165.
11. Tyrtacus, *Idylls of Theocritus with Bion and Moschus and the War Songs of Tyrtacus*, J. Banks, tr. (Bell, 1905); Vergil, *Aeneid*, IV, 259-78.
12. Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 315-50; *Since Cumorah*, 373-409; "Freemen and Kingmen" (Provo: F.A.R.M.S. N-FRE, 1981).
13. Plutarch, *Moralia* 1 and 7. On the Education of Children and On Love of Wealth.
14. Alan Watts, *Does it Matter?* (New York: Pantheon, 1970), 6-24.
15. *Lehi in the Desert*, 190-200.
16. Discussed in Hugh Nibley, "Victoriosa Loquacitas: The Rise of Rhetoric and the Decline of Everything Else," *Western Speech* 20(1956): 57-82.
17. "The False Gods We Worship," *Ensign* (June, 1976): 3.
18. "The Book of Mormon, Keystone of Our Religion," *Ensign* (November, 1986): 7; *Ensign* (May, 1975): 65.