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A LAND OF PROMISE, CHOICE ABOVE ALL OTHER LANDS

Philip M. Flammer

It goes almost without saying that a wide disparity exists between the concept of a “promised land,” as mentioned in the scriptures, and the exchanges of territory that went with such mighty endeavors as the growth of dynasties, the feudal system, and the promises of would-be conquerors. The latter were part of the enduring itch for aggrandizement, a condition aptly described by Machiavelli as “the disease of princes.” On the other hand, the concept of a promised land, as defined in scripture, involved special lands offered to special peoples by God himself. Moreover, receiving and possessing the lands as an inheritance was confirmed by covenant, with God offering both temporal and spiritual blessings for high levels of righteous behavior. If the covenant was broken by man, the divine sanction and protection were forfeit and hence the loss of the land itself—at least for a season.

A “promised land,” prepared and protected by the Lord and tied to the covenant that “inasmuch as ye keep my com-

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mandments ye shall prosper in the land," is surely one of the more vivid and pervasive concepts of the Book of Mormon. Both the Jaredites and the Nephites occupied land on the Western Hemisphere under this condition and, failing to keep the covenant, lost it to their utter ruin.

It is uncertain when Lehi was first told of the promised land awaiting him and his posterity. It is Nephi who first mentions it in the Book of Mormon. The Lord personally told Nephi that he was blessed because of his faith,

for thou hast sought me diligently, with lowliness of heart. 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. (1 Nephi 2:19–20.)

Thus, the hasty departure from Jerusalem and the migration to the promised land was revealed as part of a great plan God had prepared and now set in motion.

As part of a great vision, Nephi and his father witnessed many wonderful things and were instructed as to their meaning. This included the "iron rod," the "tree of life," and the forthcoming birth and ministry of the Savior. An angel who acted as Nephi's guide, however, further spoke of the promised land. Again in vision, Nephi was allowed to see much that would befall his people, including a visit by the resurrected Savior and the ultimate disappearance of the Nephite civilization. He also saw that some descendants of Laman and Lemuel would survive, eventually dwindling in unbelief as a degenerate people "full of idleness and all manner of abominations" (1 Nephi 12:23).

The vision was further extended to include a number of events relative to the unveiling of the promised land and God's influence in bringing devout and freedom-loving people to its shores. In Nephi's words:

And I looked and beheld a man among the Gentiles, who was separated from the seed of my brethren by the many waters; and I beheld the Spirit of God, that it came down and wrought upon the man; and he went forth upon the many waters even unto the seed of my brethren, who were in the promised land (1 Nephi 13:12).

Believers in the Book of Mormon recognize in this verse a clear reference to Christopher Columbus and his epic

“discovery” of the “New World” in 1492. The traditional view, however, holds that Columbus’s discovery was a lucky accident, a result of his belief that the world was round and his eagerness to discover a way to the eastern “Indies” by sailing west. Columbus himself would have found this explanation most unsatisfactory. A deeply spiritual man who concluded that the end of the world was not far distant, he believed himself predestined to assist in the fulfillment of certain biblical prophecies. Among other spiritual callings, he felt a special destiny in relation to Isaiah’s “islands of the sea” prophecies and Christ’s statement that “other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd” (John 10:16).¹

“I come to your Majesty as an Emissary of the Holy Trinity,” he wrote in asking King Ferdinand of Spain to support his venture. And, eight years after his discovery of the New World, he wrote, “God made me the messenger of the new heaven and the new earth . . . and he showed me the spot where to find it.”² Indeed, his last will and testament included the statement that the “most holy Trinity . . . inspired me with the idea and afterwards made it perfectly clear to me that I could navigate and go to the Indies from Spain by traversing the ocean westward.”³

Inspired latter-day prophets have underscored this important point. In a 1961 conference address, President Ezra Taft Benson, then of the Council of the Twelve, declared that as part of the “divine plan . . . to raise up the first free people in modern times . . . God inspired Columbus to overcome almost insurmountable odds to discover America and bring this rich new land to the attention of the gentiles in Europe.”⁴

After the vision of Columbus in relation to the promised land, Nephi “beheld the Spirit of God, that it wrought upon other Gentiles; and they went forth out of captivity, upon the many waters” (1 Nephi 13:13). The fulfillment of this vision/prophecy is also verified by history and by latter-day prophets.

The early Pilgrims and Puritans who left Europe for the New World did so because they sought the freedom to worship as they saw fit as well as freedom from the prevailing forms of economic bondage, important issues left largely unaffected by both the Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation. Indeed, even as these humble and devout people were preparing to leave Europe, the Thirty Years’ War, renowned for its savagery as well

as its durability, broke out between Protestants and Catholics. Aptly described as a war “in which fervent Christians were prepared to hang, burn, torture, shoot or poison other fervent Christians with whom they disagreed on the correct approach to eternal life,”⁵ it decimated much of western Europe. Moreover, the seventeenth century, like the one preceding it, experienced the widespread and monstrous “witch craze” in which both the Protestant and Catholic elite joined in identifying “Satan’s lieutenants”—usually by liberal use of judicial torture—and destroying them in the name of God. As one eminent historian put it:

The more fiercely [witches] were persecuted, the more numerous they became. By the beginning of the seventeenth century the witch-doctors had become hysterical. Their manuals have become encyclopedic in bulk, lunatic in pedantry. They demand, and sometimes achieve wholesale purges. By 1630 the slaughter has broken all previous records. It has become a holocaust in which lawyers, judges, clergy themselves join old women at the stake.⁶

Even the better-known Reformers were personally intolerant. Luther’s severity in the Peasants War, for example, is well known. Little known but worthy of mention is Luther’s one-sided discussion with the Swiss reformer Ulrich Zwingli. The purpose of the conference was to promote much-needed Protestant unity, but Luther began by focusing on the eucharist. Holding close to the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, he precluded unity or compromise by writing *Hoc est Corpus Meum* (This is my body) on the table. “I take these words literally,” he said; “if anyone does not, I shall not argue but contradict.”⁷ For his part, Zwingli, who had considerable control in Protestant Zurich, stood firm against the Anabaptists. These devout Christians emphasized spiritual matters over temporal ones and, among other things, insisted on baptism by immersion. Zwingli consented to having a number of them “truly immersed,” that is, drowned in the Limat River.⁸

In Geneva, John Calvin clung to rigid precepts based on the doctrine of predestination, declaring:

Whoever shall now contend that it is unjust to put heretics and blasphemers to death will knowingly and willingly incur their very guilt. . . . It is not in vain that he [God] banishes all those human affections that soften our hearts, that he commands paternal love

and all the benevolent feelings between brother, relations, and friends to cease. . . . When his [God's] glory is to be asserted, humanity must be almost obliterated from our memories.⁹

True to his word, Calvin burned Michael Servetus for heresy and, among other things, ordered a child beheaded for striking its parents.¹⁰

Even after King Henry VIII's break with Rome, England was not tolerant of religious diversity. The Church of England proved dogmatic and intolerant and vigorously persecuted those who did not fall into line. Many dissenters were burned for heresy. Joseph Smith's fifth great-grandfather, the Reverend John Lathrop, initially a minister for the Church of England, was more fortunate. Finding much Church of England doctrine not in harmony with scriptures, he left the state church and became a minister of The First Independent Church of London. For this breach of policy, the Bishop of London had him arrested and cast into prison.

While he was thus incarcerated, his wife died. He was not so much as allowed to attend her funeral, and his children were left with no one to care for them. He made repeated appeals for clemency, but the bishop refused even to listen to him. Finally the orphaned children went to the bishop as a group and personally pleaded for mercy. So pitiful were they . . . that the bishop was finally moved, and he released Lathrop on condition that he leave the country. This he did, and, with thirty-two members of his congregation, he went to America.¹¹

In somewhat similar fashion, the Pilgrims that landed at Plymouth Rock in 1620 had first fled from England to Holland in search of greater religious and economic freedom. Finding neither to their satisfaction, they were among the first to come to America.

Nephi also beheld in vision that the Gentiles in the promised land grew to "many multitudes" and "the Spirit of the Lord . . . was upon the Gentiles, and they did prosper and obtain the land for their inheritance; and I beheld that they were white, and exceedingly fair and beautiful, like unto my people before they were slain" (1 Nephi 13:15).

Nephi also witnessed that the "wrath of God . . . was upon the seed of my brethren; and they were scattered before the Gentiles and were smitten" (1 Nephi 13:14), a consequence amply

validated by the record of history. Much of this conflict stemmed from attraction of the western frontier, where good land, including tribal lands, was available by purchase or by conquest. While life was rarely easy for new immigrants to the promised land, opportunities were abundant and greatly enhanced by a level of freedom unknown in Europe. Indeed, the ever-increasing influx of immigrants bore ample witness that the New World was truly a land of promise, one where they could prosper to a degree not possible in Europe.

Nephi further saw that "the Gentiles who had gone forth out of captivity did humble themselves before the Lord; and the power of the Lord was with them" (1 Nephi 13:16). This pleasing combination explains much of their prosperity, which soon reached such proportions that alarmed British authorities decided to end what had been a "soft" policy of "benign neglect." Under the British policy of mercantilism, the colonies existed to be sources of raw materials and a controlled market for British manufactured goods. To establish firm control, the British imposed forms of economic sanctions. Besides increased taxes and import duties, the colonies were specifically forbidden to coin money or manufacture specific items such as iron and hats. Colonial reaction to such infringements on their freedoms and prosperity led to the Declaration of Independence and the American Revolution.

The American Revolution was a war the colonies won with divine assistance. In his vision, Nephi saw that

the power of God was with them, and also that the wrath of God was upon all those that were gathered together against them to battle. And I . . . beheld that the Gentiles that had gone out of captivity were delivered by the power of God out of the hands of all other nations. (1 Nephi 13:18-19.)

It is an axiom of history that temporary, ill-equipped and poorly trained militia such as those available to the colonies cannot prevail over regular, well-equipped and well-trained forces backed by the resources of a wealthy nation, precisely the type of forces available to England. General George Washington often complained about the reliability of the militia, saying at one point:

It takes you two to three months to bring new men in any tolerable degree acquainted with their duty. . . . Before this is accom-

plished, the time approaches for their dismissal, and you are beginning to make interest with them for their continuance on another limited period; in the doing of which you are obliged to relax in your discipline, in order as it were to curry favor with them, by which means the latter part of your time is employed in undoing what the first was accomplishing.¹²

The eventual victory of the Continental forces was indeed miraculous and was so recognized by many political and spiritual leaders of the time. And no man understood this better than George Washington, who spoke frequently of the influence of "Divine Providence." During the colonial siege of Boston, for example, Washington was gravely concerned that the British might learn his soldiers had fewer than nine rounds of ammunition per man. Well aware that they could not stop a British advance, he wrote, "If I shall be able to rise superior to these . . . difficulties . . . I shall most religiously believe, that the finger of Providence is in it, to blind the eyes of our enemies."¹³

The British missed a golden opportunity to end the revolution at Boston, at least for the time being. Other opportunities would be soon forthcoming, however. The British won at Long Island, Harlem Heights, Fort Washington, and Fort Lee while Washington was able to keep his demoralized troops intact only by retreating. The Continental Army won victories at Trenton and Princeton, but they were of little consequence other than to give the troops the will to endure Valley Forge. After the hard winter of Valley Forge, Washington wrote that

Providence has a joint claim to my humble and grateful thanks, for its protection and direction of me, through the many difficult and intricate scenes, which this contest hath produced; and for the constant interposition in our behalf, when the clouds were heaviest and seemed ready to burst upon us.¹⁴

For all his tribulations, Washington was much heartened after Valley Forge. "The hand of Providence [he wrote] has been so conspicuous in all this, that he must be worse than an infidel that lacks faith, and more than wicked, that has not gratitude, enough to acknowledge his obligations. . . ."¹⁵

Washington firmly believed that without divine assistance, any one of several events could have brought the war to an unhappy conclusion. General Charles Lee's irresponsible if not cowardly retreat at Monmouth, for example, so disorganized

colonial forces that, in Washington's words, it would have "proved fatal" to the cause except for "that bountiful Providence which has never failed us in the hour of distress." With that help, Washington was able to rally a "regiment or two" from the chaos and drive the enemy from the field.¹⁶

The fortuitous discovery of Benedict Arnold's attempt to betray the post and garrison at West Point into the hands of the British touched Washington deeply. "That overruling Providence which has so often, and so remarkably interposed in our favor, never manifested itself more conspicuously than in the timely discovery of [Arnold's] horrid design."¹⁷

While Washington personally experienced divine intervention again and again, many other Americans also saw and appreciated its results. According to historian James Hutchinson Smylie,

The clergymen had compared America to Israel during the war. . . . Again and again they referred to the new nation as God's "American Israel," or as God's "New English Israel," or as "God's American Zion," and they were positive that God was involved inseparably in America's destiny as he had been involved in Israel's.¹⁸

Equally if not more dangerous to the growing tradition of freedom in America were the "mother Gentiles" in Europe who "gathered together upon the waters, and upon the land also, to battle" (1 Nephi 13:17) with the new inhabitants of the land of promise. Some, such as the French and the Spanish, incited the Indians to harass the settlers and discourage their westward expansion. Indeed, between 1688 and 1815, six general European wars spilled over into the New World. A number of colonial wars were fought between England and France in the New World and one—the French and Indian War (1754–1763)—spread to Europe where it became known as the Seven Years' War. When the English colonies broke from the parent government and the French government helped the Americans, it was not out of sympathy for the American effort but for revenge against England. Even so, France had no desire to see America become a great nation and at times conspired to limit its expansion.

During the Napoleonic Wars, which began in 1803, Napoleon sought to build a colonial empire in the New World. Its center would be in Haiti, but its breadbasket would be the vast Louisiana Territory, a sparsely inhabited wilderness west of the

Mississippi River, as large as the United States itself. France, however, did not own the territory, having ceded it to Spain in 1762 to compensate her for her losses to England in the Seven Years' War. Thus, Napoleon first had to extract it from Spain, a matter of grave concern to the Americans, for the territory included the mouth of the Mississippi River and the port of New Orleans. The Spanish had periodically closed the port to the Americans, disrupting American trade from as far away as the upper Ohio Valley. The idea of this port being in the hands of the French so alarmed President Thomas Jefferson that he seriously considered the possibility of a forced alliance with Great Britain. In a letter to Robert Livingston, the American minister in Paris, he wrote:

There is on the globe one single spot, the possessor of which is our natural and habitual enemy. It is New Orleans. . . . The day that France takes possession of New Orleans, fixes the sentence which is to restrain her [the French Nation] forever within her low-water mark. . . . From that moment, we must marry ourselves to the British fleet and nation.¹⁹

In a series of events as remarkable as the evidence of divine intervention in the American Revolution, Napoleon abruptly decided to sell the Louisiana Territory to the United States for the astonishingly low sum of fifteen million dollars. (Jefferson's agents were authorized to offer ten million dollars for New Orleans alone.) Jefferson was not about to reject this golden opportunity, even though he had long insisted on strict adherence to the letter of the Constitution and knew he did not have authority to approve the sale. For his part, Napoleon deliberately left the western boundaries of the new territory uncertain, hoping to stir up trouble between the United States and Spain.

A few years later, the United States found herself in serious trouble with both England and France. Locked in the Napoleonic Wars, each antagonist forbade the United States to trade with the enemy. Both sides seized American merchant ships with abandon and, at one point, Britain and the United States went to war, partly because the British were stopping American ships on the high seas and forcibly impressing American sailors for near slave-like service on British vessels. It was during this War of 1812 that the British captured Washington, D.C., and burned government buildings, including the White House.

The "gentile nations" that harassed the budding United

States during these trying years had no intention of allowing the infant nation to become a powerful rival. Not until the United States gained international stature in its own right was it treated as an equal among the nations.

The birth and growth of the United States is easily one of the more astonishing events in human history, strong support indeed for the concept of divine assistance during that trying period. In particular, the nation evolved in a way counter to the usual patterns for developing nations. To suit the Lord's purposes, it was vital that freedom be an inherent part of that pattern in order to uphold the divine principle of free agency. Thus a democracy, the preferable form of political freedom, must not only cherish its freedom, it must remain anchored to a tradition of freedom so firmly rooted that it is very difficult to dislodge. This the United States achieved, largely because of divine assistance in its development as well as its founding (see 2 Nephi 1:8).

Since mankind has an affinity for mortgaging the future by exploiting resources rather than husbanding them, it is hardly surprising that the Spanish and Portuguese who followed Columbus directed their efforts to the lands of Central and South America. In their search for gold and other mineral wealth, they ravaged both lands and peoples. The Catholic Church was the only durable institution, and it too practiced economic exploitation.

How different this was from the temperate lands to the north which remained largely unexplored. These lands lacked the gold and silver which enriched Spain for a season and then left her sterile when the industrial revolution set a new standard for national wealth, power, and prestige. The lands that would form the United States possessed these resources in abundance. This provided, in time, for a new nation where people flocking to its shores could develop a firm tradition of freedom well able to withstand the powers that plotted against them. History offers no comparable development.

But perhaps most important of all, it was vital that the tradition of freedom be able to withstand internal pressures. A near universal truth of history is the seeming inevitability of a prosperous society to separate into classes and for the new "aristocracy" to seize power and use it to promote their own purposes. This was largely precluded in the United States by a divinely inspired Constitution married to a firm tradition of God-given liberty.

Still, even with freedom of worship guaranteed by the Constitution, the restored Church suffered intense persecution. And it is significant that enemies of the Church continually sought government assistance by claiming that the Church and its people were “in rebellion” against the nation and the states in which they settled. Not even the great exodus to Mexican territory in the West stilled those voices, a strong indication of what the Church could have expected in lands without a tradition of freedom guaranteed by a written constitution.

Having seen much of the future and having such a clear vision of the promised land and the role it would play in the divine plan, Nephi’s account of the arrival of his group in the promised land underscores the validity the angel’s statement to Nephi that their destination was indeed a covenant land “choice above all other lands” (1 Nephi 13:30).

We did arrive at the promised land; and we went forth upon the land, and did pitch our tents; and we did call it the promised land.

And it came to pass that we did begin to till the earth, and we began to plant seeds. . . . And it came to pass that they did grow exceedingly; wherefore, we were blessed in abundance.

And it came to pass that we did find upon the land of promise, as we journeyed in the wilderness, that there were beasts in the forests of every kind, both the cow and the ox, and the ass and the horse, and the goat and the wild goat, and all manner of wild animals, which were for the use of men. And we did find all manner of ore, both of gold, and of silver, and of copper. (1 Nephi 18:23–25.)

The great vision of the promised land given Lehi and Nephi surely sustained them during those difficult years en route to the promised land. Their long and difficult journey was one with divine purpose and hence profound meaning. By the same token, Laman and Lemuel’s festering resentment and animosity towards those with that vision is partly attributable to their total lack of understanding as to its meaning. For them, the exodus was nothing more than a foolish and unnecessary flight from Jerusalem. Thus, the hardships they faced were also unnecessary, their father Lehi a foolish visionary, and Nephi a sanctimonious and domineering younger brother. All that might have changed had they understood the concept of the promised land which they would share, and which was explained with utmost clarity.

Some time after their safe arrival, Nephi was approached by his rebellious brothers as he was studying the brass plates taken from Laban. Asked whether certain things mentioned on the plates were to be understood temporally or spiritually, Nephi spoke prophetically about the promised land on which they now stood. He spoke of its relationship to the restoration of the gospel in the latter days, together with the bringing of that gospel to the scattered remnants of their own seed.

And . . . the time cometh that after all the house of Israel have been scattered and confounded, that the Lord God will raise up a mighty nation among the Gentiles, yea, even upon the face of this land; and by them shall our seed be scattered.

And after our seed is scattered the Lord God will proceed to do a marvelous work among the Gentiles, which shall be of great worth unto our seed; wherefore, it is likened unto their being nourished by the Gentiles and being carried in their arms and upon their shoulders.

And it shall also be of worth unto the Gentiles; and not only unto the Gentiles but unto all the house of Israel, unto the making known of the covenants of the Father of heaven unto Abraham, saying: In thy seed shall all the kindreds of the earth be blessed. (1 Nephi 22:7–9.)

How that understanding of God's plan must have thrilled Nephi! To the blessings inherent in possessing the promised land and keeping the covenants, there was the added knowledge that this land would one day be the citadel of freedom essential to the restoration of the gospel. It would be God's "base of operations" for sending the gospel to the nations of the world prior to the second coming of Jesus Christ.

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