



Type: Magazine Article

The Book of Mormon—What the Nephite Record Says About God

Editor(s): Mary Connelly Kimball

Source: *Relief Society Magazine*, Vol. 18, No. 11 (November 1931),
pp. 653–657

Published by: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

Abstract: No abstract available.

Lesson Department

Theology and Testimony

(First Week in January)

Select Readings: Second Nephi, chapters 9 to 11 and chapters 26 to 33, inclusive. Make notes of both the doctrines taught and the predictions.

THE BOOK OF MORMON—WHAT THE NEPHITE RECORD SAYS ABOUT GOD

It should be kept in mind all through this course that we are considering the *Book of Mormon* as a basis for a firm belief in the reality of the future world—the world to which we expect to go when we die. That is the theme of this course. If there is substantial ground for believing the Nephite Record to be of divine origin, then we can rely on what Joseph Smith says concerning Moroni and on what the *Book of Mormon* says about heaven.

The part of the present lesson in the general theme is to show, by a comparison of what is said in the Record about God with what was taught at the time the Prophet was engaged in translating the *Book of Mormon*, that he could not have got these ideas from the people by whom he was surrounded. Hence the question, Where did he get them?

Our first task, then, is to find out just what kind of Being God was, according to the thinking of the people of Joseph Smith's time, especially at the time he was engaged with the translation of the *Book of Mormon*.

Calvin was the founder of the Presbyterian church — one of the churches in Manchester and vicinity. This is what kind of God he worshiped: "Forever harassed by a dreadful tempest, they shall feel

themselves torn asunder by an angry God, and broken by the weight of his hand, and transfixed and penetrated by mortal stings, terrified by the thunderbolt of God. So that to sink into any gulf would be more tolerable than to stand for a moment in these terrors." This was intended for the unrepentant sinner.

Another church in Manchester was the Methodist. Here is what its founder, John Wesley, said of the torments of sinners in hell: "Consider that all these torments of body and soul are without intermission. Be their suffering ever so extreme, there is no possibility of their fainting away, no, not for one moment. They are all eye, all ear, all sense. Every instant of their duration it may be said of their whole frame that they are 'trembling alive all o'er, and smart and agonize at every pore.' And of this duration there is no end. Neither the pain of body nor of soul is any nearer an end than it was millions of years ago."

As for the Baptist faith—another church mentioned by the Prophet as taking part in the revival—this is what the noted preacher, the Reverend Spurgeon, said long after Joseph Smith's time: which shows how little progress had been made in the Baptist view of God:

"When thou diest thy soul will be tormented alone; that will be a hell for it; but at the day of judg-

ment thy body will join thy soul, and then thou wilt have twin-hells, thy soul sweating drops of blood, and thy body suffused with agony. in fire exactly like that which we have on earth thy body will lie, asbestos-like forever unconsumed, all thy veins roads for the feet of Pain to tarvel on, every nerve a string on which the Devil shall forever play his diabolical tune of hell's unutterable lament."

When, therefore, Joseph Smith lived in Palmyra and Manchester, the kind of God he heard about from the preachers was what we would today call a monster, judged by his treatment of sinners. First, hell was a literal fire, like that on earth; second, into this lake of flames the sinner was thrown; third, the sinner suffered in both body and in soul; fourth, this suffering lasted forever, without hope of ending. Doubtless he heard even more lurid details than these—for there were plenty of them. Loyola, a Jesuit, taught that the fire in hell was "black" as well as very hot. That was, of course, earlier than the time of Joseph Smith, but there must have been echoes of this idea around Palmyra. Thomas Boston believed that God held "sinners with one hand over the pit of hell, while he tormented them with the other."

What kind of God would do these things? Certainly he had no kinship with the Man of Galilee, who healed people because he could not bear to see them suffer and who loved little children.

It is sometimes thought that such a conception of God was confined to a few. It was not. It was held by Christians everywhere in the world—all over America, in England, and on the continent of Europe. Fortunately the people, not even the ministers, acted upon these

beliefs or there is no telling what the world would have come to. For no doubt there were millions of men and women the world over who would have hesitated to do what the God they worshiped was represented as doing. They had too much of a sense of mercy for that.

The God of the *Book of Mormon* is in striking contrast with the God that Joseph Smith heard about when he went to any of the churches in his neighborhood.

First of all, what kind of hell did the Nephites believe in; for that will give us an idea of the character of their God.

Jacob, the brother of Nephi the First, probably says more than any other writer on this subject. His ideas are mainly in Chapter nine of Second Nephi.

"When all men shall have passed from this first death unto life, inasmuch as they have become immortal, they must appear before the judgment-seat of the Holy One of Israel; and then cometh the judgment, and then must they be judged according to the holy judgment of God. They who are righteous shall be righteous still, and they who are filthy shall be filthy still. Wherefore, they who are filthy are the devil and his angels; and they shall go away into everlasting fire, prepared for them, and their torment is as a lake of fire and brimstone, whose flame ascendeth up forever and has no end."

Some very fundamental things stand out in this remarkable chapter:

(1) The basis of what will happen to us after the resurrection is what we shall have done and been in this mortal life. The "righteous" here will be righteous there; the "filthy" here will be filthy there.

In other words the principle of cause and effect, instead of the notion of "rewards" and "punishment," will prevail in the next world.

But just who are the "righteous" here and who the "filthy" here? Everything hinges on that. Jacob says that the righteous here are they who have been baptized, who have faith, and who "endure to the end," and that the filthy are those who do not do these things. What he means by "enduring to the end" becomes evident from what he says later on about the murderer, the liar, the unvirtuous, and so on. The word "righteous" signifies conforming one's conduct to the divine standard of what is right and just.

(2) In order, however, to be classed as "righteous" or "filthy" one must know the law first and then choose whether or not he will obey it. That is what Jacob says. "Where there is no law given, there is no punishment; and where there is no punishment, there is no condemnation; and where there is no condemnation, the mercies of the Holy One of Israel have claim upon them, because of the atonement; for they are delivered by the power of him." This very considerably reduces the number of those who are "thrust down to hell."

(3) The hell of the *Book of Mormon*, though, is not a place of literal fire and brimstone, as the churches of Joseph Smith's time taught. It is as a lake of fire and brimstone—quite another thing entirely. We understand a new idea by associating it with what is already in our experience. Everybody knows what fire is and how painful it is. And so the Nephite writer uses fire as an illustration of how "awful" are the pains of hell. To be sure, he says these pains are endless. But

Joseph Smith afterwards explained that "Endless" is only another name for God. "It is not written," the revelation says, speaking of the sufferings of the condemned, "that there shall be no end to this torment, but it is written *endless torment*." And another revelation to the Prophet says, "I am endless, and the punishment which is given from my hand is Endless punishment, for Endless is my name." The phrase in Jacob, "has no end," applies to the fire, not to the torment.

To sum up, then, the *Book of Mormon* idea of hell is this: Only those go there who have not lived up to the standard of the gospel as it was revealed to them, and the "torment" they receive there is proportionate to their degree of "filthiness" here.

Such a view represents God as a God of justice and mercy, not a God of revenge and cruelty. Moreover, He is reasonable as well, according to the highest standards we have acquired in life. Besides, God is not arbitrary in his dealings with his children. No sensible person, therefore, can object to the *Book of Mormon* idea of the character of God, as revealed in his treatment of the wicked in the hereafter.

And yet this high conception of God is advanced by a country youth, without education or training in theology, a youth who had been reared in the notions of hell and God that prevailed in his neighborhood and that we have already described.

Where did Joseph Smith get this idea?

But the *Book of Mormon* has some very positive ideas about the character of God.

The God of the Nephites was Jesus Christ. That is as clear as anything. Nothing can be clearer, in fact. Says Moroni, "This is a

choice land, and whatsoever nation shall possess it shall be free from bondage, and from captivity, and from all nations under heaven—if they will but serve *the God of the land, who is Jesus Christ.*” In addition, Christ is called “the Eternal God” (Preface), “the very eternal Father of heaven and earth” (Alma 11:39), “the Lord, the Redeemer, the Savior, and the mighty One of Israel” (I Nephi, 22:26). In at least one place he is called “the Father and the Son”—the “Father, because he was conceived by the power of God; and the Son, because of the flesh” (Mosiah 15:2-4).

Now, what kind of Being was Jesus Christ, according to the *Book of Mormon*?

In the Nephite Record the aspect of Christ that is most prominent, it would seem, is that expressed in the word “Savior.” This idea, of course, lies at the basis of the Christian churches of the world, past and present; but there can be no doubt that the *Book of Mormon* writers give this word a depth and breadth not to be found in other Christian literature. “God so loved the world,” says John (3:16, 17), “that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved.”

The *Book of Mormon* works out this thought concretely, and it does so in a way that can be grasped by the simplest mind. It works it out, too, in a larger way than is done in the *New Testament*.

To begin with, God is interested in the Chosen People, just as he is represented as being in the *Old* and the *New Testament*. He selected the Israelites through whom to instruct the world religiously. But he

is interested in them more broadly than we would gather from the Hebrew writings. For the Lehtes also were of the House of Israel, and God is interested in them, too. They are the “Remnants,” who have strayed, the “other sheep” of whom Jesus speaks. And through this “Remnant” God reveals his truth to the world—not only the world of ancient America, but the modern world as well. Thus there are two witnesses, instead of one.

There is something fine and big in the thought that God would reach out after the ancient inhabitants of this continent. It gives a larger view of Him; it furnishes us with an additional means by which to understand him; it helps us to see the cord that binds the human family into a more closely-knit group. For he is interested not only in that part of Israel that happened to find themselves in Palestine and other sections of the Old World, but in parts also that happen to have gone elsewhere. God’s eye is on them all, wherever they may be.

That is not the whole story, however. God, according to the *Book of Mormon*, is likewise interested in the rest of mankind. Says the high-minded Alma, “The Lord doth grant unto all nations, of their own nation and tongue, to teach his word, yea, in wisdom, all that he seeth fit that they should have; therefore we see that the Lord doth counsel in wisdom, according to that which is just and true.” (Alma 29:8.) Here is the universal interest of God expressed, probably, as it never has been anywhere else in religious literature. The saviorship of Jesus comes out here in a way that is incomparable. He is concerned in the salvation of all men. Not only so, he provides the means for their development, each according to the

stage or degree of their understanding. This is God in history in a new sense. For, on this assumption, such leaders of thought as Plato among the Greek, Confucius among the Chinese, and Buddha among the East Indians are accounted for in the divine Providence.

Light also is thrown by the *Book of Mormon* writers on the manner in which the saviorship of Christ is manifested. It is through Love and Mercy as well as Justice, not whim, caprice, and the spirit of revenge.

First, the "plan" must be advertised. This involves man's intelligence. Some are not even capable of understanding its provisions. To these, men are "sent" who can speak to them in their own language and offer them such parts of the "plan" as they are able to comprehend. Alma's words on this point have already been quoted, and they apply here. And they will be held to what they can understand, just as those will be who are higher in the scale of culture. Every one will be held to what he is able to comprehend. The higher aspects of the "plan" have been revealed through the prophets, but especially in Jesus Christ.

And then there is the atonement of Christ, which applies to all. The basis of this is divine Love. God loved the world; Jesus loved the world. Besides, this love had to be "infinite" in order to be efficacious (II Nephi, 9:7, 21). How this Love is redemptive in its nature is perhaps better expressed in Third Nephi than even in the *New Testament*, especially from chapter eleven to the end. Some of the scenes depicted there are without parallel

in history for tenderness, compassion, and divine love. The influence of them lasted for two hundred years among the Nephites.

In the Nephite Record, then, God is represented in what he says and in what he does with respect to man. There are no refined distinctions, such as you will find in the writings of modern theologians. As in the *Gospels* God is taken for granted. He is not defined. Besides, God's chief work, it seems, is to bring to pass the salvation of mankind.

Questions

1. Tell about the kind of God that was believed in by Joseph Smith's contemporaries. What did they teach concerning hell? Why should we go to their teachings about hell for a clue to his character?

2. Tell about the ideas of the *Book of Mormon* concerning hell. What differences do you find between the conception here and in Manchester a hundred years ago? What titles are given Christ in the Record? How is redemption wrought out?

3. Which of the two conceptions of God and the Hereafter should appeal the more to a modern? Why should it? What is the reason for the change in our outlook religiously from that of a hundred years ago?

4. Where, if not from God, could Joseph Smith have got his views about God and hell? How old was Joseph when the *Book of Mormon* was published? Pick out of your acquaintance a young man of that age, in order to ascertain his capabilities for original work like this.