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Lesson III. The Spiritual and the Natural World

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Abstract: Charlevaix's statement — The testimony of learned men—The testimony of the Indians—The source of the Indian's knowledge—The remarkable experience of the brother of Jared—The lesson to be learned—The testimony of the Nephite prophets—Jesus a type—The testimony of the prophets—The doctrine of immortality—No escape from the awakening of the spirit—The purpose of the earth-life—The probationary state —The Nephite's religion sensible, reasonable—Summary.

GUIDE DEPARTMENT.

Teachings of the Book of Mormon.

LESSON III.

THE SPIRITUAL AND THE NATURAL WORLD.

A missionary named Charlevaix wrote once, "The belief the best established among our Americans is that of the immortality of the soul." This statement has been quoted time and again. No amount of research in American antiquities has brought forth the slightest evidence to controvert the opinion of Charlevaix. Indeed, in all the New World, "I know of only one well authenticated instance where the notion of a future state appears to have been entirely wanting," writes Professor Brinton, "and this in quite a small clan, the Lower Pend d'Oreilles, of Oregon."^a The aboriginal languages have words to express the ideas of soul and spiritual existence. The Indians themselves declare their belief in the existence of the soul, or the spirit. The burial rites of nearly all Indians indicate a belief in a life after death. Even the lowest of American aborigines are known to have put shoes on the feet of the dead, thus indicating that they entertained the idea of a journey after death. Well, therefore, might Von den Steinen, one of the most brilliant of the students of American antiquity, say of the American Indian, "He *knows* he will not die."

But when did the American Indian get this knowledge? What

^aBrinton, *The Myths of the New World*, p. 272.

was it that enabled him to declare with conviction, "We Indians shall not forever die; even the grains of corn we put under the earth, grow up and become living things?" Say the scholars, These are doctrines handed down from ancient Egypt and the Orient. Good; but how and by whom? It is difficult to tell. It cannot be determined. That is true. It cannot be determined—unless indeed the scholar will accept as true the only authentic, inspired account that has been preserved to modern times. Since the American Indians are truly descended from the peoples whose history is recorded in the Book of Mormon, it will be interesting to learn what the Book of Mormon teaches of a life before this and of a life hereafter. We shall then understand how the Indian knows that he will not die.

Perhaps nowhere else in Christian sacred literature can there be found a simpler, or a clearer, presentation of the doctrine of pre-existence than in Moroni's abridgment of the Book of Ether. Moriancumr, the brother of Jared, had besought the Lord to touch certain stones that they might become luminous. The Lord did so. He stretched forth his hand, we are told, "and touched the stones one by one with his finger." Now, Jared's brother was a man of great faith. The vail was taken off his eyes,

"and he saw the finger of the Lord; and it was the finger of a man, like unto flesh and blood." It appears that the brother of Jared had at that time no clearer conception of the personality of God than have the sectarians of today. When he saw the finger of the Lord, he fell down in fear. Why? Because, says he, "I knew not that the Lord had flesh and blood." Then the Lord explained to him, "Behold, I am he who was prepared from the foundation of the world to redeem my people. Behold, I am Jesus Christ. I am the Father and the Son. * * * * This body, which ye now behold, is the body of my spirit; * * * and even as I appear unto thee to be in the spirit, will I appear unto my people in the flesh." And Moroni adds, simply, "Jesus showed Himself unto this man in the spirit, even after the manner and in the likeness of the same body, even as He showed Himself unto the Nephites; and He ministered unto him."^b

We learn here, then, that in the Nephite theology it was believed that Jesus, the Savior, lived in the spirit long before He assumed earthly form, and that the spiritual body is like the physical body in form and appearance. Remember that the brother of Jared lived some three thousand years before the Christian era. Yet, Jared's brother saw the Christ. Then Jesus states the fact, "This body * * is the body of My spirit." And Moroni, abridging the record more than three thousand years later accepts the truth without question. Says he, "Jesus showed Himself unto this man in the spirit." Moreover, it appears that during all the intervening years between the time of the brother of Jared and that of

^bEther 3:5-19.

Moroni, the ancient Americans accepted the doctrine of the pre-existence of the Christ. The first Nephi and his brother Jacob both declare solemnly that they saw the Lord.^c Throughout the Nephite scripture Jesus Christ, who had not yet come to the earth in mortal life, is revered as the creator of the world, and is looked forward to as the Redeemer of mankind. He was the hope of the Nephites as He was the hope of all Israel.^d On the eventful night preceding His physical birth, the Lord Himself announced that birth to Nephi, the grandson of Helaman.^e And when the Lord Jesus came in the flesh to minister to the Nephites, He declared to them, "Behold, I am Jesus Christ the Son of God. I created the heavens and the earth, and all things that in them are. I was with the Father from the beginning."^f

It is clear, then, that in the Nephite theology the doctrine of the pre-existence of Jesus Christ was well established. But Jesus was, in a way, but a type. All that is true of His existence is true also of man's existence. If Jesus existed spiritually before He came to this earth, then man did so also. If the spirit-body of Jesus is in form and appearance like the human body, then man's spirit-body is so also. The brother of Jared saw the body of the spirit. He was told that man was created after the body of the spirit.^g So also, Alma, the great high priest, teaches that the spirits of men were given life by God, the great Creator. When therefore men die, their spirits return home; "yea, the spirits of all men, whether

^cII Nephi 11:2, 3.

^dMos. 3:5, 8.

^eIII Nephi 1:10-13.

^fIII Nephi 9:15.

^gEther 3:16.

they be good or evil, are taken home to that God who gave them life."^h And concerning that home, it would appear that the Nephite prophets knew something. For Lehi, the Nephite patriarch, tells that he had learned of the contention in heaven, when Lucifer was cast out and became the devil,ⁱ and when the Son of God was chosen to redeem mankind and became the Christ. In the Nephite theology, therefore, it was taught that the spirits of all men had existence before they came to this earth, and that the body of the spirit is in the likeness of the earthly body.

The doctrine of pre-existence is further established by the doctrine of immortality. For in the Nephite theology it was taught that the spirits of men are immortal. Before King Benjamin passed away, he called together the people of his realm and preached to them, "that [he] might go down in peace, and [that (his)] immortal spirit [might] join the choirs above in singing the praises of a just God."^j Evidently, Benjamin had complete faith in the immortality of his own spirit; and evidently, too, he believed that the immortal spirit would be active in the world hereafter. Moreover, the activity of the spirit in the life hereafter was not limited in the Nephite theology to the singing of praises and the thrumming of harps. For the same King Benjamin declared to his people, "If [a] man repenteth not, and remaineth and dieth an enemy to God, the demands of divine justice doth awaken his immortal soul to a lively sense of his own guilt, which doth cause him to shrink from the presence of the Lord."^k In the after-life, then,

those who have done wickedly, and have not made proper amends, will have the grossness of their sinfulness forced upon them. It is another way of stating the eternal truth that every knee must bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is the Christ. To those who lay hold upon the word of God, the promise is made that they shall "land their souls, yea, their immortal souls, at the right hand of God, in the kingdom of heaven, to sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and with Jacob, and with all our holy fathers, to go no more out."^l Escape from the awakening of the spirit, in the life hereafter, to its deeds good and bad, there is none. For the spirit, says the Nephite prophet, can never die. "If it were not for the plan of redemption, [laying it aside], as soon as [men] were dead, their souls were miserable, being cut off from the presence of the Lord."^m

Since the Nephite preacher knew so much of the conditions before and after mortality, it is to be presumed that he would know something, too, of the purpose of the earth-life which spans the space from the herebefore to the hereafter. And in this we are not disappointed. In the Nephite theology it was taught, that, "the Lord hath created the earth that it should be inhabited; and He hath created His children, that they should possess it."ⁿ There is no mistaken understanding here of the work of God. While the earth and all that is found therein declare the glory of God, it is not presumed that the creations have been called into existence merely to declare that glory. No; there is a purpose far greater in the organizing of the earth. The earth was created that it might be inhab-

^hAlma 40:11.

ⁱII Nephi 2:17, 18.

^jMosiah 2:28.

^kMosiah 2:38.

^lHela. 3:30.

^mAlma 42:9, 11.

ⁿI Nephi 17:36.

ited. And why should it be inhabited? It is here that the spirit of man receives its physical body, that he may become even as God?^o It is here that he learns to subject the physical to the spiritual. This life, declares the Nephite prophet, is a probationary state,^p a preparatory state,^q a time in which to serve God.^r

"For behold, this life is the time for men to prepare to meet God; yea, behold the day of this life is the day for men to perform their labors * * * * For after this day of life, which is given us to prepare for eternity, behold, if we do not improve our time while in this life, then cometh the night of darkness, wherein there can be no labor performed."^s

Yet, the Nephite prophet did not require the long-drawn face, nor the apparel of sack-cloth and ashes. His was a sensible, reasonable religion. Serve the Lord today. Serve Him with your might. But in your service take joy. The service of the Lord should bring joy. Eschew evil; it brings sorrow and misery. Seek righteousness; it brings gladness and rejoicing. Remember, Father Adam fell that the spirits of men might obtain physical bodies. It was so decreed in the councils of heaven. And man is that he may find joy.^t These truths were ever present to the Nephite worshiper. They were cried from the housetops by the Nephite preachers. They were recorded under divine inspiration by the Nephite prophets and historians. Thus did the Nephites know whence they came, why they came, and whither they were going. That is why the American Indians,

who are descended from the peoples of the Book of Mormon, know of a surety that they "shall not forever die."

In this lesson we have learned that the belief the best established among the American Indians is that of the immortality of the soul. We have learned further, that, in the Nephite theology were taught clearly the following propositions: 1. The Lord Jesus Christ existed from the beginning, before the earth was formed. 2. The body of his spirit was in the form and appearance of the physical human body. 3. The spirits of all men existed in the spirit world before they were born into this world. 4. When men die their spirits *return* home to God who gave them life. 5. There was a contention in heaven, wherein the Savior was chosen and the devil or Lucifer was cast out. 6. The spirits of men cannot die. 7. There is no escape from the awakening of the spirit in the life hereafter. 8. The earth was made that the children of men might possess it. 9. Man is that he may find joy. 10. This life is a probationary state in which to prepare for eternity.

OUTLINE.

Charlevaix's statement—The testimony of learned men—The testimony of the Indians—The source of the Indian's knowledge—The remarkable experience of the brother of Jared—The lesson to be learned—The testimony of the Nephite prophets—Jesus a type—The testimony of the prophets—The doctrine of immortality—No escape from the awakening of the spirit—The purpose of the earth-life—The probationary state—The Nephite's religion sensible, reasonable—Summary.

QUESTIONS.

1. What, according to Charlevaix, is the best established belief among the American Indians?

^oIII Nephi 28:10.

^pAlma 12:24.

^qAlma 42:10.

^rAlma 42:4.

^sAlma 34:32-35.

^tII Nephi 2:25.

2. What is the testimony of archaeologists in support of Charlevoix's statement?
3. Whence, according to the scientists, did the Indians learn of the doctrines of immortality?
4. Whence really did the Indians get their knowledge of these doctrines?
5. Relate briefly the story of the marvelous manifestation beheld by the brother of Jared.
6. What two points concerning the life of Jesus are taught in this manifestation?
7. What did the Nephite prophets teach of the pre-existence of Jesus?
8. How did Jesus Himself teach His own pre-existence on the night before His birth?
9. In His life, what did Jesus say concerning his pre-existence?
10. From the example of Jesus, what may we argue concerning mankind generally?
11. How is this argument supported by the Nephite prophets?
12. How is the doctrine of pre-existence confirmed by the doctrine of immortality?
13. What did the Nephite prophets teach concerning the immortality of the Spirit?
14. What would happen to the souls of men if there were no redemption from death?
15. For what purpose was the earth created?
16. What is the purpose of man's life upon the earth?
17. In what sense is this life a probationary state?
18. Review briefly what you have learned in this lesson.

LESSON IV.

THE DIVINE NATURE OF MAN.

Perhaps no questions are so commonplace as those ascribed to man, Whence came I? Whither am I going? In every age, in every clime, from every people, come these questions. And following hard upon the questions come the answers. Again in every age and in every clime, men have tried to account for their existence upon the earth and to give that existence a purpose. Some answers are simple, even crude; some are complex, abstract, almost if not wholly beyond the comprehension of the ordinary man. Naturally, a conclusive answer to the questions can not be given by man's wisdom alone. Only revelation from the Divine Author of our beings can settle once and for all the origin and the destiny of man. In the foregoing lesson we learned what the Nephites believed concerning the pre-existent and the future state. Their belief was founded on revelation.

Another question arises now from the discussion of the preceding les-

son. If the spirits of men existed before with God, if they come to this life merely to gain experience, if after this life they return to their former home with God, what relationship does man bear to God? In this lesson we shall learn what the Nephites taught concerning the divine nature of man.

In the Nephite theology, man was considered to be a child of God, literally the offspring of God. The first Nephi wrote of the Great Creator as the Eternal Father.^a Mosiah and Alma spoke of Him as the very Eternal Father.^b And Mormon and Moroni, the last of their people, taught that men should pray in the name of the Eternal Father.^c God was known to the Nephites as the Eternal Father, so also He was

Note.—It will be well to remember in this lesson that Christ is both the Father and the Son as explained in lesson II. Many of the references, therefore, name the Son as the very Eternal Father.

^a1 Nephi 11:21; 13:40.

^bMos. 16:15; Alma 11:38.

^cMoro. 8:23; Moro. 10:4.