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Since Cumorah - New Voices from the Dust: The Story of Zenos

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SINCE CUMORAH

NEW VOICES FROM THE DUST

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The Story of Zenos

● The 33rd chapter of Alma seems to include an entire hymn by Zenos. It begins:

"Thou art merciful, O God, for thou hast heard my prayer, even when I was in the wilderness. . . ." (V. 4.)

He starts with a cry of thanksgiving, as the *Thanksgiving Hymns* of the scrolls do, and immediately lets us know that he has spent some time in the desert calling upon God. He mingles his praises with autobiographical material, exactly as the author of said *Hymns* does, as he continues:

". . . yea, thou wast merciful when I prayed concerning those who were mine enemies, and thou didst turn them to me." (*Idem.*)

This takes us right into the thick of things: Zenos has had enemies, but he has been able by his piety to overcome their opposition and "turn them" again to him, the expression implying that they had been his followers before. Next we learn that Zenos was a farmer or at least engaged in the agricultural pursuits characteristic of the sectarians of the desert:

"Yea, O God, and thou wast merciful unto me when I did cry unto thee in my field. . . ." (V. 5.)

By now it is fairly certain that we are dealing with a poem, each section beginning, as in the *Thanksgiving Hymns*, with the same repeated utterance of thanks: "Thou wast merciful unto me, O God!" Zenos continues:

". . . again, O God, when I did turn to my house thou didst hear me in my prayer." (V. 6.)

Either Zenos is returning to his house from the field or (more probably) is returning from his stay in the wilderness; since he is speaking of his life's crises, this would seem to indicate that after the trouble was over the prophet went back home for a time. But soon he is on the move again:

"Yea, O God, thou hast been merciful unto me, and heard my cries in the midst of thy congregations." (V. 9.)

The word "congregations" occurs only twice in the King James Bible, both times in solemn hymns of praise,⁷² confirming the poetic nature of Alma's fragment. What are

the "congregations" in the midst of which Zenos spent his time? In contrast to the Bible, the Dead Sea Scrolls are simply full of "congregations" (half a dozen words being translated that way), referring to various communities of Saints (they use that word "Saints" a lot, too) who have sought to live the Law in its purity by retreating from Jerusalem and forming independent congregations in the wilderness. Since it would appear from Alma 33:4 that it was "in the wilderness" that the showdown took place which ended in turning his enemies back into his followers, and since he could only visit congregations in the plural by moving about away from home, it would seem that Zenos was a leader among those societies of Jews which had practised the custom of occasional settlement in the desert ever since the days of Joshua. For Zenos there was more trouble ahead:

"Yea, and thou hast also heard me when I have been cast out and have been despised by mine enemies. . . ." (V. 10.)

He is now discredited, despised, and thrown out—but not for long!

". . . yea, thou didst hear my cries, and wast angry with mine enemies, and thou didst visit them in thine anger with speedy destruction." (*Idem.*)

These are serious doings indeed. The tables are completely turned; the opposition is not only discomfited but also completely overthrown, apparently by force of arms, as frequently happened to the societies in the desert. So the hymn concludes on a joyful note:

". . . I will cry unto thee in all

*The Citadel and City Wall,
with the Garden of Herod,
Jerusalem.*

mine afflictions, for in thee is my joy; for thou hast turned thy judgments away from me, because of thy Son." (V. 11.)

But that is not the end of the story, which we must seek in Helaman 8:19: "... the prophet Zenos did testify boldly; for the which he was slain."

The story of an unnamed prophet. And now let us compare the ups and downs of Zenos's career with the vicissitudes of the unnamed writer of the *Thanksgiving Hymns*, who in *Hymn "H"* or No. 8 includes in the framework of a song of thanksgiving a brief sketch of his own affairs, exactly as Zenos does:

"I thank thee, O God, that thou hast illuminated my countenance by thy covenant. . . . But those who have led thy people astray, those false prophets, with their many words and their flatteries . . . I was despised by them, they esteemed

me as nothing, while thou didst manifest thy power in me." (P. iv, lines 1-8.)

From the provenance of the document it is probable that this, too, took place in the wilderness; the false prophets are described in terms only too familiar to readers of the Book of Mormon, and their business here, as in Zenos's story, is to lead away the saints. "Despised" is the very word used by Zenos in a like situation—"cast out and . . . despised"—and thus our poet continues:

". . . for I was cast out of my country like a bird from its nest; and all my friends and followers were turned away from me, and considered me no more than a vessel that has passed its usefulness. While those lying teachers and vain seers who formed against me a combination of the Devil, perverted the Law which thou hast en-

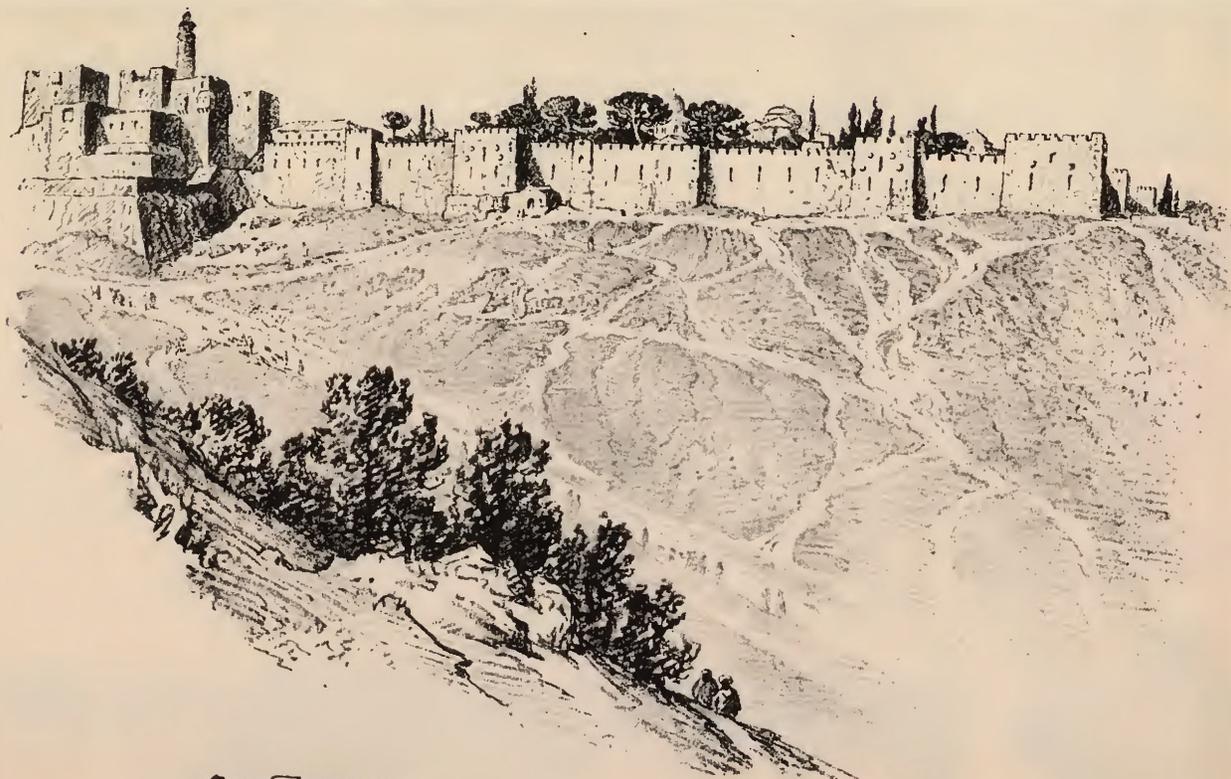
graved on my heart against their flattering words to thy people." (iv, 8-11.)

Just so, Zenos's followers were turned against him. In *Hymn 10* or "J" he tells us:

"I had become . . . a symbol of strife and discord unto my friends . . . an object of murmuring and criticism to all those whom I had gathered. . . . All spoke evil of me, with a perverse tongue, they who had been members of my congregation. . . . Because of the secret which Thou hast hidden in me, they took false reports to those seeking to make trouble."⁷³

The second time Zenos did not win his enemies back, but instead they suffered violent destruction—they were the implacables. The Qumran poet's enemies met a like fate:

"For thou, O God, dost scorn the
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Boston, February

HURDY-GURDY

BY EUNICE M. ROBINSON

*Before we saw him on our street
We heard the laughing music soar,
Heralding at white-gold noon
The swarthy troubadour.*

*Then all the children, rushing, came
With simple coin for offering
To ply the monkey's wizened charm,
Bright omen of the spring.*

*We followed them around the block
And watched them down the avenue,
Until the arching maples closed
And hid them from our view.*

*And when we closed our eyes, to hold
Awhile the magic undefined,
There still was left the fading smile
Of melody behind.*

Since Cumorah

(Continued from page 783)

machinations of the Evil One. . . they were caught in their own schemes, they who led the people away from thy covenant. . . ."⁷⁴

Like Zenos, our hero confronts them boldly:

"As for me, since I lean on thee, I shall arise and confront those who despise me. . . . For thou didst show me thy power at day-break, and didst not cover with shame the faces of those who supported me, who joined together in thy covenant and hearkened to my voice. . . . in the congregation of the saints. Thou shalt make their cause to triumph forever." (iv, 22-25.)

As he heard the prayer of Zenos "in the midst of thy congregations," so God hearkened to the voice of this poet "in the congregation of the saints." The situations of the two men—if indeed they are not one and the same person!—are remarkably alike: It is the same story of inspiration and mighty prayer, opposition, expulsion, humiliation, and ultimate triumph, and all in the wilderness and in the midst of the congregations. As told in the

Habakkuk Commentary of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the mysterious and much-discussed "Teacher of Righteousness" experiences much the same vicissitudes.

First of all we are told that the Teacher of Righteousness had been attacked by the wicked and that the people had been turned against him by the Man of Lies who led them astray from the covenant (1:4-5); then we learn that the Man of Lies brought false charges against the Righteous Teacher in a general conference, and was supported by a faction who refused to come to the Teacher's defense. (1:13.)

Then we hear of a wicked priest who at first seemed to be a man of integrity but later became greedy and unscrupulous in acquiring wealth (2:5-6), and then turned against the commandments of God and as a result suffered from a horrible disease. (2:7-8.) It was this priest we are next told, who persecuted the Righteous Teacher and delivered him into the hands of his enemies. (2:8.)

Next we learn that the Teacher of Lies set up his own religious community by trickery and deceit

(2:12-13) and that the wicked priest pursued the Teacher of Righteousness to the place where he had fled for refuge, apparently in the desert, and there at the meeting of a community on the Day of Atonement used his authority to try to take control of the meeting and confound the Teacher. (2:15.)

The next passage tells of the overthrow of the wicked priest and his ultimate disgrace, but more as a prediction and a hope than a fact: "His loss is greater than his gain . . . the cup of the wrath of God will overcome him." (2:16.) Finally, we learn that the headquarters of the wicked priest was Jerusalem, "the City," where he defiled the temple and plundered the poor. (2:18.)

Whether or not the Teacher of Righteousness (as has been maintained) was the author of the *Thanksgiving Hymns*, we are obviously dealing with a situation characteristic of religious sectaries with their bitter feuding between factions and leaders.⁷⁵ But though Zenos plainly has much in common with these two leaders, there is one thing that brings him so close to the writer of the *Hymns* as to suggest actual identity. This is his Parable of the Olive Tree.

(To be continued)

FOOTNOTES

⁷⁴I.e., in Psalms 26:12 and 68:26.

⁷⁵*Hymn* 10 (J), v, 22-25. Those seeking trouble may have been officials in Jerusalem. As Gaster renders the next lines of the poem, they may have come right out of 1 Nephi: "Because they hemmed in my way, and because of their infamy, the fount of understanding was hidden [from them]. . . ." T. H. Gaster, *op. cit.*, p. 152. "They hedged me about with thick darkness," he continues, like Nephi in the desert, ". . . my soul was overcast. Sorrow was all about me, and the pall of shame o'er my face. . . . I was bound with unbreakable cords. . . . Over my soul swirled the torrents of hell." (*Ibid.*, p. 153.)

⁷⁶iv, 22-25. He describes his deliverance "from the congregation of vanity and the assembly of violence" in vi, 4-7.

⁷⁷L. E. Toombs, in *Journal of Semitic Studies*, 1 (1956), 372f, distinguishes no less than six different teachers in the Qumran literature, all of whom suffer persecution except the Messiah in his final appearance.