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"The Fifth Gospel"

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Abstract: This series discusses the major contribution of 3 Nephi: the appearance of the risen Christ on the American continent. His ministry was not limited to the eastern hemisphere, He also visited the lost tribes of Israel and raised up prophets in the Americas who foretold His appearance. Roberts notes the distinction made between the Savior's remarks to the twelve and those to the multitude, and points out that 3 Nephi specifies the proper mode of baptism and the sacrament. The first part begins the series.

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"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel."—MARK 1: 15.

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“THE FIFTH GOSPEL.”

BY ELDER B. H. ROBERTS.

DURING the month of March of last year a sectarian minister of high standing in the community preached several discourses in Salt Lake City—three, I think—against the third book of Nephi, contained in the Book of Mormon. This book the reverend gentleman has happily called the fifth gospel. I am sorry that descriptive term did not occur to me, or to some other Elder in Israel. Had I coined the title I should have been very proud of it, for I think it a most fortunate one. Of course, the other four gospels are contained in our Hebrew scriptures. They are the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. We speak of them as the four gospels; and this reverend gentleman refers to III Nephi as the fifth gospel. I call it the American Gospel, for I so regard it. Of course after stating the title, the gentleman then questions the book's right to it. The subject of his three discourses is the consideration of the question whether this Nephite book is worthy to be classed at all with the four gospels of the Hebrew scriptures. He decided the question in the negative.

I shall not attempt in the remarks I make to deal with all three of the gentleman's discourses. I shall content myself with alluding to one, and that the third, called “Gospels Apocryphal and Real.” A word of explanation about the term “apocryphal gospels.” During the first and second centuries of the Christian era there was a world of myth and legend that grew out of the history of the Savior. The four gospels leave undescribed, as you know, His infancy and youth. Between the time His earthly guardians took up

their residence at Nazareth to the time when He commenced His public ministry—in all that period we get but one glimpse of Him, when He was twelve years of age, and then we learn of Him being in the temple disputing with the doctors—doctors of philosophy and doctors of theology—both asking and answering questions. What sober history failed to record fable and legend sought to supply, hence we have a collection of books called the Apocryphal New Testament. They deal with Him and His sojourn in Egypt and His childhood days, called the Gospel of the Infancy—two books; the Gospel of the Birth of Mary, a number of epistles—some fifteen or twenty books all told. They are so extravagant in statement, so wonder-creating in their nature, that they are generally discredited by Christians and called “apocryphal” books about Jesus and the early days of Christianity. Our reverend friend classes the fifth Gospel with this order of apocryphal books, and says that it deserves no higher rank than those books to which I have here briefly alluded.

I shall at this point read to you the synopsis of the reverend gentleman's discourse; while of course the synopsis cannot be so satisfactory as the whole discourse would be, still I think likely he has mentioned his chief objections to the book, as I am informed he himself prepared the synopsis for the public press, so that this is his representation of his discourse, and the points he scored against our III Nephi:

“‘Gospels Apocryphal and Real,’ was the title of Dr. William M. Paden's sermon last night. It was in a way a continuation of his sermons on the book of Nephi, and again a large congregation assembled to hear him. He first gave an account of the apocryphal gospels of the infancy, Nicodemus, the birth of the Virgin, and others. These he compared and classed with the gospel according to Nephi, which he had explained and dealt with the two preceding Sundays. Much in these so-called gospels anyone could quote or gather from the real gospels; the greater part of the rest of the matter, of the rest that is not copied, anyone could write. After this, Dr. Paden went on to speak of the manner in which our real gospels added something of real worth to the pictures of Christ. Thus Matthew improved on Mark, Luke on Matthew, and Mark, and John on them all. Does III Nephi add anything worth while to the picture? he asked. Luke gives us the story of the prodigal, John the story of the good Samaritan. Matthew has given us many parables. What does Nephi add which deserves to be classed with such revelations? How does it come that this so-called fifth gospel gives us no new parables? One real, original parable of the class that is found in the gospel according to Matthew would give it the necessary standing. One grand new chapter like the 17th of Luke, or 3rd of John, would be as great a surprise in this gospel according to Nephi as a Psalm like the 23rd would be in the early part of the Book of Mormon.

“Concerning the authenticity of the would-be fifth gospel, Dr. Paden made use of a very appropriate and telling simile. He said the question is not where do men say they got it, but, is it gold? These four nuggets (i.e., the four Hebrew gospels,) are gold. If your supposed nugget is not, it matters little where you got it; your father and grandfather may have been mistaken—you must submit to the gold test.”

You will observe that the primary consideration in the reverend gentleman's discourse is, Does III Nephi add anything to the picture of Christ? Is our Christian knowledge increased by it? It is that question that I propose to consider.

To begin with, I answer the question in the affirmative, and most emphatically say, Yes, III Nephi does add something to the picture of Christ, and does add something to our testimony of Christian knowledge. I marvel that the gentleman should have propounded such a question in the face of the facts which stand in III Nephi. I should have thought that one great truth, that is announced in III Nephi, would have arrested his attention, namely, the one truth that Jesus appeared in this western world and so ministered to a people that two great continents, to be filled subsequently with nations of people, might come to a knowledge of Jesus Christ and of the Gospel of salvation which He taught. I should have thought that that one fact would have been a complete answer to the gentleman's inquiry. The fact that the justice and mercy of God are broadened by this great truth adds considerable to our Christian treasury of knowledge. For instead of God's mercy and the labors of His Son being confined to the eastern hemisphere, we learn from this fifth Gospel that God sent His Son on a special mission to those inhabiting this western world, and that He presented to them the same great truths upon which His Gospel is based that He had presented to those of the eastern world; and that, moreover, while here He gave the Nephites the information that His labors in Judea and among them were not all the labors He was required to perform in the interest of humanity and their salvation, but that He must make His way to the lost tribes of Israel and declare Himself and His message also to them. Thus the horizon of Christ's mission and labor is enlarged beyond anything that can be learned from the four gospels, and the knowledge can only be found in the fifth gospel—the third book of Nephi.

That, however, is too general a view of the subject to be content with. I propose getting into closer quarters with this matter, and enquiring into it in some detail. First let me call your attention to the conditions existing at the opening of this fifth gospel. It opens with the ninety-first year of the reign of the Judges—a time which corresponds to our year one of the Christian era. At that time the Nephites everywhere were more or less expectant of the birth of the Son of God, for the Lord hath not left Himself without witnesses among the ancient inhabitants of this great land, but, as in Judea, He raised up prophets, who foretold the coming of Messiah and the conditions that would attend upon His birth into the world. Some five years before the opening of this period we are to consider, a Lamanite prophet appeared among the Nephites and prophesied in a marvelous manner concerning events nearing the doors of the people, declaring that within five years from the time he spoke there should be given a sign unto the people of this western world that Messiah had been born. That sign should be the continuance of the light of day through two days and a night; that though the sun should sink as usual beyond the western horizon the light of day should still continue through all the time of night; the sun should rise again on the morrow according to its order, and they should know that there had been this strange

phenomenon of continuous light, notwithstanding the absence of the sun; and a new star should appear also.

Does that add anything to the picture in the career of Messiah? Is it nothing that the inhabitants of the western world should see in the heavens a most beautiful sign that Jesus had been born, and by that sign, in the fulfillment of the prediction that had been made by the prophets, they should receive from God a testimony that His Son had come into the world to bring to pass the redemption of the race? I think it adds a beautiful picture to the career of Jesus Christ, and one on which the four gospels are silent.

This same prophet predicted also the signs that should attend upon Messiah's death; for through prophecy the Nephites had been made acquainted with the fact that though Jesus was the Son of God, yet must He die and be buried in order that He might by that act meet the just claims of inexorable law under which mankind were banished from the presence of God and made subject to death. So they prophesied of His death. This Lamanite prophet, Samuel, declared that during the time that the Son of God should be immolated upon the cross, this western hemisphere should be mightily shaken by the throes of physical nature; that great valleys should undergo upheaval and be thrown into mountains; that many high places and mountains should be shaken down; that many parts of the land should sink and the sea cover them; that some cities would thus be destroyed; in other cases great mountains of earth should cover wicked cities from the sight of God; and thus should there be upheaval, cataclysm, earthquakes and tempests, fire and vivid lightnings, and all the elements should give witness that the Son of God was undergoing the pains of death. Moreover, that this period of cataclysms and changes in the earth should be followed by three days of intense and complete darkness, until men should be unable to see, being deprived of the light so good to the eye and so necessary to life.

Both these events—the signs of Messiah's birth and the signs of His death—were given as foretold.

I pause again to ask this Rev. gentleman if the signs of Messiah's death on this continent do not add something to the picture of Christ's career.

In passing let me call your attention to this fact also: I think I see something very beautiful and appropriate in these marvelous signs. I think it is fitting that He who is described in the four gospels as well as in the fifth as the "Light and Life of the world," should have His entrance into earth—life proclaimed by a night in which there should be no darkness, and that a new star for a season should appear in the heavens, to be a witness to the people that "the life and light which was to bring life and light to mankind had indeed come into the world. And equally appropriate is it that when He who is described as the Life and Light of the world is laid low in death, the world should have the testimony of light eclipsed. I see a beautiful appropriateness in these signs, and in them I see added pictures in the life and career of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

AGE is not all decay; it is the ripening, the swelling of the fresh life within that withers and bursts the husk.—GEORGE MACDONALD.