

Jacob on the Future of Israel

Some time before my mission I settled on 2 Nephi 9 as my favorite chapter in the Book of Mormon. Although the intervening 30 years have given me so much more that it is really hard to choose one favorite, I still refer to it as such out of sentimental reasons. When I proposed to write about sermons in the Book of Mormon I was excited about taking on 2 Nephi 9, but as soon as I started setting out the list I was reminded that chapter 9 is only part of a much longer sermon.

The sermon is identified only as “The words of Jacob, the brother of Nephi, which he spake unto the people of Nephi.¹” It must have been some rather major occasion among the Nephite people, because it is quite a sermon. It was split over two days, but the recorded material we have puts the vast bulk of the sermon into the first day².

Jacob's concern centers on the welfare of the Nephites' souls³. He emphasizes the Lord's covenants with the House of Israel as the vessel which will carry the Nephites to salvation. Chapters 7 and 8 are quoted from Isaiah 50 and 51; chapter 9 is then Jacob's exposition on how the atonement applies in the Nephites' lives; and 10 looks forward to the day when the paths of the Gentiles and the House of Israel will be tied together to lead all unto salvation.

Chapter 6:4-5 tells that Nephi assigned Jacob to speak from the words of Isaiah. Jacob echoes Nephi's theme of applying the words of Isaiah to themselves, because they are a part of the House of Israel. In verses 6 and 7 Jacob quotes directly from Isaiah 49:22, 23 to show that in the latter days Israel should be saved by miraculous means.

Why was Jacob so concerned about the salvation of the Nephites, and why would referring to the latter day miracles address that concern? 2 Nephi Chapter 5 covers perhaps 18 years of Nephite history after they separated themselves from the Lamanites. They were probably still a fairly small group (less than 100 people) and they “had already had wars and contentions with [the Lamanites].⁴” Some of the people in this group still remembered Jerusalem and the grandeur that the Israelites there were enjoying when Lehi left. They may well have been feeling a little isolated, a little depressed. So Jacob's concern included not just spiritual issues, but temporal as well. He wanted to remind

1 2 Nephi 6:1

2 The second day includes only chapter 10.

3 2 Nephi 6:3

4 2 Nephi 5:34

them that they were part of the plan of salvation, and given their background this made the most sense in the context of their membership in the house of Israel. However, by emphasizing the atonement of Christ he is preparing them to be weened from the idea of salvation through ancestry.

In verses 8-11 Jacob expounds on the fate of those that lived in Jerusalem. He tells his people that they had been carried away into captivity, but that after they returned they would be visited by the Lord. Since they could not receive him they would be punished.

There are many who have said that the persecutions of the Jews through the ages are because they crucified the Lord, and Jacob certainly supports that. However, he adds the point that they are still the chosen people of the Lord, he still watches over them, and as soon as they come to a knowledge of the Lord all of their former blessings shall return to them. In the context of Jacob's sermon this passage is meant to reinforce to the Nephites the importance of obedience to the Lord.

Verse 12 adds the point that was so foreign to the Jews of Jesus' time: those Gentiles who join with the work of the Lord will receive the same salvation as the Jews. We are typically far removed from the idea of salvation through ancestry, but this is one of the central messages of the gospel, that salvation for all comes through faith on the Lord Jesus Christ. For the Nephites this helped to identify clearly their responsibilities before the Lord.

Verses 13-18 employ much of the language of Isaiah to drive home the point that God will employ whatever means necessary to save his people. This is to be a sign to the whole world that he is God and that he is powerful. He also explains that this salvation is a right to all those who worship God, therefore they need not be ashamed that this help comes to them.

Chapters 7 and 8, which are quotations from Isaiah 50 and 51, dwell on the themes of God as the Savior of Israel, and that he is more powerful than any other force on earth. I am not an expert on understanding Isaiah⁵, but keeping in mind those themes I can follow much of what he says.

Chapter 7 verse 1 drives home the all-important idea that the Lord will

⁵ See "Surviving Isaiah" on the musings page of this website.

never abandon Israel, but that her trials come from abandoning him. Verses 2 and 3 point out that he can exercise all power, but when he calls they must answer if they wish to benefit from his power. Verses 4-9 are Messianic verses, in that they are given from the point of view of the savior himself. Notwithstanding the trials imposed by men, he trusts in God and knows that his enemies will be defeated. Verses 10 and 11 mean, to me, that those who follow the Lord will not be left in darkness, but those who abandon him and try to be a light unto themselves will ultimately receive only sorrow.

Chapter 8 returns to the idea that there is strength in the covenant the Lord made with Abraham. Because of that covenant Israel (the land) will be a joyous place, and the Lord's law will be established there eternally. Those who obey that law need not fear anything man can do. Will they be protected from temporal suffering? Not necessarily. But they will be protected from spiritual danger. This idea is stated through a sequence of images, all of which rebuke Israel for fearing man, point out the strength of the Lord, and promise a glorious future. Necessary as this counsel was for the Jews, it was probably very comforting to the Nephites when they felt discouraged.

I am not sure of the meaning of the “two sons” mentioned in verses 18-20. Because of the description they are equated in the footnotes with the two witnesses from Revelation. However, in this context they are rather obscure. I do not know what the Jews of Isaiah's time could have gotten from these references. I suspect, though, from the flow of the narrative, that the Jews had some reference for them which made them meaningful.

The first three verses of chapter 9 restate all that we have just been through. Jacob has cited Isaiah to remind the people of the Lord's covenants, and to allow them to rejoice. Although the blessings will be “upon your children,” they still need to rejoice.

Verse 4 leads into what I see as the most important part of Jacob's teachings – how the atonement works the redemption of mankind.⁶ In Jacob's view the dichotomy between temporal death and the reality of

⁶ Verse 4 also illustrates how difficult translation can be. In Spanish the word “much” translates literally to “mucho.” However, the next word, “many” translates to “muchos.” Combining those two forms of the same word in the same thought is less pleasing in Spanish than it would be in English. However, any attempt to avoid the duplication is either clumsy or unfaithful to the text. I have seen three translations of the Book of Mormon deal with this passage, and I found none of them satisfactory. I cannot suggest a better solution.

the resurrection provide the background for this thought. The Nephites know that Christ's bodily ministry will be in Jerusalem, but they will also see him in their bodies. How does this come to pass? Because of the resurrection.

In their discussions of the atonement the Book of Mormon authors use at least three distinct words or phrases: "behooveth"⁷, "must needs be"⁸, and "expedient"⁹. I find the shadings of meaning between these three very interesting. I believe all are correct – the atonement was necessary, appropriate, and proper. The great plan of salvation is not haphazard, and the atonement did not take place in a vacuum. Overall, the idea of salvation through Christ's atonement should be seen as natural and good.

Verse 5 also states that Christ had to be subject to men in the flesh that he could die and make all men subject to him. I have thought a lot about this idea. From a logical perspective this makes sense. Christ's mission was to work the salvation of all mankind. Part of this required paying the debt to justice that all of us incurred, but couldn't pay. Justice in its perfect sense – and we are talking about God's justice – requires that the payment be exactly commensurate with the crime. But the crimes – our sins – are not isolated acts. One who steals a loaf of bread because he is starving has certainly committed a different sin than he who steals bread for the thrill of getting away with it. So how could Christ pay for *exactly* our sins? Only through knowing *exactly* our experiences. So his mortal existence was necessary, and his infinite understanding was also required to make the atonement the perfect act that was intended from the beginnings of the world.

Verse 6 has a rather interesting insight at the beginning: death fulfills "the merciful plan of the great Creator." Perhaps nothing is more feared by men than death, yet it is a sign of mercy? Indeed, in the eternal perspective death is the escape from our mortal probation¹⁰. We need mortality to grow, but without death we would be forever banished from the presence of our Heavenly Father.

Verse 6 also ties together the three great events in the plan of salvation: the creation of the earth, the fall of Adam, and the atonement of Jesus Christ. Without any one of those three events the plan would be incomplete and doomed to failure. Verses 7 through 10 expand on

7 "To be necessary or proper": 2 Nephi 9:5; 2 Nephi 10:3; Hel 14:15

8 "Necessary": 2 Nephi 9:6,7; 2 Nephi 10:3;

9 "Appropriate to a purpose": Alma 34:9-13; Alma 42:8-9; Hel 14:15

10 See "Death as a Release" on the musings page of this site.

this idea, telling what would happen with an incomplete plan. If the atonement were finite it could not comprehend all the conditions necessary to satisfy justice. Without that infinite atonement and its corresponding power of atonement, our physical death would be the end of our progression¹¹, and we would be permanently banished from the presence of God. In that spiritual world, without the protection of God's power, we would of necessity become subject to the devil, and remain in misery eternally.

In contrast to that gloomy picture, verses 10 through 12 cite the great goodness of God in providing for our escape from death and hell. In particular, Jacob identifies the two portions of death – the temporal, which is simply death, and the spiritual, which he distinguishes as hell. Thus the unreality of hell to those who reject God – they do not believe in spiritual life, so spiritual death likewise means nothing.

In the next verse Jacob agrees that the greatness of God means that the same rules apply equally to the righteous. The righteous dead will be released from their spiritual prison, which is paradise, and their bodies will be freed from corruption to be joined eternally with their spirits. This condition of immortality will include the perfection of our memories, so that our entire existence up to that point will be revealed to us with no clouding of temporal memory. Verses 14 and 15 then recount how that perfect knowledge becomes the judgment of God, because we will know all of our actions, and their import, because of our recollection of premortal events.

Verse 16 deals with a subject which Elder Oaks discussed at some length in a recent conference talk¹² – the idea that our final judgment is not so much a reflection of our past actions, but the natural result of who we have become. I remember when I was younger wondering if it was possible to “fake it” into the Celestial Kingdom – do everything right, even if inside I didn't have the right spirit. In fact, this is not possible. The final judgment is a reflection of who we are, not just how we act. Verse 17 goes on to say that the conditions of this salvation have been explained, and we must be subject to the conditions of the law.

¹¹ Verse 7 uses a phrase which I suppose must come from a usage current among the Nephites, but less familiar to me: “the first judgment.” From the context I believe this refers to our separation from God due to sin, but that is not entirely clear. Compare to Alma 12:36.

¹² Dallin H. Oaks, “The Challenge to Become,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2000, 32

The process by which we become heirs of the Celestial Kingdom involves work on our part and divine intervention. Verse 18 specifies that belief in Christ and humility are the beginnings of this process for us. Enduring the sufferings of mortality and not paying heed to the shame or scorn of the world both require humility. Even if this seems like a difficult task now, Jacob points out that the natural outcome of this behavior is joy.

Joy should not be confused with the enjoyment that is so frequently sought after in the world. Joy comes with the internal peace that results from obeying the Lord and believing his promises. Enjoyment can come in the same way, but it is limited in its scope. We can find joy while enduring the crosses of the world, but there is generally little enjoyment in that adventure. Joy also comes from knowing that our final estate will be life with our Father, and not the suffering which comes from ignoring his commandments.

In verses 20 through 22 Jacob returns more directly to the theme mentioned in verse 7 – Christ's ability to save us comes from his infinite knowledge of who we are and what we have experienced. This knowledge makes God holy. He suffers – or experiences – all of the pains of every mortal in order to enable to resurrection and exaltation of all mankind. In an interesting departure from the usual shorthand of referring to “all men¹³,” Jacob specifies that this applies to men, women, and children. He wants to be sure that we understand that everyone is included.

Verses 23 and 24 specify our part of the exaltation covenant – repentance, baptism, and faith in the Holy One of Israel. Without these tokens on our part we will be damned, because we cannot enter the presence of God without them. If exaltation required nothing on our part it would effectively be compulsory, which is contrary to God's law. Therefore it is dependent on our acceptance of the conditions which are set. Willful rejection of those terms will condemn us.

The clarification in verses 25-26 is that where there is no knowledge of the law the atonement of Christ suffices to save people. I have often thought about what this means. It seems perfectly consistent to me that the plan of salvation should not be limited to only those who have lived on the earth when the true church is available. However, it also seems likely that not knowing the teachings of Christ does not give a person a free pass to salvation. I believe that each person will be

¹³ He returns to “all men” in the very next verse!

judged by how well he or she lived up to the level of understanding that was available to him or her in mortality. So if you consider a person whose society included cannibalism, as long as they lived honorably within the limits of the understanding they had, cannibalism by itself would not be sufficient to keep them from salvation. In many ways, though, the fate of those who have not the gospel is only hypothetical, because as verse 27 states, we have the law, we know the truth, and we will be condemned by our disobedience if we willfully disregard that which we know.

In verses 28 through 38 there is a list of woes that includes a number of forms of disobedience. Verses 28 and 29 have long held a special significance to me, as I am prone to trust in my own understanding. The danger is failure to remember that God truly is over all, and we cannot succeed without him. To be learned is good if we hearken to his counsels, but our wisdom is foolishness if we try to stand on our own.

There is an interesting little side note on verse 30. I have my missionary scriptures (which are nearly 40 years old) open on my lap as I write this, and I noticed toward the end of the verse the phrase "...their treasure is their God." Note the capitalization. I cross referenced this to D&C 1:16. In both places if you look at a pre-1980 printing of the scriptures you will find the capital 'G', but in the current scriptures it lower case. I suppose that it was previously capitalized because the word "God" so generally applies to our Heavenly Father and his son in the scriptures. However, in this use, it refers to a false god, and the lower case helps remind us of the futility in over-emphasizing worldly wealth.

Nor should I overlook verse 34, which was frequently quoted by a missionary I knew as: "Wo unto the liar, for he shall be *thrust* – not dropped, not tossed, but *thrust* down to hell."

In all seriousness, the warning in verse 38 should be a sobering thought to all. We will be taken home to God, and we will have to give an accounting of our lives. Standing in His presence with a knowledge of our guilt would be an excruciating experience if we have chosen not to accept the grace of Christ. Verses 39 and 40¹⁴ build on that thought to emphasize that sin is death, but truth is life and love. If we are irritated by the truth when we hear it spoken this should be a clear warning that we have wandered from the correct path and need to return as quickly as possible through faith on the Lord Jesus Christ and

¹⁴ Compare verse 40 with 1 Nephi 16:2-3.

repentance of our sins.

Although verses 41-43 contain a warning, they also contain warm promises for the righteous. Notwithstanding the images of Saint Peter at the pearly gates which have grown up over the years, the entrance to eternal happiness and glory is the Lord himself. No one can sneak past, or justify wickedness there, for the guard is He who suffered all of our sins, weaknesses, and pains, and He knows us perfectly. But if we have humbled ourselves and sought to do his will forever, we will meet him with a warm welcome, and know that we are home. The truly wise and prudent are promised eternal happiness.

Verses 44 through 53 are the conclusion to this portion of this masterful sermon. Jacob asserts that he has declared unto his people the truth, and has made them responsible for their own actions. Jesus is the rock of our salvation, and faith in him brings happiness. Although Jacob abhors sin, his duty as a teacher requires him to speak of wickedness, because the people are troubled by sin. If they will repent they will find joy and happiness.

The promise for those who follow this path is given in verses 50 and 51. Jacob compares the Lord's rewards to food and drink, but which cannot be purchased with money. The image I see is the richness of the Lord's blessings to those who fear and serve him¹⁵. The admonition to "let your soul delight in fatness" seemed to me to be a part of the images of bounty that Jacob is creating. However, in Isaiah 58:11 fatness is equated with strength in the footnote. We are not just rejoicing in bounty, but in the strength of the Lord to save.

Verse 53 speaks of the condescension of the Lord, the same terminology that was used in Nephi's interpretation of the Tree of Life vision¹⁶. The missionary discussions used to have some study questions, one of which asked about the condescension of God. Based on these verses, and other commentary I have read, I understand that God's condescension has to do with his willingness to reach down to the level of men in order to provide us his salvation. Jacob has discussed this as spiritual salvation in the verses leading up to this; in verse 53 he also relates it to the temporal salvation of the descendants of the Nephites – a part of their seed will be preserved to become a righteous

¹⁵ This verse also shows another challenge in translation. In Spanish there simply is no verb for "to feast," and yet the specific meaning of feasting here is not satisfied by the verb "to eat." So the translators of the current version of the Book of Mormon have added a footnote to explain the connotation of the verb in English.

¹⁶ See 1 Nephi 11:16

branch unto the house of Israel.

In chapter 10, the second day of this sermon, Jacob picks up where he left off with the righteous branch. In verses 3 through 5 Jacob builds a line of reasoning which I believe is unique in scripture. Verse 3 begins with the word "Wherefore," signifying that the argument is connected to the outcome in verse 2, that part of the Nephites' will be restored to that which will give them truth and prevent their spiritual death. The argument is that Christ had to come among the Jews, otherwise he would not have been slain. The connection with verse 2 makes me believe that Jacob is saying that had Christ not been killed by the Jews he would not have been able to complete the atonement. So as he goes on to describe the afflictions that would come upon the Jews, I think we also should recognize that perversely the Jews at Jerusalem in Christ's time played a vital part in the atonement!

The temporal salvation of the Jews is shown to be dependent on their acceptance of Christ in verse 7. Jacob then embarks on what must have been a difficult point for his listeners – that the Gentiles would play a major role in gathering in the scattered Jews and in preserving the seed of the Nephites in the Americas, and so would be highly blessed. Then in verses 10 through 19 Jacob speaks of the America's as a blessed land, both for Jews and Gentiles. The blessings on this land are conditional upon righteousness, in particular, those who fight against Zion shall perish, and those who will prosper in this land must worship God.

In modern times there are a great number of nations on the American continents, and the people who live here display a wide range of behaviors. But the admonition to worship God ought to be a warning to us wherever we are. There is a lot of comment about the decay of moral values in society. Some who indulge in vice claim they are hurting no one but themselves. Nonetheless, the blessings of the Gentiles on this land depend on the worship of God. I believe that when Jacob speaks of Gentiles on this land in these latter days he refers to all of us, because we live in Gentile nations and are not governed by the law of God. Our collective prosperity and success depends on our collective righteousness. Individual sin does not affect just the sinner.

Verse 20 returns Jacob to his original theme – reassuring the Nephites that they have great reason to rejoice because of the blessings of the Lord. The Lord has not forgotten them, because they are part of his covenant people. They are free to choose their own path into the

eternities – eternal life or eternal death – depending on their righteousness and faith on the Lord Jesus Christ.

So Jacob has traveled through the future of the house of Israel, the Lord's defense of his people, the great plan of salvation, individual and collective responsibility for sin, the future of the Nephites and the Gentiles on the promised land, and the hope the Nephites have. Through all of this stands one towering figure, the Lord Jesus Christ. It is his plan for us, and he has paid the price so that the plan will work. From the lowliest individual to the greatest nation, the hope for everyone is in Christ and his grace toward us. That is Jacob's witness, and the witness of the Book of Mormon. To those I add my humble witness. Christ lives. He is our friend. In him we may all have life, and that eternally.