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Omni and the Words of Mormon

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SP-OMN

Preliminary Report

FOUNDATION FOR
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Lecture

on

Omni and The Words of Mormon

The Book of Omni is the last book in the Small Plates, and in its modern form is divided into 30 verses. It consists of writings by five men. The first is Omni, son of Jarom, after whom the book is named. The second is Amaron, Omni's son; the third is Amaron's brother Chemish; the fourth is Abinadom, the son of Chemish; and the fifth, and by all means the most important, historically speaking, is Amaleki, the son of Abinadom.

The first four named men seem to have had little, if any, desire to write. Their efforts contributed but 11 verses of the 30 in the book and they tell us but little of any great interest. Omni seems to have been a bluff old soldier who in 3 verses tells us he (like his father) wrote somewhat to "preserve our genealogy" and had fought much to preserve the Nephites from falling into the hands of the Lamanites. He calls himself a "wicked man" because he had not kept the statutes and commandments of God as he should have done. Thirty-eight years passed away (B.C. 280) after Omni delivered the plates to his son Amaron before the latter wrote anything, and his brother Chemish gives us a description of it in a manner which is amusing to us at this day:

Now I, Chemish, write what few things I write, in the same book with my brother; for behold, I saw the last which he wrote, that he wrote it with his own hand; and he wrote it in the day that he delivered them unto me. And after this manner we keep the records, for it is according to the commandments of our fathers. And I make an end. (Omni 9)

If all the Nephite historians had kept records in this brief fashion their work wouldn't have amounted to much.

Abinadom, son of Chemish, writes but 2 verses (10,11) in which he relates that he had taken the lives of many Lamanites in defence of his

people, the Nephites. He concludes by telling us that he knows of no revelations except that which has been written, nor prophecy. And so he makes an end.

Verses 12-30 by Amaleki, son of Abinadom, are of great interest and importance to us in getting a sound understanding of the Book of Mormon. For convenience we may logically divide these verses into two parts for discussion. The first of these comprises verses 12-22; the second, verses 23-30. Now let us examine verses 12-22.

First of all, Amaleki tells us that a man by the name of Mosiah was warned by the Lord to flee out of the land of Nephi where the main body of the Nephites lived. Moreover, he was to take with him as many as would hearken to the voice of the Lord and lead them into the wilderness. Mosiah and his faithful associates, including Amaleki, did as the Lord commanded. As well as we can determine, they seem to have proceeded north in the wilderness until they came across a people they had never heard of before who were called the people of Zarahemla. These people, later known to us as Mulekites (Mos. 25:2), had originally come out of Jerusalem at the time that Zedekiah, king of Judah, was carried away captive into Babylon. According to Book of Mormon chronology, as I estimate it, that event took place about B.C. 590. The people of Zarahemla, who were now very numerous, were led by the Lord to this continent where they settled in the land of Zarahemla, a land destined to be of great importance in the future history of the Nephite people. Needless to say, the people of Zarahemla rejoiced when Mosiah and his followers joined them, because they had brought with them the Brass Plates containing the records of the Jews, not to mention other sacred relics. We are told in verse 17 that the people of Zarahemla had had many wars and contentions; and their language had become corrupted;

and they had brought no records with them; and they denied the being of their Creator. It became necessary for Mosiah to have his people teach them his language. When this was done, their leader Zarahemla gave a genealogy of his fathers, according to his memory. The people of Mosiah and of Zarahemla united together; and Mosiah was appointed to be the king over the two peoples.

An incident of great interest to us is related in verses 20-22. A large stone with engravings upon it was brought to Mosiah; and he interpreted the engravings by the gift and power of God. This suggested that he was in possession of the "holy interpreters" or the Urim and Thummim as we know it. The engravings gave an account of the last ruler of the Jaredite people, the people preceding the Nephite nation on this continent. This ruler was known as Coriantumr and was discovered by the people of Zarahemla; and he dwelt with them for the "space of nine moons." The engravings told a few things about Coriantumr's forefathers. They came originally from the "tower," that is, the Tower of Babel, at the time the Lord confounded the language of the people. (See Ether 1) And the judgments of the Lord fell upon Coriantumr's people; and their bones lay scattered in what the Nephite people called "the land northward."

The finding of Coriantumr in or about the land of Zarahemla strongly suggests that the last great battles of the Jaredites took place at no very great distance away from the land of Zarahemla, a few hundred miles at most. A lonely wounded man is not likely to have wandered thousands of miles away from the site of his last great battle.

Now, let us consider the remaining verses in Omni, i.e. verses 23-30. The historian, Amaleki, tells us that he was born in the days of Mosiah and lived to see his death. Benjamin, the son of the king then reigned in

his father's stead. Amaleki tells of serious war and much bloodshed between the Lamanites and Nephites in which struggle king Benjamin succeeded, in driving out the enemy from the land of Zarahemla.

Like all men, Amaleki began to get old; and, having no posterity, and knowing that king Benjamin was a just man, he decided to deliver up the Small Plates of Nephi to him, knowing they would receive good care. He also exhorted all men to come to God, to believe in prophecy, revelation, the ministering of angels, in the gift of tongues, and in the gift of interpreting languages. He invited men to offer their whole souls to Christ, to fast, pray, and endure to the end. In so doing they receive salvation.

Amaleki ends the Book of Omni, and incidentally fills up the Small Plates of Nephi, by telling us of an incident involving a large number of Nephites who wanted to return to the land of Nephi, the land of their inheritance from which the elder Mosiah had led them or their fathers in the first place. They were probably curious as to what had happened to the main body of the Nephites that Mosiah and his other righteous companions had left in the land of Nephi. In their journey into the wilderness, probably in a southerly direction, their leader whom Amaleki calls a "stiff-necked man" caused a contention among them; and all but fifty of them were slain. (vs. 28) These returned to the land of Zarahemla, persuaded a considerable of others to accompany them, and departed again into the wilderness to find the land of Nephi. Amaleki tells us that he had a brother who went with this party concerning which he never received any news. The details of this incident mentioned by Amaleki are related to us by Zeniff, the leader of the second expedition, in the Book of Mosiah, chapter 9. Zeniff's account will be treated in a subsequent lecture.

Now I want to emphasize important facts concerning the structure and

message of the Book of Mormon of which Amaleki's words should make us conscious. First, when the elder Mosiah and his righteous companions fled into the wilderness they left behind them the main body of the Nephites of whom we never hear of again in the Nephite record. Let me emphasize that relatively early in Nephite history the main body of Nephites are lost to our notice. It would seem that when Mosiah and his faithful friends fled from the main body ~~that~~ they fulfilled the prophecy of Jacob to this effect, and I quote:

And the time speedily cometh, that except ye /the Nephites/ ~~reptn~~ they /the Lamanites/ shall possess the land of your inheritance, and the Lord God will lead away the righteous out from among you. (Jacob 3:4)

And in the second place, what happened to the main body of Nephites? Apparently they were destroyed and the land of their inheritance was taken over by the Lamanites in accordance with Jacob's prophecy. For when Zeniff's people returned back to the land of their inheritance they found the cities of their forefathers in the hands of the Lamanites and the walls there-of in a bad state of disrepair. (See Mos. 9:5-8) And for this reason we are forced to conclude that from Omni, verse 12, to the end of the Book of Mormon (the Book of Ether excepted) we are dealing with the descendants of Mosiah and his friends who united with a much larger body of Mulekites in the land of Zarahemla. In effect, we may say that Book of Mormon history from Omni 12 is a history of the Mulekite people who adopted Nephite leadership and Nephite culture. That this statement is true is reflected many years after Amaleki's time in a statement made in the 25th chapter of Mosiah. After Zeniff's people had returned from the land of their fathers under the leadership of Limhi and the elder Alma we find this account:

And now king Mosiah /the younger Mosiah/ caused that all the people should be gathered together. Now there were not so many of the children of Nephi, ~~for~~ so many of those who were descendants of

Nephi, as there were of the people of Zarahemla, who was a descendant of Mulek, and those who came with him into the wilderness. (Mosiah 25:1,2)

Notice carefully that the Mulekites outnumbered the Nephites. Therefore, throughout the remainder of so-called "Nephite" history we are doubtless dealing with a people who had a preponderance of Mulekite blood in their midst. The Nephites were clearly a minority group.

Now we have finished with the Small Plates of Nephi. So let us turn to a consideration of The Words of Mormon. This book, if we may call it such, constitutes a small but major division of the Book of Mormon. It contains one chapter of eighteen verses and occupies less than two printed pages in the current edition. You may wonder as to the purpose of Mormon in writing it. We need not ponder about that too much at this point. Suffice it to say that Mormon wants to write a preface and an explanation of a number of facts which he desires the reader to understand. I shall bring out these points as we proceed.

The Words of Mormon may, for purposes of analysis, be divided into four parts:

- I. Mormon explains what he hoped to do with the record he has written; his hopes concerning his son Moroni. (Vss. 1-2)
- II. Mormon's earlier work of abridgment. He finds the Small Plates of Nephi and places them with his own record. He prays for redemption of his brethren, the Lamanites. (Vss. 3-8)
- III. Mormon to finish out his record from the Large Plates of Nephi. The process by which the Nephite records fell into the hands of Mormon. His people to be judged by them. (Vss. 9-11*)
- IV. Mormon's account of the early history and labors of king Benjamin. (Vss. 12-18)

MORMON'S BRIEF PREFACE CONCERNING HIS RECORD.--In verses 1 and 2 Mormon explains that he is about to deliver into the hands of his son Moroni the record which he had been making. It is quite obvious that he means the entire record he had made as far as Mormon, chapter 7. We know the approximate date, because the great Nephite prophet-general says that he had witnessed

the almost complete destruction of his people. This statement, together with the facts given by him in Mormon 6:5-6, lead us to believe that the date is about A.D. 384. Mormon writes that he believes his son will live to witness the entire destruction of his people. With a father's expression of love, he hopes that his son will survive them and write something concerning them, and concerning Christ, "that someday it may profit them." The clause in quotation marks doubtless refers to the descendants or remnants of his people in the latter days.

MORMON'S EXPLANATIONS OF EARLIER LITERARY ACTIVITY AND THE FINDING OF THE SMALL PLATES OF NEPHI.--From Mormon's words in the first part of vs. 3 it is quite evident that he had been engaged in literary activities prior to his finding the Small Plates. He says that he "had made an abridgment from the plates of Nephi [Large Plates], down to the reign of this king Benjamin, of whom Amaleki spake. . ." By this he undoubtedly has reference to the abridgment which he made of the Book of Lehi, which was first translated by the prophet Joseph Smith. This translation constituted the 116 pages which Martin Harris obtained and lost, to the dismay of Joseph Smith and to the anger of the Lord. (See D & C 3 and 10) In the preface to the first edition of the Book of Mormon, Joseph tells of the incident, and his words we quote in part:

As many false reports have been circulated respecting the following work, and also many unlawful measures taken by evil designing persons to destroy me, and also the work, I would inform you that I translated, by the gift and power of God, and caused to be written, one hundred and sixteen pages, the which I took from the Book of Lehi, which was an account abridged from the plates of Lehi, by the hand of Mormon; which said account some person or persons have stolen and kept from me,...

Mormon then explains that when he had finished his abridgment (of the Book of Lehi), he searched among the records which had been delivered into his hands and found "these plates," meaning the Small Plates of Nephi.

(Vs. 3) The prophecies concerning Christ and other spiritual writings which he found upon them pleased him so much that he determined to put them with the rest of the record which he had already made, or was in the process of completing. He said, "I do this for a wise purpose; for thus it whispereth me, according to the workings of the Spirit of the Lord which is in me." (Vss. 4-6) The "wise purpose" we already know well in connection with Nephi's words in 1 Nephi 9:5. The Lord instructed Nephi to make the Small Plates, and many centuries later commanded Mormon to put them with his record, in order to forestall the enemies of Joseph Smith who stole the 116 pages of translated matter out of his possession. The quotation given above from the first edition of the Book of Mormon makes the matter sufficiently clear.

It is patent from Mormon's words that he is trying to make clear to us the reasons why the Small Plates appear in the midst of his own writings. The "Words of Mormon" are in part designed to show the relation which the Small Plates bear to what follows in the Nephite record.

Mormon writes some words in verse 5 which should be carefully scrutinized and weighed. Here they are:

Wherefore, I chose these things, to finish my record upon them, which remainder of my record I shall take from the plates of Nephi; and I cannot write the hundredth part of the things of my people. (Vs. 5)

What does he mean by "I chose these things, to finish my record upon them. . ."? By "these things" is clearly meant the Small Plates of Nephi. My colleague, Eldin Ricks, takes the view that "to finish my record upon them" means that Mormon wrote his few last words (i.e., the Words of Mormon) upon a little space that was still left upon the Small Plates after Amaleki (Omni 30) had finished his work of writing. And if that isn't the meaning, what other interpretation is to be placed on the words? The word "upon"

seems rather definite.

The next clause, "which remainder of my record I shall take from the plates of Nephi," is at first reading not clear. The grammar may be called in question, but a little study would seem to indicate that the antecedent of "remainder" is "record" in the preceding clause. That is to say, Mormon has reference to his remaining words (vss. 12-18 involving Benjamin and hence the Large Plates of Nephi) in the Words of Mormon and not to the work of abridging the books which follow, such as Mosiah, Alma, Helaman, etc., as is commonly supposed. To my mind, all of this great work of abridgment has been completed; it is water under the bridge, so to speak. Nor do the opening words of verse 9, "and now I, Mormon, proceed to finish out my record which I take from the plates of Nephi; . . ." militate against this view. Here, as above, Mormon has reference to finishing out his few remaining words, which have to do with the life of king Benjamin (vss. 12-18), obviously an abridgment the source of which would be the Large Plates.

MORMON EXPLAINS HOW THE NEPHITE RECORDS CAME INTO HIS HANDS.--Before finishing out his record by telling about king Benjamin, Mormon explains how the records of the Nephites came into his hands. He tells us that when Amaleki had delivered up the Small Plates ("these plates") to king Benjamin, the latter put them with the Large Plates of Nephi ("other plates"), which had been handed down by the kings from generation to generation until the days of Benjamin. We should observe here that the elder Mosiah must have smuggled the Large Plates away from the corrupt king of the land of Nephi when he fled away into the wilderness. (See Omni 12) It was doubtless Mosiah who handed them to his son Benjamin. From king Benjamin all these records, so Mormon continues, were handed down in turn through the generations until they fell into his hands. He prays that God will preserve them; in

fact, he knows they will be preserved, because great things are written upon them by which his people and their brethren will be judged in the great and last day. (Vss. 9-11)

MORMON'S ACCOUNT OF KING BENJAMIN'S EARLY HISTORY AND LABORS.--It seems to ~~the writer~~ that Mormon was aware of the fact that the reader of the Book of Mormon would not have access to the accounts of King Benjamin's life as contained in the Book of Lehi, which was first translated by the prophet Joseph Smith and written on the 116 pages he mentions as having lost. Mormon knew, of course, how very little was said about Benjamin's early life in the Book of Omni. (Omni 23-25) He was also aware of the fact that what he had written about Benjamin in the Book of Mosiah was confined to the last three years of the king's life. (Mosiah 6:5) Therefore he must have felt it necessary to make a smoother and more logical transition between the Book of Omni and the Book of Mosiah by writing down a brief abridgment of Benjamin's life that would span the intervening years. In vss. 12-18 we have this condensed account of King Benjamin's life, the source of which must have been the Large Plates of Nephi, as intimated in verse 5. Mormon mentions the contentions Benjamin had to meet among his own people. (Vs. 12) Not only that, but the Lamanites attacked his people in strength. Personally led by King Benjamin, his armies beat off the Lamanites and drove them out of their borders. (Vss. 13-14) Apostate teachers, prophets,--and even false Christs--arose among his people, and there were many dissensions away to the Lamanites. But Benjamin, with the assistance of many holy men like himself, not to mention the help of true prophets, succeeded after great labors in establishing peace in the land. (Vss. 15-18)

We are thankful to Mormon for giving us even this little about the life of the great Benjamin, aside from what is said in the Book of Mosiah about his declining years.