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Alma 12, The Universal Pattern of Apostasy

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Alma 12, The Universal Pattern of Apostasy

Alma and Amulek's confrontation with Zeezrom and the people of Ammonihah presents some interesting and perplexing questions for us. Hugh Nibley described this Alma 12 as "the hardest chapter in the Book of Mormon. It's the one that separates us farthest from the world. It's the chapter of Alma where the gospel plan is given."⁷⁸⁸

We know the Ammonihahites had apostatized, but we are not told the nature or the extent of their apostasy. The reason for the perplexity is that the prophets challenge them with some of the most sacred and profound teachings of the Feast of Tabernacles temple drama. One may ask, "How is it that Zeezrom and his partisans knew so much about the sacred rites of the Law of Moses, and yet were caught up in such abject corruption that they were willing to kill innocent people just to prove that Alma and Amulek didn't have the power to stop them?" To explore a possible answer, it may be instructive to look at an evolutionary pattern that is typical of an apostasy generally, to see that theirs was not unique—the pattern of apostasy is almost always the same. Whenever anyone or any group of people leave the church, they always think their situation is justified because it is remarkable. In fact their self-justification is not at all remarkable, and the path of their apostasy almost always carries them down the same predictable slippery slope.

It begins with a challenge to priesthood authority. Its script may vary, but not much. It will read something like, "They do not understand as well as I do," or "They did something that I know was wrong," or "They do not understand my situation." That challenge to priesthood authority almost always has an even deeper underlying cause: It is easier to criticize others than to repent of one's own shortcomings—or else, simply, repentance is not as attractive as sin. In the Book of Mormon, Korihor's teachings are an excellent example. He preached:

16 Ye look forward and say that ye see a remission of your sins. But behold, it is the effect of a frenzied mind; and this derangement of your minds comes because of the traditions of your fathers, which lead you away into a belief of things which are not so.

⁷⁸⁸ Nibley, *Teachings of the Book of Mormon—Semester 1*, 330.

In the Book of Mormon.

17 And many more such things did he say unto them, telling them that there could be no Atonement made for the sins of men, but every man fared in this life according to the management of the creature; therefore every man prospered according to his genius, and that every man conquered according to his strength; and whatsoever a man did was no crime (Alma 30:16-17).

Apostasy may also stem from a political or economic challenge to priesthood authority. A biblical example is Jeroboam, who split the kingdom of Israel after Solomon died (1 Kings 12). To ensure that his people did not return to Jerusalem to worship, Jeroboam built his own alternative sanctuaries, established the worship of golden calves, “and Jeroboam ordained a feast in the eighth month, on the fifteenth day of the month, like unto the feast that is in Judah, and he offered upon the altar” (v. 32). Since it was on the 15th day of the month—the same as the Feast of Tabernacles—it is reasonable to suppose he changed the temple drama just enough to satisfy his own purposes without making everyone else too upset.

It appears that apostate leaders who are reported in the Book of Mormon did essentially the same thing as Jeroboam. For example, since Abinadi’s recorded words are mostly about becoming an adopted child of God, it is reasonable to suppose that in the orchestrated apostasy sponsored by King Noah, the king and his priests had retained the forms of at least the coronation scene and its promise of sonship in the temple drama, but had ignored or perverted the doctrines taught by the drama.

After the challenge to priesthood authority, the next step in an apostasy and the first major change of doctrine is to corrupt the understanding of the Atonement, then the Godhead, then the covenant meanings of the ordinances, and then other doctrines as they become inconvenient. The last things to go are the forms of the ordinances.

The reason the meaning of the Atonement is first is because a correct belief in the Atonement imposes the need to repent. Throughout history, people have been willing to pay a great deal of money to any preacher who could convincingly teach them that they need not change their lives very much in order to be saved.

Along with the change in the responsibilities imposed by the Atonement and repentance comes the question of salvation—if it is easy to come by, then what makes it worthwhile? Without the ennobling powers of repentance, salvation must be defined as something less than godhood. So it becomes a state of eternal bliss and happiness with no responsibility—some variety of Nirvana. With that notion, the understanding of the eternal relationship between Heavenly Father and his children simply dissolves into an undefinable

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eternal bliss. Now, the nature of the Godhead must also be changed in order to accommodate for that new undefinable relationship. Such changes are most apparent when one observes the apostasy of the post-exilic Jews and the similar apostasy of the Christians after the death of the apostles.

The Israelites of the First Temple period worshiped Elohim, the Father of the gods; and Jehovah, the God of Creation and the covenant God of Israel. They also acknowledged a heavenly Council of gods. After the Babylonian conquest, the post-exilic Jews abandoned Elohim, rejected the Council, and worshiped an unembodied, undefinable “One God” whom they called Jehovah. About 800 years later, the Christians did essentially the same sort of thing. They redefined the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost and combined them into an unembodied, undefinable “One God.”

Notwithstanding the severity of any apostasy, there is almost always a desire to maintain the forms of legitimacy in the changed religion, and that is most easily accomplished by keeping reasonably true to the forms of the ordinances and the rituals—by continuing to do things the way they had always been done. Therefore, to some degree or other, the form of the ceremonies remain intact. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the royal coronation ceremonies. The ceremonial washing, clothing, anointing, crowning, and giving a new name are more ancient than Egypt and Babylon. They are also as recent as the coronations of the present Pope and the reigning English queen. Again, the reason is obvious: legitimacy requires continuity. In each generation, the next king must be crowned in the same way as the last king. Otherwise, eyebrows will rise and legitimacy be questioned. So the form of that ritual has remained essentially the same from generation to generation for at least the last 5,000 years.

Apparently something like this was the situation among the people of Ammonihah. They had preserved enough of the festival drama that when Alma and Amulek spoke to them, the prophets’ approach was to call vivid attention to the original meanings of the ordinances the apostates had preserved but corrupted in their ritual.

The crescendo of the ancient temple drama was when the people entered the temple in the presence of God, showing that the king (and symbolically, all the people) was worthy to be crowned king and priest. The Book of Mormon authors sum up that entire concept with the word “redeem,” which means to enter the presence of God.⁷⁸⁹ That concept is the one Alma used to convince Zeezrom that he must repent.

⁷⁸⁹ See the chapter called, “Meaning of Redeem—to ‘come unto Christ’.”