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The Book of Mormon: Nephite Ideas of the Rich and the Poor

Editor(s): Mary Connelly Kimball

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Lesson Department

Theology and Testimony

(First Week in May)

THE BOOK OF MORMON: NEPHITE IDEAS OF THE RICH AND THE POOR.

Select Readings: Alma, chapters 29-35, inclusive. Are there any new ideas here? If so, what are they?

One of the things that make the prophets outstanding in the history of revealed religion is their attitude toward the rich and the poor.

Isaiah is a signal example of this. "What mean ye," demands the prophet, "that ye beat my people to pieces, and grind the faces of the poor?" And elsewhere he exclaims, "Woe unto them that decree unrighteous decrees, and that write grievousness which they have prescribed; to turn aside the needy from judgment, and to take away the right from the poor of my people, that widows may be their prey, and that they may rob the fatherless!" Also he predicts the time when "the meek shall increase their joy in the Lord, and the poor among men shall rejoice in the Holy One of Israel."

Jesus, however, is the most notable example of sympathy with the poor and the oppressed. One of the signs that he was the Christ, as he told the disciples of John was that "the poor have the gospel preached unto them." Every reader of the *Gospels* remembers how Jesus isolated the widow who, out of her poverty, had given her "mite" in the temple. Every one knows also what he said about the difficulty which the rich would encounter in their attempt to get into heaven. And then there is Lazarus and the rich man—a classic example.

Now the spirit of the *Book of*

Mormon, so far as this phase of life is concerned, is of a piece with that of the prophets and of Jesus.

That astonishing man Jacob, whom we have had several occasions already to quote, has something also to say on this subject. "Woe unto the rich, who are rich as to the things of the world. For because they are rich they despise the poor, and they persecute the meek, and their hearts are upon their treasures; wherefore, their treasure is their god. And behold, their treasure shall perish with them also." (II Nephi 9:30)

King Benjamin, who lived in the second century before Christ, elaborated on this theme in a discourse which he made to his people. Here are the ideas he advanced:

(1) The "substance" which the rich claim as their own is not theirs at all, but God's. In this he agrees with another, the psalmist, who says, "The earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof." This is the ground that all the prophets take, who have spoken on the subject. Men are only "stewards," as our own prophet stated in his time.

(2) Those who have sufficient to live on from day to day should impart of their substance to those who are poor. And this for the reason that all are really "beggars," the rich as well as the poor; the rich "beg" the Lord for a remission of their sins, even if they do not beg

for their bread. The King adds:

"If ye judge the man who putteth up his petition to you for your substance that he perish not, and condemn him, how much more just will be your condemnation for withholding your substance, which doth not belong to you, but to God, to whom also your life belongeth."

The *Book of Mormon*, however, nowhere condemns riches as such, nor the rich because of their wealth. It condemns only the attitude of mind so often induced by money values. And in this there is agreement with all that is elsewhere said on the subject. To come again to Jacob's teachings (2 : 17 - 19): "Think of your brethren like unto yourselves, and be familiar with all and free with your substance, that they may be rich like unto you. But before ye seek for riches, seek ye for the kingdom of God. And after ye have obtained a hope in Christ ye shall obtain riches, if ye seek them; and ye will seek them for the intent to do good—to clothe the naked, and to feed the hungry, and to liberate the captive, and administer relief to the sick and the afflicted."

King Benjamin touches a point that still, after more than two thousand years, is much mooted. He says (Mosiah, 4:16-18): "And also ye yourselves will succor those that stand in need of your succor; ye will administer of your substance unto him that standeth in need; and ye will not suffer that the beggar putteth up his petition to you in vain, and turn him out to perish."

"Perhaps thou shalt say: The man has brought upon himself his misery; therefore I will stay my hand, and will not give unto him of my food, nor impart unto him of my substance that he may not suffer, for his punishments are just. But I say unto you, O man, whosoever

doeth this the same hath great cause to repent; and except he repenteth of that which he hath done, he perisheth forever, and hath no interest in the kingdom of God."

And then (in verse 22) follows that passage about judging, already quoted.

This problem of the poor and the rich, therefore, appears to have given the Nephites the same concern as it is giving the world today. And they sought to solve the problem chiefly, it seems, by requiring charity on the part of the rich toward the less "fortunate." Our solution is mainly through another channel.

After the visitation of Christ to the Nephites this problem was solved by the adoption of what is known among us as the "united order," or the "order of Enoch."

The united order, so far as we know, was first employed as a means of handling the matter of the poor and the rich in the City of Enoch. Hence one of its names. Enoch lived the sixth generation from Adam.

Says the *Bible*: "Enoch walked with God: and he was not; for God took him." In the *Pearl of Great Price*, however, we learn much more about him. His people were living under the united order; they had all things common; and there were no rich and no poor among them.

This order prevailed also among the first disciples of Christ. The account says, "And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul: neither said any of them that aught of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common. Neither was there any among them that lacked: for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them and brought the prices of the things that were sold, and laid

them down at the apostles' feet: and distribution was made unto every man according as he had need." (Acts 4:32-37)

But the most successful attempt to live the united order so far as our information goes, was among the ancient Nephites after the time of Christ. Here is what is said of the matter:

"And they did minister one to another; and they had all things common among them, every man dealing justly, one with another. And it came to pass in the thirty and sixth year, the people were all converted unto the Lord, upon all the face of the land, both Nephites and Lamanites, and there were no contentions and disputations among them, and every man did deal justly one with another. And they had all things common among them; therefore there were not rich and poor, bond and free, but they were all made free, and partakers of the heavenly gift." (III Nephi, 26:19; IV Nephi, 1:2, 3)

This condition went on from the year thirty-six, A. D., to the year two hundred and one, A. D. In this last year the historian writes, "From that time forth they did have their goods and their substance no more common among them." Whereupon, he continues, "they began to be divided into classes; and they began to build up churches unto themselves to get gain, and began to deny the true church of Christ." (IV Nephi, 1:26, 27)

To sum up the question of the rich and the poor as it appeared among the Nephites:

(1) There was the customary social division among them of the rich and the poor. Many allusions to this classification are made throughout the narrative of the thousand years of Nephite history: The first Nephi tells of it by way

of prophecy and warning (I Nephi, 13:7, 8). Alma the Younger refers to it disapprovingly (Alma, 1:29, 30). All through the history, in fact, this division on the basis of property ownership runs like a scarlet thread.

(2) An earnest attempt was made during all this time to handle the problem. This was done mainly by the prophets, and their appeal seems to have been through religion. They sought to induce the rich to look after the interests of the poor and unfortunate, by telling them that their salvation in the next world would be in question if they did not. We read of no effort on the part of the state to relieve the situation. The efforts made, however, appear to have been only temporary in their nature, and did not go to the root of the economic question.

(3) This root-remedy was attempted only after Christ furnished the idea and the impetus. It was the united order, and involved the principle of equality in temporal concerns—which is the primary inequality in the world as at present constituted. And the basis of this order was found in the spirit of religion.

A consideration of the principles of the united order in our own times will doubtless furnish a clue to what was done under Enoch, under the ancient apostles in Palestine, and at the time it was practiced among the Nephites. Here are these principles in brief:

(1) Inequality in temporal things is an artificial, not a normal, condition. "It is not given," says a revelation to the Prophet Joseph Smith, (49:20) "that one man should have that which is above another, wherefore the world lieth in sin." Furthermore, the Lord says in reference to this very matter of material inequality, "I say unto

you, be one; and if ye are not one, ye are not mine."

"Let every man esteem his brother as himself, and practice virtue and holiness before me," the Prophet is told. "And again I say unto you, let every man esteem his brother as himself. For what man among you having twelve sons, and is no respecter of them, and they serve him obediently, and he saith unto the one: Be thou clothed in robes and sit thou here; and to the other: Be thou clothed in rags and sit thou there—and looketh upon his sons and saith I am just?" (Sec. 38:24-26.)

(2) Temporal equality does not mean that every man should have the same amount as every other man of temporal goods. Edward Partridge, the first bishop of the church, was requested in the Kirtland branch of this order to "appoint unto this people their portions, every man equal *according to his circumstances and his wants and needs.*" The man with a wife would "need" more than the man without; and the man with seven children would "need" more than the one with only three; and so on.

(3) This equality in temporal things is a pre-requisite to equality in spiritual things. In a revelation given in 1832 (78) the Prophet is told (verses 3, 5, 6): "For verily I say unto you, the time has come, and is now at hand; and behold, and lo, it must needs be that there be an organization of my people, in regulating and establishing the affairs of the storehouse for the poor of my people, * * * that you may be equal in the bonds of heavenly things, yea, and earthly things also, for the obtaining of heavenly things. For *if ye are not equal in earthly things, ye cannot be equal in obtaining heavenly things.*"

(4) Not only a few members of

the church, but all of them, were to be under this order. "You are to be equal, or in other words, you are to have equal claims on the properties, for the benefit of managing the concerns of your stewardships, every man according to his wants and his needs, inasmuch as his wants are just—and all this for the benefit of the church of the living God, that every man may improve upon his talent, that every man may gain other talents, yea even an hundred fold, to be cast into the Lord's storehouse, to become the common property of the whole church—every man seeking the interest of his neighbor, and doing all things with an eye single to the glory of God."

In the united order, therefore, we come face to face with the conflict between selfishness and service, between Christ and the "natural man." Its adoption by the Saints in Missouri and Ohio days was unsuccessful partly because of human weakness and partly because of circumstances over which they had no control—outside opposition. Since then the law of the united order has been held in abeyance, excepting for some trials of it in a few places in Utah—Orderville, Glenwood, and Brigham City. After the Redemption of Zion, whenever that event takes place, the practice of this economic principle will be renewed.

With us, as soon as the united order was abandoned, a lesser law, the law of tithing, took its place. But there is no mention of tithing in the *Book of Mormon* in connection with their own religious practices.

Questions

1. How important is the matter of earning a living in the modern system? Explain how it is that the "love of money" is the "root" of

all evil. What is the cost of living per individual in the United States? What danger is there in the accumulation of large surpluses of wealth?

2. To what extent is "charity" a solution of the unemployment problem? Tell about the "dole" in England. Is it true that a poor man is to blame for his condition? Has society any part in that blame? If so, what part? Why does the Lord so often express sympathy for the poor and censure for the rich? Are riches in themselves bad? Why do you think so?

3. What is the united order? Tell about its practice among the people of Enoch, among the early

disciples of Christ in Palestine, among the Nephites, among the Latter-day Saints. Why is wealth so often a hindrance to the enjoyment of spiritual blessings? Explain the sentence, "It is not given that one man should have that which is above another." Explain: "If ye are not equal in earthly things, ye cannot be equal in obtaining heavenly things." Under our present economic system, talent is often undeveloped in the youth for lack of means. Show that this would not be the case under the united order. Compare tithing with the united order. To what extent would there be individual ownership, and to what extent public ownership, under the united order?

Teachers' Topic

Watchword: "And into whatsoever house ye enter, first say, Peace be to this house."—Luke 10:5.

Text: "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me."—Matthew 16:24.

This injunction together with the record of the life of our Savior, gives us to understand that life to the faithful is not to be one of ease and pleasure. Had He intended us to pass through this existence casually, He would have set the example by doing so Himself; but that was not the pattern that He gave us to follow. When He said that he who would come after Him must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Him, it was no idle phrase. He meant that there would be a cross for each to bear, and that earthly pleasures must be renounced. Had Jesus chosen the gratification of temporal power He would have been greater than Pilate or Herod in their time. What is the glory which they achieved compared to the memory of Him who has lived

in the hearts of mankind for nineteen centuries? They are remembered only because of Him. Time has dimmed their glory, but year by year and century by century His light has grown brighter, His influence more strong. From poverty, suffering, crucifixion, He became the greatest power for good that the world has ever known.

It seems natural and easy to us at this distant time for Him to have chosen as He did. We know little of the temptation He had to resist in choosing to be faithful to His trust. What we do know, and what we must build upon is that He did choose righteously, and that that is the pattern He meant us to follow. That does not mean necessarily that we must be denied all earthly joys. It means that for everyone