

4

THE BOOK OF MORMON'S
MESSAGE TO THE GENTILES*Terry B. Ball and Jeremy Daniel Wendt*

AS THE PROPHET MORMON CHRONICLED the tragic destruction of the Nephites, he momentarily turned his attention to a latter-day people he called “Gentiles,” pleading with them, “O ye Gentiles, how can ye stand before the power of God, except ye shall repent and turn from your evil ways? . . . Therefore, repent ye, and humble yourselves before him” (Mormon 5:22, 24). Later, Mormon’s son, Moroni, also voiced concern for these Gentiles, praying “unto the Lord that he would give unto the Gentiles grace, that they might have charity” (Ether 12:36). Hundreds of years earlier the prophet Nephi expressed similar care for the spiritual welfare of the Gentiles. Recording the words of an angelic messenger, Nephi declared, “If the Gentiles repent it shall be well with them,” but “wo be unto the Gentiles if it so be that they harden their hearts against the Lamb of God” (1 Nephi 14:5–6).

The anxiety and hope voiced by these prophets for the spiritual

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welfare of the Gentiles raise some important questions. Who are these Gentiles? How do the Gentiles fit into God's plans? Why did the Book of Mormon prophets speak so fervently to and about the Gentiles? Answers to these questions can be found in the Book of Mormon. Those answers constitute an important message, admonition, and warning for a latter-day covenant people.

WHO ARE THE GENTILES?

The definition of a Gentile has varied through time and among people. To the early Old Testament authors, a Gentile (from the Hebrew *goyim*, literally meaning “the nations”) apparently was anyone who was not a descendant of Jacob or Israel (see Genesis 10:5). This simple definition became less useful with the scattering of Israel. We know that around 721 B.C. the Israelites living in the northern kingdom of Israel were conquered and carried away by the Assyrians, never to be heard from again in the biblical text (see 2 Kings 17:6–23). Today we refer to them as the “lost tribes.” Nephi tells us what became of them: “It appears that the house of Israel, sooner or later, will be scattered upon all the face of the earth, and also among all nations. And behold, there are many who are already lost from the knowledge of those who are at Jerusalem. Yea, the more part of all the tribes have been led away; and they are scattered to and fro upon the isles of the sea” (1 Nephi 22:3–4).¹

After Assyria carried away the northern Israelites, those living in the southern kingdom of Judah, who were not carried away, eventually came to be known simply as “the Jews,” either because they literally descended from the tribe of Judah, or because they lived in the geographical area of the political kingdom of Judah. Thus, one who was not a literal descendant of Judah could still be considered a “Jew” for geographical or political reasons. For example, Lehi and his family sometimes identified themselves as those who “came” from the Jews, and as “descendants of the Jews” (2 Nephi 30:4; see also 33:8), although they knew that genealogically they were descendants of Joseph rather than Judah (see 1 Nephi 5:14). Since the other Israelites were carried away and lost,

The Book of Mormon's Message to the Gentiles

41

it seemed to the “Jews” that remained that they were the only certain or identifiable remnant of the house of Israel. Consequently, for them the paradigm for classifying people shifted from the dichotomy of “Israelite or Gentile” to that of simply “Jew or Gentile.” Moreover, the distinction was no longer a purely genealogical one, but rather a political or geographical one as well. Anyone who could not claim to be a Jew by tracing his or her lineage back to the tribe, the land or the kingdom of Judah, could be viewed as a Gentile.

The Book of Mormon authors typically viewed the world from a Jewish or Gentile perspective. For example, the title page, written by Mormon, declares that one purpose of the book is to convince “the Jew and the Gentile that JESUS is the CHRIST” (see also 1 Nephi 13:42; 2 Nephi 10:16; 26:12, 33; 27:1; 30:3). The use of the simple Jew or Gentile distinction by the Book of Mormon authors naturally led them to refer to many latter-day individuals and peoples as Gentiles simply because they will not have ancestors from the land or kingdom of Judah, even though they may, in fact, be blood descendants of one of the tribes of Israel. For example, while Joseph Smith would be considered a Gentile under the Book of Mormon’s Jew or Gentile paradigm, modern revelation confirms that he had truly descended from the “loins” of Abraham through Joseph (D&C 132:30; see also D&C 113:3–6; 2 Nephi 3:7). Likewise, others who could be deemed Gentiles by the narrow Jew or Gentile designation have been assured by the Lord that they are indeed the “seed of Abraham” (D&C 103:17) and “lawful heirs, according to the flesh” to the “priesthood” that “hath continued through the lineage” of their fathers (D&C 86:8–9). Latter-day Saints understand that most members of the Church are in reality literal blood descendants of the covenant lineage of Israel, even though they “are identified with the Gentiles” (D&C 109:60) in the latter days and in the Book of Mormon. As Elder Bruce R. McConkie explained, from the Book of Mormon’s Jew or Gentile perspective, “Joseph Smith, of the tribe of Ephraim, the chief and foremost tribe of Israel itself, was the Gentile by whose hand the Book of Mormon came forth, and the members of The Church of

Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, who have the gospel and who are of Israel by blood descent, are the Gentiles who carry salvation to the Lamanites and the Jews.”² Accordingly, Latter-day Saints should find the Book of Mormon’s message to the Gentiles especially significant.

HOW DO THE GENTILES FIT INTO GOD’S PLANS?

The teachings of the Book of Mormon prophets concerning the future of the Gentiles, especially just before and subsequent to the restoration of the gospel, reveal the vital role they are to play in God’s plan to redeem His children.

The Pre-Restoration Gentiles. The Book of Mormon adds great clarity to our understanding of the founding and apostasy of the early Christian church among the Gentiles prior to the restoration of the gospel. Unlike the early disciples of Christ in Old World Palestine who struggled to understand if and how the Gentiles were to be accepted into the Church, the Book of Mormon prophets knew the gospel was for all nations.³ As Lehi spoke of the things he saw in vision, he stated that after being slain, the Messiah “should rise from the dead, and should make himself manifest, by the Holy Ghost, unto the Gentiles” (1 Nephi 10:11). In a similar vision, Nephi added that the Gentiles would receive the gospel through the writings of the Jews. The angel said, “Thou hast beheld that the book proceeded forth from the mouth of a Jew. . . . Wherefore, these things go forth from the Jews in purity unto the Gentiles” (1 Nephi 13:24–25). With this knowledge, Lehi and Nephi apparently understood more about how the gospel was to be taken to the Gentiles than the early Apostles. While on the American continent, the Savior said as much: “And they [His disciples in Jerusalem] understood me not . . . that the Gentiles should be converted through their preaching. . . . They understood me not that the Gentiles should not at any time hear my voice—that I should not manifest myself unto them save it were by the Holy Ghost” (3 Nephi 15:22–23).

The Book of Mormon prophets also understood that after the

The Book of Mormon's Message to the Gentiles

43

Gentiles received the gospel by the preaching and writings of the Jews and the ministration of the Holy Ghost, a “great and abominable church” would be founded among them. This church would slay the “saints of God,” torture them, and bind them down into captivity in its quest for power, praise, and wealth (1 Nephi 13:6, 9). Moreover, as the angel explained to Nephi, this church founded by the devil would seek to hide and pervert the true word of God:

“And after they [the words of the book or the precursor to our Bible⁴] go forth by the hand of the twelve apostles of the Lamb . . . thou seest the formation of that great and abominable church, . . . for behold, they have taken away from the gospel of the Lamb many parts which are plain and most precious; and also many covenants of the Lord have they taken away. . . .

“Wherefore, thou seest that after the book hath gone forth through the hands of the great and abominable church, that there are many plain and precious things taken away from the book. . . .

“ . . . Because of these things which are taken away out of the gospel of the Lamb, an exceedingly great many do stumble, yea, insomuch that Satan hath great power over them” (1 Nephi 13:26, 28–29; see also 1 Nephi 14:13–14).

Nephi knew that not only would the words of Christ's Apostles be corrupted by this great and abominable church, but also they would be taught to ignore the Holy Ghost. “They put down the power and miracles of God, and preach up unto themselves their own wisdom and their own learning” (2 Nephi 26:20).

Nephi saw in his vision how some Gentiles, anxious to escape the oppression fostered by the great and abominable church, would eventually escape and find religious freedom in the American promised land. He first described the journey of a man we identify as Christopher Columbus: “And I looked and beheld a man among the Gentiles, . . . and I beheld the Spirit of God, that it came down and wrought upon the man; and he went forth upon the many waters, even unto the seed of my brethren, who were in the promised land” (1 Nephi 13:12).⁵ Then Nephi foretold of the groups that followed: “I beheld the Spirit of God, that it wrought upon other Gentiles; and they went forth out of captivity” (1 Nephi 13:13).

Nephi saw that these Gentiles, after physically escaping, would “humble themselves before the Lord; and the power of the Lord was with them” (1 Nephi 13:16). That power would enable them to gain victory in the Revolutionary War. Nephi foresaw that “their mother Gentiles were gathered together upon the waters, and upon the land also, to battle against them. And I beheld that the power of God was with them [the Gentiles in America]. . . . The Gentiles that had gone out of captivity were delivered by the power of God out of the hands of all other nations” (1 Nephi 13:17–19).⁶

As these Gentiles established themselves in the promised land, the Book of Mormon prophets knew that they would smite and scatter the descendants of Lehi, just as the Gentiles had earlier scattered others of the house of Israel (see 1 Nephi 10:14; 13:14, 34; 22:7–8; 2 Nephi 26:15, 19; 3 Nephi 16:8–9; 20:27–28; Mormon 5:9, 15, 20). This scattering, they knew, was an antecedent to the Lord’s plan to restore the gospel upon the earth.

The Gentiles in the Restoration. Nephi prophesied, “The time cometh that after all the house of Israel have been scattered and confounded, that the Lord God will raise up a mighty nation among the Gentiles, yea, even upon the face of this land; and by them shall our seed be scattered. And after our seed is scattered the Lord God will proceed to do a marvelous work among the Gentiles, which shall be of great worth unto our seed; wherefore, it is likened unto their being nourished by the Gentiles and being carried in their arms and upon their shoulders” (1 Nephi 22:7–8; see also 1 Nephi 21:22–23; 13:34; 2 Nephi 6:6; 21:10–16; 26:12–14; Mormon 5:20).⁷

Latter-day Saints understand that the establishment of God’s Church on the earth is a major part of this “marvelous work” the Lord would do in the latter days. The Book of Mormon teaches that, in fulfillment of prophecy, the Gentiles would be the first to receive the gospel in the last days: “And after he [Christ] has manifested himself unto the Jews and also unto the Gentiles [i.e. the ancient church], then he shall manifest himself unto the Gentiles and also unto the Jews [in the last days], and the last shall be first, and the first shall be last” (1 Nephi 13:42; see also 1 Nephi 10:11; 15:17; 21:6; 2 Nephi 21:10–12; Jacob 5).⁸

Nephite prophets delighted to know that their record, the Book of Mormon, would play a vital role in the Lord's work among the Gentiles to restore the gospel and the plain and precious truths fundamental to His plan to redeem His children. Nephi explained that the words his people would write would be delivered to one of the Gentiles (Joseph Smith) and that through him the Lord would bring forth the Book of Mormon to the world (see 2 Nephi 27:6–21). Nephi testified that this record would be of great worth, in that it would “establish the truth of the first [the Bible], which are of the twelve apostles of the Lamb, and shall make known the plain and precious things which have been taken away from them” (1 Nephi 13:40). He foresaw that the Book of Mormon would have a profound effect on the people of the earth. It would separate the repentant from the proud. Some would receive it and repent, while others would respond with scorn. To those who accepted it and helped to bring forth the Church of the Lamb, the angel of Nephi's vision promised: “They shall have the gift and the power of the Holy Ghost; and if they endure unto the end they shall be lifted up at the last day, and shall be saved in the everlasting kingdom of the Lamb” (1 Nephi 13:37; see also 2 Nephi 29:3–14).

In addition to the Bible and the Book of Mormon, the Gentiles would be the means of bringing forth other books of scripture to the descendants of Lehi and scattered Israel (see 1 Nephi 13:39–40).⁹ Latter-day Saints typically understand these other records to include the scriptures of the Restoration, such as the Doctrine and Covenants, the Pearl of Great Price, and perhaps other records of the lost tribes of Israel. Nephi explained that eventually “it shall come to pass that the Jews shall have the words of the Nephites, and the Nephites shall have the words of the Jews; and the Nephites and the Jews shall have the words of the lost tribes of Israel; and the lost tribes of Israel shall have the words of the Nephites and the Jews, . . . and my [God's] word also shall be gathered in one” (2 Nephi 29:13–14).

Perhaps the Book of Mormon prophets found their greatest hope for the future in their understanding that this glorious restitution and reunion of scripture would facilitate the restoration of “the

fulness the gospel of the Messiah” that would surely “come unto the Gentiles” (1 Nephi 15:13), who then would take it to the remnant of the descendants of Lehi and the rest of scattered Israel. We can feel the depth of Nephi’s righteous anticipation as he foresaw that the restored gospel would come “from the Gentiles unto the remnant of our seed—and at that day shall the remnant of our seed know that they are of the house of Israel, . . . that they may know how to come unto him [their Redeemer] and be saved” (1 Nephi 15:13–14). That hope for the redemption of Israel and the vital role of the Gentiles in its accomplishment is expressed over and over by Book of Mormon prophets (see 1 Nephi 13:38–42; 15:13–17; 21:22–23; 22:8–12; 2 Nephi 6:6–7; 10:8–9, 18; 30:3–7, 18; 3 Nephi 16:4–5; 16:10–11; 21:1–7, 22–26; 26:8; Mormon 5:10; 7:8; Ether 12:22).

The Book of Mormon further testifies that as the faithful Gentiles fulfill their divine stewardship to take the restored gospel to the world, they will ultimately be recognized as part of the covenant family and be numbered among the house of Israel (1 Nephi 14:1–3; 2 Nephi 10:18; 30:2; 3 Nephi 16:13; 21:1–7, 22–25; 28:27, 32; 30:1–2).¹⁰ The Book of Mormon prophets saw this latter-day gathering, restoring, and redeeming of the faithful as a fulfillment of the covenant God made with Abraham, saying, “In thy seed shall all the kindreds of the earth be blessed” (1 Nephi 22:9, see also 2 Nephi 21:10–16; 30:8; 3 Nephi 20:27–46; 21:1–7, 26, 28–29; 29:1; Mormon 5:20).

WHY DID THE BOOK OF MORMON PROPHETS SPEAK TO THE GENTILES?

Notably, the prophets Nephi and Jacob, who began the Book of Mormon record, and Mormon and Moroni, who ended it, spoke the most frequently to the Gentiles.¹¹ Perhaps because they were so recently separated from their brethren, and knowing that their descendants’ eventual restoration to Israel was so dependent on the Gentiles, Nephi and Jacob were moved to exhort the latter-day Gentiles to fulfill their part in God’s plan. As he closed his record,

Nephi spoke of the “charity” he felt for the Gentiles, but also of his great concern for them, “for none of these [the Gentiles] can I hope except they shall be reconciled unto Christ” (2 Nephi 33:9). His record warns the Gentiles that their response to the marvelous work of the restored gospel would have everlasting consequences leading them to either peace and life eternal for acceptance, or blindness and captivity for rejection (1 Nephi 14:7; see also 1 Nephi 14:5–6; 2 Nephi 28:32; 30:2). Echoing that admonition, Jacob declared, “Blessed are the Gentiles, they of whom the prophet has written; for behold, if it so be that they shall repent and fight not against Zion . . . they shall be saved” (2 Nephi 6:12). Hope and concern permeate their admonitions to the Gentiles.

Likewise, having just witnessed the spiritual and physical demise of their people, the last Book of Mormon prophets, Mormon and Moroni, pled with the Gentiles to fulfill their vital role in restoring latter-day Israel. There is a startling sense of anxiety and warning in their words. After abridging 3 Nephi, Mormon exhorted:

“Hearken, O ye Gentiles, and hear the words of Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God, which he hath commanded me that I should speak concerning you, for, behold he commandeth me that I should write, saying:

“Turn, all ye Gentiles, from your wicked ways; and repent of your evil doings, of your lyings and deceivings, and of your whoredoms, and of your secret abominations, and your idolatries, and of your murders, and your priestcrafts, and your envyings, and your strifes, and from all your wickedness and abominations, and come unto me, and be baptized in my name, that ye may receive a remission of your sins, and be filled with the Holy Ghost, that ye may be numbered with my people who are of the house of Israel” (3 Nephi 30:1–2).

Later, in some of his last words, Mormon warned the latter-day Gentiles that if they persisted in apostasy, then “a remnant of the seed of Jacob” would rise up against them (Mormon 5:24). As he spoke to descendants of Lehi, the resurrected Savior issued a similar warning to the Gentiles: “If the Gentiles do not repent after the blessing which they shall receive, . . . then shall ye, who are a remnant of the house of

Jacob, go forth among them, . . . and ye shall be among them as a . . . young lion among the flocks of sheep, who, if he goeth through both treadeth down and teareth in pieces” (3 Nephi 20:15–16; see also Micah 5:8–9; 3 Nephi 16:9–12; 16:14–16; 21:11–21).¹² As he abridged the record of Ether, Moroni also regularly interjected a plea and warning to the Gentiles into the text. “And this cometh unto you, O ye Gentiles, that ye may know the decrees of God—that ye may repent, and not continue in your iniquities until the fulness come, that ye may not bring down the fulness of the wrath of God upon you as the inhabitants of the land have hitherto done” (Ether 2:11; see also 8:23–26; 12:23–38). Certainly these prophets’ admonitions constitute one of the most important messages of the Book of Mormon to the latter-day covenant people.

CONCLUSION

The Book of Mormon’s message to and about the Gentiles is clear and poignant. The Gentiles would receive the gospel of Jesus Christ beginning in the meridian of time through the ministration of the Holy Ghost and the preaching and writing of the Jews. Later, apostasy would sweep through the Gentile churches, resulting in the formation of the oppressive and predatory great and abominable church. Some Gentiles would then flee to the American promised land, where they would scatter the descendants of Lehi, prosper, and build a great nation blessed by the hand of the Lord. The Lord would then begin to fulfill His covenant to redeem His children by restoring the fullness of the gospel among these Gentiles. The Book of Mormon, the Bible, and the scriptures of the Restoration would play a vital role in that restoration. As the gospel is restored, the Gentiles who accept the gospel will then take it to scattered Israel, restoring them to the covenants. Subsequently, these Gentiles will be recognized as part of the covenant family, be numbered among the house of Israel, and enjoy the fullness of the blessings God extends to His children. These Gentiles are warned that if they reject the blessings, responsibilities, and opportunities being offered them, they will face God’s wrath. Thus is the burden of the latter-day

covenant people called the Gentiles. As stewards of the gospel in the latter days, they are entitled to God's greatest blessings, or His condemnation, depending on what they do with their stewardship, "for of him unto whom much is given much is required" (D&C 82:3).

NOTES

1. First Nephi 21:1 suggests that the term "isles" was understood by Nephi to mean any place to which Israel had been scattered. Joseph Fielding Smith added to our understanding of what became of those tribes as he discussed the purposes for the scattering of Ephraim. Among other reasons, he declared, "It [the scattering of Ephraim] was for the purpose of blessing the people of other nations with the blood of Israel among whom Ephraim 'mixed' himself. The scattering of other Israelites answered the same purpose" (Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, comp. Bruce R. McConkie [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1956], 3:252). Apparently then, after being carried away from the Holy Land, all or at least part of the Ten Tribes dispersed themselves among the nations and were assimilated by or mixed with them.

2. Bruce R. McConkie, *The Millennial Messiah: The Second Coming of the Son of Man* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1982), 233; see also D&C 109:60; 1 Nephi 13:38–40; 15:13–14; 22:7–12.

3. For a discussion of the difficulties the early church leaders faced in integrating the Gentiles into the Church, see Terry B. Ball, "Isaiah and the Gentiles," in *Covenants, Prophecies, and Hymns of the Old Testament* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2001), 187–88.

4. Latter-day Saints understand that this book, which "proceeded forth from the mouth of a Jew" (1 Nephi 13:24), included a version of the text we now call the Bible.

5. President Ezra Taft Benson made it clear that this prophecy refers to Christopher Columbus (*The Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1998], 577).

6. President Ezra Taft Benson made it clear that this prophecy refers to the Revolutionary War (*Teachings*, 575–76).

7. In this context Nephi apparently understood that the "nourishing" which the Gentiles would perform for his descendants, and the rest of scattered Israel, would be of a spiritual nature, for the Gentiles would make known "unto all the house of Israel . . . the covenants of the Father of heaven unto Abraham" (1 Nephi 22:9; see also Isaiah 49:23).

8. The allegory of the olive tree in Jacob 5 well teaches the Gentile's place in God's plans. For a good discussion of the allegory, see Paul Y. Hoskisson, "The

Allegory of the Olive Tree,” in *The Allegory of the Olive Tree*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1994), 70–104.

9. We interpret Nephi’s reference to “other books” in 1 Nephi 13:39 to include but not be limited to the Book of Mormon.

10. For a more detailed discussion of this topic, see Ball, “Isaiah and the Gentiles,” 187–90.

11. Most of the discourse to and about the Gentiles is found in 1 Nephi through Jacob and Mormon through Moroni. Very little is said to or about them in the middle books of the record, with the exception of the Savior’s discourse concerning them in 3 Nephi 16–28.

12. Elder Bruce R. McConkie understands the “remnant of Jacob” referred to in this passage to be the righteous, and the metaphor of a lion tearing to pieces has reference to the destruction of the wicked at the Second Coming (*Millennial Messiah*, 248).