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## Nephi's "Great and Abominable Church"

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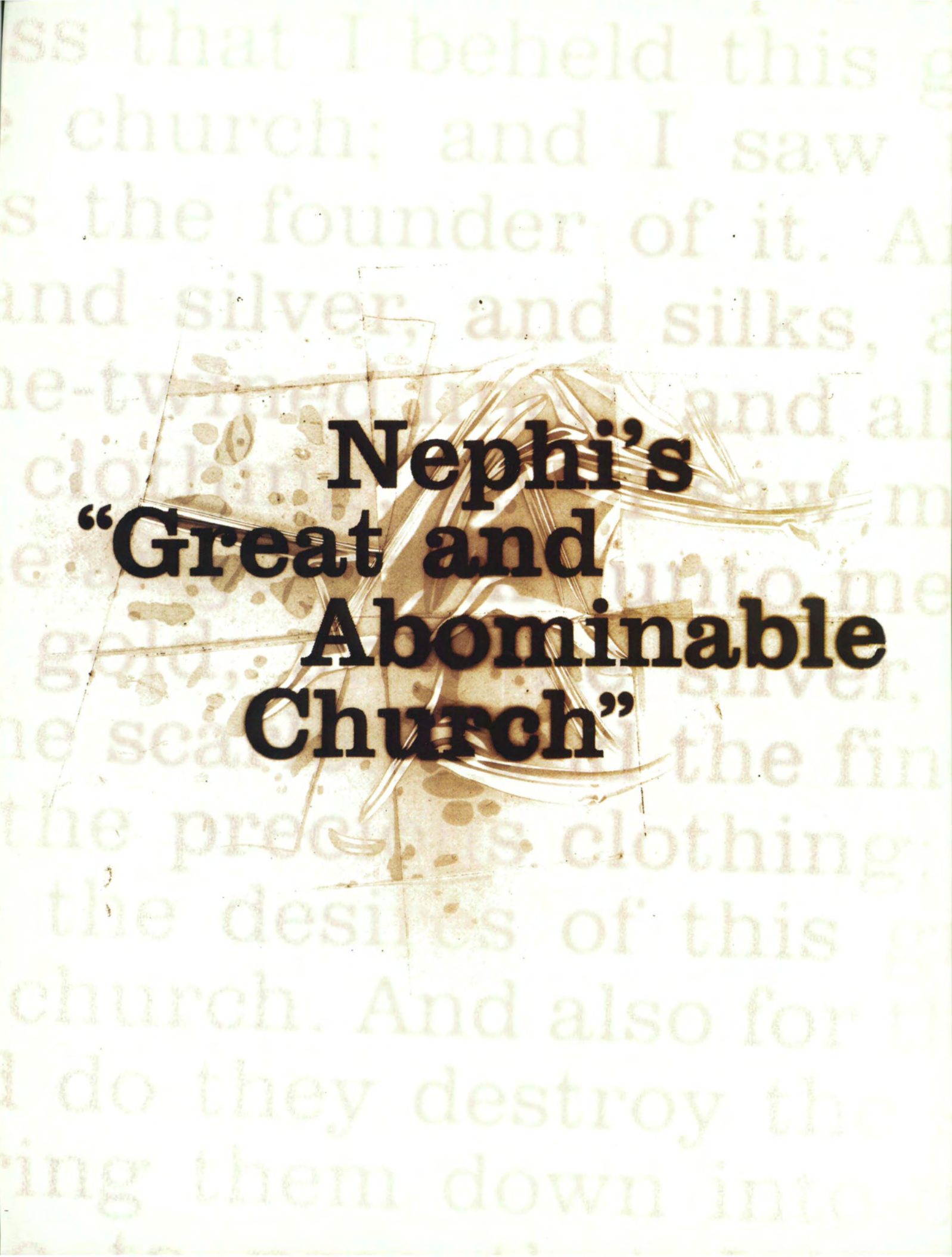
**Title** Nephi's "Great and Abominable Church"

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**Abstract** In 1 Nephi 13-14, Nephi describes major characteristics of the great and abominable church: it persecutes and slays the Saints of God; it seeks wealth and luxury; it is characterized by sexual immortality; it has excised plain and precious things from the scriptures; it has dominion over all the earth; and its fate is destruction by a world war. Nephi's vision, known as an apocalyptic vision in biblical literature, corresponds well to features of Babylon as described in the apocalyptic Revelation of John (Revelation 17). Clearly, the earliest apostate church and the great and abominable church are the same. A suggested description for this phenomenon, avoiding a denominational name, is hellenized Christianity.



**Nephi's  
"Great and  
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*In 1 Nephi 13–14, the prophet Nephi relates a vision in which he saw the future of the world and its kingdoms as it related to his posterity. Nephi’s vision is the type of revelation known in biblical literature as apocalyptic, a type represented in the New Testament most fully by the Revelation of John.*

The two revelations have more in common, though, than apocalyptic form, for they both deal in part with an often misunderstood concept: the great and abominable church of the devil. The visions together give us prophetic information about the matter.

Before proceeding further, however, we must define some of the terms that bear upon the two visions. The Greek word *apostasia* (apostasy, falling away) means “rebellion or revolution.” It conveys the sense of an internal takeover by factions hostile to the intentions of the previous leaders. I personally prefer the translation “mutiny,” as it suggests that unauthorized members commandeer a ship and take it where the ship is not supposed to go. Since early Christians often thought of the church as a ship, I think *mutiny* conveys the sense of what Paul and others meant by the term *apostasia* (see 2 Thessalonians 2:3).

The word *great* in the phrase *great and abominable church* is an adjective of size rather than of quality and, like the Hebrew *gadol* or the Greek *me-gas*, informs us of the great size of the abominable entity. Secondary meanings might refer to great wealth or power.

The term *abominable* is used in the Old Testament to describe what God hates, what cannot fail to arouse his wrath. In Daniel, the abomination of desolation is that thing so hateful to God that its presence in the temple causes the divine presence to depart, leaving the sanctuary desolate. In the Old Testament, the terms translated into English as abominable or abomination (Hebrew roots *shiqqutz*, *ta’ab*, *piggul*; Greek Septuagint and New Testament *bdelugma*) are usually associated with idolatrous worship or gross sexual immorality.

The word *church* (Hebrew *qahal* or *edah*; Greek *ekklesia*) had a slightly broader meaning anciently than it does now. It

referred to an assembly, congregation, or association of people who bonded together and shared the same loyalties. Thus the term was not necessarily restricted to religious associations; in fact, in Athens the Greeks used the term to denote the legislative assembly of government.

Originally, the term *ekklesia*, formed from two words meaning *call* and *out*, referred to those citizens whom heralds called out or summoned to public meetings. Thus, it was an ideal word to represent the body of individuals whom God “calls out” of the world through the Holy Ghost. The civil dimension of the word appears in Acts 19:32, where *assembly* in the King James Version is a translation of the Greek *ekklesia*. We must, however, remember that we don’t know the original word on the gold plates that Joseph Smith translated as *church*. Whatever it was, the Prophet chose to translate it as *church* instead of as *assembly*.

When we put all this together, we find that the term *great and abominable church* means an immense assembly or association of people bound together by their loyalty to that which God hates. Most likely, this “church” is involved specifically in sexual immorality, idolatry (that is, false worship), or both. While the book of Revelation does not use the exact phrase *great and abominable church*, both John and Nephi use a number of similar phrases to describe it. They call it the “Mother of Harlots, and Abominations,” “mother of abominations,” and “the whore that sitteth upon many waters.” (Revelation 17:1, 5; 1 Nephi 14:10–11).

The major characteristics of the great and abominable church described in 1 Nephi may be listed as follows:

1. It persecutes, tortures, and slays the Saints of God (see 1 Nephi 13:5).
2. It seeks wealth and luxury (see 1 Nephi 13:7–8).



3. It is characterized by sexual immorality (see 1 Nephi 13:7).
4. It has excised plain and precious things from the scriptures (see 1 Nephi 13:26–29).
5. It has dominion over all the earth, among all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people (see 1 Nephi 14:11).
6. Its fate is to be consumed by a world war, when the nations it incites against the Saints war among themselves until the great and abominable church itself is destroyed (see 1 Nephi 22:13–14).

Another symbol used in the book of Revelation to represent the great and abominable church, as well as worldliness and wickedness in general, is Babylon. Five of the six characteristics identified in 1 Nephi are also attributed to Babylon in the book of Revelation:

1. Babylon is drunk with the blood of the Saints, the martyrs of Jesus, and the prophets (see Revelation 17:6; 18:24).
2. She is known for her enjoyment of great wealth and luxury (see Revelation 17:4; 18:3, 11–16).
3. She is characterized by wanton sexual immorality (see Revelation 17:1–2, 5).
4. She has dominion over all nations (see Revelation 17:15, 18; 18:3, 23–24).
5. Her fate is to be consumed by the very kings who, because of her deceptions, have made war on the Lamb (see Revelation 17:14–16; 18:23).

The one characteristic not common to both prophetic descriptions is Nephi's statement that the great and abominable church has held back important parts of the canon of scripture. This omission in Revelation is not surprising since John's record is one of the scriptures Nephi says was tampered with (see 1 Nephi 14:23–24).

In noting the characteristics of Babylon, we should be careful to distinguish between her and the beast in Revelation 17—they do not represent the same things, though the beast supports the great and abominable church (see Revelation 17:3, 7). The beast, for instance, is entirely missing in Nephi's description of the great and abominable church.

Babylon, the “woman . . . arrayed in purple and scarlet” described in Revelation 17–18, is specifically the Satanic counterpart of the virtuous woman in chapter 12 who symbolizes the Church of Jesus Christ that was forced into the wilderness (see JST Revelation 12:6)—that is, became inaccessible to human beings. Symbolizing the counterfeit church as an immoral woman underscores the nature of her evil: she is physically and spiritually unfaithful, representing both sexual immorality and idolatry, the twin abominations of the Old Testament. Thus she is the “mother of abominations.”

It appears in Revelation that while the symbol of the unvirtuous woman represents false religion, the beasts, the image of the beast, and its horns represent other aspects of the devil's kingdom. The “Mother of Harlots” cannot represent

kingdoms or governments—the beast and its horns do that (see Revelation 17:12; also JST Revelation 13:1)—but she can represent the false beliefs and ideologies that often capture and motivate governments. The same evil genius, Satan the old dragon, is behind both, but the beast and the harlot symbolize separate entities with separate functions in the evil empire.

When the civil governments (the kings of the earth) commit fornication with the false religion—that is, when church and state are joined together—then the wine of their fornication makes all the world drunk, and her sins and plagues reach unto heaven (see Revelation 17:2; 18:3–5). The immorality and idolatry of the great and abominable church, together with the power of the civil states, dominate the economy and the lifestyles of all nations and destroy the spiritual equilibrium and discernment of human beings.

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In this context, we need to remember the uses to which Satan puts secret combinations. The Book of Mormon makes it clear that secret combinations have existed from the beginning of time among all nations. These secret organizations are closely allied with Babylon in seeking power and wealth and in killing the Saints of God. Moroni lamented that secret combinations destroyed both the Jaredites and his own people and warned that a similar fate awaits any nation that allows these combinations to prosper (see Ether 8).

Perhaps the greatest difficulty in understanding Nephi's description of the great and abominable church is what seems to be a contradiction between chapter 13 and chapter 14. In 1 Nephi 13 the great and abominable church is one specific church among many. Nephi's description of it as



“most abominable above all other churches” (1 Nephi 13:5, 26) does not make sense otherwise. Moreover, the great and abominable church in chapter 13 has a specific historical description: it was formed among the Gentiles after the Jews transmitted the Bible in its purity to the Gentiles. (see 1 Nephi 13:26). It is also the specific historical agent responsible for excising plain and precious truths from the scriptural record.

To this we must add the information given in Doctrine and Covenants 86:1–3, which states that the great and abominable church did its work after the apostles had “fallen asleep”—that is, after the end of the first century A.D. In Revelation, the role of the whore also has a historical frame. She comes into the picture after the appearance of the beast, which she rides and which supports her, and she is eliminated from the scene while it yet continues (see Revelation 13:1; 17:3, 7, 16). Clearly, “great and abominable” here refers to one specific church among many others that are not “great and abominable.”

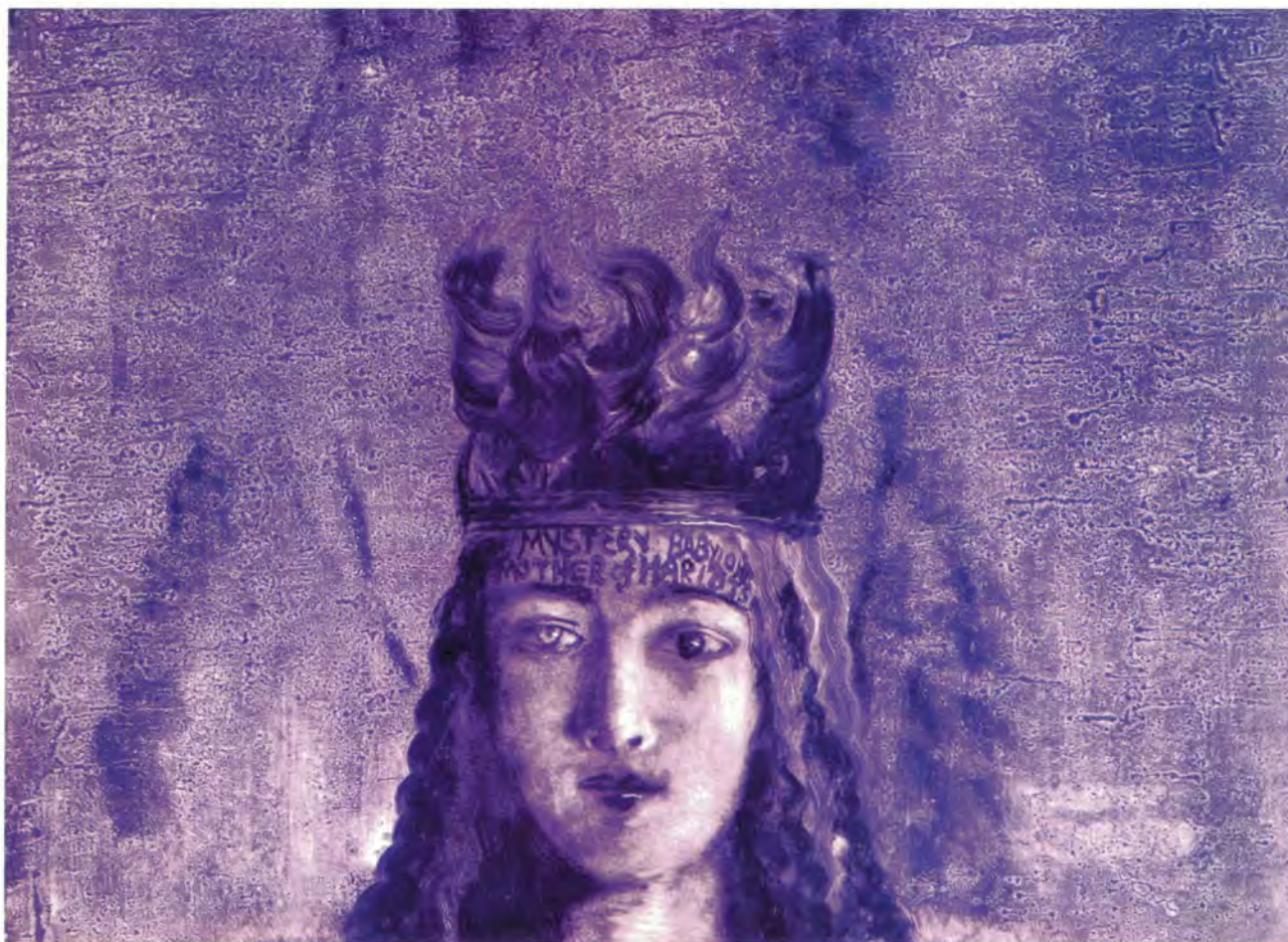
The apparent contradiction comes in 1 Nephi 14:10, in which we are told that the devil’s church consists of all those organizations not associated with the Church of Jesus Christ: “Behold there are save two churches only; the

one is the church of the Lamb of God, and the other is the church of the devil.”

How can this be? How can the devil’s church or churches be one and many at the same time? The apparent contradiction actually gives us the solution to the larger puzzle and ultimately our identification of the great and abominable church. The answer is that the term is used in two different ways in 1 Nephi 13–14. In chapter 13 it is used historically, and in chapter 14 it is used typologically.

In apocalyptic literature—remember that both Revelation and 1 Nephi 13–14 are apocalyptic in nature—the seer is caught up in vision and sees things from God’s perspective. Time ceases to be an important element; this is one reason the chronology in Revelation at times seems to be scrambled: with God there is no time as we reckon it (see Alma 40:8).

Apocalyptic visions are highly symbolic, usually requiring an angelic interpreter for the seer to understand what he sees. The symbols are inclusive—that is, they stand for categories into which all specific instances of something can be placed. This is why the great and abominable church can be called Ninevah (some of John’s language comes from the description of Ninevah in Nahum 3), or Babylon, Sodom, Egypt, Jerusalem, or Rome. The names change, but the character—





“that great city, which reigneth over the kings of the earth” (Revelation 17:18)—remains the same in every dispensation.

In this sense the church of the devil is equivalent to that great and spacious building seen in vision by both Nephi and his father (see 1 Nephi 8:26–28, 31, 33–34; 11:35–36). The apocalyptic description of the great and spacious building matches the characteristics of the church of the devil; the artificial structure without foundation represents the carnal

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world, and its values and lifestyle include mockery of the kingdom of God. It fights against the apostles of Jesus Christ, and its fall will be great, for “thus shall be the destruction of all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people, that shall fight against the twelve apostles of the Lamb” (1 Nephi 11:36).

To illustrate further, let us take the name of the great and abominable church: Babylon. A quick, literal reading of Revelation might lead us to believe that some particular city is being described, and we would want to know which city Babylon represented. However, if we read more carefully, we see that Babylon is not one city but many, all of which fall into the larger category of “that great city.”

Babylon is the antithesis of the city of God, the heavenly Jerusalem or Zion. Just as Zion is wherever the pure in heart dwell (see D&C 97:21), so Babylon is wherever the wicked live. Latter-day Saints don’t seem to have any trouble understanding that Zion is a spiritual category that may in different contexts mean Salt Lake City or a branch in some outlying area of the world or Far West or Jerusalem or the city of Enoch or the New Jerusalem. Why, then, is it difficult to understand Zion’s opposite, Babylon, in the same way?

This variable identity is what Jacob teaches us in 2 Nephi 10:16: “He that fighteth against Zion, both Jew and Gentile, both bond and free, both male and female, shall perish; *for*

*they are they who are the whore of all the earth; for they who are not for me are against me, saith our God.”*

In this context, then, anyone who fights against Zion can be put into the category of Babylon. In apocalyptic literature the cast of characters is constant. There is only one script and one plot from the foundation of the world until its end, and the roles and lines of the drama are always the same from dispensation to dispensation, even though the individuals and institutions who act out the roles and speak the lines change with time.

The important thing to know is what the patterns, the identifying characteristics, of the typological categories are. Then we can orient ourselves in any time or place and know who functions as Babylon and Zion. That, of course, also works for our present day.

Once we understand that the term *great and abominable church* has two uses, the one open (inclusive and archetypal), the other closed (exclusive and historical), the rest becomes easier. In 1 Nephi both the angel and Nephi refer to the specific institution that played the role of Babylon in the Roman Empire in the second century A.D.: “Behold the formation of a church which is most abominable above all other churches,” which tortured and slew the Saints of God, reveled in gold and silks, and took away many parts from the gospel of Christ. (13:5; see also 13:8, 26).

In chapter 14, verse 10, however, Nephi describes the archetypal categories: “There are save two churches only”—the church of the Lamb of God, or Zion; and the church of the devil, or Babylon. “Whoso belongeth not to the church of the Lamb of God belongeth to that great church, which is the mother of abominations; and she is the whore of all the earth.”

Apocalyptic literature is dualistic. Since it deals with types, everything boils down to opposing principles: love and hate, good and evil, light and dark. There are no gray areas in apocalyptic writing. In this sense, there are only two categories in the realm of religion: religion that will save and religion that won’t. The former is the Church of the Lamb, and the latter, no matter how well intentioned, is a counterfeit.

In the historical sense, though, only one entity can be *the* great and abominable church. Well-intentioned churches would thus not qualify as the mother of abominations described in 1 Nephi 13. They do not slay the Saints of God nor seek to control civil governments nor pursue wealth, luxury, and sexual immorality.

In either the apocalyptic sense or the historical sense, individual orientation to the Church of the Lamb or to the great and abominable church is not by membership but by loyalty. Just as there are Latter-day Saints who belong to the great and abominable church because of their loyalty to Satan and his lifestyle, so there are members of other churches who belong to the Lamb because of their loyalty to him and his lifestyle.



Membership is based more on who has your heart than on who has your records.

Some Latter-day Saints have erred in believing that some specific denomination, to the exclusion of all others, has since the beginning of time been the great and abominable church. This is dangerous, for many will then want to know which it is, and an antagonistic relationship with that denomination will inevitably follow.

Some, for example, have argued that elements of Judaism in the first century were reflected traits of Babylon. After all, Jewish leaders persecuted the church and spilled the blood of the Saints. They crucified the Messiah and joined religion together with civil government. We should recognize, however, that it was this kind of argument—that the Jews were the beast, the antichrist—that led directly to the Holocaust in this century and that still fans the moral insanity of some present-day groups. Has Satan's hand ever been more clearly discernible in any human undertaking than in the Holocaust?

The irony is that while Jerusalem in A.D. 30 might have been one manifestation of Babylon (see Revelation 11:8), Judaism cannot be the great and abominable church Nephi and John describe. First, the Jews did not enjoy dominion over all the nations of the earth. Second, Nephi says that the scriptures were complete when they came forth from the mouth of a Jew, but that the great and abominable church, which had its formation among the Gentiles, excised them (see 1 Nephi 13:24–26). Third, it does not seem to be the fate of the Jews to be utterly consumed by the nations of the earth—quite the opposite, in fact.

More often, some have suggested that the Roman Catholic church might be the great and abominable church of Nephi 13. This is also untenable, primarily because Roman Catholicism as we know it did not yet exist when the crimes described by Nephi were being committed. In fact, the term *Roman Catholic* only makes sense after A.D. 1054 when it is used to distinguish the Western, Latin-speaking Orthodox Church that followed the bishop of Rome from the Eastern, Greek-speaking Orthodox Church that followed the bishop of Constantinople.

In the period between Peter and the Roman emperor Constantine, there were many Christian churches besides the Orthodox Church: Ebionites, Syrian and Egyptian churches, Donatists, Gnostics, Marcionites, and so on. Even if we use the term *Catholic* for the church Constantine made the state religion in A.D. 313, the New Testament as we know it was already widely circulating. That is, the plain and precious parts had already been removed. The notion of shifty-eyed medieval monks rewriting the scriptures is unfair and bigoted. We owe those monks a debt of gratitude that anything was saved at all.

By the time of Constantine, the apostles had been dead for centuries. Furthermore, the early Orthodox Church can

hardly be accused of immorality. It had, in fact, gone to the extremes of asceticism. In some areas of the world, Orthodoxy replaced an earlier, already corrupt form of Christianity. And during much of the period, members of the Orthodox Church were not in a position to persecute anyone, as they were being thrown to the lions themselves. The Catholic Church of the fourth century was the *result* of the apostasy—its end product, not the cause. To find the real culprits, we need to look at a much earlier period in church history than the fourth century after Christ. Satan had his ministers in the world long before then, and we must remember that Babylon was already there to oppose Zion in the days of Cain, Nimrod, Pharaoh, and Herod.

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Actually, no single known historical church, denomination, or set of believers meets all the requirements for the great and abominable church: it must have formed among the Gentiles; it must have edited and controlled the distribution of the scriptures; it must have slain the Saints of God, including the apostles and prophets; it must be in league with civil governments and use their police power to enforce its religious views; it must have dominion over all the earth; it must pursue great wealth and sexual immorality; and it must last until close to the end of the world. No single denomination or system of beliefs fits the entire description. Rather, the role of Babylon has been played by many different agencies, ideologies, and churches in many different times. It should be clear that the great and abominable church that Nephi described in chapter 13 is not the same historical entity that crucified the Savior or that martyred Joseph and Hyrum.

It would be an error to blame some modern denomination



for the activities of an ancient great and abominable church. The other error is to go too far the other way, dehistoricizing the abominable church altogether. The term then becomes merely a vague symbol for all the disassociated evil in the world. We cannot, in the face of the scriptural evidence, accept this view. For if we do, we will not be able to recognize the categories and know who is playing the role of Babylon in our own times or in times to come. Thus, we must, on the one hand, avoid the temptation to identify the role of the great and abominable church so completely with one particular entity that we do not recognize the part when it is played by some other entity. At the same time, we must remember that the role will be played by some entity or coalition, and we must be able to tell by their characteristic fruits which is Zion and which is Babylon.

Can we, then, identify the historical agency that acted as the great and abominable church in earliest Christianity? Such an agent would have had its origins in the second half of the first century and would have done much of its work by the middle of the second century.

This period might be called the blind spot in Christian history, for it is here that the fewest primary historical sources have been preserved. We have good sources for New Testament Christianity; then the lights go out, so to speak, and we hear the muffled sounds of a great struggle. When the lights come on again a hundred or so years later, we find that someone has rearranged all the furniture and Christianity has become something very different from what it was in the beginning. That different entity can accurately be described as hellenized Christianity.

The hellenization of Christianity is a phenomenon that scholars of Christian history have long recognized. Hellenization refers to the imposition of Greek culture and philosophy upon the cultures of the East. The result was a synthesis of East and West, a melting pot of popular culture that was virtually worldwide. In the realm of religion, however, synthesis means compromise, and when we speak in terms of the gospel, compromise with popular beliefs means apostasy from the truth.

When Jewish Christianity and Greek culture met head-on in the Gentile mission field in the middle of the first century, a great battle of beliefs and lifestyles arose. The Greeks' worldview eventually won, and Jewish Christianity was revised to make it more attractive and appealing to a Greek audience.

Primary prejudices of the Greek world were the absolute nature of God (i.e., he cannot be bound or limited by anything) and the impossibility of anything material or physical being eternal. In order to satisfy the Gentiles steeped in Greek philosophy, Christianity had to throw out the doctrines of an anthropomorphic God and the resurrection of the dead, or reinterpret them drastically. Denying or altering the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead is precisely what some Greek

Christians at Corinth had done, and Paul responded against them forcefully in 1 Corinthians 15.

Paul also linked the apostasy with Satan's work in setting up a false religion. In 2 Thessalonians he said, "That day shall not come, except there come a falling away [*apostasia*] first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition" (2 Thessalonians 2:3). That "man of sin" will sit in the temple of God, "shew" himself that he is God (2 Thessalonians 2:4). The "mystery of iniquity" (2 Thessalonians 2:7) was already under way as Paul wrote, and you will recall that one of the names of Babylon is "mystery" (Revelation 17:5).

The son of perdition, or the "man of sin" Paul speaks of, is Lucifer.<sup>1</sup> He is the counterfeit of the Man of Holiness. The temple in which he sits is the church, now desolate and devoid of the divine presence by the abomination of apostasy. The Joseph Smith Translation of 2 Thessalonians 2:7 adds, "Christ suffereth him to work, until the time is fulfilled that he shall be taken out of the way."

In Doctrine and Covenants 86:3, the Lord identifies the whore, Babylon, as the apostate church: "After they [the apostles] have fallen asleep the great persecutor of the church, the apostate, the whore, even Babylon, that maketh all nations to drink of her cup, in whose hearts the enemy, even Satan, sitteth to reign—behold he soweth the tares; wherefore, the tares choke the wheat and drive the church into the wilderness."

Clearly, whatever denominational name we choose to give it, the earliest apostate church and the great and abominable church that Nephi and John describe are identical. The fact is, we don't really know what name to give it. I have proposed hellenized Christianity, but that is a description rather than a name.

The historical abominable church of the devil is that apostate church that replaced true Christianity in the first and second centuries, teaching the philosophies of men mingled with scriptures. It dethroned God in the church and replaced him with man by denying the principle of revelation and turning instead to human intellect. As the product of human agency, its creeds were an abomination to the Lord, for they were idolatry: men worshipping the creations, not of their own hands, but of their own minds.

Babylon in the first and second centuries may even have been a collection of different movements. Some Jewish Christians couldn't let go of the law of Moses and eventually gave up Christ instead. The Orthodox Christians adopted Greek philosophy. The Gnostics wallowed in the mysteries and in unspeakable practices on the one hand or in neurotic asceticism on the other. Second-century compilers like Tatian and Marcion rewrote the scriptures, the latter boldly chopping out anything, he didn't like. And all of them together forced the virtuous woman, the true church of Jesus Christ, into the wilderness. □

[NOTES ON PAGE 70]



## ENDNOTES

the title "Warring against the Saints of God." It is republished here with the permission of the author and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, publisher of the *Ensign*.

1. See Bruce R. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1973), 3:62–64.

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