

The Gathering of Israel in the Book of Mormon: A Consistent Pattern

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The Book of Mormon is holy scripture. It is a key witness of the divine Sonship of Jesus Christ and a convincing testimony that salvation is to be found only through him. The Book of Mormon's primary message, that Jesus Christ came to earth to redeem mankind, is closely tied to the history of the house of Israel. One of the primary purposes of the Nephite record, according to its title page, is "to show unto the remnant of the House of Israel what great things the Lord hath done for their fathers; and that they may know the covenants of the Lord, that they are not cast off forever."

The ancient American scripture contains repeated promises about the gathering of Israel that together yield a complex picture of the role the twelve tribes are to play in the latter days. The picture of gathering that the record presents is entirely consistent within the book and between it and the Bible. This picture assures readers that God has a plan for his chosen people and that they have a crucial mission to perform. Moreover, the Nephite record tells us how Israel will be identified and unified.

What the Book of Mormon teaches about Israel includes such diverse topics as the physical and spiritual aspects of scattering and gathering, the relation of the natural or genetic Israelites and those who are adopted, the timetable and geography of the gathering, and the special situations of three groups—the Jews, the descendants of Lehi, and the lost ten tribes. Here I focus only on one topic, the relation between the physical and spiritual aspects of scattering and gathering.

Background: Jew and Gentile

The Book of Mormon assumes that its readers know about the origins of Israel; God's covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; and the promises of priesthood power and eternal life for the chosen seed. At no place in the Book of Mormon does a writer specifically define "the house of Israel," although everything said is consistent with their being the descendants of the patriarch Jacob. What we have, rather, are insightful comments and explanations about the scattering and gathering of Israel.

Book of Mormon writers often speak in a generalizing, black-and-white, clearly defined fashion. Thus there are said to be only two churches on earth—the church of the Lamb and the church of the devil (see 1 Nephi 14:10). The same generalizing viewpoint can be seen when we read in Alma 34:33-35 that individuals either receive and live up to gospel laws here or else they face at death a time of "darkness" when no action is possible. Latter-day revelation makes clear that, while this is broadly true, a number of important qualifications apply to that picture. We also are told that partial judgment at death divides all mortals into just two camps, called paradise and outer darkness (see Alma 40:12-14). Again, the details revealed in our day expand on that loose characterization of the afterlife.

This same uncomplicated manner of labeling is also used in referring to major classes of people in the prophetic view of history presented in the Book of Mormon. In particular, two major historical groups are of concern to Nephi—Jews and Gentiles. To him, Jews are those descended from the inhabitants of the kingdom of Judah at the time Lehi left Jerusalem, regardless of whether individuals might have had ancestors not of the tribe of Judah (see 2 Nephi 33:8). In terms of this very generalized definition, even one who happened to be descended from one of

the ten tribes but who lived around Jerusalem in 600 B.C. would be called a Jew (see 2 Nephi 25:6, 14-15 and 33:8). So in this framework, the Lehite colony—whether Nephite or “Mulekite”—is a subcategory of the Jews.

In these terms, it is perfectly appropriate for Nephi to speak of the reception of the Book of Mormon by the latter-day descendants of Lehi as follows: “Then shall the remnant of our seed know concerning us, how that we came out from Jerusalem, and that *they are descendants of the Jews*” (2 Nephi 30:4; italics added). Later Nephi explained: “I have charity for the Jew—I say Jew, because I mean them from whence I came” (2 Nephi 33:8; italics added; compare D&C 19:27).

Further, the Book of Mormon prophets spoke often of the latter-day restoration of the gospel among “the Gentiles” in the New World promised land and of the gospel message those Gentiles would take to the house of Israel in the latter days (see 1 Nephi 15:17; 22:7-8). In this sense, people may be Israelite by descent but Gentile by culture. Joseph Smith thus prayed as a part of the dedicatory services in the Kirtland Temple: “Now these words, O Lord, we have spoken before thee, concerning the revelations and commandments which thou hast given unto us, who are identified with the Gentiles” (D&C 109:60).

The Scattering of Israel

The Old Testament makes clear the causes for the scattering of Israel. Speaking on behalf of Jehovah, Moses warned ancient Israel that, if they rejected God, they would be scattered among the nations: “If thou wilt not hearken unto the voice of the Lord thy God, to observe to do all his commandments and his statutes which I command thee this day; . . . thou shalt . . . be removed into all the kingdoms of the earth” (Deuteronomy 28:15, 25). “The Lord shall scatter thee among all people, from the one end of the earth even unto the other; and there thou shalt serve other gods, which neither thou nor thy fathers have known” (v. 64).

The Lord spoke similar words through Jeremiah more than half a millennium later: “Because your fathers have forsaken me, saith the Lord, and have walked after other gods, and have served them, and have worshipped them, and have forsaken me, and have not kept my law; and ye have done worse than your fathers; . . . therefore will I cast you out of this land into a land that ye know not, . . . where I will not shew you favor” (Jeremiah 16:11-13). The cause of Israel’s scattering is plain: she had forsaken the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and no longer deserved his blessings.

The Book of Mormon presents the same message. In writing of the Jews, who here symbolize all the house of Israel (see 1 Nephi 15:17, 20; Mormon 5:14), Jacob taught that “after [the Lord] should manifest himself they should scourge him and crucify him. . . . And after they have hardened their hearts and stiffened their necks against the Holy One of Israel, behold, the judgments of the Holy One of Israel shall come upon them,” such that “they [will be] driven to and fro.” In short, they “shall be scattered, and smitten, and hated” (2 Nephi 6:9-11). Jacob later explained that, “because of priestcrafts and iniquities,” the Jews “will stiffen their necks against him [Christ], that he be crucified. . . . And they who shall not be destroyed shall be scattered among all nations” (2 Nephi 10:5-6). Of course the same result was prophesied for the Nephites. Nephi the son of Helaman predicted that, unless the Nephites repented of their wickedness, the God of Israel would, instead of gathering his people, scatter them (see Helaman 7:19).

The Gathering of Israel

The gathering of Israel is to result from the scattered remnants of Israel repenting and returning to the worship of the Lord Jehovah. Old Testament references to the gathering of Israel are numerous. They underline the essential

fact that a chosen people are a people who make appropriate choices. They must choose the God of their fathers and strictly obey his counsels and teachings if they are to be gathered and blessed (see, for example, Isaiah 43:1-7; Jeremiah 3:12-23; 16:11-21).

The Book of Mormon is even more specific in clarifying this principle of gathering: the people of Israel will be gathered again to the degree that they return to Christ and become formally associated with the Saints of God. That is, people are gathered first spiritually and second temporally, first to the Lord and his church and then to the lands of their inheritance or to the congregations of the Saints. Nephi wrote that “after the house of Israel should be scattered they should be gathered together again; or, in fine, after the Gentiles had received the fulness of the Gospel [i.e., after the restoration through Joseph Smith had taken place], the natural branches of the olive-tree, or the remnants of the house of Israel, should be grafted in, or come to the knowledge of the true Messiah” (1 Nephi 10:14). Nephi later explained to his rebellious brothers some of the words of their father concerning Israel’s destiny:

Now, the thing which our father meaneth concerning the grafting in of the natural branches through the fulness of the Gentiles, is, that in the latter days, when our seed shall have dwindled in unbelief, yea, for the space of many years, and many generations after the Messiah shall be manifested in body unto the children of men, then shall the fulness of the gospel of the Messiah come unto the Gentiles, and 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, and that they are the covenant people of the Lord; and then shall they know and come to the knowledge of their forefathers, and also to the knowledge of the gospel of their Redeemer, which was ministered unto their fathers by him; wherefore, they shall come to the knowledge of their Redeemer and the very points of his doctrine, that they may know how to come unto him and be saved (1 Nephi 15:13-14; compare 2 Nephi 30:5; Mormon 7:1-10).

Jacob reminded his people that the Lord God “has spoken unto the Jews, by the mouth of his holy prophets, even from the beginning down, from generation to generation, until the time comes that they [the Jews, or the house of Israel] shall be *restored to the true church and fold of God*; when they shall be gathered home to the lands of their inheritance, and shall be established in all their lands of promise” (2 Nephi 9:2; italics added).

The sequence of gathering—first to Christ and his Church and then to specific locations—is clear in Jacob’s words. Having taught that the people of Jerusalem who reject the Savior will be “scattered among all nations,” he added: “Thus saith the Lord God: When the day cometh that they shall believe in me, that I am Christ, then have I covenanted with their fathers that they shall be restored in the flesh, upon the earth, unto the lands of their inheritance” (2 Nephi 10:6-7). Among his American Israelites, the resurrected Lord spoke of the day when the gospel of Jesus Christ would be had among his people:

I will remember the covenant which I have made with my people; and I have covenanted with them that I would gather them together in mine own due time, that I would give unto them again the land of their fathers for their inheritance, which is the land of Jerusalem, which is the promised land unto them forever, saith the Father. And it shall come to pass that the time cometh, when the fulness of my gospel shall be preached unto them and they shall believe in me, that I am Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and shall pray unto the Father in my name. Then shall their watchmen lift up their voice, and with the voice together shall they sing; for they shall see eye to eye. Then will the Father gather them together again, and give unto them Jerusalem for the land of their inheritance (3 Nephi 20:29-33).

In short, the restoration of Israel is primarily their restoration to the knowledge of Christ (see Mormon 9:36). “It is not the *place* of gathering that will save the scattered remnants,” Elder Bruce R. McConkie has written, “but the *message* of salvation that comes to them in their Redeemer’s name. . . . Salvation is not in a *place* but in a *person*. It is in Christ.”¹

President Spencer W. Kimball likewise summarized this principle as follows: “Now, the gathering of Israel consists of joining the true church and their coming to a knowledge of the true God. . . . Any person, therefore, who has accepted the restored gospel, and who now seeks to worship the Lord in his own tongue and with the Saints in the nations where he lives, has complied with the law of the gathering of Israel and is heir to all of the blessings promised the saints in these last days.”²

Joseph Smith, the Book of Mormon, and the Gathering

The Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith play key roles in the gathering of Israel in the final dispensation. Not only does the Book of Mormon describe with exactness the process by which Israel was to be scattered then gathered, it also spells out the *means* by which that gathering is to take place. People are to become converted to the restored gospel and be gathered into the true church of God particularly through the Book of Mormon.

Some six hundred years before Christ, Nephi saw that in the future a powerful church would take many plain and precious truths from the Bible writings as Jewish writers originally recorded them. He also saw the work that Joseph Smith would set in motion and gloried in the fact that through the Book of Mormon, as well as “other books” of scripture, plain and precious truths and “many covenants” of the Lord would be restored (1 Nephi 13:20-40).

His father Lehi, drawing on the writings of Joseph of old as contained on the brass plates, prophesied about the coming of Joseph Smith, a “choice seer” who would do much to bring the scattered Israelites to a knowledge of the promises made to their ancestors. “Thus prophesied Joseph [in Egypt], saying: Behold, that seer will the Lord bless; and they that seek to destroy him shall be confounded; . . . and his name shall be called after me; and it shall be after the name of his father. And he shall be like unto me; for the thing, which the Lord shall bring forth by his hand [the Book of Mormon and the Restoration], by the power of the Lord shall bring my people unto salvation” (2 Nephi 3:7, 14-15).

In addition, while he was among the Nephites, the risen Lord spoke of the latter-day work of gathering and of the vital role of this leader, Joseph Smith.

For in that day, for my sake shall the Father work a work, which shall be a great and a marvelous work among them; and there shall be among them those who will not believe it, although a man shall declare it unto them. But behold, the life of my servant shall be in my hand; therefore they shall not hurt him, although he shall be marred because of them. Yet I will heal him, for I will show unto them that my wisdom is greater than the cunning of the devil. Therefore it shall come to pass that whosoever will not believe in my words, who am Jesus Christ, which the Father shall cause him [Joseph Smith] to bring forth unto the Gentiles, and shall give unto him power that he shall bring them forth unto the Gentiles, (it shall be done even as Moses said) they shall be cut off from among my people who are of the covenant (3 Nephi 21:9-11).

President Ezra Taft Benson has emphasized the obligations resting upon those who have been given the Nephite scripture: “The Book of Mormon is the instrument that God has designed to ‘sweep the earth as with a flood, to gather out His elect unto the New Jerusalem.’ (Moses 7:62.)”³ In fact, because of its central role in the work of gathering in the last days, the Nephite prophets spoke of the Book of Mormon as one of the signs of the times showing that gathering is underway.

Following his abridgment of the Savior’s teachings in America, Mormon advised his readers “that when the Lord shall see fit, in his wisdom, that these sayings [in the Book of Mormon] shall come unto the Gentiles according to his word, then ye may know that the covenant which the Father hath made with the children of Israel, concerning their restoration to the lands of their inheritance, is already beginning to be fulfilled” (3 Nephi 29:1; compare 21:1-7). His son Moroni added, after discussing the great vision of the Brother of Jared: “When ye shall receive this record ye may know that the work of the Father has commenced upon all the face of the land” (Ether 4:17).

Elder McConkie stated that “the process of gathering is one in which the scattered remnants of Jacob—those of all tribes—believe the Book of Mormon, accept the restored gospel, and come to the latter-day Zion. . . . This gathering will be one person here, and two there, and a few somewhere else—all by the power of a book, the stick of Joseph joined with the stick of Judah.”⁴ Almost four hundred years after Christ’s birth, the prophet-editor Mormon, knowing that his compilation would one day reach all peoples, spoke with fervor:

Therefore I write unto you, Gentiles, and also unto you, house of Israel, when the work shall commence, that ye shall be about to prepare to return to the land of your inheritance; yea, behold, I write unto all the ends of the earth; yea, unto you, twelve tribes of Israel. . . . These things doth the Spirit manifest unto me; therefore I write unto you all. And for this cause I write unto you, that . . . ye may believe the gospel of Jesus Christ, which ye shall have among you; and also that the Jews, the covenant people of the Lord, shall have other witness besides him whom they saw and heard, that Jesus, whom they slew, was the very Christ and the very God (Mormon 3:17-21).

The Millennium: The Final Work of Gathering

The Book of Mormon provides a consistent message regarding the final “work of the Father.” It tells us that part of the gathering of Israel will not take place until after the return of Christ and the beginning of the millennial era. Nephi, apparently quoting the prophet Zenos, told of the destruction of the wicked at the time of the Second Coming: “For behold, saith the prophet, the time cometh speedily that Satan shall have no more power over the hearts of the children of men; for the day soon cometh that all the proud and they who do wickedly shall be as stubble; and the day cometh that they must be burned” (1 Nephi 22:15). The righteous would be delivered through the destruction of the wicked by fire. Those who fought against Zion and the Saints would be destroyed, and Moses’ prophecy would be fulfilled that those who reject the Lord and his servants would be cut off from among the people of the covenant (see vv. 16-20).

Using language borrowed from Zenos, Nephi then described the millennial day and one phase of gathering: “The time cometh speedily that the righteous must be led up as calves of the stall, and the Holy One of Israel must reign in dominion, and might, and power, and great glory. And he gathereth his children from the four quarters of the earth; and he numbereth his sheep, and they know him; and there shall be one fold and one shepherd; and he shall feed his sheep, and in him they shall find pasture” (vv. 24-25).

Jesus himself explained about this phase of gathering:

Then shall they [the “Gentiles” of the Latter-day Church] assist my people [natural Israel] that they may be gathered in, who are scattered upon all the face of the land. . . . Then shall the power of heaven come down among them; and I also will be in the midst. And *then shall the work of the Father commence at that day*, even when this gospel shall be preached among the remnant of this people. Verily I say unto you, at that day shall the work of the Father commence among all the dispersed of my people, yea, even the tribes which have been lost, which the Father hath led away out of Jerusalem (3 Nephi 21:24-26; italics added).

Further, the Savior said: “Then shall the work commence, with the Father among all nations in preparing the way whereby his people may be gathered home to the land of their inheritance. And they shall go out from all nations” (3 Nephi 21:28-29).

Conclusion

How the scattered people of Israel will return to the God of their fathers and then return to their lands of inheritance is consistently presented within the pages of the Book of Mormon. The process of gathering is also consistent with what the Old and New Testaments and the Doctrine and Covenants say about it. The Book of Mormon could not have contained such a sweeping and orderly picture of Israel—its scattering, gathering, and destiny—without divine inspiration to the prophets who gave it to us. No New York farmer on his own could have woven these threads together throughout such a large and complex book. The Book of Mormon bears the marks of antiquity; it evidences the yearnings of a people of long ago whose hopes and dreams were for a united Kingdom of Israel under the gentle command of the Holy One of Israel.

Surely, as Moroni affirmed on the title page of the Book of Mormon, God has done great things for Israel; he has not forgotten her. In fact, one of the overarching messages of the allegory of Zenos about Israel’s history (see Jacob 5) is that God has no intention of letting Israel go. After centuries of longsuffering and endurance with an often stubborn, hardhearted people, the Lord’s merciful hand is stretched out still—he will not let Israel go! Jacob said that the Lord “remembereth the house of Israel, both roots and branches; and he stretches forth his hands unto them all the day long” (Jacob 6:4-5). The Book of Mormon provides an invaluable doctrinal interpretation of Israel’s past, as well as a sacred lens through which to scan Israel’s possibilities.

Footnotes

1. *The Millennial Messiah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1982), 200; italics added.

2. *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, ed. Edward L. Kimball (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982), 439.

3. *A Witness and a Warning: A Modern-day Prophet Testifies of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), vii.

4. *A New Witness for the Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 457.