

TEMPLE WORK AMONG THE NEPHITES

The Book of Mormon is a history of three separate colonies brought from the old world to the American continent. It is concerned largely with a colony led from Jerusalem by Lehi about 586 B. C. Soon after landing in this country, these people broke up into two factions, the Nephites and the Lamanites. The latter were cursed with a dark skin because of their wickedness and rebellion. Centuries later the Nephites apostatized from the Christian faith, and the Lamanites exterminated them. The Lamanites were the ancestors of the American Indians.

The ceremonials and rituals that the Indians have transmitted from father to son from ancient times may have been taken from the Nephites at a time when they had priests and prophets and an extensive system of religious ceremonies.

This colony of Israelites from Jerusalem brought with them the Old Testament books that were in existence at that time, these sacred documents being inscribed upon plates of brass. For many centuries the righteous Nephites enjoyed the spiritual gifts of prophecy and revelation. God

inspired their great preachers and leaders; angels visited them and instructed them in the way of salvation. Though they read and preached from the Old Testament record upon the brass plates, they continued to receive additional scripture, which was written upon their own metal plates.

Soon after their arrival in this country, we read:

And I, Nephi, did build a temple; and I did construct it after the manner of the temple of Solomon save it were not built of so many precious things; for they were not to be found upon the land, wherefore, it could not be built like unto Solomon's temple. But the manner of the construction was like unto the temple of Solomon; and the workmanship thereof was exceeding fine.¹

It is not unreasonable to believe that God could have revealed to the Nephites the same ceremonies that were revealed to King Solomon and his successors in Jerusalem. Since the first Nephite Temple was similar to that which was erected in Jerusalem in Solomon's time, it is not unlikely that the temple in America was built for the same purpose, the Nephites being divinely instructed in the ritual that must be conducted in the sacred edifice.

Six hundred years later, the Nephites were building Temples and carrying on the work that had been instituted in their first Temple.

The Book of Mormon teaches that Jesus appeared to the Nephites after His resurrection and ascension into heaven. His first appearance was made to a group of devout worshipers assembled at the Temple in the land Bountiful. The houses of worship built by the Nephites were surely used for the same ceremonies that were administered in the House of the Lord in Jerusalem.

Even after the Nephites were destroyed, about 400 A.D., it is not unlikely that the Indians perpetuated many religious practices they had learned from the Nephites. Long

¹ 2 Nephi 5:16.

after that time, it was customary to erect temples to their deities. The historian Bancroft estimates "that 80,000 temples and churches were erected to Quetzalcoatl."²

Another student of the subject has said of the origin and transmission of certain mystic rites of the Indians:

The thronged mythology of the Moquis has given rise to a very complex system of worship, which rests upon this theory: In early days certain superhuman beings, called Cachinas, appeared at certain seasons, bringing blessings or reproofs from the gods, and, as indicated by their name, they listened to the people's prayers and carried back their desires to the gods. A long while ago they revealed certain mystic rites to a few good men of every clan, by means of which mortals could communicate directly with the gods, after which their visits ceased, and this, the Moquis say, was the origin of their numerous Katcheens societies.³

From other reliable historians, we quote:

After this we may be prepared for Lord Kingsborough's deliberate confession that the Aztecs had a clear knowledge of the Old Testament and most probably of the New, though somewhat corrupted by time and hieroglyphics!⁴

Knowledge was handed down from generation to generation and preserved in a book in which was also a record of their progress until that time; of their monarchs, laws and customs; of the system of their ancient calendars; of the character of their years, and symbols of their months and days; of the signs and planets, cycles and series; of the first day of the new moon; of the transformations, in which is included moral philosophy, as also of the arcanum of the vulgar wisdom hidden in the hieroglyphics of their gods, with all that pertain to religion, rites and ceremonies; for which cause the book was called "A Magori Analogato," Divine Book.⁵

They, the American aborigines, assert that a book was once in possession of their ancestors; and along with this recognition they have traditions that the Great Spirit used to foretell to their fathers future events; that he controlled nature in their favor; that angels once talked with them; that all the Indian tribes descended

² H. H. Bancroft, *Native Races*, III, 275.

³ J. W. Lesueur, *Indian Legends*, p. 174.

⁴ Prescott, *Conquest of Mexico*, Vol. II, p. 287.

⁵ Boturini, p. 129.

from one man who had twelve sons; that this man was a noble and renowned Prince, having great dominions; and that the Indians, his posterity, will yet recover the same dominion and influence. They believe by tradition that the spirit of prophecy and miraculous interposition once enjoyed by their ancestors will yet be restored to them, and that they will recover the book, all of which have been so long lost.⁶

The cultured Nephites erected palatial Temples in which their sacred ceremonies were performed, while centuries later the Indians were content to resort to subterranean chambers for their rituals. These underground "kivas" are regarded by students of the subject as special council chambers where the religious rites are administered to the men of the tribe who have been initiated into the secret order of the clan. There are many features of the kiva and its ritual that have a striking resemblance to Solomon's temple.

In these underground rooms, a sacred fire was kept burning or smoldering all the time. It has been suggested by some authorities that certain ablutions connected with their rituals were performed in the kiva, its position below the surface of the ground symbolizing the grave, just as baptism symbolizes burial and resurrection.

It is evident to the readers of the Book of Mormon that the Nephites built many Temples in which their religious ceremonies were performed. It is not unreasonable to assume that the Indians may have perpetuated some of these ceremonies, changing them materially with the passing of time.

As evidence that the Nephites' project of temple-building was carried out over a large area, we call attention to the following incidents: President Brigham Young was invited to Manti, Utah, to dedicate the site where the Mor-

⁶ Colton, *Origin of the American Indians*, published in London, 1833.

mons would build a Temple. A choice plot of ground near the center of town had been selected for the purpose, but when President Young visited the place on April 25, 1877, he took Warren Snow and went to the hillside beyond the town. Brother Snow relates:

We two were alone: President Young took me to the spot where the Temple was to stand; went to the southeast corner, and President Young said, "Here is the spot where the Prophet Moroni stood and dedicated this piece of land for a Temple site, and that is the reason why the location is made here, and we can't move it from this spot; and if you and I are the only persons that come here at high noon today, we will dedicate this ground."

At an early date, it was made a matter of record that on the fifth day of August, 1850, President Brigham Young pointed out the site on the hill where the Manti Temple was later built. At that early date it was definitely stated that the Temple should be built on that site.

The residents of St. George experienced a similar surprise when, a few years earlier, the same inspired leader visited that community for the purpose of dedicating a Temple site. At that southern city, two sites had been approved by the local brethren. Both of these sites were on an eminence which, like the site at Nauvoo, provided an appropriate location for a Temple. When President Young visited the two proposed sites, he requested that his teamster conduct the party to the lowest place in the valley, a veritable swamp, infested with marsh-grass and cattails. Pointing out the marsh to the brethren, he explained that the Temple must be built at that place, because the Nephites had previously dedicated that very site for the erection of a Temple, but had been unable to bring their hopes to a full fruition.

It required months to drain the swamp, and with special machinery, resembling well-drilling machines, drive tons of

rock into the boggy soil to prepare a suitable foundation. Despite the vast amount of labor required to make this site suitable, Utah's first Temple was erected where the Nephites had planned to build.

The following incident was related to the writer in the St. George Temple in the presence of the acting president of the Temple, George F. Whithead, and others. The narrator was Elder David Cannon, a member of the presidency of the Temple, who said that his famous father, David H. Cannon, a prominent pioneer in southern Utah, was once captured by the savage Navajos, who were anxious to kill him for revenge, one of their braves having been killed a short time before by a party of whites en route to California.

Many of the native tribes in the southwest had agreed that the Mormons were their friends and should never be molested. For this reason they were requested to keep their hair clipped up to the top of their ears when traveling in Indian territory. Brother Cannon, who could speak the language of many Indian tribes, had neglected to keep his hair cut in the stipulated manner, and thus his captors refused to believe that he was a member of the society they were pledged to protect. He was tied to a tree; an archer was selected to send an arrow into his breast, yet he contended with that chief that he was a Mormon, whereupon the chief ordered the archer to put aside his bow and arrow for a moment. The angry leader of the Navajos approached the trembling white man and tore open the front of his shirt. When he saw the marks of the priesthood upon his clothing, the spirit of the war-party instantly left the face of the chieftain, and the smile of a friend played upon his rugged features. Removing the buckskin thong which bound the captive, the venerable red man explained: "Many moons ago, when my people were good, and the Great Spirit often visited them, they were permitted to wear those same marks in their

clothing; but when my people went to war, and forgot the teachings of the Great Spirit, he never came to them any more, and they were not permitted thereafter to place those marks in their clothing."

Their white friend was taken to their village, where he was entertained with great hospitality. When he departed for his home, an escort of warriors conducted him to the settlements of the white men.

It is not unlikely that the many "Masonic touches" in the folklore and ritual of the American Indians have descended from the distant past, dating back to the time when the Nephites administered their sacred rites in their holy Temples. It is equally logical to assume that those rituals were very similar to the rites performed in the Temple at Jerusalem. If some features of the Solomonic ritual have been preserved and transmitted through the years by the Masons, as they declare, it is just as reasonable to assume that the knowledge the American Indians have of "Masonry" has descended in the same manner—a sort of spurious, counterfeit system without the priesthood and authority that first established and operated it, for which reason it lost most of its sublime and sacred nature, becoming a worldly and temporal institution completely shorn of its former grandeur and spiritual significance.