The Nephite Disease

Excerpts from *Since Cumorah* by Hugh Nibley (2nd edition).

[Pages 354-359.] When a person suffering from diabetes consults a doctor, the doctor does not prescribe a treatment for cancer, even though cancer is today considered *by far the more dangerous disease*. What we read about in the Book of Mormon is the “Nephite Disease”—and we have it! We should be glad that we do not have the much worse diseases that infect some other societies, and that there is greater hope for us. But diabetes if neglected can kill one just as dead as cancer—after all, the Nephites were terminated. We can be most grateful, therefore, regardless of how sick others may be, that God in the Book of Mormon has diagnosed our sickness for our special benefit, and prescribed a cure for us … “it must needs be that the riches of the earth are mine to give; but beware of pride, lest ye become as the Nephites of old.” (D&C 38:39.) There it is in a nutshell: it is the fate of the Nephites, not of the Lamanites, Greeks, or Chinese, that concerns us; and that doom was brought on them by pride which in turn was engendered by the riches of the earth.

There are four portentous danger-signals in the Book of Mormon, three internal and one external … The external threat is of course the Lamanites; the internal danger signals are 1) the accumulation of wealth, 2) the appearance on the scene of ambitious men, and 3) the presence in the society of “secret combinations to get power and gain.”

Wealth as such is not described as an evil in the Book of Mormon: indeed prosperity is depicted as the normal reward of righteousness. Many have asked why God would consistently reward the virtues of the Nephites with a prosperity which almost infallibly destroyed that virtue. The answer is in the “almost”—there is no paradox here; wealth need not be destructive. A person in exuberant health is certainly more likely to be tempted of the flesh than one suffering from a dire disease. And yet exuberant good health is a reward of right living. The temptations of health and the temptations of wealth are real, to be sure, but they are not irresistible, and they are necessary to test mankind in this life of probation …

The righteous can be entrusted with unlimited wealth because they *do not put their hearts upon it* … Riches are to be accepted gratefully as a fringe benefit in the Book of Mormon, but never to be the object of our search: “But the laborer in Zion shall labor for Zion; for if they labor for money they shall perish.” (2 Ne 26:30.) The condemnation of the Nephites in the days of wickedness and vengeance is ever that “they have set their hearts upon riches.” “Ye are cursed because of your riches,” says Samuel the Lamanite, “and also your riches are cursed because ye have set your hearts upon them …” (Hela 13:21.)

Why should we labor this unpleasant point? Because the Book of Mormon laboris it, for our special benefit. Wealth is a jealous master who will not be served halfheartedly and will suffer no rival—not even God: “Their treasure is their God” (2 Ne 9:20). “Ye cannot serve God and Mammon” (Mt 6:24; italics added [by Nibley]). In return for unquestioning obedience, wealth promises security, power, position, and honors, in fact everything in this world. Above all, the Nephites like the Romans saw in it a mark of superiority and would do anything to get hold of it, for to them “money answereth all things.” (Eccl 10:19.) Even the people of the church when they “began to wax proud, because of the exceeding riches” (Alma 4:6) became fiercely competitive, full of “envyings, and strife, and malice, and persecutions, and pride …” (Alma 4:9.) “Ye do always remember your riches,” cried Samuel. “… unto great swelling, envyings, strifes, malice, persecutions and murders, and all manner of iniquities.” (Hela 13:22.) Along with this, of course, everyone dresses in the height of fashion, the main point being always that the proper clothes are expensive—the expression “costly apparel” occurs fourteen times in the Book of Mormon. The more important wealth is, the less important it is how one gets it; in one of many enlightening passages we are told how the Lamanites upon adopting Nephite business methods became corrupt as a matter of course, almost as if it were inevitable: “… they taught them that … they might write one to another. And thus the Lamanites began to increase in riches, and began to trade one with another and wax great, and began to be a cunning and a wise people … delighting in all manner of wickedness and plunder, except it were among their own brethren.” (Mos 24:6-7.) At least they retained a spark of ethics.

The most calamitous effect of wealth, according to the Book of Mormon, is the inequality it begets in any society. Right at the beginning Jacob sounds the warning: “… many of you have begun to search for … precious ores, in the which this … land of promise … doth abound most plentifully. And the hand of providence hath smiled upon you most pleasingly … and because some of you have obtained more abundantly than that of your brethren ye are lifted up in the pride of your hearts … Do ye not suppose that such things are abominable unto him who created all flesh? And the one being is as precious in his sight as the other …” (Jac 2:12-13, 21.)

Inequality is not only the result of wealth-seeking: it is sometimes actually the purpose: “… they began to seek to get gain that they might be lifted up one above another…” (Hela 6:17.) With great insight the Book of Mormon shows us how wealth-oriented societies sought moral justification in a display of religious piety, like the Zoramites … It would even seem that church people are especially susceptible to the Nephite disease; none reverence “precious things” more ardently than the priests, and yet even the people of the true church share the weakness: “… the people of the church began to the lifted up in the pride of their eyes, and to set their hearts upon riches and upon the vain things of the world, that they began to be scornful, one towards another, and they began to persecute those that they did not believe according to their own will and pleasure …” (Alma 4:8.) An aggressive and self-righteous bigotry was the best defense against uneasy consciences.

Accordingly, as Samuel the Lamanite caustically observes, any professional toady who could not only justify but sanctify the ways of the affluent Nephites could name his own price, “because he speaketh flattering words unto you, and he saith that all is well …” (Hela 13:27-28.) An army of Nephite lawyers made everything legal and respectable and in the process laid “the foundation of the destruction of this people.” (Alma 10:27.) But who would be such a churl as to speak of robbing the poor of money that went to adorning the house of God? (Morm 8:37, 39.) For that matter, who persecutes the poor? Nobody in our time goes out of his way to oppress the poor—as Mormon puts it, you simply suffer the poor “to pass by you, and notice them not.” (Morm 9:39.) They just don’t exist. The guilty conscience, or rather, the guilty subconscious, is hypersensitive to criticism in the Book of Mormon, and reacts vigorously to it, denouncing the critic as “a false prophet … a sinner, and of the devil,” and taking immediate measures “in all manner of ways to destroy him.” (Hela 13:26.) [Since Cumorah, 2nd ed., pg. 354-359.]

[Since Cumorah, 2nd ed., pg. 377-379.] Next we are taken to a later time relative to the one just indicated [post Book of Mormon publication], “concerning that which must shortly come, at that day when these things shall come forth among you”—these are events subsequent to the time of the coming forth; the prophet helpfully informs us that he is speaking in the timeless idiom of prophecy:
“Behold, I speak unto you as if ye were present, and yet ye are not. But, behold, I know your doing.” (Morm 8:35.) And so this is for us: “And I know that ye do (present tense) walk in the pride of your hearts; and there are none save a few only who do not lift themselves up in the pride of their hearts, unto the wearing of very fine apparel, unto envying and strife, and malice, and persecutions, and all manner of iniquities . . .” (Morm 8:36.) Here is our own fashionable, well-dressed, status-conscious and highly competitive society. The “iniquities” with which it is charged are interesting, for instead of crime, immorality, and atheism we are told of the vices of vanity, of the intolerant and uncharitable state of mind: pride, envy, strife, malice, and persecution. These are the crimes of meanness; whereas libertines, bandits, and unbelievers have been known to be generous and humane, the people whom Mormon is addressing betray no such weakness. They are dedicated people: “For behold, ye do love money, and your substance, and your fine apparel, and the adorning of your churches, more than ye love the poor and the needy, the sick and the afflicted.” (Morm 8:37.) These people do not persecute the poor (they are too singleminded for that), but simply ignore their existence: “. . . ye adorn yourselves with that which hath no life, and yet suffer the hungry, and the needy . . . to pass by your, and notice them not.” (Morm 8:39.)

It is important to note that these people are church builders (the unbelievers are addressed in the next chapter), and that they include the members of the true church: “O ye . . . who sell yourselves for that which will canker, why have ye polluted the holy church of God?” (Morm 8:38.) The apostate churches were already pointed out in the earlier period (Morm 8:32-33) along with their wrangling of the Bible (Morm 8:33). After the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, moreover, there is the only one “holy Church of God” (1 Ne 10:14). The expression here, moreover, cannot refer to the primitive church, of which these latter-day Christians know nothing—they are not in a position to pollute it, and the pollution is necessarily an inside job. And why should the true Church be any more immune to the blandishments of money and fine clothes and beautiful churches today than it was in the days of the Nephites? Unless even these times are “cut short in righteousness” who shall be saved? If the Book of Mormon is to be trusted, the members of the Church as well as the non-members need someone to “prick their hearts with the word, continually stirring them up unto repentance.” (Jarom 1:12.) Why should they now think that all these warnings are not meant for them, but only for the wicked outsiders? It is exactly that attitude which Nephi and Samuel the Lamanites attached with such vigor. The Book of Mormon was given to us because it was meant for us . . . [Since Cumorah, 2nd ed., pg. 377-379.]

[Since Cumorah, 2nd ed., pg. 392-395.] Our medical analogy is not without illusory precedent. The word “history,” in fact, is simply the adaptation by Hecataeus of Miletus of a medical term to the affairs of nations. “Historia” means the progress of symptoms marking the course of a disease. It is highly applicable here, since the Book of Mormon itself uses the medical analogy when it speaks of “money, and your substance, and your fine apparel” as “that which will canker,” i.e., cause cancer. (Morm 8:37-38.) Since the first step in the Nephite disease is exposure to wealth, the only sure cure or prevention would seem to be strict avoidance of wealth. But is it any pleaasanter to die of anemia than of cancer? One can avoid almost any disease by giving up eating altogether, but there must be a better way.

One of Satan’s favorite tricks is to send ailing souls after the wrong cure, leading them by his false diagnosis to “strain at a gnat and swallow a camel.” In this he is ably abetted by those physicians who would force us to choose between their own violent, extreme, and sometimes fantastic remedies and a sure and agonizing death. Either accept the Wackelberry Cure, they say, or resign yourselves to a frightful and certain end—no other alternative is conceivable. And so by instilling fear with one hand and offering an only hope with the other such practitioners gain a following.

But the Book of Mormon is against violent remedies. It prescribes the gentlest of treatments—charity, accompanied by strong and steady doses of preaching the gospel. The final analysis of Mormon and Moroni was that the fatal weakness of the Nephites was lack of charity . . . It is most fortunate that the Book of Mormon not only sets before us the clear “historia” of Nephite disease, but describes for us as well the circumstances under which it has been cured and the remedies employed . . .

Since wealth was dangerous only when people set their hearts upon it, the preaching of the word was the best defense against its insidious inroads. However, once the infection had gained entry it spread rapidly and drastic measures were necessary . . . The cure for that inequality which is the most pernicious effect of accumulated wealth, according to the Book of Mormon, was first of all preaching, then royal decrees or other laws for the support of the indigent, and, when things went too far, economic collapse . . . since equality is a state of mind, the most effective remedy was always preaching.

The threat of ambitious individuals was met by public-spirited but not ambitious leaders backed by “the voice of the people.” The common downfall of ambitious people, however, in the Book of Mormon as in other history, is provided by other ambitious people—they almost automatically produce antibodies which then act as a check on their power. Such is the regular course of Jaredite history. Indeed, Mormon lays down the general principle: “it is by the wicked that the wicked are punished.” (Morm 4:5.) The conflict is costly and wasting, however, to the body politic, and may even lead to its destruction, as in the Roman Republic. Secret combinations are formed to implement the ambitions of individuals, seeking power through gain and gain through power. Hence they produce and thrive in an atmosphere of conflict, within the groups and between them, assassination being, as the Book of Mormon makes very clear, the cornerstone of their dire economy. Local applications (police harassment) can be effective, but usually force the evil underground and make it harder than ever to deal with. Because these bodies are parasitic, however, they can be effectively starved out, as was demonstrated by Lachoneus and his general strike. Also because they are parasitic, in order to thrive or even survive they must enjoy a measure or cooperation from a willing host. Reports on the Mafia and Costra Nostra agree that these societies cannot exist without the help of corrupt local officials and a complacent public; they receive financial aid from businessmen who would never be seen in a casino and yet will lend the owners money because their operations are “legal” and bring money into the community.

. . . What makes the thing so frightening is not the parasite itself but the fact that a society is willing to offer it entry and encouragement (to “uphold” it), without which it is not dangerous at all. Its presence therefore should be viewed more as a symptom than a cause: “Wherefore, the Lord commandeth you, when ye shall see these things come among you that ye shall awake to a sense of your awful situation . . .” (Ether 9:24.) Immediate repentance, not police action, is urgently prescribed: “O ye Gentiles . . . repent of your sins, and suffer not that these murderous combinations shall get above you, which are built up to get power and gain . . .” (Ether 9:23.) [Since Cumorah, 2nd ed., pg. 392-395.]