

Sermon Subject: OUR AMERICAN SCRIPTURES

SCRIPTURE: II Nephi 12:64-72, Book of Mormon

Wherefore, because that ye have a bible, ye need not suppose that it contains all my words; neither need ye suppose that I have not caused more to be written. For I command all men, both in the east, and in the west, and in the north, and in the south, and in the islands of the sea, that they shall write the words which I speak unto them....For behold I shall speak unto the Jews, and they shall write it: And I shall also speak unto the Nephites, and they shall write it: And I shall also speak unto the other tribes of the house of Israel, which I have led away, and they shall write it; And I shall also speak unto all nations of the earth, and they shall write it. And 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 Jews.

"..... to the convincing of the Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the Christ, the Eternal God, manifesting himself unto all nations."

Many of the nations of earth have sacred writings or scriptures which contain the laws and principles of religious and moral conduct by which the followers of various religious movements govern their lives and their worship. The Bible is only one of almost countless sacred books which are to be found in almost every nation in the world. The attitude of Christian people towards these books is usually that they are interesting to the student of comparative religions or the student of ancient literature, but that they are not necessarily reliable as a source of religious truth or moral guidance. Although there may be moral truth in other sacred writings, Christian people traditionally believe and have been taught that in the Bible, and in the Bible only, is to be found a safe guide to worship of the true God, to salvation, and to spiritual, moral and ethical conduct. Latter Day Saints believe that the Book of Mormon is worthy of a place beside the Bible as a Christian book of sacred scripture, written by the chosen nation, Israel. We believe the Book of Mormon to be inspired in the same way that the Bible was inspired; that it was written by the same kind of men, under very much the same circumstances and under the same limitations. We believe that like the Bible, it is a reliable guide to salvation, to worship, to spiritual, moral, and ethical conduct.

The Book of Mormon is not intended to displace the Bible, but to establish it more firmly and securely as the word of God. The Book of Mormon brings an added witness to the divinity of Jesus, in a time when many modern philosophies are doubting his divinity, and watering down his deity to make him just a great man who was many centuries ahead of his time. The Book of Mormon is an added witness to the impartiality and unchangeability of God, whose Only Begotten Son came as the Savior of all men, and whose message of salvation is for all nations.

As the familiar Christian Bible is the record and result of God's dealings with men in the old world, but was written for the edification of new world and old alike, so the Book of Mormon is the record and result of God's dealings with men in the new world -- America -- but is intended for the edification of all men and all nations -- new world and old alike. It has a particular and specific mission to the descendants of those ancient American peoples who wrote the book, and likewise to the other remnants of scattered Israel, wherever they may be sifted among the nations of the world.

The Book of Mormon might therefore be legitimately called "Our American Scriptures." In America we are all more or less familiar with the writings of such religious leaders and teachers as Emmanuel Swedenborg, Mary Baker Eddy, Pastor Russell, and Ellen G. White, which their followers regard as sacred writings. But can these writings be rightfully termed scriptures, or a Bible?

What is a Bible? One book by one author is not a bible, for a bible is a library of sacred books by different authors, brought together in one volume. The Book of Mormon, by this definition, is the one and only American bible. It is the only indigenous American compilation of sacred books written by various ancient authors, brought together in one volume, and used by a religious body as a guide to salvation and moral conduct.

How may a Christian judge what is and what is not scripture? How did the church councils which chose our present canon of scripture decide what was scripture and what was not? We do not know how many books were considered before the 66 books of our Bible were finally accepted, but we are all familiar with some of the apocryphal books which just missed getting into the Bible. What many of us probably do not know is that there are at least 27 books mentioned in the Bible which are completely lost to history. Would they be classed as scripture if we had them today? If some such ancient manuscript should turn up, how would we go about evaluating it, and deciding whether or not it was scripture?

May we suggest a few simply tests for determining whether a writing is inspired, or whether it deserved to be considered as scripture. First, does it reveal God? Does it reveal something of his nature, his love, his wisdom, his glory, his concern for men? Does it show how he has made himself known to men, warning them of carelessness and rebellion, urging them to repentance, teaching them the ways of life and peace and happiness? Second, does it center in Christ, the Son of God, the Redeemer and Savior of the world? Does it testify to his divinity? Does it teach the atonement? Does it give hope of a resurrection and eternal life through Christ and his atonement? And third, are its ethical and moral teachings above reproach? Does it rebuke evil, in high place or low? Does it call men to repentance? Does it command and counsel righteousness in all things, by all men? And fourth, do its teachings agree with the previously accepted scriptures, the Bible?

By any or all of these tests, the Book of Mormon deserves to be called scripture. It reveals a God who is from everlasting to everlasting, unchangeable, impartial, and eternal. It reveals a God who speaks with men as God spoke to Moses; who directs the calling out and sending forth of his chosen people, as Moses led the children of Israel out of Egypt. It tells of how God guided one group from the Tower of Babel to the promised land of America, communing with their prophet, instructing them in practicalities as well as in spiritual things, protecting them for 344 days as their vessels were driven before a great tempest to America. It reveals a God who when it appeared that Israel was doomed in the Old World, led a righteous branch of Israel out from Jerusalem just before the destruction of that city by Nebuchadnezzar, supplied with the books of the law and of the prophets who had written up until that time.

Christ is the center of the Book of Mormon story. Twenty-two hundred years before his birth, Christ appeared in open vision to Book of Mormon prophets, and foretold his coming into the world. Among the people of the second colony -- the Jews from Jerusalem -- prophets predicted his coming again and again and constantly held before the people the law of Moses as a foreshadowing of the Messiah who was to come. Five years before the time for his birth, a prophet in America told of the signs on this continent which should herald Christ's birth. There would be a new star in the heavens; and there should be a day, a night, and a day without any darkness. At the end of five years, the signs appeared, and the people of America knew that the Messiah had been born.

These people also were prophetically prepared for his crucifixion and death, which was to be signalized in America by three days of darkness, with thunderings and lightnings, tempests and earthquakes and tidal waves, so that the whole face of the land was changed, and many wicked cities destroyed. After three days of dense darkness, the first Easter in America was marked by the return of the sunrise and the light of another day. Several months later, after Jesus had ascended from the Old World, he appeared on three separate occasions to the inhabitants of America, teaching them his gospel, organizing his church, ordaining his disciples and priesthood, establishing his ordinances, and personally ministering to the people as he had done in the old world -- healing the sick, preaching to the outcasts and humble, and ushering in a golden age of peace, prosperity, and culture, which continued for two hundred years, until people began to forget these wonderful experiences with Christ, and turn again to pride and lust and selfishness. That was the beginning of the end.

By our third test, the Book of Mormon is worthy to be called scripture. It teaches faith in God, repentance, baptism in water, the laying on of hands. It tells of the life after death, of the resurrection of the body, of reward and punishment for the good and evil done in the flesh. It counsels honesty, chastity, meekness, patience, sobriety, thrift and industry, charity, unselfishness, stewardship. It speaks out strongly for the sanctity of human personality, for democracy in government, and for free moral will or agency for the individual, with personal accountability for the way he uses that agency. It teaches the age-old lesson which is so much a part of the Bible story -- that when nations or men forsake God, and turn to wicked rebellion, they are doomed to misery, disappointment, frustration, and eventually annihilation. In a day when many have disbelieved and explained away the Bible dictum that the wages of sin is death, the Book of Mormon tells its epic story of the destruction of whole civilizations and cultures because of a failure to learn this simple but inescapable fact.

The Book of Mormon is a compilation of fifteen books, by some twenty-five authors, abridged and finally brought together by an author and compiler named Mormon, from whom the book takes its name. Like the Bible, the Book of Mormon contains history, law, prophecy, biography, epistles, sermon, exhortations, and doctrinal teachings. It included some excerpts from Old Testament prophets, whose writings were brought to America by the second colony. It contains the words of Jesus, as he taught the people of the American continent, and gave them counsel and instruction concerning the destiny of this land, which modern America would do well to heed.

There are definite differences of style between the authors of the various books which comprise the Book of Mormon, though these differences have been somewhat levelled off in the abridgement. There are some ways in which the Book of Mormon differs radically from the Bible. Though there are occasional bursts of poetic language, there is little or no poetry in the Book of Mormon -- nothing to compare with the book of Psalms. The Book of Mormon has occasional wise sayings, but nothing to compare with the Book of Proverbs. There is no time for sweepingly dramatic writing, for romance such as is found in the Book of Ruth, or for glorification of victorious national heroes. Like the Bible, the Book of Mormon contains biographical material having to do with sinners as well as saints; but like the Bible there is no attempt in the Book of Mormon to gloss over or excuse sin, either in men or in nations.

Like the Bible, the Book of Mormon was written by humble men who were called of God and inspired for this task. Some people have the notion that the Bible was dictated word by word to prophets who were set apart and completely different from their fellows, and thus made infallible. On the contrary, the Bible was written by men -- inspired men to be sure, but men who never made any claim to infallibility. Joshua was a general; David was a shepherd boy, king, and adulterer by turns; Solomon, turned out to be an idolater and a polygamist; Isaiah was a palace courtier

and statesman; Amos was a herdsman; Matthew was a tax collector; and Luke was a physician. The Bible which they wrote was never intended to be an inspired textbook of science, mathematics, geology, or astronomy. When inspired men wrote of those subjects, they were subject to the common errors of their day. But when they wrote of spiritual principles, of salvation, of the nature of God, of doctrine, of worship, of morality, they were right. The Book of Mormon is like the Bible in that it was written by humble men who recognized their limitations. They too disclaimed infallibility. They frankly tell us that "if there are faults, they are the mistakes of men," that "when we write, we write in our weakness," unable at times to put into words the great things they have seen and felt and known under the inspiration of God's Spirit.

Like the Bible, the Book of Mormon deserves to be called scripture -- because it testifies of God and Christ, and counsels the kind of spirituality and morality which will lead to him. We who know it testify that when it is read with an open mind, the same Spirit which testifies to the truth contained in the Bible will testify to the truth contained in the Book of Mormon, our American scriptures. We invite you to read it for yourself and test this promise.