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Gospel Insight

Setting Up Golden Calves

Fred E. Woods

Associate Professor of Church History and Doctrine

On January 19, 1841, the Lord gave a revelation regarding the building of the Nauvoo Temple and issued a call for the faithful Saints from afar to gather and to help build this sacred edifice (see D&C 124:25-55). In this same revelation the Lord reproved Almon Babbitt: "And with my servant Almon Babbitt, there are many things with which I am not pleased; behold, he aspireth to establish his counsel instead of the counsel which I have ordained, even that of the Presidency of my Church; and he setteth up a golden calf for the worship of my people"(D&C 124:84).

One wonders what Babbitt did to bring divine displeasure and why the Lord specifically stated that "he setteth up a golden calf for the

Woods continued on page 6

In this issue

Dennis Largey Interview	1
Spotlights	7

The Book of Mormon Reference Companion

An Interview with Dennis Largey

What is the *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*? It is a single-volume encyclopedic dictionary of the Book of Mormon. It contains over nine hundred articles and covers more than fifteen hundred topics, including people, places, words, phrases, doctrines, Church history (dealing with the coming forth of the Book of Mormon), Old Testament history (that relates to the Book of Mormon), chapter reviews with commentary on the twenty-one Isaiah chapters, and a three-section appendix, as well as tables, outlines, illustrations, and photographs. The *Reference Companion* is 850 pages, has a split-column, reference-style format with subject headings and color graphics throughout the book.

Why did you compile it?

For many years biblical scholars have produced encyclopedic dictionaries of the Bible. The *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*, *Holman Bible Dictionary*, *The New Lingers Bible Dictionary*, and *The Oxford Companion to the Bible* are just a few. The Bible has been well represented with this type of reference book. Our intention in writing the *Reference Companion* was to create a volume that was similar to these biblical works. The "stick of Joseph," one of the most published and influential books in the world, should have a reference book comparable to its scriptural companion, the "stick of Judah."

Of course the central reason for creating the book was to help Latter-day Saints better understand the Book of Mormon. Understanding brings appreciation and then love, which in turn encourages more reading. And more reading of the Book of Mormon allows its major purpose to be accomplished: that of persuading all readers to come unto Christ.

Reference Companion continued on page 2

worship of my people." This can only be fully uncovered by taking a careful look at the history of the Church at this time.¹ In October 1840, Babbitt was appointed to preside over the Church in Kirtland.² This assignment would include temporarily shepherding the migrating Saints in this area who did not have the economic means to continue on to Nauvoo. However, as Benjamin Johnson informs us, Babbitt was rebuked for promoting Kirtland (where he owned a business) as the gathering place instead of encouraging the Saints to promptly move on to Nauvoo, where the temple was being built.⁵

The imagery of the golden calf is greatly enhanced by a comparison between Babbitt and Jeroboam (first king of the northern kingdom of Israel), who was guilty of the same offense. In 1 Kings 12:26-33, Jeroboam discouraged the ten tribes of Israel from going up to Jerusalem to worship at the temple, which was at this time the only authorized gathering place for offering sacrifice. Instead, he erected golden calves at Bethel and Dan, corrupted the priesthood, and changed the feast days in order to strengthen his power in the northern kingdom.⁴ A knowledge of this archaic history significantly deepens the meaning of the phrase "golden calf" and seems to unravel the mystery as to why the Lord would choose this particular imagery.

In modern times, President Spencer W. Kimball has identified other "golden calves" or idols that sometimes misdirect the Lord's children.⁵ He stated, "Modern idols or false gods can take such forms as clothes, homes, businesses, machines, automobiles, pleasure boats, and numerous other material defectors from the path to godhood."⁶ In addition, President Kimball noted that "Intangible things make just as ready gods. Degrees and letters and titles can become idols."⁷ In an academic setting, some may be tempted to establish their learning through the merits of their degree or title and at the same time dismiss the counsel of living prophets.

In the Book of Mormon, the ancient prophet Jacob explained, "O the vainness, and the frailties, and the foolishness of men! When they are learned they think they are wise, and they hearken not unto the counsel of God, for they set it aside, supposing they know of themselves, wherefore, their wisdom is foolishness and it profiteth them not. And they shall perish. But to be learned is good if they hearken unto the counsels of God" (2 Nephi 9:28-29).

May we continually abide by this wise advice and adhere to the counsel the Lord has ordained. In this way, we will avoid setting up "golden calves" that may detour us and others on the path to eternal life.

NOTES

1. President Joseph Fielding Smith stated, "You are not going to understand the Doctrine and Covenants, you are not going to get out of it all there is in it unless you take it up section by section, and then when you do that, you will have to study it with its setting as you get it in the history of the Church" (Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation: Sermons and Writings of Joseph Fielding Smith*, comp. Bruce R. McConkie [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1956], 3:199; emphasis in original).

2. Andrew Jenson, *Latter-day Saint Biographical Encyclopedia* (Salt Lake City: Andrew Jenson History, 1901), 1:284.

3. Benjamin Johnson, *My Life's Review* (Independence: Zion's Press, 1947), 87. For more information on this issue, see A. Gary Anderson, "Almon W. Babbitt and the Golden Calf," *Regional Studies in Latter-day Saint Church History: Illinois*, ed. H. Dean Garrett (Department of Church History and Doctrine, Brigham Young University, Provo: Utah, 1995), 35-54.

4. For more information on the life of Almon Babbitt, see Anderson, "Almon W. Babbitt," 35-54.

5. Spencer W. Kimball, *The Miracle of Forgiveness* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1969), 40-42.

6. Kimball, *Miracle of Forgiveness*, 40.

7. Kimball, *Miracle of Forgiveness*, 41.