



Type: Journal Article

The Title of Liberty and Ancient Prophecy

Author(s): RoseAnn Benson

Source: *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship*,
Volume 23 (2017), pp. 299-307

Published by: The Interpreter Foundation

Abstract: Captain Moroni cites a prophecy regarding Joseph of Egypt and his posterity that is not recorded in the Bible. He accompanies the prophecy with a symbolic action to motivate his warriors to covenant to be faithful to their prophet Helaman and to keep the commandments lest God would not preserve them as he had Joseph.

INTERPRETER

— § —
A JOURNAL OF MORMON SCRIPTURE

Volume 23 · 2017 · Pages 299-307

The Title of Liberty and Ancient Prophecy

RoseAnn Benson

Offprint Series

© 2017 The Interpreter Foundation. A 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 444 Castro Street, Suite 900, Mountain View, California, 94041, USA.

ISSN 2372-1227 (print)
ISSN 2372-126X (online)

The goal of The Interpreter Foundation is to increase understanding of scripture through careful scholarly investigation and analysis of the insights provided by a wide range of ancillary disciplines, including language, history, archaeology, literature, culture, ethnohistory, art, geography, law, politics, philosophy, etc. Interpreter will also publish articles advocating the authenticity and historicity of LDS scripture and the Restoration, along with scholarly responses to critics of the LDS faith. We hope to illuminate, by study and faith, the eternal spiritual message of the scriptures—that Jesus is the Christ.

Although the Board fully supports the goals and teachings of the Church, The Interpreter Foundation is an independent entity and is neither owned, controlled by nor affiliated with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or with Brigham Young University. All research and opinions provided are the sole responsibility of their respective authors, and should not be interpreted as the opinions of the Board, nor as official statements of LDS doctrine, belief or practice.

This journal is a weekly publication. Visit us at MormonInterpreter.com
You may subscribe to this journal at MormonInterpreter.com/annual-print-subscription

THE TITLE OF LIBERTY AND ANCIENT PROPHECY

RoseAnn Benson

Abstract: Captain Moroni cites a prophecy regarding Joseph of Egypt and his posterity that is not recorded in the Bible. He accompanies the prophecy with a symbolic action to motivate his warriors to covenant to be faithful to their prophet Helaman and to keep the commandments lest God would not preserve them as he had Joseph.

An illustration of how Old Testament prophecy expands our appreciation of Book of Mormon teachings is found in the epic war section of the book of Alma. Interestingly, an army captain used ancient prophecy regarding God’s preservation of a righteous remnant to motivate his people to declare their dedication to fight for the most precious parts of Nephite culture: God, religion, family, and free government (Alma 46:35).¹ An important Nephite practice was that of appointing as chief captain one who recognized the spirit of revelation because every conflict was to be prosecuted under the divine direction of God (see Alma 16:5; 3 Nephi 3:19).² Moroni’s spiritual gifts not only

1. Some individuals have asserted that the term “liberty” is a nineteenth-century American ideal and not part of the ancient world. Although long post-Lehi’s departure, findings in the caves at Qumran have yielded important documents from the second century AD. The Bar Kokhba (alternate spelling Kochba) people reissued Roman coins with the following slogans: “Redemption of Israel” and “Freedom of Israel” or “Freedom of Jerusalem” in an effort to inspire the people of their day to fight for liberty. Hugh Nibley, “Bar-Kochba and Book of Mormon Backgrounds,” *The Prophetic Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and Provo, UT: FARMS, 1988), 279–280.

2. Stephen D. Ricks, “‘Holy War’ in the Book of Mormon and the Ancient Near East,” in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, John W. Welch, ed. (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1992), 202.

spurred his people to greater obedience and fervor in their fight for righteous principles, but he recorded a new and significant prophecy not found in our Old Testament.

Historical Background

At the disappearance of the prophet Alma (see Alma 45:18–19), his son Helaman, who had previously received the sacred relics that symbolized his calling as prophet and ecclesiastical leader (see Alma 37), set about to reorganize the leadership of the churches in the Nephite land by appointing new priests and teachers (see Alma 45:20–22). Because of the wars, there had been dissension and disorder in the Church (see Alma 45:20–21).³

In response to Helaman’s reorganization and regulations, some Nephites were angry, and a wealthy group of Nephites refused to acknowledge him as their Chief Priest and prophet (see Alma 45:23–24; 46:6). Amalickiah, the leader of this dissident group, was described as “a large and a strong man” (Alma 46:3) and “a man of cunning device and a man of many flattering words” (Alma 46:10). He promised those angry with Helaman a return to kingship and greater power for “lower judges” (Alma 46:4) as “rulers over the people” (Alma 46:5), if they supported him to be king.

Perhaps Helaman’s regulations were direction to the membership of the church clarifying that the change from kingship to judgeship promoting greater liberty and personal responsibility had originated, at least in part, from revelation (see Mosiah 29:25–38). Therefore, judgeship should be the type of government the Nephites supported politically.⁴

3. LDS Scholar Lynn Wardle found that compared to the Bible and other books of scripture the Book of Mormon has the most scriptural references to the word “dissent.” This term is often combined with contention, iniquity, or wickedness. Dissent, however, “is not applied to personal searching, doubting, groping, or struggling to know the truth or come to Christ that so often are crucial to the conversion process. Apparently the writers of the Book of Mormon distinguished between honest, personal inquiry and yearning for righteousness and the kinds of activities they characterized as dissent.” Wardle, “Dissent: Perspectives from the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 3 (1994): 1, 56.

4. Initially, King Mosiah stated that kingship is the best form of government if there were a guarantee that just kings would rule; however, the experience of some of the Nephites with King Noah and the Jaredites with their kings demonstrated the difficulty with keeping leaders who based their judgments on the commandments of God (Mosiah 29:13). Later, Chief Judge Pahoran would declare that the “spirit of freedom” is also the “Spirit of God” (Alma 61:15); therefore, God desired judgeship, with its promotion of personal liberty and responsibility, not kingship. Nephi, son of

Whatever principles or doctrines Helaman taught, the dissension of Amalickiah and his followers constituted both ecclesiastical apostasy and political sedition (see Alma 46:10). Just after a victory led by Captain Moroni over the Zoramites and Lamanites that included great loss of Nephite lives (see Alma 43–44), Amalickiah and his followers fomented civil war attempting to overturn a government of judges as set forth by King Mosiah and Alma and approved by the voice of the people almost 20 years earlier (see Mosiah 29 and Alma 2).

Captain Moroni uttered a heartfelt prayer for his people — the persecuted Christians, “all those who were true believers in Christ” and who had gladly taken “the name of Christ,” and who supported Helaman and liberty under God’s laws (Alma 46:15). Perhaps his pleading with the Lord inspired him to remember his ancestors and led him to rend his coat, following an Old Testament pattern as a sign of mourning (see Alma 46:10–12).⁵ For the Nephite nation to survive another war, this one inflamed by internal division, a pledge of loyalty was essential for a military victory.⁶

Rending of Clothing

What was the historical significance of Moroni’s rending his clothing? There are many accounts in the Bible and the Book of Mormon describing the rending of clothing, the soul, the veil of the temple, the veil of darkness, heaven, etc. In this passage, however, Moroni had a very distinct meaning in mind. He linked his actions directly to Joseph who was sold into Egypt, their ancestral tie to the house of Israel (see 1 Nephi 5:14; Alma 46:23). The story of their ancient clan leader Joseph and his coat of “many colors” is found in Genesis 37.⁷ When Jacob, son

Helaman, or else Mormon in an editorial note commented that the reestablishment of kingship was in defiance of the law and rights of the country and would mean that liberty would be lost in the land (see 3 Nephi 6:30).

5. The order of Moroni’s ritual actions is unclear: the rending of coat, putting on armor, and prayer. Although prayer is mentioned last, it may have occurred first because of this phrase: “And therefore, at this time, Moroni prayed that the cause of the Christians, and the freedom of the land might be favored” (Alma 46:16).

6. Terrence Szink, “An Oath of Allegiance in the Book of Mormon,” in *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin, eds. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and Provo, UT: FARMS, 1990), 35.

7. Jewish legend proposes that Joseph, of all Jacob’s sons, looked the most like his father. Part of Joseph’s special relationship may have been that Jacob shared with him sacred knowledge about the Messiah that he had received from Shem and Eber and bequeathed Adam’s special garment to him. Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends*

of Isaac, received Joseph's coat that had been dipped in goat's blood by his other sons, he rent his clothing and mourned because he believed Joseph's body had been torn by wild animals (see Genesis 37:33–34).⁸

Captain Moroni and the Nephites would have known the miraculous outcome of the story from the brass plates. Joseph, "who was preserved by the hand of the Lord, that he might preserve his father, Jacob, and all his household from perishing with famine" (1 Nephi 5: 14), rescued his family by providing all they needed during their sojourn in Egypt. God sent Joseph ahead to prepare, preserve, and deliver the family of Jacob. In the process he became like a "savior" to them (see Genesis 45:6–11).

It is difficult, however, to link the story of wicked brothers rending Joseph's coat to cover their sin with the story of Captain Moroni, who rent his coat not just as a sign of mourning for spiritual dissension among his people but as token of a covenant with Christ. He created a war banner by inscribing on the torn remnant a call to the Nephites to remember "our God, our religion, and freedom, and our peace, our wives, and our children" (Alma 46:12). By citing an ancient ancestor, he set the precedent for the ceremony and legitimized in the eyes of the people his call to battle a civil war.⁹ He rallied the Nephites under this "title of liberty" (Alma 46:13) by putting on his shield and fastening on his armor, symbolizing his willingness to fight for these principles (Alma 46:13).¹⁰ His message was both a call to obedience and a prophecy: He then "went among

of the Jews, trans. Henrietta Szold (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1948), 2:4, 139.

8. There are several Jewish legends regarding the lies that Jacob's sons told him about Joseph's coat. One legend claims to be the conversation between Jacob and his sons: "When we were driving our herds homeward, we found this garment covered with blood and dust on the highway, a little beyond Shechem. Know now whether it be thy son's coat or not." Jacob recognized Joseph's coat, and, overwhelmed by grief, he fell prostrate, and long lay on the ground motionless, like a stone. Then he arose, and set up a loud cry, and wept, saying, "It is my son's coat." Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 2:25.

9. Kerry Hull, "War Banners: A Mesoamerican Context for the Title of Liberty," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 24 (2015), 86.

10. "Many scriptures that refer to 'the name of Jesus Christ' are obviously references to the authority of the Savior." Dallin H. Oaks, "Taking Upon Us the Name of Jesus Christ," *Ensign*, (May 1985): 81. Thus, an additional insight would be that by rejecting Helaman and his prophetic authority, the apostate Nephites were also rejecting their baptismal covenant under the Law of Moses as well as Jesus Christ and his authority to direct his people through his prophet.

the people waving the rent part of his garment in the air,” that all might see the writing which he had written upon the torn cloth (Alma 46:19)¹¹ and shouted, “Behold, we are a remnant of the seed of Jacob; yea, we are a remnant of the seed of Joseph, whose coat was rent by his brethren into many pieces; yea, and now behold, let us remember to keep the commandments of God, or our garments shall be rent by our brethren, and we be cast into prison, or be sold, or be slain” (Alma 46:23).¹² The phrase *whose coat was rent by his brethren into many pieces* is the direct link between the two stories. The dramatic warning and action is a type of symbolic-enacted-prophecy also found in the Old Testament.¹³ Donald Parry identifies five general characteristics of this type of enacted prophecy in the Old Testament: 1) a prophet played a major role in the symbolic actions as prophecy and often dramatized the prophecy himself; 2) the prophetic symbolic action originated from God as direct revelation from God with formulaic phrases indicating this; 3) the prophetic symbolic actions include either a ritualistic gesture, a movement, a posture, or as in Captain Moroni’s demonstration, a dramatized act; 4) the dramatized action is symbolic representing more than what is visible to onlookers or participants; and 5) the prophetic symbolic actions often required the participation of two or more individuals, or in this case, many warriors. Captain Moroni warned his people that unless they were obedient, all the evil that happened to Joseph because of his brothers’ wickedness would happen to them but without the eventual positive outcome.

The Nephite warriors who were supporters of the prophet Helaman and the chief commander of the armies, Captain Moroni, accepted

11. The earliest rendition of the text reads that Moroni “went forth among the people waving the rent of his garment.” Royal Skousen, ed., *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 441.

12. Don Parry makes the case that the rending of Captain Moroni’s coat was a symbolic action that implied a prophetic curse. Donald W. Parry, “Symbolic Action as Prophetic Curse,” *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch (SLC: Deseret Book and Provo, UT: FARMS, 1992), 207.

13. Examples in the Old Testament of this type of prophecy are found in the actions of Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Donald W. Parry, “Symbolic Action as Prophecy in the Old Testament,” in *Sperry Symposium Classics: The Old Testament*, ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson (SLC and Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, and Deseret Book 2005), 337–355.

this call to action by covenant. Part of ancient Israelite culture was an appreciation for covenant making and keeping. Like his Israelite ancestors, Moroni would have viewed his world through Old Testament covenant theology, meaning “the formation of all social, political, and religious” communities was based on covenant making.¹⁴ Terry Szink discovered similarities between Nephite oaths and ancient Near Eastern oaths: 1) the parties entering into the oath take upon themselves a conditional curse, and 2) the oath taking is accompanied by rituals that symbolize the punishment to be inflicted upon oath breakers. “Simile oath” or “simile curse” describes this type of covenant making. Thus, covenant, curse, and ritual are bound together and in this instance with prophecy.¹⁵ The Nephite oath takers also dressed in full armor for battle and rent their garments. As a sign of their covenant with God, they cast their torn garment remnants at the feet of their chief captain and declared: “We covenant with our God, that we shall be destroyed, even as our brethren in the land northward, if we shall fall into transgression; yea, he may cast us at the feet of our enemies, even as we have cast our garments at thy feet to be trodden under foot, if we shall fall into transgression” (Alma 46:21–22).¹⁶ Clothing, for example, is an indication of the character of an individual and may be inseparably

14. Thomas R. Valleta “The Captain and the Covenant,” in *The Book of Mormon: Alma, The Testimony of the Word*, Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate, Jr., eds. (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 1992), 228.

15. Szink, “An Oath of Allegiance in the Book of Mormon,” 36. Morisse used the term “simile curse” rather than “simile oath.” He explained that “simile curses” have two parts: 1) “an event,” and 2) “an application of that event to the subject of the curse.” Mark J. Morisse, “Simile Curses in the Ancient Near East, Old Testament, and Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, 2/1 (1993): 125, 127–128, 134–135.

16. Regarding the passages in Alma 46:21–24, John Tvedtnes declares, “Because Jewish tradition indicates that Joseph’s garment was the high priestly garment of Adam, this passage may have more meaning than previously supposed. In this passage, the desecration of the garment symbolizes being ‘ashamed to take upon them the name of Christ,’” John A. Tvedtnes, “Priestly Clothing in Bible Times,” in *Temples of the Ancient World*, ed. Donald Parry (SLC and Provo, UT: Deseret Book; FARMS:1994), 698 fn. 50. The Book of Jasher also relates that after Joseph’s brothers tore the coat and dipped it in blood, they “trampled it in the dust and sent it to their father.” While this detail is not found in the Bible, it may be reflected in the additional part of the Nephite oath phrase that they would be “trodden underfoot,” which may have been a tradition familiar to Moroni. Matthew Roper, “Joseph’s Coat and Moroni’s Covenant of Liberty” *Insights* 22/10 (2002), <http://publications.mi.byu.edu/fullscreen/?pub=1295&index=1>.

connected to it. Hugh Nibley wrote, “To the modern and the western mind all this over-obvious dwelling on types and shadows seems a bit overdone, but not to the ancient or Oriental mind. . . . So foreign to us but so characteristic of people who speak synthetic languages, that if things are *alike* they are the *same*.”¹⁷

Captain Moroni then linked the ritual of the rent coat to Joseph and a promise given by God to Jacob shortly before his death, and unknown to us except by Moroni’s quotation of it:

Even as this remnant of garment of my son hath been preserved, so shall a remnant of the seed of my son be preserved by the hand of God, and be taken unto himself, while the remainder of the seed of Joseph shall perish, even as the remnant of his garment. Now behold, this giveth my soul sorrow; nevertheless, my soul hath joy in my son, because of that part of his seed which shall be taken unto God (Alma 46: 24–25).¹⁸

Likely this promise was recorded on the brass plates because the Nephite Christians making the covenant knew the story. By reciting this information about Joseph’s coat, Moroni linked his rent coat to the heavenly promise of preservation. Surely to Jacob, who was shown “proof” that Joseph was dead, this prophecy from God demonstrated God’s ability to overcome seemingly impossible obstacles. In Jacob’s day, Ephraim and Manasseh were tangible testimony of God’s promise that Joseph’s coat had not completely decayed (Alma 46:24; see also Genesis 48). This was the first of several fulfillments of the prophecy.

Moroni pointed his people to their Israelite ancestors and ancient clan leaders, father Jacob and his son Joseph, to boost the Christian Nephites’ courage in the battle against the apostate Nephites. The situation of the Nephites loyal to Helaman is described as “exceedingly precarious” (Alma 46:7). Captain Moroni had to unite the faithful

17. Hugh Nibley, “A Strange Order of Battle,” *An Approach to the Book of Mormon* (SLC: Deseret Book, 1988), 212. The descriptor “synthetic language” is a linguistic term meaning that a single word or symbol could contain as much information as an English phrase or sentence.

18. Joseph told his brothers, “God *sent* me before you to *preserve you a posterity* in the earth, and to save your lives by a great deliverance” (Genesis 45:7, emphasis added). The Hebrew term rendered “posterity” in the KJV means “remnant” which is the word used throughout the Book of Mormon passages in Alma 46:23–24, 27. John A. Tvedtnes, “The Remnant of Joseph,” *Insights* 20, no. 8 (2002), <http://publications.mi.byu.edu/fullscreen/?pub=1271&index=3>.

Nephites to 1) thwart an all-out civil war led by a minority group of disobedient Nephites, and 2) avoid weakening the Nephites' ability to protect themselves against further Lamanite attacks. He adapted and expanded Jacob's words directly to the Nephite situation declaring: "And now who knoweth but what the remnant of the seed of Joseph, which shall perish as his garment, are those who have dissented from us? Yea, and even it shall be ourselves if we do not stand fast in the faith of Christ" (Alma 46:27). Captain Moroni believed that the apostate Nephites led by Amalickiah would be destroyed as had a portion of Joseph's coat and that those who had covenanted to be faithful to the principles on the title of liberty would be preserved as was the remnant of Joseph's coat. Moroni also implied that the faithful Nephite Christians could be "saviors" to their people if they would be as perfectly obedient to their covenants as Joseph had been (see Alma 46:18, 23); God would preserve a faithful remnant.

Promise of a Remnant: Historical Beginnings

The promise that a remnant of Joseph would be saved began with the above prophecy by Father Jacob (Israel) first reiterated in the Book of Mormon by patriarch and prophet Lehi as he recounted the covenants and prophecies of ancient clan leader Joseph.

And great were the covenants of the Lord which he made unto Joseph. Wherefore, Joseph truly saw our day. And he obtained a promise of the Lord, that out of the fruit of his loins the Lord God would raise up a righteous branch unto the house of Israel; not the Messiah, but a branch which was to be broken off, nevertheless, to be remembered in the covenants of the Lord that the Messiah should be made manifest unto them in the latter days, in the spirit of power, unto the bringing of them out of darkness unto light — yea, out of hidden darkness and out of captivity unto freedom (2 Nephi 3:4–5).

From a remnant of Joseph of Egypt's posterity, God would raise up a righteous branch by separating out a special group of righteous individuals. Lehi saw his family as that righteous branch broken off from the main body of the house of Israel (see 2 Nephi 3:4–5).

Lehi and Captain Moroni each saw their people, the Nephites, as fulfillment of Jacob's prophecy (see Alma 46:24–26), "a branch which was to be broken off, nevertheless, to be remembered in the covenants of the Lord" (2 Nephi 3:5) or "as a remnant of the seed of Jacob; yea,

we are a remnant of the seed of Joseph” (Alma 46:23). Captain Moroni saw Nephite survival tied to being faithful to Christ; the title of liberty covenant Christians were likened to the remnant of Joseph’s coat that was preserved as was Joseph (see Alma 46: 27). Captain Moroni could motivate his people to action because he understood the cultural and spiritual power of these themes from Father Jacob (Israel) and Joseph of Egypt as well as their own Nephite prophet and patriarch, Lehi. Captain Moroni used ritualistic symbols and prophetic promises to encourage his people and remind them of the blessings that awaited their faithfulness and prophetic warnings to counsel his people regarding the dire consequences that would befall them if they rejected their covenants with the Lord (see Alma 46:11–28).¹⁹

Conclusion

Many prophets have been told that the Lord would preserve a righteous remnant of the tribe of Joseph for his own purposes — anciently, in their day, and in the latter days. Lehi saw his posterity as the righteous remnant that had been separated from the land of Jerusalem. Captain Moroni applied this prophecy in a very specific situation in order for his people to be a remnant who would survive, reflecting his testimony of this ancient promise. The visual reminder, a war banner of torn clothing with a powerful message written on it, was flown in all the cities that followed the prophet Helaman and God and desired religious freedom. Nibley declared that Moroni’s recitation of Jacob’s prophecy “was not merely a resemblance or a type but the very event foreseen by the patriarch of old.”²⁰

RoseAnn Benson, PhD, *Southern Illinois University, formerly taught at Brigham Young University in ancient scripture and Church history and doctrine. She also received an MA at BYU in ancient near eastern studies, emphasizing religious education.*

19. Parry, “Symbolic Action as Prophetic Curse,” 206.

20. Nibley, “A Strange Order of Battle,” 213.

