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For Their Liberty and Their Freedom

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The Book of Mormon documents the fluctuations within the political system on the North American continent between 600 B.C. and A.D. 400. It comments on the qualities of key government officials and the methods of determining the worth of these leaders. The Book of Mormon also contains instructions for the maintenance of freedom as citizens. Both leaders and citizens are responsible for the maintenance of this freedom. In the book of Alma, Moroni recognizes this and chastises the chief judge Pahoran for his apparent lack of efficacy. Although he passes judgment on the situation without all the information, his words are valid for all leaders and nations: “And now, my beloved brethren—for ye ought to be beloved; yea, and ye ought to have stirred yourselves more diligently for the welfare and the freedom of this people; but behold, ye have neglected them insomuch that the blood of thousands shall come upon your heads for vengeance” (Alma 60:10).

The liberties and freedoms we enjoy depend upon our righteousness. Should we fail to fulfill our responsibility to create and regulate a righteous government, the Lord will take His blessings from us and chasten or destroy us. Careful study of the Book of Mormon shows us two important aspects of righteous governments: inspired, worthy leaders and an interdependent, mutually beneficial relationship between citizens and their government.

LEADERS: KINGS, JUDGES, AND GENERALS

In the Book of Mormon, kings, judges, and generals teach us necessary qualities of good leaders. The distinction between a good

leader and a bad leader is found not in the position the leader holds, but in whether the leader acts in the people's interest or for his own aggrandizement. Righteousness and wickedness are not inherent in specific types of leaders; rather, they stem from degrees of devotion to the people.

Soon after Lehi dies, the Nephites separate from the Lamanites and the patriarchal form of leadership dissolves. As a result of this, the two dominant governments establish kings to rule over the people. The Nephite government shows examples of both righteous and unrighteous kings. King Benjamin exemplifies the qualities of a righteous king: he prefers to work in the fields rather than enslave his people or depend on their toil. He states, "I . . . have been kept and preserved by his matchless power, to serve you with all the might, mind and strength which the Lord hath granted unto me" (Mosiah 2:11).

Not all kings serve as faithfully as King Benjamin. King Noah enslaves his people with taxes to support an immoral aristocracy of priests: "Yea, and thus they were supported in their laziness, and in their idolatry, and in their whoredoms, by the taxes which king Noah had put upon his people; thus did the people labor exceedingly to support iniquity" (Mosiah 11:6). Noah drives away the Spirit through immoral activities and eventually loses his kingdom. His lack of concern for the welfare of his people leads first to uprisings against him and ultimately to his death (see Mosiah 19:20). Prophets throughout the Book of Mormon warn that certain types of leaders lend themselves more easily to corruption. Speaking to his people on the nature of kings, Mosiah says, "Therefore, if it were possible that you could have just men to be your kings, who would establish the laws of God, and judge this people according to his commandments . . . then it would be expedient that ye should always have kings to rule over you. . . . Now I say unto you, that because all men are not just it is not expedient that ye should have a king or kings to rule over you" (Mosiah 29:13, 16). Prophets emphasize the fact that all kings rule with different degrees of righteousness.

The power associated with such a position can easily lead weaker men to abuse it. In the book of Ether, the Jaredites experience many

problems with wicked kings: “And it came to pass that the people desired of them that they should anoint one of their sons to be a king over them. And now behold, this was grievous unto them. And the brother of Jared said unto them: Surely this thing leadeth into captivity” (Ether 6:22–23). If all leaders were righteous there would be no issue of safeguarding the people against those who would abuse power. Leaders with absolute power become corrupted more easily than others. The Book of Mormon contains many examples of unchecked monarchies that lead to totalitarian types of government.

However, not all those who fail to have the Spirit fail to be good leaders. King Morianton exemplifies this concept during his reign after the death of Riplakish: “And after that he had established himself king he did ease the burden of the people, by which he did gain favor in the eyes of the people, and they did anoint him to be their king. And he did do justice unto the people, but not unto himself because of his many whoredoms; wherefore he was cut off from the presence of the Lord” (Ether 10:10–11). The most important criterion for a good leader is caring for those you lead. This captures the very nature of leadership. The Spirit is not necessary for good leadership; however, righteous leaders such as King Benjamin, Helaman, Nephiah, and Moroni teach us that the Spirit facilitates righteous leadership.

Judges also constitute a major form of leadership in the Book of Mormon. Mosiah creates the system of judges because of difficulty in deciding who would become king. The system works to peacefully solve the problem and to create a less corruptible form of government. The system of judges affects society so profoundly that it changes the way time is kept in the records (see Mosiah 29:44). The judges stand accountable for all the activities of the government. They also prosecute criminals and preserve freedom. “Behold, it came to pass that the son of Nephiah was appointed to fill the judgment-seat, in the stead of his father; yea, he was appointed chief judge and governor over the people, with an oath and sacred ordinance to judge righteously, and to keep the peace and the freedom of the people, and to grant unto them their sacred privileges to worship the Lord their God, yea, to support and maintain

the cause of God all his days, and to bring the wicked to justice according to their crime” (Alma 50:39).

Judges check each other to create a less corruptible form of leadership than that of kings: “And now if ye have judges, and they do not judge you according to the law which has been given, ye can cause that they may be judged of a higher judge. If your higher judges do not judge righteous judgments, ye shall cause that a small number of your lower judges should be gathered together, and they shall judge your higher judges, according to the voice of the people” (Mosiah 29:28–29). The checks and balances in the system of the judges parallel those outlined in the United States Constitution. Both systems contain preventative measures intended to stop corruption and keep a balance of power. Both contain a natural restraint of power, which leads to less corruption within the government. However, in the book of Helaman the new system of judges, while an improvement over totalitarian monarchy, falls short of perfection. Nephi gives an account of the corruption of the government before the coming of Christ:

And seeing the people in a state of such awful wickedness, and those Gadianon robbers filling the judgment-seats—having usurped the power and authority of the land; laying aside the commandments of God, and not in the least aright before him; doing no justice unto the children of men;

Condemning the righteous because of their righteousness; letting the guilty and the wicked go unpunished because of their money; and moreover to be held in office at the head of government, to rule and do according to their wills, that they might get gain and glory of the world, and, moreover, that they might the more easily commit adultery, and steal, and kill, and do according to their own wills. (Helaman 7:4–5)

This infiltration of good government can be found in many nations throughout the world. The Book of Mormon teaches us to judge our leaders righteously and safeguard ourselves against those who would use their position to “commit adultery, and steal, and kill.” Because of this breakdown and corruption, the Nephite

nation becomes a failed state, living in anarchy with family tribes as protection. The Nephites lose the support system that righteous people give to their government, and therefore the system of judges dissolves. Checks and balances must function constantly to keep the judgment seats from being overrun with corruption. If there are not enough moral citizens to uphold the system, it will fail (see Mosiah 29:26–27).

Within the Nephite government, both the chief judges and the people elect military leaders, or captains (see Alma 46:34). Magistrates and military captains have very different duties and responsibilities. However, these inspired generals teach us a great deal about leadership. Because of the many wars waged by the Nephites, generals serve as an integral part of the government. During times of righteousness, military leaders have the spirit of prophecy. Helaman writes, “Now it was the custom among all the Nephites to appoint for their chief captains, (save it were in their times of wickedness) someone that had the spirit of revelation and also prophecy; therefore, this Gidgiddoni was a great prophet among them, as also was the chief judge” (3 Nephi 3:19).

The people support these leaders because they know the importance of the Lord’s guidance for their nation. Captains, who lead righteously but do not qualify as great prophets, consult with those who have the spirit of prophecy for guidance. For example, Zoram, a Nephite captain, seeks council from the prophet to gain strength: “Zoram and his two sons, knowing that Alma was high priest over the church, and having heard that he had the spirit of prophecy, therefore they went unto him and desired of him to know whither the Lord would that they should go” (Alma 16:5). Just as the citizens support the prophetic military leaders, those captains who lack the spirit of prophecy sometimes recognize its importance to their cause.

The most classic example of an elected general is Captain Moroni. Physically and mentally gifted, Moroni “took all the command, and the government of their wars. And he was only twenty and five years old when he was appointed chief captain over the armies of the Nephites” (Alma 43:17). However, Moroni’s most

important gifts and talents are not his military capabilities but his spiritual strengths. “Yea, verily, verily I say unto you, if all men had been, and were, and ever would be, like unto Moroni, behold, the very powers of hell would have been shaken forever; yea, the devil would never have power over the hearts of the children of men” (Alma 48:17). All these qualities contribute to make Captain Moroni a prime example of an excellent leader who cares for his people and is admirable in both mind and stature.

CITIZENS AND CIVIL LIBERTIES

The Book of Mormon also teaches us about citizenship and the proper rights and privileges associated with it. As we explore the relationship between the citizens and the government and then discuss the issue of civil liberties in the Book of Mormon, we find that citizens can either facilitate or limit a government’s defense of individual freedoms.

A government is nothing without those it governs. Both depend on each other. The government relies on those it governs for support. The people give their support and resources in exchange for protection. It is also the duty of the people to regulate and control the power of the government. This point is illustrated in the book of Alma, when Captain Moroni suspects indifference or rebellion within the government. He warns, “And I will come unto you, and if there be any among you that has a desire for freedom, yea, if there be even a spark of freedom remaining, behold I will stir up insurrections among you, even until those who have desires to usurp power and authority shall become extinct” (Alma 60:27).

The American government was founded on this very principle. The Declaration of Independence emphasizes that “whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or abolish it,” and again, “it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security.”¹ This shows that the people are not only responsible to support the government through taxes and material means, they are also responsible to regulate their

government. We see this when Moroni drives out the corrupt aristocracy and restores freedom: "And he did raise the standard of liberty in whatsoever place he did enter, and gained whatsoever force he could. . . . And it came to pass that thousands did flock unto his standard, . . . in the defense of their freedom. . . . And thus, when Moroni had gathered together whatsoever men he could . . . he came to the land of Gideon; and uniting his forces with those of Pahoran they became exceedingly strong, even stronger than the men of Pachus, who was the king of those dissenters who had driven the freemen out of the land of Zarahemla" (Alma 62:4–6). Moroni fights for the protection of civil rights within his country and against those who would corrupt the government, murder, and steal. Without regulation, government can overstep its bounds and infringe upon rights and civil liberties.

Citizens in the Book of Mormon clearly value civil liberties. "Now there was no law against a man's belief; for it was strictly contrary to the commands of God that there should be a law which should bring men on to unequal grounds. For thus saith the scripture: Choose ye this day, whom ye will serve" (Alma 30:7–8). This tolerance for other beliefs eases contention within a country and allows men their agency to choose. The most classic example or even the equivalent of this in our country is the Bill of Rights. "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances."² The purpose of the Bill of Rights is similar to what Alma states above: to keep men on equal grounds. This idea is necessary to maintain order and peace; it was also necessary for the restoration of the gospel.

The rights of those governed sometimes conflict with the good of the people. Several times in the Book of Mormon, as well as in modern history, the government curtails certain guaranteed rights for the good of the people. After Moroni reinstates a free form of government, the king-men who had rebelled are put into prison without trial. "And it came to pass that there were four thousand of those dissenters who were hewn down by the sword; and those of

their leaders who were not slain in battle were taken and cast into prison, for there was no time for their trials at this period. And the remainder of those dissenters, rather than be smitten down to the earth by the sword, yielded to the standard of liberty, and were compelled to hoist the title of liberty upon their towers, and in their cities, and to take up arms in defense of their country” (Alma 51:19–20). Traditionally, only severe emergency situations have prompted this curtailment of rights. In this instance, Lamanites invade and the king-men are on the verge of causing a civil war.

Certain standards dictate when this revocation of rights becomes necessary. Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes created the standard of “clear and present danger” in the case *Schenck v. United States*.³ Article I Section 9 of the Constitution states that “The privilege of the writ of habeas corpus shall not be suspended, unless when in cases of rebellion or invasion the public safety may require it.”⁴ Habeas corpus was suspended by Abraham Lincoln during the Civil War.⁵ The freedom of the press has also been revoked in the past, specifically during the invasion of Grenada, when a naval blockade was enforced by the United States Navy to keep all reporters off the island of Grenada.⁶ These actions were perceived as necessary to maintain order within the country. The moment these actions step beyond that point of necessity, aspects of our government need to be examined and possibly modified to further protect the rights of the majority of the people.

CONCLUSION

We can learn many lessons from both leaders and citizens in the Book of Mormon, where we find examples of both good and bad leaders. Leaders such as Noah and King Benjamin demonstrate that the difference between weak and strong leaders is whether they truly feel any responsibility for their people or whether they are concerned only for themselves. However, the burden of an effective government does not rest with its leaders alone. Ultimately, we as citizens are responsible for our government. In the Book of Mormon and the beginning of American history, the people rise up against unrighteous

governments to restore or establish just governments. The Book of Mormon illustrates the need for righteous citizens to judge their government. It also provides them with a standard to judge by: Are the government officials acting for themselves or for the people? Effective government and the freedoms it provides are directly connected with our righteousness as a people. As we maintain our government through our righteousness, we maintain our liberties and our freedoms.

NOTES

1. U.S. Department of State, "Declaration of Independence," Washington D.C.: GPO, 1776.
2. U.S. Department of State, "United States Constitution," Washington D.C.: GPO, 1787, Amendment 1.
3. See William A. McClenaghham, *Magruder's American Government* (Needham, Mass.: Prentice Hall, 2001), 547.
4. U.S. Department of State, "United States Constitution," Washington D.C.: GPO, 1787, Article 1 Section 9.
5. McClenaghham, *Magruder's American Government*, 547.
6. John Vivian, *The Media of Mass Communication*, 6th ed. (Boston, Mass.: Pearson Education, 2003), 444.