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Working out Salvation History in the Book of Mormon Politeia with Fear and Trembling

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Alan Goff

Review of James E. Faulconer, *Mosiah: A Brief Theological Introduction* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2020). 135 pages. $9.95 (paperback).

Abstract: *The Maxwell Institute for the Study of Religion has released another book in its series* The Book of Mormon: Brief Theological Introductions. *This book by James E. Faulconer more than ably engages five core elements of the book of Mosiah, exploring their theological implications. Faulconer puzzles through confusing passages and elements: why is the book rearranged so that it isn't in chronological order? What might King Benjamin mean when he refers to the nothingness of humans? And what might Abinadi mean when he declares that Christ is both the Father and the Son? The most interesting parts of the introduction to Mosiah are those chapters that sort through the discussion of politics as both Alma*$_1$ *and Mosiah*$_2$ *sort out divine preferences in constitutional arrangements as the Nephites pass through a political revolution that shifts from rule by kings to rule by judges. Faulconer asserts that no particular political structure is preferred by God; in the chapter about economic arrangements, Faulconer (as in his analysis of political constitutions) asserts that deity doesn't endorse any particular economic relationship.*

My kingdom is not of this world.
John 18:36

I believe in God, but I detest theocracy. For every Government consists of mere men and is, strictly viewed, a makeshift; if it adds to its commands "Thus saith the Lord," it lies, and lies dangerously.
C.S. Lewis, "Is Progress Possible"

> For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.
> Isaiah 55:8–9
>
> Behold, great and marvelous are the works of the Lord. How unsearchable are the depths of the mysteries of him; and it is impossible that man should find out all his ways. And no man knoweth of his ways save it be revealed unto him; wherefore, brethren, despise not the revelations of God.
> Jacob 4:8

James Faulconer has authored another in the Maxwell Institute's series *The Book of Mormon: Brief Theological Introductions*; his subject: the book of Mosiah. The examination is admirable in drawing deep exegetical insights from Mosiah despite the study's brevity. I'll quibble with Faulconer about passages he could have engaged; disagree with some readings; and extend some interpretations when my readings correspond with Faulconer's but call for more elaboration, but make no mistake that Faulconer has done a commendable job of highlighting important theological elements of Mosiah, themes and passages readers often read over casually without drawing out the deeper meaning present.

Brief introductions such as this are in vogue among publishers. Oxford University Press has the "very short introductions" series that highlights authors, countries, nuclear weapons, various philosophies, even improbable topics such as fire and teeth. Perhaps the best-known series of this type is the "for Dummies" series published by Wiley. (A book about theology for dummies would seem a confusion of audience: "learning made easy," asserts the publisher, as if learning is as easy as switching from baking cookies to doing no-bake cookies.) The Pelican Book imprint (Penguin) attempted from 1937 to 1984 to educate the British populace on economics, science, literature, and history — usually introduced by the adjective *popular* — and was revived in 2014 with subjects such as parenting, Marxism, the Anthropocene, and argumentation. Cambridge University Press does short introductions to management. MIT Press does the Essential Knowledge series with such topics as hate speech, phenomenology, contraception, and quantum entanglement.

In all these book series, the word that consistently pops up in promotional material is *accessible*. Much more specialized publishers produce brief introductions to topics in mathematics, psychology, science, and other subject areas. Something about contemporary Western cultural

conditioning trains readers to demand brevity (think of *CliffNotes* and *Sparknotes* summaries rather than the laborious-but-rewarding work of reading *War and Peace* or *Heart of Darkness* cover to cover, and do I understand correctly that the Quibi streaming service broadcasts complete scripted and unscripted programs lasting between seven and ten minutes?) Even Bollywood movies have reduced their average run time from three hours to half that to match modern attention spans (and generate more ticket sales in the same amount of screen runtime).

Returning to the book at point, let me summarize the book first (mingling some brief regrets about elements of Mosiah that Faulconer didn't address) while mixing in some issues and concepts I believe call for more detailed engagement. Perhaps some publisher will commit to a *Book of Mormon: Deep Theological Engagement* series which will permit Faulconer more far-reaching and sustained exploration.

Introduction

Faulconer's book makes no claims to comprehensiveness or definitiveness; brevity doesn't permit such possibilities. Faulconer works well within the constraints of the book series. The Introduction lays out the five themes the book develops, which happen to be the five numbered chapters of this book: (1) why Mosiah has the peculiar, nonchronological structure it has; (2) despite discussing good and bad government and leaders, Mosiah warns against the reader's too-human tendency to conflate particular forms of government, policies, or leaders with God's will (Mosiah "is *not* a tract about good government; if anything, it is an argument against mixing religion with politics" [9]); (3) when King Benjamin asserts that his listeners should keep in mind their own nothingness, Faulconer explains what that nothingness might mean to Benjamin; (4) what might Benjamin mean when he asks "Are we not all beggars?" with the implicit answer that we are. The point is not about our socio-economic status but rather to impress on the listener/reader the human place in the divine economy and the consequences of remission of sins. The last numbered chapter (5) takes up the confusing issue in Mosiah 15:1–5, which can be interpreted as a passage asserting a trinitarian relationship in the Godhead between the Father and Son. The discussion in this chapter is as close as the book gets to doing systematic theology.

The Introduction is representative of the book generally as a model of compositional clarity and simplicity in writing. I can and will lament that Faulconer doesn't address some issues or raise some questions, always recognizing that the small physical format (5″ by 8″) and page

limit (150) as specified by what the series editors impose as strict limits on the concerns Faulconer could take up. An example of a topic I would have liked considered is the name of the book. The content could have led to its being called the book of Abinadi or the book of Benjamin (for surely each is more prominently featured than Mosiah$_2$ is), but it is the book of Mosiah. The Hebrew root *m-s-h* is the stem of the word we read in English as *messiah* (often transliterated as *mashiach*). Of course, *Mosiah* has that same *m-s-h/y-s-h* base (vowels in the biblical text are post-biblical, so vowel notation in the written form of the Hebrew Bible is somewhat speculative; the Hebrew name *Mosiah* means "savior"). The word straightforwardly means "anointed," but usually with the alternate translation of "to save," in the nominal form "savior," or "the Lord saves or delivers." Surely the name of the book has something to do with the theological themes and the salvation history written into the narrative: (a) Benjamin's people hear the word of salvation, which hearing changes their life trajectories, (b) the Limhi and Alma$_1$ groups are saved/delivered from bondage to Lamanites, (c) Alma$_2$ and the sons of Mosiah$_2$ are saved from sin and debauchery, and (d) the reunified Nephite and Mulekite groups undergo a political revolution from leadership by kings to leadership by judges in an attempt to save the polity from a repetition of King Noah's ruinous reign.

Chapter 1: Why This Structure?

Faulconer accepts the consensus view that Mosiah was the first portion of the Book of Mormon we read that Joseph Smith dictated. After Martin Harris lost the first manuscript, Smith resumed translation from the large plates of Nephi (apparently from the narrative juncture where he left off), dictated Mosiah through to Moroni, then went back and filled in the earlier part by translating First Nephi through the Words of Mormon from the small plates. This is known as the Mosiah-first theory of Book of Mormon composition. The book of Mosiah itself has some chronological problems to work out. When we read the book of Mosiah we often don't grasp that the reading order is not the chronological order of events recounted in the book.

The book of Mosiah itself is fragmentary, and Faulconer asserts that structure becomes theme. The Lehite group fragments into Nephites and Lamanites, Mosiah$_1$ leaves the original land of inheritance to settle in Zarahemla, Zeniff separates to return to the land of Nephi, which colony divides into those led by Limhi and Alma$_1$. By the end of the book, these

divisions are nullified as the remaining Nephites are reunited in Zarahemla. Similarly, Faulconer reads the text of Mosiah as itself fragmented.

The events in Mosiah have been disassembled like an anagram puzzle and reassembled in a different order than the chronological timeline. The chronology would have the following trajectory (13–17):

1. The chronological book of Mosiah would start in Mosiah 9 with Zeniff leading a group to recolonize the land of Nephi and continue through the ministry and death of Abinadi and subsequent capture of the Limhi group by Lamanites. (The implication here is that the main Nephite group at Zarahemla doesn't experience the Noah/Abinadi confrontation except as it is recounted after the fact.)
2. The $Alma_1$ group flees from King Noah's army to find refuge in Helam and is soon brought into Lamanite bondage.
3. Benjamin delivers his address and transfers the kingship to $Mosiah_2$. Benjamin then dies. (The implication here is that the Zeniff group — or their parents — were present to hear or read Benjamin's speech in Zarahemla about 75 years before Zeniff recolonizes the land of Nephi.)
4. $Mosiah_2$ sends Ammon and a search party to find the Zeniff group. Under Limhi, the Zeniff group escapes Lamanite bondage by returning to Zarahemla.
5. $Alma_1$'s group escapes Lamanite bondage in their exodus to Zarahemla. Alma becomes high priest over all the Nephites and Mulekites at Zarahemla.
6. Younger Nephites — including $Alma_2$ and the sons of $Mosiah_2$ — rebel, are converted, and prepare to preach to the Lamanites.
7. $Mosiah_2$ translates the Jaredite record retrieved under the auspices of Limhi.
8. $Mosiah_2$ leads a political revolution that transforms the government from kingship to judgeship. The reign of the judges commences when $Alma_2$ becomes the first chief judge. $Mosiah_2$ and $Alma_1$ die.

The main element moved out of chronological order is number 3: King Benjamin's speech has been moved to the beginning of the book of Mosiah. Readers infrequently understand that the death of Abinadi and conversion of $Alma_1$ occur some seven decades before Benjamin's speech, and $Alma_1$'s splinter group converges with the Zarahemla main body of Nephites just four years after that speech (17). Faulconer notes that

the rearrangement of Mosiah is intentional, and the structure conveys a large part of the book's theological and political message, although the reader may miss the point by being confused about the timeline. The reorganization of the content places a focus on government at the center point in the narrative. The first section (chapters 1–16) builds a comparison of a good king (Benjamin) with a bad king (Noah). The second half (chapters 17–29) develops a discussion of good government and bad government (again with an example of good kingship, $Mosiah_2$'s, with bad kingship cited as a stumbling block, Noah's) with a focus on administrative structure.

The book's emphasis on government results from the divisions in Nephite society. Benjamin's speech reacts to fragmentation; $Mosiah_2$'s constitutional change in leadership structure attempts to solve the problem of disunion. Despite modeling five good kings ($Mosiah_1$, $Mosiah_2$, Benjamin, Zeniff, and Limhi), the example of one bad king and his deliberate cultivation of division among the people causes $Mosiah_2$ to urge constitutional change. But even after governmental transformation, the political and religious fragmentations continue as the false doctrine of Nehor (Alma 1) and attempted coup d'état by Amlici (Alma 2) demonstrate (to go slightly beyond the narrative Faulconer restricts himself to) the theme. "Benjamin's answer to the question of unity, the answer with which the book of Mosiah begins, is repentance and keeping covenant rather than a form of government" (24). Religious conversion is the answer to faction: politics isn't (in fact, politics is most often a root cause of division). Although Benjamin's sermon results in unity, the solution must be found anew, at least in every generation. Absent the change of heart that comes with religious transformation, cardiac divisions remain. Even after $Mosiah_2$'s political reforms, Nehor attempts a religious revolution and Amlici attempts a political reversion to kingship (Alma 2:1 ties Nehor to Amlici); Alma needs to resign the chief judgeship to engage in religious revival (Alma 4) and the resulting reunification of Nephite hearts. Place your faith in God by whose grace hearts can change, is the theme, and don't devote yourself to utopian political schemes, partisan institutions, or politicians. The book of Mosiah's major theme is this: don't make the mistake of believing governments can save souls. $Mosiah_2$ is the last of the Nephite kings and $Alma_2$ the first of the Nephite chief judges; but $Alma_2$'s resignation from the judgeship just four chapters into the book of Alma points to the limits of politics if conversion of hearts and minds is the object and design of our existence.

Chapter 2: Good Kings and Bad Kings: The Futility of Politics, the Necessity of Atonement

Faulconer's analysis of Mosiah's structure continues with his discussion of politics in chapter 2. Mosiah's governmental reform enacts change from kingship to judgeship. This discussion is appropriate, for the book of Mosiah is the Book of Mormon politeia as much as 1 Samuel 8–12 (often included in such description is Deuteronomy 17:14–20) is frequently called the *biblical politeia*; those biblical passages anticipate and enact political transformation from judgeship to kingship; the first part of the Deuteronomistic History (Joshua, Judges, 1 Samuel) are as concerned with leadership of the Israelites by judges as the rest of that history is about leadership by kings (2 Samuel to 2 Kings). Robert Alter and Richard B. Hays have pioneered readings of the Hebrew Bible and New Testament which demonstrate the complexity and ubiquity of allusion in those texts. Alter notes the constant state of allusion present in the Hebrew Bible, a form of textuality resulting from the intellectual process of the writers and their views of history: he refers to "the paramount importance of intrabiblical allusion for ancient Hebrew writers";[1] and a foundational element for that intertextuality is the Hebraic belief that historical events repeat over and over in patterns of apostasy, exoduses, and divine deliverance repeating prototypes, archetypes, and models from the past. Hays notes the same for the New Testament: "If we want to understand what the New Testament writers were doing theologically — particularly how they interpreted the relation of the gospel to the more ancient story of God's covenant relationship to Israel — we cannot avoid tracing and understanding their appropriation of Israel's Scriptures."[2] Hebraic literature constantly alludes to other portions of the biblical text, and the reader who doesn't explicitly read for such connections misses a large part of the meaning; much work needs to be done in exploring Book of Mormon intertextuality with the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, and portions of the Nephite scripture itself that precede the passage doing the alluding.

What is true of biblical textuality is also the pattern of Nephite scripture, which puts itself in constant typological relationship with the portions of the Hebrew Bible the Lehi group brought with them to their

1. Robert Alter, *The World of Biblical Literature* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), x.

2. Richard B. Hays, *The Conversion of the Imagination: Paul as Interpreter of Israel's Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2005), 27.

promised land and additional biblical content revealed to the Nephite group. To understand what the Book of Mormon politeia attempts to teach its readers one must understand what the biblical politeia taught its Nephite readers. Jim Faulconer and David Gore[3] correctly read the posture of Mosiah, which doesn't put the divine stamp of approval on forms of government. In other words and using contemporary contexts and an updating of the scriptural text used throughout the interpretive history of the Bible called typology with its type/antitype structure, God is not a Republican or Democrat, Tory or Labourite, free-market capitalist or socialist (and each of these ideologies and parties can and do easily become idols of the cave). These are human institutions and arrangements constructed and peopled by fallible humans with spotty records and histories, each with an admixture of good and evil; and those who assert a divine mandate for their preferred political structures, factions, or stances don't understand the divine discontent with not only the clay pot made by the potter's hand but the potter as human clay made by divine hands (Jeremiah 18:1–12) (this is not a form of political relativism in which all political and economic structures are equal [equally good or equally bad] in some way, but like the pigs who are all equal while some are more equal than others, some institutions are more evil than others, and comparison of political and economic systems requires a granular examination of ways in which systems are better and worse in different aspects than others). God's work requires constantly building up and breaking down, planting and pulling up, consecrating and desecrating what humans have fashioned, misshapen, and mangled:

> O house of Israel, cannot I do with you as this potter? saith the Lord. Behold, as the clay is in the potter's hand, so are ye in mine hand, O house of Israel. At what instant I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, and to pull down, and to destroy it; If that nation, against whom I have pronounced, turn from their evil, I will repent of the evil that I thought to do unto them. And at what instant I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to build and to plant it, If it do evil in my sight, that it obey not my voice, then I will repent of the good, wherewith I said I would benefit them. (Jeremiah 18:6–10)

3. David Charles Gore, *The Voice of the People: Political Rhetoric in the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2019).

The divine-human interaction is one of God executing one plan, only to have humans mess it up after a single or a few generations, requiring a reset with one divine Groundhog Day repetition after another.

Genesis has the divine plan beginning with Adam and Eve's imposing stringent requirements on the humans (vegetarianism, comity between humans and animals), but by chapter 6 human society has devolved into violence and sin, in just two generations. Noah is a second Adam (both iterations are gardeners, each receives the same command to multiply and fill the earth, each is given a fresh new earth to populate), but this time the animals fear humans, for animal flesh joins plants as human food (Genesis 9:1–7). The violent tendencies humans manifest toward each other, beginning with Cain, now have a different potential outlet, for post-deluge humans can kill animals for food (antediluvian animals were sacrificed, but not eaten). The God of Genesis wants to bless all humanity, but the violence and corruption to which humans are prone in the primeval period causes God to wipe the slate clean and start over again with Noah and his descendants. That tactic soon results in post-deluge violence and division comparable to Cain's murder of Abel (after which Cain founds the first city with a polity based on coercion and brutality) with the Tower of Babel and the prototypical municipality's project of constructing a tower high enough to permit the storming of heaven and overthrowing of God. St. Augustine saw Cain's murder of Abel and Romulus's murder of Remus as paradigmatic for all human societies: violence and murder are the foundation of the city of man. One common definition of government among political scientists today is that organization which can make plausible claims to a monopoly on the use of violence in a society.

An aspect of the narrative in Mosiah calls the reader to see the biblical Noah as a new Adam, but also King Noah as a new Noah (and, therefore, a new Adam also). Having migrated to a new land under Zeniff, King Noah's father, King Noah repeats the biblical Noah's act of planting a vineyard and imbibing the wine to his shame (Genesis 9:20–21), "And Noah began to be an husbandman, and he planted a vineyard: And he drank of the wine, and was drunken; and he was uncovered within his tent"). Similarly, King Noah "planted vineyards round about in the land; and he built wine-presses, and made wine in abundance; and therefore he became a wine-bibber and also his people" (Mosiah 11:15). Noah is the type, King Noah the antitype.

God's plan C in the sublunary working out of the divine design is to covenant with Abraham and his offspring that all of humanity might be

blessed. The genesis story shows God dumbing down expectations of humans to see what formal social arrangements are best adapted to human nature and human weakness, for human benefit. This is how the reader ought to view the biblical and Book of Mormon politeia narratives, both instances of God planting crops and pulling up weeds once humans are exiled to the lone and dreary world of politics and economics; God is not locked-in to kingship or judgeship, parliamentary or presidential democracy, authoritarianism or anarchy, merchantilism or feudalism. Plan D narrows the focus to a subset of Abraham's seed. The initial plans with Adam and Eve and later with the Noachide laws encompass all of humanity. Then focus fastens on Abraham and his posterity. That plan then narrows to Jacob and his offspring. Moses and the Mosaic covenant represent another divine attempt create a pattern among the Israelites so the whole world of humanity might witness the divine power and love. After exiles and conquests, the Jews are the remnant of earlier chosen people.

That is why when the people ask for a king as do all the nations in 1 Samuel 8–12, both Samuel and God are disappointed, but God still acquiesces to the popular will. The Israelites aren't satisfied with charismatic judges who are sent by God when circumstances become dire (usually under military threat from Philistines or other neighbors) but want leadership that is dynastic, reliable from generation to generation rather than reliance on God to raise up a judge/deliverer (with some of these judges a *mosiah* or *savior* is sent: Judges 6:14–15, 36–37; 7:71 Samuel 7:8; 9:16 regarding Gideon, Samuel, and Saul as saviors) in a crisis. Samuel, the last of the judges, resists the voice of the people, viewing it as a rejection of him rather than of God, but God urges him to grant the people's desire: "Hearken unto the voice of the people in all that they say unto thee: for they have not rejected thee, but they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them" (1 Samuel 8:7). God then instructs Samuel to articulate the "manner of the king": corvee labor, appropriation of property, confiscation of one-tenth of the people's agricultural and pastoral goods, impressing sons and daughters into the king's service (and the rest of the books of Samuel and Kings demonstrate the realization of these consequences, especially under Solomon), and the concentration of political power in the king's household, along with the potential for despotism that results; that is why of King Noah the book of Mosiah notes that he taxed one-fifth of all the people's goods; the Book of Mormon alludes to Samuel's "manner" of the king to show that Noah is twice as rapacious as the kings of Israel and Judah are predicted to be (Mosiah 11:3). This "manner" of the king can be viewed as legislation:

Samuel warns the people what the institutional arrangements will be once they have a king, as all the nations do. Yet the Israelites insist: "but we will have a king over us" (1 Samuel 8:19).

The book of Mosiah wants to ensure that readers catch the comparison between Samuel (the last Israelite judge who institutes kingship) with $Mosiah_2$ (the last Nephite king who institutes judgeship) by providing allusive references between the two. As $Mosiah_2$ possesses seer stones to translate the Jaredite record, the account assures the reader these are antique devices, for "whosoever has these things is called a seer, after the manner of old times" (Mosiah 28:16), presumably divination tools that extend deep into the biblical past. The reader is also alerted by being told the relationship between a seer and a prophet. When Limhi asks Ammon if anyone can translate the Jaredite record, Ammon notes that $Mosiah_2$ has stated "that a seer is greater than a prophet" (Mosiah 8:15), because "a seer can know of things which are past, and also of things which are to come" (Mosiah 8:17); $Mosiah_2$ is soon going to embark on structural governmental reform, just as Samuel did. When the first king of Israel is about to be revealed to Samuel the prophet and Saul goes in search of the lost asses, we are similarly told the relationship between a seer and a prophet: Saul's servant urges Saul to ask the local prophet (Samuel) where the asses are, for "he that is now called a Prophet was beforetime called a Seer" (1 Samuel 9:9).

The Book of Mormon politeia is in constant allusive dialogue with not just 1 Samuel 8–12 and Deuteronomy 17 but the entire Deuteronomistic History (Joshua through 2 Kings), which also explores the nature and quality of leadership (a dialogue I won't have space to explore in this review). Faulconer notes the relevance of biblical engagements with politics and how that discussion is carried out in the Book of Mormon in relation to the Israelite records the Nephites brought with them. "The Bible, however, not only is concerned with the fact that a wicked king is likely to oppress the people and to be difficult to overthrow. It also shows a direct correlation between good rulers and good people as well as between corrupt rulers and bad people" (31–32). Except Faulconer doesn't refer to First Samuel to make this point but to Isaiah 32:1–8.

As Faulconer notes, the political content of Mosiah depends on comparison of good kings (Benjamin and $Mosiah_2$ in particular) with wicked King Noah. Noah believes he is above the people he rules, making up his own rules and laws for himself and his sycophants, that the power of armies and institutions can keep a polity together; but Noah doesn't realize that politics and power can't unify the people:

"Noah believes that power, his power, can prevent these differences, and he trusts that it will" (35). But it is Benjamin's approach, not Noah's, that brings a society together: "When it comes to the creation of unity, now as well as in the eternities, politics is futile, unable to bring about the end it desires" (42). That doesn't mean people should eschew politics, just realize its limitations. "To say that politics is futile is to say that there is no particular politics of righteousness: politics is futile for the purpose of making people good, but not for organizing them to live better lives" (42–43). Politics can make good people bad, but it can't make bad people good. "No politics will make us good. We must already be good independent of our politics. So there are Christians in politics, but Christianity does not imply any particular politics: not a monarchy, not judges, not a Confucian state, neither American-style democracy nor European-style social democracy" (43).

The Deuteronomistic History has lots of kings to choose from, but it also highlights for comparison good and bad kings. For the Northern Kingdom the paradigmatic evil kings are abundant: Jeroboam (who introduced idol worship) and Ahab (both syncretistic, greedy, and murderous) stand out. The Southern Kingdom of Judah has an archetypal evil king (Manasseh) and two good kings: Josiah and Hezekiah. Just three kings into the Israelite experiment with kingship, the United Kingdom even had one king who is both the paradigmatic good and evil king: Solomon is the wise and righteous king early in his reign and the syncretistic king later in his reign who likely served as the chief model of what kings should not do in Deuteronomy 17's Law of the King.

In the transition from judges to kings, God shows the people choosing badly and lays out the consequences, but God acquiesces to the request despite Samuel's objections. At least when those Nephites who followed Alma_1 in fleeing from Noah are foolish enough to desire a king like all the nations they have known ("the people were desirous that Alma should be their king," Mosiah 23:6), the never-past-and-not-to-be-featured king persuades the people to rescind their desires, citing evil King Noah as an example of the potential, bad consequences, referring to his own experience and desire rather than attributing the leadership arrangement to God, for "*I say unto you* [not thus saith the Lord] it is not expedient that ye should have a king" (Mosiah 23:7). Similarly, when Mosiah_2 urges the people to transition from kingship, he doesn't attribute the institutional change to God's command but to his own prudential judgment: "*I command you to do these things*, and that ye have no king" (Mosiah 29:30); Alma_1 urges the people to choose wisely and "trust no

man to be a king over you" nor trust no man to be your teacher, minister, president, or governor "except he be a man of God, walking in his ways and keeping his commandments" (Mosiah 23:13–14). $Alma_1$ permits himself to be consecrated high priest at this point and later selected as chief judge, but he too well understands the all-too-human capacity for abuse of power after the fall. Or, as Faulconer explains the matter, "Understanding the futility of politics means recognizing what good politics can do — help us organize ourselves productively and efficiently — and especially what it cannot do, make us good" (43).

The theological message the reader should take away from the two politeias is that certain foundational events are universal because human nature and the unfolding of the divine plan are general. They repeat time and again. The premises of such recurrence are that (1) God is in charge of the universe and history and (2) repetitions are built into the system so that one can look backward or forward in time to see the divine blueprint unfolding. So the modern reader should see not only $Mosiah_2$ and $Alma_1$ looking back to see their situation as a repetition of biblical times past, but we should even find in the twenty-first century that circumstance, human fallenness, and political happenstance repeat themselves, for we contemporary readers want as much as the ancient Israelites or ancient Nephites to be like all the nations.

This split vision of seership looks to the past and the future simultaneously. Mosiah doesn't endorse any particular governmental structure, but the book condemns corrupt and abusive government no matter the form and endorses good government that promotes the interests of the populace rather than serving the welfare of elites. In portraying a tyrant-king, the Book of Mormon repeats an archetype found commonly in the Old Testament, the ancient Near East, and virtually everywhere and everywhen (even today). King Noah is the archetype of bad government in the Book of Mormon, evidenced by explicit corruption and self-dealing while living high at the taxpayers' expense (making the Zeniff/Noah/Limhi line a monarchic generational and dynastic burden on the people, while failing — as Faulconer points out all politics do — to make people better). Noah engaged in the following worst practices of governance. He

- built opulent buildings to show off wealth and power to the populace (Mosiah 11:8, 13);
- sent his brown-shirted troops to suppress his own dissenting people when they protested his rule (Mosiah 18:33; 19:1–2);

- surrounded himself with corrupt sycophants and yes-men, even requiring the people to flatter their dear leader and his cabinet-full and basket-full of priests (Mosiah 11:7);
- coveted riches (Mosiah 11:14);
- like any narcissist, served his own selfish interests rather than the public good (Mosiah 29:23; 19:8);
- boasted in an illusory or short-lived strength over enemies and divided people rather than bringing them together (Mosiah 11:19);
- engaged concubines, harlots, and whores (Mosiah 11:2, 14);
- threatened to use violence to retain political office when challenged (Mosiah 14:4–7);
- further nurturing his edifice complex, built a tall tower (the putatively tallest tower in the principal city) to surveil his people and his enemies (Mosiah 11:12);
- placed a heavy taxation burden on his people to support iniquity without paying any taxes himself (a tax burden of 20% of their income) (Mosiah 11:3);
- planted vineyards for wine production and drove his people to drink (Mosiah 11:15);
- put himself above the law: "it is not expedient that we should have a king; for thus saith the Lord: Ye shall not esteem one flesh above another, or one man shall not think himself above another" (Mosiah 23:7), nor above the law when holding a position of power;
- like wicked autocrats everywhere (that is, all autocrats) appointed his cronies and sycophants to governmental positions by "chang[ing] the affairs of the kingdom" (Mosiah 11:4), firing the previous priests and appointing new counselors in his own image (Mosiah 11:5), and spreading corruption throughout the body politic from the top down: "For behold, he has his friends in iniquity, and he keepeth his guards about him; and he teareth up the laws of those who have reigned in righteousness before him; and he trampleth under his feet the commandments of God; And he enacteth laws, and sendeth them forth among his people, yea, laws after the manner of his own wickedness; and whosoever doth not obey his laws he causeth to be destroyed; and whosoever doth rebel against him he will

> send his armies against them to war, and if he can he will destroy them; and thus an unrighteous king doth pervert the ways of all righteousness" (Mosiah 29:22–23);
> - caused the people to suffer, for as Mosiah$_2$ enumerates just a few of the disadvantages, plagues and divisions that result from having a wicked potentate rule over them: "And he also unfolded unto them all the disadvantages they labored under, by having an unrighteous king to rule over them; Yea, all his iniquities and abominations, and all the wars, and contentions, and bloodshed, and the stealing, and the plundering, and the committing of whoredoms, and all manner of iniquities which cannot be enumerated — telling them that these things ought not to be, that they were expressly repugnant to the commandments of God" (Mosiah 29:35–36).

Having had one close call and narrow escape from tyranny and bondage under King Noah (the type of the evil ruler), the Nephites had the prudence when another putative king came along (just five years after Mosiah$_2$'s reforms went into effect) attempting to overthrow self-governance, the people's voice came against making Amlici king (Alma 2:7), whose wickedness drove him and his followers to reject the voice of the people and attempt a coup d'état by force. It is neither coincidental nor accidental that usurpers who would be kings (Amlici and Amelickiah), long before explicit kingmen emerge in the narrative, were led by those whose name has their aspirations nominalized (the root word *m-l-k* means "king" in Hebrew). Those who supported Amlici's kingly bid in an election failed, and they proceeded to extra-constitutionally consecrate Amlici king and use force to overturn the will of the people (Alma 2:7–10), which would be comparable today to supporting a King Noah despite such a king's having been straightforwardly rejected in a reelection campaign. These repetitions over long time spans teach the reader that history repeats itself and that God acts through not only repetitions of wicked rulers but also through deliverances from such would-be or has-been kings.

The lesson Mosiah$_2$ wants the Nephites to learn (and contemporary readers today) is that one evil ruler can negate the work of many good rulers, and structural safeguards such as institutional arrangements cannot in the absence of a righteous populace when constitutional guardrails are constantly under pressure to ensure against populist or elitist authoritarianism. It is, says Mosiah$_2$, uncommon for the majority to choose unrighteously, but common that a minority of the popular

vote might select unrighteously (Mosiah 29:26), "And if the time comes that the voice of the people doth choose iniquity, then is the time that the judgments of God will come upon you" (Mosiah 29:27). The Israelites unwisely rejected God from being their king in order to be like all the nations; the Zeniffites imprudently appointed Noah to succeed Zeniff as king, and he "did cause his people to commit sin, and do that which was abominable in the sight of the Lord. Yea, and they did commit whoredoms and all manner of wickedness" (Mosiah 11:2) because they did not learn the lesson from past repetitions of tyranny and oppression.

Exegesis of such recurrences in scripture is theological if we believe that God's mighty acts of salvation repeat themselves over time, for we will want to know how humans have dealt with God and God has dealt with humans in the past. "For he that diligently seeketh shall find; and the mysteries of God shall be unfolded unto them, by the power of the Holy Ghost, as well in these times as in times of old, and as well in times of old as in times to come; wherefore, the course of the Lord is one eternal round" (1 Nephi 10:19); and those lessons learned by saints of former days are relevant to saints of latter days, because we humans, all too human as we are, are prone to repeat mistakes from past lessons unlearned, which require divine intervention along patterns witnessed in bygone times. King Noah's greed, arrogance, corruption, lawlessness, narcissism, and selfishness are not how proper kings should act, and therefore neither kingly nor unpresidented [sic] in the history of national leadership. Cyrus is not the type repeated over time and historical circumstances, nor the antitype to be learned from today. King Noah is.

Chapter 3: Salvation as Creation from Nothing: Mosiah 4:1–12

Faulconer spends two chapters examining portions of Benjamin's speech, parts that may puzzle readers. Faulconer performs the exegetical work that theology often does to clarify a sacred text. After giving his sermon and seeing the congregation recognize their own carnal and fallen state while pleading for the grace of God, Benjamin further urges them that "if the knowledge of the goodness of God at this time has awakened you to a sense of your nothingness, and your worthless and fallen state" (Mosiah 4:5), the audience should embrace the right view of their place in the cosmos. This troubles some readers who have an exalted view of humanity and its place as divinities in embryo to think of humanity as "nothing." Faulconer makes a case that "nothing" here means not worthless or nonexistent (as in creation ex nihilo: "creation out of nothing") but as "no-thing," meaning indeterminate or unformed

matter. The restoration tradition doesn't adhere to the notion of creation out of nothing, but God's creative act is to take chaotic, formless matter and organize it much as a potter would at the wheel.

Commonly in his speech, Benjamin uses the simile that humans are like the dust of the earth out of which God shaped the created order we now live in. But even dust obeys the divine command. "Implicitly, Benjamin moves from the formlessness of dust prior to our creation to the form we receive as sons and daughters of Adam and Eve in relationship with God" (50). Faulconer's reading connects Benjamin's dust and creation to the creation account in Genesis, because Adam and Eve were also created out of the dust of the earth. We too are formless until we are shaped and created, spun out of dirt into a workable vessel; the listeners see themselves as "even less than the dust of the earth" (Mosiah 4:2) because they are responding directly to Benjamin's words that "Ye cannot say that ye are even as much as the dust of the earth; yet ye were created of the dust of the earth; but behold, it belongeth to him who created you" (Mosiah 2:25). The audience and the readers don't belong to themselves but to God, who created them out of dust. "Benjamin is thinking analogously about human beings: having been created from formlessness by the Father, we have lowered ourselves to formlessness again through sin" (56). The goal of Benjamin's sermon is to have the audience and the reader be re-formed and re-shaped by becoming new creatures.

Chapter 4: Are We Not All Beggars? Mosiah 4:12–28

In Chapter 4 Faulconer notes the effects of Benjamin's sermon on its audience, the effects it might have on the reader of Mosiah. Faulconer lists 12 such effects, most of them tied into obligations of service. One of the consequences is that a Zarahemla audience should result in people experiencing this rebirth. "These actions are among the ways that those whose sins have been remitted will imitate their Redeemer in service" (62). Benjamin articulates these outcomes not as commandments but as the products of having sins remitted. The first cluster of results has to do with spiritual depth: we will rejoice, be filled with God's love, retain a remission of sins, and grow in knowledge God and his works; Faulconer articulates all of these as not just individual virtues but one's affecting the community (63–66). The next cluster of follow-on results impact family and community: teaching children and dealing justly with neighbors. Another cluster focuses on succoring those who need our help. Faulconer singles out the three classes of people affected by these obligations that we naturally fulfill after our hearts are changed:

the rich, the poor, and the beggar, the only passage in which the word *beggar* is used in the Book of Mormon. Since Benjamin's speech is a call to a changed heart that produces service, the implication is that we have a duty to serve the beggar. "Benjamin is not arguing for social change. He neither says nor implies that having a society with both rich and poor is a problem. Nor does he say that it isn't. The existence of all three social classes that he mentions creates an obligation of economic redistribution for each of the top two classes, but Benjamin says nothing about what kind of political or economic system (if any) his thinking leads to" (72). Just as particular political systems are for humans to work out in the mangle and muddle of principle and practice, so too are the economic systems humans attempt to realize a better society and not divinely directed, enacted, or endorsed.

Chapter 5: God Himself Shall Come Down

One can see in Maxwell Institute promotional material published by *The Church News* about the series the sensitivity to the notion that we in the restoration tradition don't do theology, but we do do doctrine. "That term can scare some people off, but all we mean by 'theology' is a more considered and reflective meditation on the scriptures and their implications," says Terryl Givens: "Theology just means 'God talk,' 'God discourse.' … So theology is a way of trying to be more introspective and contemplative about our faith in rigorous ways. … Rigor is one of the hallmarks of this series; it's not about erudition or sophistication, or academic training or language. It's just about thinking harder about gospel things."[4] Faulconer grapples in the fifth chapter with the question of how to understand in Abinadi's theology how Jesus can be considered both the Father and the Son while concurrently members of the Church of Christ are doctrinally committed to the notion that members of the Godhead are distinct and separate personages.

One can discern from the fact that Faulconer feels the need to define the word "Trinitarian" for the general audience he aims to reach (83) that he has a nonspecialist audience in mind. Faulconer parses the context and syntax of the passage (Mosiah 15:1–5) to clarify the meaning. The theological problem of Christology — the problem Faulconer addresses: how can Christ be both divine and human — has a long history in the

4. Grace Carter, "Maxwell Institute Series Helps Readers See the Book of Mormon Through New Eyes," *Church News*, May 7, 2020, https://www.thechurchnews.com/living-faith/2020-05-07/maxwell-institute-book-of-mormon-brief-theological-introductions-183308.

Christian tradition (90), and the Nephites at various times also grappled with the problem (89). Abinadi's is the first reference to the condescension of Christ in the chronological structure of the Nephite record. In a literal deus ex machina, Christ comes among men and takes humanity upon himself yet remains divine. An angel visits Benjamin and explains that Christ is all of three beings: the Son of God, the Father of heaven and earth, and the Creator. The various roles and aspects don't exclude the possibilities of others. Yet, even though this doctrine was taught to the Nephites throughout the time covered by the Book of Mormon (including among the Jaredites), "that it needed to be taught over and over again suggests that people found it difficult to believe" (99), just as we do also. After a close exegesis of the relevant passages which the reader would be better served to read directly from Faulconer than have me summarize, "the upshot is that aspects of these verses can be read in Trinitarian terms, as some have suggested, but they need not be" (105). For Faulconer, Mosiah 15 is not a discourse about the being or ontology of the Godhead nor a discussion about their relationship to each other. It is merely Abinadi's explanation of what it means for God to come to earth tabernacled in flesh and blood and become mortal (109).

This brief theological discussion of Mosiah (rightly, I think, as Faulconer asserts, the most complex book in the Book of Mormon) ends with a brief conclusion which reminds the reader that the book of Mosiah is a "fragmentary book about a fragmented people … obsessed with the question of unity" (112), which can be achieved only through the grace of the atonement clothed in the garments of service. The book of Mosiah tries as hard as Benjamin and Mosiah_2 to unify the readers' hearts and minds, from the opening to the book of Mosiah to the closing chapter. Even in the middle, another of the fragmented Nephite groups is told by Alma_1 how to move forward in faith and service: "And he commanded them that there should be no contention one with another, but that they should look forward with one eye, having one faith and one baptism, having their hearts knit together in unity and in love one towards another" (Mosiah 18:21). The gospel and the atonement might make a new creation of us, and out of many, one.

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