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The Captain and the Covenant

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Thomas R. Valletta

Mormon masterfully abridged the scriptural record about Moroni, chief captain of the Nephite armies, demonstrating to his anticipated readers that this was a man most needed not only for his day, but also for our own. He explicitly editorialized for those who might otherwise miss his point: “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). In accordance with Mormon’s hopes, Captain Moroni endures as a model of courage and righteousness to many Latter-day Saints. His powerful example is obscured only by ignorance and misunderstanding of the world in which he lived. Brigham Young taught that the scriptures can best be understood by reading them “as though [we] stood in the place of the men who wrote them” (*Journal of Discourses* 7:333; hereafter *JD*). There is an immense historical and cultural distance separating Moroni from modern comprehension. This distance can be narrowed by striving to view Moroni within the context of his own world. While that project is far too encompassing for the scope of this chapter, one particularly fruitful area worth investigating concerns Moroni’s covenantal perspective.

In Mormon’s view, Captain Moroni exemplified the model Nephite disciple of Christ:

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[He] was a strong and a mighty man; he was a man of a perfect understanding; yea, a man that did not delight in bloodshed; a man whose soul did joy in the liberty and the freedom of his country, and his brethren from bondage and slavery; Yea, a man whose heart did swell with thanksgiving to his God, for the many privileges and blessings which he bestowed upon his people; a man who did labor exceedingly for the welfare and safety of his people. Yea, and he was a man who was firm in the faith of Christ, and he had sworn with an oath to defend his people, his rights, and his country, and his religion, even to the loss of his blood. (Alma 48:11–13)

This seemingly simple list of character qualities, scrutinized within the context of modern times, raises important questions. For example: What constitutes “perfect understanding” and how is it obtained? For one who “does not delight in bloodshed” but rejoices in the “sacred word of God” (Alma 44:5), why is Captain Moroni seemingly so committed to the sword? What is the source and meaning of his ancient law of liberty? What is the origin and nature of the Nephite oaths that might cause him to commit “even to the loss of his blood?” (Alma 48:13). The list of questions goes on, but reflection is persuasive that Moroni’s character and actions are more understandable within their historical, cultural, and theological context.

Implicit in Mormon’s description of Moroni is the prophetic model of a man who understood the nature and value of covenant-making and keeping. The weight of the evidence accumulated in Alma chapters forty-three through sixty-three reveals that both Captain Moroni and Mormon were steeped in the scriptural understanding of covenants. His greatness resulted from his knowledge of and faithfulness to his covenants. Like his ancient Israelite ancestors, Moroni viewed his world through covenant theology now generally lost among the moderns.

The Prevalence of Covenants in Ancient Times

From before the foundations of the world, God has covenanted with his children (Abr 3:24–28; Rasmussen 12–13). In

every dispensation, covenanting has been the divine method of binding us in commitment to gospel principles and ordinances essential to our progress and salvation (eg Gen 17:2; D&C 49:9). Prophets and apostles in our own time have consistently stressed the importance of covenants. President Marion G. Romney, as one example among many, commented in a general conference talk: “Traditionally, God’s people have always been known as a covenant people. The gospel itself is the new and everlasting covenant. The posterity of Abraham through Isaac and Jacob constitute what is known as the covenant race. We come into the Church by covenant, which we enter into when we go into the waters of baptism. The new and everlasting covenant of celestial marriage is the gate to exaltation in the celestial kingdom. Men receive the Melchizedek Priesthood by an oath and covenant” (Romney 43). Eternal covenants constitute God’s approach to His children’s progress and perfection.

Covenant Defined

Although the etymology of the Hebrew word for “covenant,” *berith*, is debatable, “the most plausible solution” seems to tie it to the Akkadian *biritu*, meaning to “clasp,” “fetter” or “bind.” The original meaning of the word was not “agreement or settlement between two parties,” but, as Weinfeld indicates:

berith implies first and foremost the notion of “imposition,” “liability,” or “obligation.” Thus we find that *berith* is commanded (*tsivvah beritho*, “he has commanded his covenant,” Ps 111:9; Judges 2:20), which certainly cannot be said about a mutual agreement. . . . *Berith* is synonymous with law and commandment (eg Deut 4:13; 33:9; Isa 24:5; Ps 50:16; 103:18), and the covenant at Sinai in Exodus 24 is in its essence an imposition of laws and obligations upon the people (vv 3–8). (Weinfeld 255)

According to the LDS Bible Dictionary, covenant

sometimes denotes an agreement between persons (1 Sam 23:18) or nations (1 Sam 11:1); more often between God and man; but in this latter case it is important to notice that the two parties to the agreement do not stand in the relation of independent and equal

contractors. God in his good pleasure fixes the terms, which man accepts. (651)

Oaths and "Cutting a Covenant"

The texts of both Old Testament covenants and covenant renewals and Ancient Near Eastern treaties support the notion of the serious binding nature of covenants. Considerable scholarly effort has been expended detailing the comparisons between their structural similarities (see Baltzer; McCarthy *Old Testament Covenant*). In 1954, George E. Mendenhall compared the structure of the Sinai Covenant with that of the Hittite treaties of the fourteenth and thirteenth centuries B.C. ("Covenant Forms" 54). The Hittite treaties, in his estimation, have an identical structural typology with that of the biblical covenant. He also suggests that initially there was a formal oath which was "a conditional self cursing, an appeal to the gods to punish the promiser if he defaults" (52). There was, according to Mendenhall, "some solemn ceremony which accompanied the oath" (61). Weinfeld agrees that the covenant had to be "confirmed by an oath (eg Gen 21:22–24; 26:26–31; Deut 29:9–29; Josh 9:15–20; 2 Kgs. 11:4; Ezek 16:8; 17:13–19); which included most probably a conditional imprecation: "May thus and thus happen to me if I violate the obligation" (256). "Sacrifices accompanied the oath in connection with a covenant," according to M. H. Pope, which may be the origin of the Hebrew idiom "to cut a covenant with" someone. He explains:

In the sacrifices of the covenant the animals were cut in two, and one or both parties passed between the pieces (Gen 15:10, 17). In Jeremiah 34:18 those who break the covenant with the Lord are told that they will be made like the calf which they cut in two and passed between its parts. This suggests that the oath which bound the parties to a covenant may have stipulated in the conditional curse that the violator should be treated like the sacrificial animal. (576)

This imagery illuminates the divine warnings of an impending sword to come down upon a covenant-breaking Israel. For example, in Leviticus 26:25, we read: "And I will bring a sword upon you, that shall avenge the quarrel of my covenant:

and when ye are gathered together within your cities, I will send the pestilence among you; and ye shall be delivered into the hand of the enemy” (compare Deut 32:41; Jer 46:10). Metaphorically and historically, a covenant-breaking Israel faced the terrible prospect of a punishing sword.

It is noteworthy that sometimes the term “word” was used synonymously with “covenant” (eg Num 30:2; Deut 33:9; 1 Chron 16:15; Ps 105:8). This may be a result of the binding nature of the revealed word of God (compare Ex 13:16; Deut 11:18). In our own dispensation, the Lord has revealed: “For of him unto whom much is given much is required; and he who sins against the greater light shall receive the greater condemnation” (D&C 82:3). Phrases such as “keeping the commandments” (Alma 48:15), and “maintenance of the sacred word of God” (Alma 44:5), are the scriptural equivalent of living the covenants of the Lord (Alma 46:21).

Covenants in the Old Testament

The Old Testament is a record of a covenant people and their relationship to God (eg Gen 6:17, 18; 9:1–17; 11:1–9; 17:1–7; Ex 6:5–7; Ex 19: 3–6; JST Ex 34:1–2; Deut 26, 28; Josh 24; Isa 49:15–23; Jer 11:9–10; 33:19–26). Scholars have written extensively concerning the importance of ancient covenants (see Eichrodt; McCarthy *Treaty and Covenant*; Mendenhall “Covenant”). McComiskey is among the many who considers the covenant “the most foundational aspect of Old Testament theology” (15). He asserts: “The history of redemption in the Old Testament is marked by the ratification of covenants in which God affirmed his will for his people. A covenantal structure underlies the program of redemption” (10). This is consistent with Nephi’s summary of the Biblical record’s value:

The book . . . is a record of the Jews, which contains the covenants of the Lord, which he hath made unto the house of Israel; and it also containeth many of the prophecies of the holy prophets; and it is a record like unto the engravings which are upon the plates of brass, save there are not so many; nevertheless, they contain the covenants

of the Lord, which he hath made unto the house of Israel; wherefore, they are of great worth. (1 Nephi 13: 23)

Like the Israelites before them, the Latter-day Saints are a covenant people conversant with the need and importance of covenant-making. Less familiar, yet critical to understanding Captain Moroni's actions is the Old Testament view that the formation of all social, political, and religious community is based upon the covenant. The central idea and foundational principle of ancient Israel was the covenant. The *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* indicates: "the covenant is not merely a theological concept, but is rather the original form of social and religious organization. . . . Thus the covenant, though a religious rather than a political structure, was no more a mere theological concept than politics is purely a philosophical concept today" (719). In ancient Israel, all history was viewed through the lens of the covenant. Every man was expected to study the law and statutes of God (Deut 17:19; 31:11; Josh 8:34; 2 Kgs 22:8). The covenant enabled "Israel to make sense—moral sense—of historical experience" (Levenson 55).

Captain Moroni and Book of Mormon Covenant Theology

As would be expected for divinely led Israelite transplants, covenants constituted the core of religion, society and government in the sacral world of the ancient Nephites. To assert that Captain Moroni is better understood within the tradition of a covenant people is not a particularly radical thought. The living prophet of his day, Alma, was prone to quote the covenant promise and cursing revealed centuries earlier by Father Lehi: "Inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments, ye shall prosper in the land . . . And again it is said that: Inasmuch as ye will not keep my commandments ye shall be cut off from the presence of the Lord" (Alma 9:13; 36:1, 30; 37:13; 38:1). This prophecy from Lehi was repeated over and over by the Book of Mormon prophets to remind the Nephites of their responsibilities as inhabitants of the promised land (eg 1 Nephi 2:20–21; 2 Nephi 1:7–9, 20; Alma 45:10–14, 16; 50:20). Alma's father had been

instrumental in re-establishing the Church at the waters of Mormon with baptism “as a testimony that ye have entered into a covenant to serve him until you are dead” (Mosiah 18:13). Moroni also would likely have been familiar with what some have described as ancient covenant renewal practices during the years of Nephite monarchy (see Nibley, *An Approach* 295–310; Ricks “Treaty/Covenant Pattern” 151–62). Recognizing that “the Book of Mormon records Hebraic treaty-covenants,” Richard Lloyd Anderson points out, however, that “its overarching covenant is that of God with his people, tenuous because of the constant threat that these transplanted Israelites will forget their heritage and the miracles of their New World exodus.” Professor Anderson reiterates the reminder of John the Baptist to Judah that “a national relationship can continue only to the extent of valid individual relationships with God—these add up to the general divine covenant. The Book of Mormon brings us closer to God because no scripture more specifically ties the Christian ordinances of baptism and the sacrament to the covenant concept. No book does more to bring the national covenant down to individual responsibility” (12). Early in the history of the Nephite nation, the prophets displayed the same sacral perspectives operative in the old world. Nephi noted this continuity when he rejoiced how his soul “delighteth in the covenants of the Lord which he hath made to our fathers” (2 Nephi 11:5). From the book of Ether’s warning that “this is a land which is choice above all other lands; wherefore he that doth possess it shall serve God or shall be swept off” (Ether 2:10), to the Savior’s profound covenantal discourse in 3 Nephi 20, the Book of Mormon is so permeated with covenants and covenant-making that its title page declares that one of its major purposes in the Latter-days is to “show unto the remnant of the House of Israel what great things the Lord hath done for their fathers; and that they may know the covenants of the Lord, that they are not cast off forever” (Title Page of the Book of Mormon).

In addition to the pervading covenantal concept in the Book of Mormon, a brief quantitative summary of the word itself reveals that Captain Moroni was steeped in covenant theology. The word “covenant” or its derivatives appear 26 times in the Book of Alma chapters dealing with Moroni (Alma 43–62), while they appear only three other times in the rest of the book. “Covenant” appears seven times in Alma 46 and five times in Alma 44, a frequency surpassed only by the Lord’s discourse in 3 Nephi 20, where the term or a derivative appears ten times. Additionally, the term “oath” appears twelve times in the Captain Moroni chapters, while it doesn’t appear at all elsewhere in the Book of Alma. The closest match is in the book of Mosiah, where it appears nine times. Clearly, realizing Moroni’s fundamental grounding in and adherence to covenants is necessary to understand him. Indeed, his words and his actions can only be understood in the light of ancient covenant theology.

A Man of Perfect Understanding

Mormon describes Captain Moroni as “a man of a perfect understanding” (Alma 48:11). Today’s readers, living in an age of excessive and empty flattery, can miss the power and intent of Mormon’s tribute, which had to be etched in metal plates; consequently, each word was carefully chosen (see Mormon 8:5; 9:33). Mormon’s descriptive phrase “perfect understanding” has profound significance when we view it in historical context, for it shows that Moroni himself excelled at keeping covenants.

The term “understanding” also has several meanings throughout the Book of Mormon. One important use of the word carries the idea of spiritual perception or comprehension. This use is frequently described as “understanding” centered in the heart (eg 2 Nephi 16:10; Mosiah 2:9; 12:27). The heart, according to Joseph Fielding McConkie, is often employed in the scriptures as a symbolic “expression of spiritual receptivity or the lack of it, such as the hardening of the heart (1 Nephi 15:10),” as well as the place of true gospel understanding (262;

see Matt 13:15). In the context of the scriptures which Mormon edited or wrote, “understanding” is a gift from God (WofM 1:9), attainable only by studying and giving heed to the word of God (Alma 32:28). Mormon taught that spiritual understanding leads to a knowledge of truth. For example, he says that Alma and the Sons of Mosiah “waxed strong in the knowledge of the truth; for they were men of a sound understanding and they had searched the scriptures diligently, that they might know the word of God” (Alma 17:2).

Mormon’s use of the term “understanding” is consistent with Old Testament usage. The most common word for “understanding” and “insight” in Hebrew is *binah*, which is formed from the root *byn*, and originally meant “to distinguish, separate” (Ringgren 99). Israel was only able to distinguish the truth from error by discernment given of God as she studied and gave heed to his law. Thus, Moses reported to the people,

I have taught you statutes and judgments, even as the Lord my God commanded me, that ye should do so in the land whither ye go to possess it. Keep therefore and do them; for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the nations, which shall hear all these statutes, and say, Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people. (Deut 4:5–6)

Here, in part, is the divine prescription for wisdom and understanding: learn and do the covenants of God.

In ancient Israel, “understanding” was often tied to the genre of “wisdom literature,” which includes the books of Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes and some of the Psalms. These books underscore how vital it is to get (Prov 4:5, 7; 16:16), to seek (Prov 23:23), and to learn (Prov 4:1; compare 1:2; 2:3) wisdom and understanding.

In Job 28:12, 20, the question is asked, “Where shall wisdom or understanding be found?”—God alone knows (v 23). Thus we read, “The fear of Yahweh is wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight” (Prov 9:10; compare Job 28:28). Thus it can even be said: “Trust in Yahweh and do not rely on your own insight” (*binah* Prov 3:5; compare 23:4). (Ringgren 105)

According to these scriptures, all true understanding ultimately has its source in God. We can gain spiritual insight only by learning and doing the laws and statutes of God, by keeping covenants. Psalms 111:10 asserts that, “a good understanding have all they that do his commandments: his praise endureth for ever.” This spiritual discernment is a blessing from God, which is given to aid in further observation of the law. This thought is expressed in Psalm 119:34: “Give me understanding, and I shall keep thy law; yea, I shall observe it with my whole heart.”

In the 1828 *American Dictionary of the English Language*, “perfect” means “finished or complete,” which is consistent with the Hebrew terms translated “perfect” in the King James Version of the Bible. To state, therefore that Captain Moroni was “a man of a perfect understanding” is to declare that he diligently studied and lived by the sacred word of God, and that he understood the consequences of not giving heed to the covenants. Moroni’s own testimony to Zerahemnah supports this conclusion, where he claims:

we have gained power over you, by our faith, by our religion, and by our rites of worship, and by our church, and by the sacred support which we owe to our wives and our children, by that liberty which binds us to our lands and our country yea, and also by the maintenance of the sacred word of God, to which we owe all our happiness and by all that is most dear unto us. (Alma 44:5)

As noted earlier, at times the term “word” was used synonymously with “covenant” in the Old Testament. “Maintenance of the sacred word of God” is tantamount to being faithful to one’s sacred covenants (Alma 44:5). Captain Moroni felt so anchored to God’s word that before he would do battle against the Lamanites, he inquired of the prophet “whither the armies of the Nephites should go” (43:23). He had confidence “that God would make it known unto them whither they should go to defend themselves against their enemies . . . and his heart did glory in it; not in the shedding of blood but in doing good, in preserving his people, yea, in keeping the commandments of God, yea, and resisting iniquity” (48:16). His behavior in this

respect follows the pattern found in ancient Israel (Nibley, *Since Cumorah* 297; Ricks, “Holy War” 103–117; Vaux 1:258–67). Old Testament scriptures provide many examples of belief in the necessity of divine sanction as a necessary prelude to battle (Judges 7:9–14; I Sam 28:5–6; 30:8; II Sam 5:19–25; I Kings 8:44; 22:5, 7–8). Modern scripture confirms that God directed the ancients “that they should not go out unto battle against any nation, kindred, tongue, or people” unless he commanded them to (D&C 98:33). Moroni’s faith and reliance upon the word of God is much like the faith of the ancients spoken of by the author of Hebrews: “who through faith subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of the aliens” (Heb 11:33–34; see the JST changes in this chapter). Mormon is consistent with this view in his testimonial that Moroni was a “man who was firm in the faith of Christ . . . and in keeping the commandments of God” (Alma 48:13, 15).

Moroni and the Title of Liberty

One of the many examples of Moroni’s scriptural foundation in the covenants of God is his experience with the “title of liberty.” In response to the dissension of Amalickiah and his proud followers, Captain Moroni followed ancient ritual and “rent his coat; and he took a piece thereof, and wrote upon it—In memory of our God, our religion, and freedom, and our peace, our wives, and our children” (Alma 46:12). Hugh Nibley notes parallels of Moroni’s action in “The Rule of Battle for the Sons of Light” of the *Dead Sea Scrolls*, which involves inscribing significant phrases on battle ensigns. This act also is reminiscent of the legendary Iranian Independence Flag of Kawe, which, according to Professor Nibley, involved the hanging of a leather apron upon a pole to rally the forces of liberty (“New Approaches” 92–95). After fastening the title of liberty on the end of a pole and dressing in his armor, Moroni “bowed to the earth,

and he prayed mightily unto his God for the blessings of liberty to rest upon his brethren, so long as there should a band of Christians remain to possess the land” (Alma 46:13). He then declared, in a pointed reference to their faithfulness in keeping covenants: “Surely God shall not suffer that we, who are despised because we take upon us the name of Christ, shall be trodden down and destroyed, until we bring it upon us by our own transgressions” (v 18).

Moroni then “went forth among the people, waving the rent part of his garment in the air, that all might see the writing” and cried aloud, “Behold, whosoever will maintain this title upon the land, let them come forth in the strength of the Lord, and enter into a covenant that they will maintain their rights, and their religion, that the Lord God may bless them” (vv 19–20). This rallied the faithful, who “came running together with their armor girded about their loins, rending their garments in token, or as a covenant that they would not forsake the Lord their God; or in other words, if they should transgress the commandments of God, or fall into transgression, and be ashamed to take upon them the name of Christ, the Lord should rend them even as they had rent their garments” (v 21).

While twentieth-century readers correctly view this moment as a time of great patriotism, it is important to note that any such feelings of the Nephites were founded in their covenants. The focus in the record is not upon an emotional flag-waving fervor, but upon the necessity of keeping covenants with the Lord in order to be preserved in the land. According to the record, “the covenant which they made,” as they “cast their garments at the feet of Moroni,” was: “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” (v 22).

Hugh Nibley has said “treading on one’s garments while making a covenant” follows a “forgotten but peculiar old Jewish

rite” (“Freemen” 335–36), and Terrence Szink has found comparable rites in the ancient world (35–45). He suggests that the oath of the Nephite army described in Alma 46:21–22,

is similar to a number of Near Eastern oaths that have two characteristics. First, they are self-execrative in nature: the party making the covenant or treaty takes upon himself a conditional curse, swearing that, if he fails to fulfill his part of the agreement, he is willing to endure a specified punishment. Second, they are accompanied by various rites that in some way symbolized the punishment to be inflicted. (36)

One striking example of just such an oath from the Ancient Near East is the “so-called Hittite Soldiers’ Oath” located at Boghazkoy in present-day Turkey. Dating back to the second millennium BC, “it contains a series of rituals in which an officer [presumably a priest] presents the participants with an object that, either through its destruction or by its very nature, represents the punishment for breaking the oath or for showing disrespect to the king” (37). Instead of clothing, the Hittite ritual employs wax and mutton fat. In one case they are thrown onto a flame with the explanation: “‘Just as this wax melts, and just as the mutton fat dissolves, whoever breaks these oaths [shows disrespect to the king] of the Hatt [land], let [him] melt lik[e wax], let him dissolve like [mutton fat]!’ [The me]n declare: ‘So be it!’” (36–7).

In another case the priest throws the wax and mutton fat on the ground and, according to the text: “they trample it under foot and he speaks as follows: ‘Whoever breaks these oaths, even so let the Hatti people come and trample that man’s town under foot’” (37). Szink’s research offers several Biblical examples of oaths taken under circumstances similar to that of Moroni’s faithful soldiers (eg Judges 19–21; 1 Sam 11).

The covenant renewal pattern of Captain Moroni’s compatriots is more properly understood within the framework of ancient Israelite thought. Nephite social cohesion, like the “unity of the Israelite people and its relationship with God, was founded on covenant, and this covenant was in its original form a purely religious affair” (McCarthy, *Old Testament Covenant*

23). While most Latter-day Saints are familiar with covenants, few realize that anciently the covenant was the very foundation for government. Moroni's sentiment parallels ancient Israel's view that government was based upon covenants between God and his children, as well as between God's children. When Moroni rallies the forces, it is not to some partisan political cause but to the cause of their covenants with God.

Drawing upon ancient types and shadows, Moroni dramatically compares their current state of affairs with that of their covenantal lineage by declaring: "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" (v 23). With the recollection of an old world tradition, Moroni calls out to rally his forces: "Let us preserve our liberty as a remnant of Joseph" (v 24).

The appropriateness of this typology cannot be overstated. Joseph was historical proof that jealousy and dissension could lead to bondage, but that faithfulness to covenants with God leads to preservation and liberty. Anciently, Joseph was a symbol of freedom and liberty. Midrashic commentators have considerable to say about the story of Joseph, and particularly his struggles with his brothers. One account has God telling the guilty brothers: "By your lives you sold Joseph into slavery, and therefore you will recite the tale of your own Egyptian bondage until the end of time" (Graves 253).

First-time readers of the Book of Mormon are often surprised at the number of references to "freedom" and "liberty." Actually, "freedom" appears 26 times in Alma, all between chapters 43 and 63. There are only three other direct references in the entire Book of Mormon. The term "liberty" or its derivative appears thirty-three times in these same Alma chapters, more than the rest of the Book of Mormon put together. Concerning the antiquity of these concepts, Hugh Nibley has noted

that “the constant recurrence of the word liberty (*kherut*) in the Dead Sea Scrolls, to say nothing of the Bar Kochba coins, shows that it is entirely in order in Moroni’s world” (“Bar-Kochba” 280).

Both “freedom” and “liberty” (Hebrew: *deror* and *hopsi*) have their Hebrew roots in emancipation from slavery. As is true of Joseph as an individual and Israel as a nation, freedom and liberty came because of making and keeping covenants with God. At Sinai God set Israel free, based upon obedience to his covenant. God taught Israel that freedom and liberty were not the result of their prowess, but the result of their trusting his power (compare Ex 23:20–25; Deut 5:6–6:2). Likewise, when they least trusted God, they found themselves enslaved by their enemies (eg Lev 26). The Book of Mormon contains the same construct. Moroni realized that freedom came from diligence and giving heed to the word of God, and not from Nephite cunning and military might.

The rent coat plays a particularly significant role in the comparison between Moroni’s cause with that of Joseph’s. Moroni reminds his people of the words of Jacob when “he saw that a part of the remnant of the coat of Joseph was preserved and had not decayed” (Alma 46:24). Though this prophecy of Jacob is nowhere recorded in the Bible, support has been documented in several apocryphal stories. One such story, told by the renowned Moslem historian, Muhammad ibn-ibrahim ath-Tha’labi, is particularly relevant:

And when Joseph had made himself known unto them [his brethren] he asked them about his father, saying, “What did my father after [I left]?” They answered, “He lost his eyesight [from weeping].” Then he gave them his garment [*qamis*, long outer shirt]. According to ad-Dahak that garment was of the weave [pattern, design] of Paradise, and the breath [spirit, odor] of Paradise was in it, so *that it never decayed* or in any way deteriorated [and that was] a sign [omen]. And Joseph gave them that garment, and it was the very one that had belonged to Abraham, having already had a long history. And he said to them, “Go, take this garment of mine and place it upon the face of my father so he may have sight again, and return [to me] with all your families.” And when they had put Egypt behind them

and come to Canaan their father Jacob said, "Behold, I perceive the spirit [breath, odor] of Joseph, if you will not think me wandering in my mind and weak-headed from age." [for] he knew that upon all the earth there was no spirit [breath, odor] of Paradise save in that garment alone. And as-Sadi says that Judah said to Joseph, "It was I who took the garment bedaubed with blood to Jacob, and reported to him that the wolf had eaten Joseph; so give me this day thy garment that I might tell him that thou art living, that I might cause him to rejoice now as greatly as I caused him to sorrow then." And Ibn-Abbas says that Judah took the garment and went forth in great haste, panting with the exertion and anxiety . . . and when he brought the garment he laid it upon his face, so that his sight returned to him. And ad-Dahak says that his sight returned after blindness, and his strength after weakness, and youth after age, and joy after sorrow. [Then follows a dialogue between Jacob and the King of Death]. (Nibley *An Approach* 219–20).

In this account, we not only have the preserved remnant of the garment sent by Joseph to his father to show he was alive, and the torn one mingled with blood which Judah took to his father as evidence of Joseph's death, but we also have a tradition that the one preserved once belonged to Abraham. This peculiar garment had in it the "weave" and "breath" of Paradise. Here is evidence of what might be a symbolic use of garments to represent the covenants of the Lord. Israel traced their covenants with God back to Abraham (Ex 2:24; Lev 26:42; 2 Kgs 13:23; 1 Chron 16:16; Ps 105:9; Acts 3:25; 7:8). In this apocryphal story Joseph's garment, which once belonged to Abraham, is preserved just as the covenant (as well as the covenant people) is preserved through Joseph. The evidence of Paradise in the garment's "weave" and "breath" may reflect the "coats of skins" with which God clothed Adam and Eve in the Garden (Gen 3:21).

Another story from the same Moslem source documents the garment's symbolism of the covenant. As Dr. Nibley paraphrases it: "Joseph's brethren bring his torn garment to their father as proof that he is dead, but Jacob after examining the garment ('and there were in the garment of Joseph three marks or tokens when they brought it to his father') declares that the way the cloth is torn shows him that their story is not true" (*An*

Approach 218). Jacob prophesied: “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” (Alma 46:24). The rent garment symbolized the covenants of God to preserve a posterity unto Jacob and Joseph. While those of Joseph who reject the covenants through apostasy and dissension shall perish, God will preserve a remnant of the seed of Joseph (compare Ether 13:6). Moroni says it could very well be that “the remnant of the seed of Joseph, which shall perish as his garment, are those who have dissented from us.” In fact, he forewarns, “it shall be ourselves if we do not stand fast in the faith of Christ” (Alma 46:27).

Moroni and the Sword

Most of what we know about the life of this faithful “man of Christ” involves his career as a great military leader. It seems odd to some modern readers that a man versed in the word of God, and practiced in keeping the covenants of the Lord, could be so entangled in military affairs. This may partially explain Mormon’s insistence that Moroni “did not delight in bloodshed” and was taught “never to raise the sword except it were against an enemy, except it were to preserve their lives” (Alma 48:11, 14). Mormon makes clear in his narrative that the motives of Moroni were pure and correct and that he had the utmost consideration for covenants. One example is particularly illustrative. During a bloody battle against Zerahemnah’s forces, Mormon explicitly tells the reader:

The Nephites were inspired by a better cause, for they were not fighting for monarchy nor power but they were fighting for their homes and their liberties, their wives and their children, and their all, yea, for their rites of worship and their church. And they were doing that which they felt was the duty which they owed to their God; for the Lord had said unto them, and also unto their fathers, that: Inasmuch as ye are not guilty of the first offense, neither the second,

ye shall not suffer yourselves to be slain by the hands of your enemies. (Alma 43:45–46)

The Nephites here were following the ancient law of war that has been reiterated, but mostly ignored in our own dispensation (D&C 98:32–38; Deut 20:10–12). Knowledge that their actions were consistent with God’s word must have enheartened Moroni’s forces. At one point in the battle, however, when things were not going in favor of the Nephites, Moroni inspired them with “thoughts of their lands, their liberty, yea, their freedom from bondage” (v 48). His motivational leadership turned the tide to victory.

When the Nephites had their enemy encircled, Moroni “commanded his men that they should stop shedding their blood” (v 54). After causing his men to withdraw from the confrontation, Moroni sought for a covenant of peace by explaining to Zerahemnah that “we do not desire to slay you. Behold, we have not come out to battle against you that we might shed your blood for power; neither do we desire to bring any one to the yoke of bondage” (vv 1–2). Moroni’s subsequent words reveal that he understood the cause of the conflict to be religious persecution: “this is the very cause for which ye have come against us; yea, and ye are angry with us because of our religion” (v 2). He testified to Zerahemnah, “ye behold that the Lord is with us; and ye behold that he has delivered you into our hands. And now I would that ye should understand that this is done unto us because of our religion and our faith in Christ. And now ye see that ye cannot destroy this our faith” (v 3).

With the fervent zeal of a man truly converted to the Lord, Moroni testified that “God will support, and keep, and preserve us, so long as we are faithful unto him, and unto our faith, and our religion” (v 4). Yet, unlike some of our modern fanatics blinded by the passion of false religion, Moroni’s desire was not for further vengeance and blood, but for peace. He promised Zerahemnah if “ye deliver up your weapons of war unto us . . . we will seek not your blood, but we will spare your lives, if ye will go your way and come not again to war against us” (v 6).

Zerahemnah caused his men to surrender their weapons but, in a gesture uniquely suited to a covenant society, he emphatically refused to “take an oath” which he knew they would break (v 8). His intense hatred toward the Nephites forced an impasse in the peace negotiations, and in frustration Moroni handed back the weapons of war to Zerahemnah (vv 9–10). The Captain warned him, however, that he would “not depart except ye depart with an oath that ye will not return again against us to war.” Declared Moroni, “Now as ye are in our hands we will spill your blood upon the ground, or ye shall submit to the conditions which I have proposed” (v 11).

Immediately upon regaining his sword, Zerahemnah rushed forward in a frenzied attempt to slay the Captain, but one of Moroni’s quick-thinking soldiers intervened by knocking away Zerahemnah’s sword and cutting off his scalp (Alma 44:12). This soldier then raised up the scalp as a warning to the rest of Zerahemnah’s forces and a token of the covenant of peace (v 14). Many “entered into a covenant of peace” at this time and “depart[ed] into the wilderness” (v 15). Zerahemnah, however, was “exceedingly wroth, and he did stir up the remainder of his soldiers to anger, to contend more powerfully against the Nephites” (v 16). An angered Moroni “commanded his people that they should fall upon them and slay them” (v 17). When slaughter became so great that neither side could even count their dead “because of the greatness of the number,” Moroni again called a halt to the terrible action. This time the soundly defeated Lamanites surrendered their weapons, “entered into a covenant with him of peace,” and were allowed to “depart into the wilderness” (vv 20–21).

This sequence of scripture effectively reveals Moroni, not as a man of war, but of peace. Repeatedly, Mormon records how Moroni offers opportunities for peace and forgiveness to his battered but belligerent opponents. He also interprets Moroni’s military actions as preparation “to support [the Nephites’] liberty, their lands, their wives, and their children, and their peace, and that they might live unto the Lord their God, and that they

might maintain that which was called by their enemies the cause of Christians” (Alma 48:10).

There are other, more symbolic reasons for Moroni’s close identification with the sword. Book of Mormon writers often use the term “sword” for a symbol of divine power, particularly as judgment (Hamblin 332–34). As discussed earlier in this chapter, the Hebrew idiom, “cutting a covenant,” may have had its roots in the sacrifices so intimately connected with the oath-swearing tied to covenants. Those sacrifices, as noted, may have had personal implications for the person or persons involved in entering the covenants. Whether these curses or penalties were intended to be taken literally or symbolically or both, the scriptures clearly say that the “sword” is a penalty designated for covenant-breakers (eg Lev 26:25; Deut 32:41; Job 19:29; Isa 34:1–5; Jer 46:10). Alma 26:19 is an example of this metaphoric convention: “Oh then, why did he not consign us to an awful destruction, yea, why did he not let the sword of his justice fall upon us, and doom us to eternal despair?”

Much later in the Book of Mormon record, Samuel the Lamanite warns the Nephites that God “hath put it into my heart to say unto this people that the sword of justice hangeth over this people; and four hundred years pass not away save the sword of justice falleth upon this people” (Hel 13:5; compare Alma 54:6; 60:29; 3 Nephi 2:19; 20:20; 29:4; Mor 8:41; Ether 8:23). Moroni employed this phraseology in his warning to Ammoron, when he declared, “Behold, I would tell you somewhat concerning the justice of God, and the sword of his almighty wrath, which doth hang over you except ye repent and withdraw your armies into your own lands” (Alma 54:6). Again, in Alma 60:29, when he denounced apparent government waste and corruption, he proclaimed that “except ye do bestir yourselves in the defence of your country and your little ones, the sword of justice doth hang over you; yea, and it shall fall upon you and visit you even to your utter destruction.”

Mormon seems to have organized and shaped the book of Alma to show that “the preaching of the word” has a “more

powerful effect upon the minds of the people than the sword, or anything else” (Alma 31:5), but rejection of the word of God leads the people “to bondage, or to perish by the sword, or to dwindle in unbelief, and mingle with the Lamanites” (50:22). Mormon introduces Captain Moroni at a pivotal point in the book. Chapter 43 opens with a pointed statement that Alma and his sons “did go forth among the people, to declare the word unto them,” but that “we shall say no more concerning their preaching, except that they preached the word, and the truth, according to the spirit of prophecy and revelation; and they preached after the holy order of God by which they were called” (v 1–2). At this point, Mormon turns his attention to the “wars between the Nephites and the Lamanites” (v 3). After describing the socio-political-religious situation in the eighteenth year of the reign of judges, and noting that the Lamanites were mainly led by “those who had dissented from the Nephites” (vv 5, 6, 13) Mormon introduces Moroni, chief captain over the armies of the Nephites (vv 16–17). Throughout the remainder of the book of Alma, Moroni spent much of his time exercising the sword (eg chapters 43–44, 46, 48, 50–53, 55, 60, 62), an inevitable result of some people’s rejection of the word. In many respects, Moroni personified the very “sword of justice” which he warned Pahoran “doth hang over you; yea, and it shall fall upon you and visit you even to your utter destruction” (Alma 60:29). Mormon seems to have had this symbolism in mind, for although he calls Moroni a man of “the word,” Moroni’s role can be best characterized as a man of “the sword.”

Moroni and the Dissenters

Moroni and his sword led the fight against pride, nobility and dissension (Alma 51: 17–20); combated iniquity and evil (46:9–11); supported the “cause of freedom” (35); and “delighted in the saving of his people from destruction” (55:19). It is likely that Mormon included so much material on Moroni for more substantial reasons than a fascination with military history. Moroni was a man needed in his day to counter the

pride, dissension, iniquity and covenant-breaking which abounded. The term “dissension” or its derivative appears over 26 times in these chapters, more than in any other book. The next most frequent usage is in the book of Helaman, where the term or a derivative appears 15 times.

Moroni’s views concerning dissension and disunity can be best understood within his covenantal perspective. He coupled a love of freedom and liberty with the knowledge that these could only be secured by faithfulness and obedience to covenants. Dissidents, in his view, were covenant-breakers. Their lack of trust in God or concern for the community of the saints put the whole people in jeopardy. Their alliances with Nephite enemies only compounded the problem. Both Moroni and Mormon saw dissension as a root cause of Nephite problems. Moroni’s “Title of Liberty” speech warned of the serious consequences for “those who have dissented” (46:27). Mormon also had similar views: “For it has been their quarrelings and their contentions, yea, their murderings, and their plunderings, their idolatry, their whoredoms, and their abominations . . . which brought upon them their wars and their destructions” (50:21).

Describing Moroni’s motivation, Mormon declared: “For it was his first care to put an end to such contentions and dissensions among the people for behold, this had been hitherto a cause of all their destruction” (51:16; compare 60:14–16, 32). One cannot blame Moroni for his sensitivity to dissension. Without exception, every enemy specifically identified by Mormon in Alma 43–63 is a body of Nephite dissenters or a group led by a Nephite dissenter (eg 43:5–8, 46:3–7, 50:25–28, 51:16, 52:3, 61:8). While the narrative indicates that Moroni faced Lamanite opposition, Mormon goes out of his way to point out that they were led by Nephite dissenters. He shaped the narrative so we could see the wickedness and dangers of dissension and dissenters, of covenant-breaking and covenant-breakers.

Conclusion

The prophet Moroni, son of Mormon, foresaw these same problems in our day, and warned that “the sword of vengeance hangeth over you; and the time soon cometh that he avengeth the blood of the saints upon you, for he will not suffer their cries any longer” (Mormon 8:41). As mankind increasingly rejects God’s word and the mercy of his covenants, modern Saints must look more attentively to the pattern and type of Captain Moroni. He is a man most needed for our own day. His Christlike example and leadership in a time of socio-political crisis is unsurpassed in scripture. Yet, for many, the lessons of his life have been illusive, or, at best, elusive.

In this chapter, I have tried to show that covenant-making and keeping is at the heart of understanding Captain Moroni. His words concerning freedom and liberty can appear shallow and useless until we view them in their covenantal origin and fragility. His views concerning dissension may seem narrow and intolerant unless we view them in that covenant perspective. His actions in crisis and war could be mistaken for demagoguery unless we are aware of their ancient roots and Hebrew traditions.

Reading the Captain Moroni chapters in the book of Alma through the lens of the “covenant” allows us a better grasp of the mind and heart of this great servant of God, a chance to see as he saw, and to feel as he felt. We can liken these classic stories of the “war” chapters in Alma, such as the raising of the “Title of Liberty,” to us when we study them within the context of the ancient covenantal perspective. One of Mormon’s many editorial summaries makes it clear that he meant these chapters to be understood this way. Noting the Nephite prosperity and strength in the twenty-first year of the reign of Judges, Mormon attributes these blessings to the mercy and justice of the Lord, “to the fulfilling of all his words unto the children of men” (Alma 50:19). He cites a revelation from the Lord to Father Lehi indicating that “inasmuch as they [Lehi and his posterity] shall keep my commandments they shall prosper in the land. But

inasmuch as they will not keep my commandments they shall be cut off from the presence of the Lord" (v 20). Mormon then testifies:

And we see that these promises have been verified to the people of Nephi; for it has been their quarrelings and their contentions, yea, their murderings, and their plunderings, their idolatry, their whoredoms, and their abominations, which were among themselves, which brought upon them their wars and their destructions. And those who were faithful in keeping the commandments of the Lord were delivered at all times, whilst thousands of their wicked brethren have been consigned to bondage, or to perish by the sword, or to dwindle in unbelief, and mingle with the Lamanites. But behold there never was a happier time among the people of Nephi, since the days of Nephi, than in the days of Moroni (vv 21–23).

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