The Title of Liberty and Ancient Prophecy

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

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

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

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

**Historical Background**

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

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

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

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

⁴ Initially, King Mosiah stated that kingship is the best form of government if there were a guarantee that just kings would rule; however, the experience of some of the Nephites with King Noah and the Jaredites with their kings demonstrated the difficulty with keeping leaders who based their judgments on the commandments of God (Mosiah 29:13). Later, Chief Judge Pahoran would declare that the “spirit of freedom” is also the “Spirit of God” (Alma 61:15); therefore, God desired judgeship, with its promotion of personal liberty and responsibility, not kingship. Nephi, son of
Whatever principles or doctrines Helaman taught, the dissension of Amalickiah and his followers constituted both ecclesiastical apostasy and political sedition (see Alma 46:10). Just after a victory led by Captain Moroni over the Zoramites and Lamanites that included great loss of Nephite lives (see Alma 43–44), Amalickiah and his followers fomented civil war attempting to overturn a government of judges as set forth by King Mosiah and Alma and approved by the voice of the people almost 20 years earlier (see Mosiah 29 and Alma 2).

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

**Rending of Clothing**

What was the historical significance of Moroni’s rending his clothing? There are many accounts in the Bible and the Book of Mormon describing the rending of clothing, the soul, the veil of the temple, the veil of darkness, heaven, etc. In this passage, however, Moroni had a very distinct meaning in mind. He linked his actions directly to Joseph who was sold into Egypt, their ancestral tie to the house of Israel (see 1 Nephi 5:14; Alma 46:23). The story of their ancient clan leader Joseph and his coat of “many colors” is found in Genesis 37. When Jacob, son...
of Isaac, received Joseph’s coat that had been dipped in goat’s blood by his other sons, he rent his clothing and mourned because he believed Joseph’s body had been torn by wild animals (see Genesis 37:33–34).

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

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

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


10. “Many scriptures that refer to ‘the name of Jesus Christ’ are obviously references to the authority of the Savior.” Dallin H. Oaks, “Taking Upon Us the Name of Jesus Christ,” Ensign, (May 1985): 81. Thus, an additional insight would be that by rejecting Helaman and his prophetic authority, the apostate Nephites were also rejecting their baptismal covenant under the Law of Moses as well as Jesus Christ and his authority to direct his people through his prophet.
the people waving the rent part of his garment in the air,” that all
might see the writing which he had written upon the torn cloth
(Alma 46:19) and shouted, “Behold, we are a remnant of the seed
of Jacob; yea, we are a remnant of the seed of Joseph, whose coat
was rent by his brethren into many pieces; yea, and now behold, let
us remember to keep the commandments of God, or our garments
shall be rent by our brethren, and we be cast into prison, or be sold,
or be slain” (Alma 46:23). The phrase whose coat was rent by his
brethren into many pieces is the direct link between the two stories.
The dramatic warning and action is a type of symbolic-enacted-
prophecy also found in the Old Testament. Donald Parry identifies
five general characteristics of this type of enacted prophecy in the
Old Testament: 1) a prophet played a major role in the symbolic
actions as prophecy and often dramatized the prophecy himself;
2) the prophetic symbolic action originated from God as direct
revelation from God with formulaic phrases indicating this; 3) the
prophetic symbolic actions include either a ritualistic gesture, a
movement, a posture, or as in Captain Moroni’s demonstration, a
dramatized act; 4) the dramatized action is symbolic representing
more than what is visible to onlookers or participants; and 5) the
prophetic symbolic actions often required the participation of
two or more individuals, or in this case, many warriors. Captain
Moroni warned his people that unless they were obedient, all the
evil that happened to Joseph because of his brothers’ wickedness
would happen to them but without the eventual positive outcome.

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

11. The earliest rendition of the text reads that Moroni “went forth among
the people waving the rent of his garment.” Royal Skousen, ed., The Book of Mormon:
The Earliest Text (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 441.
12. Don Parry makes the case that the rending of Captain Moroni’s coat was a
symbolic action that implied a prophetic curse. Donald W. Parry, “Symbolic Action
as Prophetic Curse,” Reexploring the Book of Mormon, ed. John W. Welch (SLC:
13. Examples in the Old Testament of this type of prophecy are found in the
actions of Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Donald W. Parry, “Symbolic Action as Prophecy
this call to action by covenant. Part of ancient Israelite culture was an appreciation for covenant making and keeping. Like his Israelite ancestors, Moroni would have viewed his world through Old Testament covenant theology, meaning “the formation of all social, political, and religious” communities was based on covenant making.\textsuperscript{14} Terry Szink discovered similarities between Nephite oaths and ancient Near Eastern oaths: 1) the parties entering into the oath take upon themselves a conditional curse, and 2) the oath taking is accompanied by rituals that symbolize the punishment to be inflicted upon oath breakers. “Simile oath” or “simile curse” describes this type of covenant making. Thus, covenant, curse, and ritual are bound together and in this instance with prophecy.\textsuperscript{15} The Nephite oath takers also dressed in full armor for battle and rent their garments. As a sign of their covenant with God, they cast their torn garment remnants at the feet of their chief captain and declared: “We covenant with our God, that we shall be destroyed, even as our brethren in the land northward, if we shall fall into transgression; yea, he may cast us at the feet of our enemies, even as we have cast our garments at thy feet to be trodden under foot, if we shall fall into transgression” (Alma 46:21–22).\textsuperscript{16} Clothing, for example, is an indication of the character of an individual and may be inseparably

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\item \textsuperscript{16} Regarding the passages in Alma 46:21–24, John Tvedtnes declares, “Because Jewish tradition indicates that Joseph’s garment was the high priestly garment of Adam, this passage may have more meaning than previously supposed. In this passage, the desecration of the garment symbolizes being ‘ashamed to take upon them the name of Christ,’” John A. Tvedtnes, “Priestly Clothing in Bible Times,” in \textit{Temples of the Ancient World}, ed. Donald Parry (SLC and Provo, UT: Deseret Book; FARMS:1994), 698 fn. 50. The Book of Jasher also relates that after Joseph’s brothers tore the coat and dipped it in blood, they “trampled it in the dust and sent it to their father.” While this detail is not found in the Bible, it may be reflected in the additional part of the Nephite oath phrase that they would be “trodden underfoot,” which may have been a tradition familiar to Moroni. Matthew Roper, “Joseph’s Coat and Moroni’s Covenant of Liberty” \textit{Insights} 22/10 (2002), http://publications.mi.byu.edu/fullscreen/?pub=1295&index=1.
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connected to it. Hugh Nibley wrote, “To the modern and the western mind all this over-obvious dwelling on types and shadows seems a bit overdone, but not to the ancient or Oriental mind. … So foreign to us but so characteristic of people who speak synthetic languages, that if things are alike they are the same.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Promise of a Remnant: Historical Beginnings**

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

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

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

Lehi and Captain Moroni each saw their people, the Nephites, as fulfillment of Jacob’s prophecy (see Alma 46:24–26), “a branch which was to be broken off, nevertheless, to be remembered in the covenants of the Lord” (2 Nephi 3:5) or “as a remnant of the seed of Jacob; yea,
we are a remnant of the seed of Joseph” (Alma 46:23). Captain Moroni saw Nephite survival tied to being faithful to Christ; the title of liberty covenant Christians were likened to the remnant of Joseph’s coat that was preserved as was Joseph (see Alma 46: 27). Captain Moroni could motivate his people to action because he understood the cultural and spiritual power of these themes from Father Jacob (Israel) and Joseph of Egypt as well as their own Nephite prophet and patriarch, Lehi. Captain Moroni used ritualistic symbols and prophetic promises to encourage his people and remind them of the blessings that awaited their faithfulness and prophetic warnings to counsel his people regarding the dire consequences that would befall them if they rejected their covenants with the Lord (see Alma 46:11–28).\footnote{Parry, “Symbolic Action as Prophetic Curse,” 206.}

**Conclusion**

Many prophets have been told that the Lord would preserve a righteous remnant of the tribe of Joseph for his own purposes — anciently, in their day, and in the latter days. Lehi saw his posterity as the righteous remnant that had been separated from the land of Jerusalem. Captain Moroni applied this prophecy in a very specific situation in order for his people to be a remnant who would survive, reflecting his testimony of this ancient promise. The visual reminder, a war banner of torn clothing with a powerful message written on it, was flown in all the cities that followed the prophet Helaman and God and desired religious freedom. Nibley declared that Moroni’s recitation of Jacob’s prophecy “was not merely a resemblance or a type but the very event foreseen by the patriarch of old.”\footnote{Nibley, “A Strange Order of Battle,” 213.}

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