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The Book of Mormon — A Guide to Religious Living: II. Government by Law

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The Book of Mormon — A Guide to Religious Living

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II. GOVERNMENT BY LAW

IN February Americans and lovers of democracy everywhere celebrate the birth of two men who gave of their faith, wisdom, devotion, and courage that a "government of the people, by the people, and for the people" might be established and "not perish from the earth."

Washington and Lincoln were not alone in their faith in constitutional government with the ultimate authority vested in the people. Men like Patrick Henry and Thomas Jefferson likewise loved liberty more than they feared death or personal sacrifice. For centuries, in fact, men had been struggling to free themselves from the rule of man over man. The Magna Carta, wrested from King John of England in 1215, marked the beginning of man's successful effort to gain political rights from rulers of European States.

The Colonial Fathers, inspired by their English heritage, were not, however, the first Americans to believe in and practise representative, democratic government. It is quite thrilling to find scattered through the pages of the Book of Mormon a basic faith in democracy and some

noteworthy descriptions of its value and practice. The Nephites had their Washingtons, Jeffersons, and Lincolns who believed in and fought for the freedom which comes to people who rid themselves of the reign of man over man. Before introducing Book of Mormon principles and ideals of government, let us consider for a moment governments in general.

Two Types of Government

No matter what the name — whether monarchy, republic, fascism or something else—governments tend to group themselves around two types: personal and impersonal. Personal government is that type in which authority is vested in man, in whomever rules or governs in the state. Impersonal government is that type in which men are governed primarily by law to which those who govern and those who are governed are alike amenable. Naturally, there are men and laws in all forms of government, but in a personal type of government the will (or whim or desire or intuition) of the ruler is greater than the law. In the impersonal type, law is greater than

the ruler and the ideas and desires of those who govern become truly effective only as they are translated into the laws of the land. Absolute monarchies, dictatorships, sultanates and the like are illustrations of personal government; republics, democracies, and constitutional monarchies are illustrations of impersonal governments.

Which of these two types of government is preferable? Which is more consistent with the nature of man—his dignity and worth, his free agency and his capacity for eternal progression towards a God-like life? Where does the weight of evidence lie? What does experience teach us? The Book of Mormon gives a definite answer to these questions, an answer the wisdom of which has been impressed indelibly upon some of our minds in this our day.

About a century before the birth of Christ, there reigned as king of the Nephites a man named Mosiah. He, like his father, King Benjamin, had ruled his people in righteousness all his days. The Nephites were well pleased with a monarchial form of government and asked that Mosiah appoint one of his sons to reign after him. All of his sons refused the kingship because they much preferred to continue their missionary labors for Christ. Still the people demanded a king but Mosiah pleaded with them to change the form of government from a monarchial (personal) type to a democratic (impersonal) reign under the laws of God administered by judges elected by the people.

Personal Government

That Mosiah should suggest such a change in the form of government is not too remarkable, but the description he gives of the evils of personal rule and his reasons for establishing a government by law are most interesting. Moreover, they reflect a rich experience in government. Let us consider his line of reasoning.

Nephi, centuries before Mosiah's time, in his beautiful Psalm-like prayer (see 2 Nephi 4:16-35), had already set the stage for Mosiah's thinking when he wrote:

"O Lord, I have trusted in thee, and I will trust in thee forever. I will not put my trust in the arm of flesh; for I know that cursed is he that putteth his trust in the arm of flesh. Yea, cursed is he that putteth his trust in man or maketh flesh his arm." (2 Nephi 4:34.)

Mosiah applies this teaching to politics. (Open the Book of Mormon to Mosiah, Chapter 29.) His first objection to monarchy is that man cannot be trusted with power over fellowman:

"It is better that a man should be judged of God than of man, for the judgments of God are always just, but the judgments of man are not always just." (Mosiah 29:12.)

His own son, then an ardent follower of Christ, might even "turn again to his pride and vain things" if another were made king over the land (vss. 5-10).

"Because all men are not just" and one cannot be sure how a man will act if given power over fel-

lowmen, "it is not expedient," said Mosiah, "that ye should have a king rule over you. For behold, how much iniquity doth one wicked king cause to be committed, yea, and what great destruction." (Vss. 16, 17.)

Mosiah then proceeds to indicate, in the most discerning manner, the specific evils of personal rule gone bad. All one has to do to make it a description of our time is to change the word dictator for king. Let us do that and also add a contemporary illustration or two.

". . . I say unto you, ye cannot dethrone an iniquitous king (dictator) save it be through much contention, and the shedding of much blood." (Vs. 21.)

Was he right? How did the French get rid of Louis XVI, the English of Charles I, and the Germans of Hitler?

"For behold, he has his friends in iniquity, (his minority party), and he keepeth his guards (his Gestapo or secret police) about him; and he tearth 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 after the manner of his own wickedness (full of selfishness, conceit, and vindictiveness); and whosoever doth not obey his laws he causeth to be destroyed (to be sent to a concentration camp), 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 (dic-

tator) doth pervert the ways of all righteousness." (Vss. 22, 23.)

How true to life is Mosiah's description of the evils of personal government! How applicable to our time when men, discouraged with the failures of democracy, succumb in their inertia and short-sightedness to the rule of the "strong" man, who may readily bring in his wake all the evils described by Mosiah.

Impersonal Government

In the remaining part of Chapter 29, Mosiah develops the advantages of impersonal democratic government. He writes,

". . . do your business by the voice of the people."

". . . choose you by the voice of this people, judges, that ye may be judged *according to the laws* which have been given you by our fathers, which are correct, and which were given them by the hand of the Lord." (Vs. 25.)

(Space will not permit extensive quotation, so read the remaining part of Mosiah 29.)

You will see that a government of righteous laws, executed by persons responsible to the people, will not only avoid the evils of dictatorships but will promote righteousness, justice, peace, freedom, greater equality before the law, and the development of the people because "the burden should come upon all the people, that every man shall bear his part." (Vs. 34.)

The Nephite record not only teaches the evils of man's rule over

man, it also illustrates it throughout. Much of the war instigated by the Lamanites against the Nephites was a direct result of the lust for power on the part of Nephite dissenters who, unsuccessful in gaining rule over their own people, went over to the Lamanites to work their evil designs among both Lamanites and Nephites. The most interesting illustration of this is recorded in the latter part of Alma, beginning with Chapter 43. This war history in the Book of Mormon is said by some to be dull reading of one battle after another. If read as a struggle between peoples of diametrically opposite political and religious points of view, it becomes fascinating reading.

These last twenty chapters in Alma contain an interesting study in contrasts. They tell the story of two strong men — Amalickiah, whose chief desire is to rule over man, and Moroni, whose great desire is to preserve the liberty of his people. Amalickiah can stoop to nothing too low to achieve his evil end. He flatters, deceives, steals, and kills to gain power. Moroni, on the other hand, prays, works, thinks, fights, and persuades in the most upright and forthright manner to achieve good ends.

The Nephite historian glories in the wonderful character of this youthful Nephite general and man of God, the first Moroni in these words:

"And Moroni 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 religion, even to the loss of his blood." (Alma 48:11-13, see also vs. 16-18.)

Another great patriot and believer in government by law was the chief judge of the Nephites, Pahoran. Receiving two epistles from Moroni in which he was severely taken to task for not having sent supplies and men to Nephite armies (see Alma 59 and 60), Pahoran replies in a most selfless manner and spirit, explaining how he was prevented from doing his duty by rebellion among his own people. Instead of being angry with Moroni for his false accusations, he writes to him in this spirit:

"And now, in your epistle you have censured me, but it mattereth not; I am not angry, but do rejoice in the greatness of your heart. I, Pahoran, do not seek for power, save only to retain my judgment-seat that I may preserve the rights and the liberty of my people. My soul standeth fast in that liberty in the which God hath made us free."

"Therefore, come unto me speedily with a few of your men, and

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may be in the home, or in some neighborhood condition of which the parents are unaware. The cure for mental and moral troubles consists in finding the causes and removing them.

On the positive side these principles are fundamental:

(1) Every child should be made to feel that he is wanted, is loved, is needed. This is true of teacher-pupil relations as well as of parent-child relations. In the normal development of human kind the in-

dividual never outgrows these needs. He may, however, develop such strength of character that he may resist evil and do much good in face of hatred and scorn of others; this has been the fate of martyrs. It is far from the province of officers and teachers of any educational institution to cause a pupil to feel that he is not loved and appreciated.

Reverential music and orderly conducted worship services may contribute much toward realizing the purposes of religious education.

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leave the remainder in the charge of Lehi and Teancum; give unto them power to conduct the war in that part of the land, *according to the Spirit of God, which is also the spirit of freedom which is in them.*" (Alma 61:9, 15.)

An Application

Latter-day Saints should be believers in impersonal government by law. The Book of Mormon teaches and exemplifies its value. We believe the constitution of the United States was inspired of God to establish just such a government

because ". . . it is not right that any man should be in bondage one to another." (See Doc. & Cov. 101: 77-80.) Joseph Smith, when asked how he governed his people in Nauvoo so well, replied, "I teach them correct principles and they govern themselves."

The only wise and safe rule among men in all walks of life is a rule by righteous law and principle. This is true not only in national life, but also in business, in church work, in the family and even in one's own private life, as we shall elaborate in a future article.

"Sole depositories of the remains of human liberty, our duty to ourselves, to posterity, and to mankind, call on us by every motive which is sacred or honorable, to watch over the safety of our beloved country during the troubles which agitate and convulse the residue of the world."
—Thomas Jefferson to the legislature of New York State, 1809.