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KnowWhy #153 - How Did Seeking a King Get in the Way of Sustaining a Prophet?

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Abstract: Amalickiah, who convinced many Nephite judges to “support him and establish him to be their king,” caused also “many in the church” to reject the words of the prophet Helaman. Less than twenty years earlier, King Benjamin had, in allusion to King Noah, reminded them of “how much iniquity doth one wicked king cause to be committed, yea, and what great destruction.” It may be noteworthy that a fundamental political shift took place among the Maya around this time. Perhaps the Nephites who supported Amalickiah were influenced by the political movements of surrounding nations. These events warn against rejecting prophetic teachings in favor of popular political ideologies.



Helaman, James Fullmer with Rocky Mountain Landscape, Albert Bierstadt

HOW DID SEEKING A KING GET IN THE WAY OF SUSTAINING A PROPHET?

“AND NOW IT CAME TO PASS THAT AFTER HELAMAN AND HIS BRETHREN HAD APPOINTED PRIESTS AND TEACHERS OVER THE CHURCHES THAT THERE AROSE A DISSENSION AMONG THEM, AND THEY WOULD NOT GIVE HEED TO THE WORDS OF HELAMAN AND HIS BRETHREN.” ALMA 45:23

THE KNOW

At the beginning of Alma 45, Mormon provided a special heading summary,¹ sometimes referred to as a colophon,² which reads: “The account of the people of Nephi, and their wars and dissensions, in the days of Helaman, according to the record of Helaman, which he kept in his days” (Alma 45, chapter heading). Although still in the book of Alma, Mormon’s helpful summary reveals that a shift in the source text has taken place and emphasizes that Helaman will unfortunately have to face wars and dissensions during his ministry.

After preparing Helaman as his successor, Alma mysteriously disappeared while journeying toward the land of Melek (Alma 45:18–19).³ While Mormon doesn’t reveal how Helaman felt about this sudden loss of his father or his new burden of responsibility, the text immediately reports that Helaman went forth to “declare the word” and “establish the church again in all the land” (vv. 20, 22).

Unfortunately, Helaman’s diligent efforts were promptly rejected by a substantial segment of the people:

And now it came to pass that after Helaman and his brethren had appointed priests and teachers over the churches that there arose a dissension among them, and they would not give heed to the words of Helaman and his brethren. But they grew proud, being lifted up in their hearts, because of their exceedingly great riches; therefore they grew rich in their own eyes, and would not give heed to their words, to walk uprightly before God. (Alma 45:23–24)

The animosity towards Helaman’s spiritual reforms was so strong that these dissenters gathered together and were “determined to slay” him and his brethren (Alma 46:1). The culprit behind this movement was a “large and strong man” named Amalickiah, who, through flat-

tery, had convinced many “lower judges of the land” to “support him and establish him to be their king” (vv. 3–5). Not only was he popular among society at large, but “there were many in the church who believed in the flattering words of Amalickiah” (Alma 45:7).

For those Nephites familiar with their own history, this state of affairs would have indeed seemed “exceedingly precarious and dangerous” (Alma 45:7). Less than twenty years earlier,⁴ King Mosiah had, in allusion to King Noah, reminded them of “how much iniquity doth one wicked king cause to be committed, yea, and what great destruction” (Mosiah 29:17). In the deeper past, the early Israelites sought to pressure Samuel into anointing a king who would “judge [them] like all other nations” (1 Samuel 8:5).⁵ Samuel similarly tried to warn the people about the excesses and abuses of power to which monarchs often succumbed (see 1 Samuel 8:11–18).⁶

It may also be noteworthy that during the approximate timeframe of Helaman’s ministry, a fundamental political shift took place among the ancient Maya. “Though the significance of the Preclassic–Classic divide can be overstated, the distinction does seem to reflect a transformation from one social and political order to another. . . . Elements of this system took root in various parts of Mesoamerica between 100 BC and AD 100.”⁷

During this transition, the “relationship between kingship and cosmos was re-articulated, even reconceived.”⁸ This suggests, perhaps, that the Nephites who supported Amalickiah were, like the Israelites in Samuel’s day, influenced by the political movements of surrounding nations.

THE WHY

In the cases of Samuel and King Mosiah, the moral was not necessarily that kingship was or is inherently evil.⁹ Rather those histories show that when the people would not take counsel from the Lord, their desire for worldly monarchs can readily lead to sorrow and destruction. In both narratives, the Lord, through an appointed prophet, counseled the people to either adopt or maintain a specific political system—in these cases, a system of judges.

In large part, then, it would appear that Helaman was rejected because the people allowed their own political agendas to supersede their faith in prophetic counsel.

Especially from the perspective of Mormon, who himself saw much the same development among his own people, this loss of faithful loyalty and good judgment was tragic. As in Mormon’s day, many members of the church in Helaman’s day were not immune to flattery and desertion.

Mormon reported that Helaman’s people “dissented even from the church” (Alma 46:7). Yet, as the Lord told Samuel anciently, “they have not rejected thee, but they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them” (1 Samuel 8:7). This same sentiment can certainly be applied to Helaman and his brethren who “notwithstanding their exceedingly great care over the church” (Alma 46:6), failed to persuade the people to heed the Lord.

The rise of Amalickiah and the kingmen who supported him led the Nephite civilization into a decade of intermittent but steady warfare and destruction.¹⁰ This terrible course of events helps demonstrate the importance of remembering the Lord in times of prosperity and peace, and it warns against rejecting prophetic teachings in favor of popular political ideologies. In the wake of these events, Mormon’s lament provides a stirring warning to modern readers to not repeat such follies: “Thus we see how quick the children of men do forget the Lord their God, yea, how quick to do iniquity, and to be led away by the evil one” (Alma 46:8).

FURTHER READING

Joseph Fielding McConkie and Robert J. Millet, *Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, 4 vols. (Salt Lake City, UT: Bookcraft, 1987–1991) 3:321–327.

Jonathan Kaplan, “1 Samuel 8:11–18 as ‘A Mirror for Princes,’” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 131, no. 4 (2012): 625–642.

John A. Tvedtnes, “King Mosiah and the Judgeship,” *Insights* 20, no. 11 (2000): 2.

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NOTES

1. Rather than being supplied by modern editors, this editorial comment was actually written by Mormon himself and reveals his understanding about the upcoming section of Nephite history. For information related to the introduction and revision of summary headings, see Bruce R. Satterfield, “Publication History of the Book of Mormon,” *Church News*, January 1, 2000, online at lds.org.
2. See Thomas W. Mackay, “Mormon as Editor: A Study in Colophons, Headers, and Source Indicators,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2, no. 2 (1993): 90–109; John A. Tvedtnes, “Colophons in the Book of Mormon,” in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon: A Decade of New Research*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City and Provo UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992), 13–17; John A. Tvedtnes, “Colophons in the Book of Mormon,” in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon: Insights You May Have Missed Before*, ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1991), 32–37.
3. Alma 45:19 reports that Alma “was taken up by the Spirit, or buried by the hand of the Lord, even as Moses.” This seems to allude to Deuteronomy 34:6 which says that “he [the Lord] buried him in a valley in the land of Moab ... but no man knoweth of his sepulchre unto this day.” These clues suggest the possibility that Alma, like Moses, was translated instead of suffering mortal death. For general information concerning the LDS understanding of translated beings, see Mark L. McConkie, “Translated Beings,” *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 4 vols., ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York, NY: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1992), 4:1485–1486.
4. This is only an approximate estimate based on the 2013 edition of the LDS Book of Mormon. The section heading for Mosiah 29 estimates a year of 92–91 BC. The section heading for Alma 45 estimates 73 BC.
5. See 1 Samuel 8:4–5 for a fuller reasoning of their request: “Then all the elders of Israel gathered themselves together, and came to Samuel unto Ramah, And said unto him, Behold, thou art old, and thy sons walk not in thy ways: now make us a king to judge us like all the nations.”
6. For evidence that Samuel’s warning likely drew upon a contemporary genre of discourse which decried monarchical abuse, see Jonathan Kaplan, “1 Samuel 8:11–18 as ‘A Mirror for Princes,’” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 131, no. 4 (2012): 625–642.
7. Simon Martin and Nikolai Grube, *Chronical of the Maya Kings and Queens: Deciphering the Dynasties of the Ancient Maya*, 2nd edition (London, Eng.: Thames and Hudson, 2008), 17.
8. Martin and Grube, *Chronical of Maya Kings and Queens*, 17.
9. See Mosiah 29:13: “Therefore, if it were possible that you could have just men to be your kings ... I say unto you, if this could always be the case then it would be expedient that ye should always have kings to rule over you.” See also Jonathan Kaplan, “Samuel 8 as Mirror for Princes,” 637.
10. See John W. Welch and J. Gregory Welch, *Charting the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2007), chart 137, wars 7–8.