Type: Book Chapter

Benjamin and Noah: The Principle of Dominion

Author(s): Lee L. Donaldson

Abstract: Mormon's graphic account of the two contrasting leaders makes the book of Mosiah vital reading for anyone who would aspire to lead others or who is called to lead others in the latter days. Mosiah II also recognized the great value of studying these two kings and concluded the book of Mosiah with a one-chapter summary of the lessons we should learn from them. Those who have dominion either follow the Messianic model of leadership by service (exemplified by Benjamin) or the satanic model of leadership by domination (exemplified by Noah). Leadership by service builds Zion, while leadership by domination builds Babylon.

Benjamin and Noah: The Principle of Dominion

4

Lee L. Donaldson

The book of Mosiah's penetrating look into the characters of king Benjamin and king Noah illustrates a lesson on righteous and unrighteous uses of power and authority. The scriptural term for power is *dominion* (see Gen 1:26; D&C 121:39, 46), which Noah Webster's 1828 *American Dictionary* defines as "sovereign or supreme authority: the power of governing and controlling. . . . [The] right of governing." Dominion is not limited to the realm of civil government. Whenever any individual makes decisions that affect the lives of other people, be it through family, church, or municipal government, that person exercises dominion.

In the waning moments of his life, king Mosiah II gathered his people together to propose a change in the structure of their government. He warned them of the risks of unrighteous dominion in a monarchy and illustrated his point by summoning up the two most prominent examples of kingship from Nephite political history, king Benjamin and king Noah:

> If it were possible that you could have just men to be your kings, who would establish the laws of God, and judge this people according to his commandments, . . . 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. . . . Now I say unto you, that because all men are not

Lee L. Donaldson is a coordinator in the Church Educational System, Chicago, Illinois.

just it is not expedient that ye should have a king or kings to rule over you. For behold, how much iniquity doth one wicked king cause to be committed, yea, and what great destruction! (Mosiah 29:13, 16–17)

Contrast Between Two Kings

A close look at the book of Mosiah makes it obvious why Mosiah II would have selected these two kings to make his point: Benjamin is the type of a righteous king, Noah the model of a wicked one. King Benjamin's purpose was to bring his people to Christ, while Noah led his people away from Christ. The "great joy" of Benjamin's people came from the teachings of their righteous king (Mosiah 5:4), whereas the "sore afflictions" of Noah's reign were the fruits of his evil leadership (Mosiah 12:4).

The book of Mosiah contrasts the characters of Benjamin and Noah on at least seven points: their treatment of and attitude toward temples; their handling of conflicts with the Lamanites; their methods of succession; their use of and reaction to sermons; and their attitudes toward physical labor and service, the written word, and the living prophets. These contrasts give life to our understanding of the principle of dominion.

Temples

The temple is placed in the center of Israel both literally and symbolically. For ancient Israel, the entire camp was laid out in relationship to the tabernacle, or temple. The temple was located in the center of the camp, and each tribe was responsible for guarding a certain portion of it (Num 2–3). For modern Israel, the temple is where we are prepared in all things to enter the presence of the Lord. It is at the center of our spiritual lives. Elder Boyd K. Packer also places the temple in the administrative center of modern Israel. He writes, "We would do well to

see that in administering the organizations of the Church, all roads lead to the temple" (Packer).

The temple is a sacred place where God makes himself and his plan known to his people. This plan is an eternal pattern or template. The words *temple* and *template* (possibly) both derive from the same Latin word, *templum* (*Oxford English Dictionary*, s.vv. "template," "temple").[1] A template is "a gauge, pattern, or mold . . . used as a guide to the form of a piece being made" (*Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*). One can learn much about a people by their use of sacred places. In the book of Mosiah, Mormon points out striking differences in temple worship between the peoples of Benjamin and Noah.

The purpose of Benjamin's temple is clear. The temple was where Benjamin's people "took of the firstlings of their flocks, that they might offer sacrifice and burnt offerings . . . that they might give thanks to the Lord their God" (Mosiah 2:3–4). It was also where they gathered to have "the mysteries of God . . . unfolded to [their] view" (Mosiah 2:9). While they were gathered at the temple, Benjamin's people "enter[ed] into a covenant" to obey the commandments of God and do his will (Mosiah 5:5). Mormon never gives the reader a physical description of Benjamin's temple, perhaps to show that temples are to help us understand things beyond the physical realm.

Like ancient Israel, Benjamin's people " pitched their tents round about the temple, every man having his tent with the door thereof towards the temple" (Mosiah 2:6). As the word *tent* can also mean household, or people (*Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* 4:572), in a very real sense the families of Benjamin's colony turned toward the temple.

Noah's temple, on the other hand, symbolizes the degenerate nature of his reign. Mormon describes that temple as having

---

[1] Hugh Nibley also covers several other possible origins for the word *temple* in *Mormonism and Early Christianity* (Salt Lake: Deseret Book, 1987) 358.

all manner of fine work within the walls of the temple, of fine wood, and of copper, and of brass. And the seats which were set apart for the high priests, which were above all the other seats, he did ornament with pure gold; and he caused a breastwork to be built before them, that they might rest their bodies and their arms upon while they should speak lying and vain words to his people. (Mosiah 11:10–11)

Mormon here reduces Noah's temple to an empty expression of worldliness; reference to true temple worship is conspicuously absent. The temple, for Noah, appears to have been a symbol of the ruling class's authority rather than a place of honest worship.

Conflicts with the Lamanites

Another point of comparison between Benjamin and Noah is their reaction to combat. In wartime Benjamin gathered together "his armies, and he did stand against [the Lamanites]; and he did fight with the strength of his own arm, with the sword of Laban. And in the strength of the Lord they did contend against their enemies" (WofM 1:13–14). Benjamin's courage and faith in God helped him drive the Lamanites "out of all the lands of [the Nephites'] inheritance" (WofM 1:14) and establish peace in the land.

King Noah's response was completely different. His tyrannical reign brought about the collapse of his kingdom. In the final moments of his rule, he spinelessly fled to the false security of his tower to escape being slain by Gideon. He cried out for Gideon's mercy, avoiding death only by alerting Gideon to the surprise invasion of a Lamanite army. Noah then "commanded the people that they should flee before the Lamanites, and he himself did go before them, and they did flee into the wilderness" (Mosiah 19:5–9).

Then, in one of the most appalling acts in the Book of Mormon, Noah "commanded them that all the men should leave their wives and their children, and flee before the Lamanites" (Mosiah 19:11). Although the marriage union was constituted by the covenants of the patriarchal order of

the priesthood, Noah commanded his followers to flee for their own lives and follow him into the wilderness. This final act of cowardice and evil was too much for many of his people. They refused to leave their families and were captured by the Lamanites. Those who followed Noah deeper into the wilderness finally mutinied and took his life (Mosiah 19:12–15).

Succession

Another striking contrast between the two kings is seen in the transfer of royal authority from monarch to successor. Righteous leaders like Adam, Joseph, and Moses gathered their people together to leave them a blessing and to ensure the peaceful passing of authority (Gen 48:8–20; JST Gen 50:24–38; Deut 33; 34:9; 2 Nephi 3:5–21; 4:2; D&C 107:53). Benjamin followed this pattern while Noah did not.

King Benjamin had legitimate claim to the throne. His own father had not sought the Nephite monarchy but had been called to it by the Lord (Omni 1:12). King Benjamin's personal actions show that he viewed the authority to govern as a divine stewardship and treated succession to the throne as a sacred obligation. For instance, when Benjamin realized that "he must very soon go the way of all the earth," he selected his oldest son, Mosiah II, to be the next king (Mosiah 1:9–10). He passed on the records, the sword of Laban, and the Liahona (Mosiah 1:16), which, according to Gordon C. Thomasson, were the three tokens of Nephite kingship (3–4). Benjamin also gathered his people together to prepare them for a change in leadership. There is no record of any contention or power struggle between his sons.

Noah, on the other hand, did not provide for succession to his throne. Instead, his son Limhi was appointed king by the people after his father's kingdom had collapsed (Mosiah 19:26). There is no record of Noah's ever having taught Limhi about royal responsibilities. Ironically, Limhi's first official act of government was to indenture his people to the Lamanites.

Noah's reign brought about his people's bondage and landed his son in a political quagmire, while Benjamin's son ruled without conflict.

Sermons

Another vivid contrast between the two kings is seen in the context of the two greatest sermons found in the book of Mosiah: Benjamin's tower discourse and Abinadi's moving testimony. The common theme of these two sermons is the Atonement. Each king, however, took a different role in the two sermons. Benjamin delivered the first one himself, while Noah heard and rejected the second one.

The audiences of both sermons and their reactions also differ. King Benjamin had his son Mosiah send "a proclamation throughout all the land," after which "the people gathered themselves together throughout all the land, that they might go up to the temple to hear the words which king Benjamin should speak unto them" (Mosiah 2:1). The people responded to their beloved king and gathered to the holy place to hear the word of the Lord. His prophetic description of the suffering Messiah who would take upon him the sins of his people caused a mighty change in the hearts of the people: they had "no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually" (Mosiah 5:2). Benjamin had the names of those who entered into a covenant with the Lord recorded. He also "appointed priests to teach the people, that thereby they might hear and know the commandments of God, and to stir them up in remembrance of the oath which they had made" (Mosiah 6:3).

Noah not only failed to gather his people to hear the word of the Lord, but he also imprisoned the very messenger who brought it. Abinadi delivered his sermon not from a tower but in chains. His audience, Noah and Noah's priests, hardened their hearts against his sermon, and the priests flaunted the hardness of their hearts by condemning Abinadi to death. The wicked king wavered for a moment out of fear, but then agreed

to the atrocious sentence of his priests. Abinadi's sermon had no effect on Noah's disposition to do evil; instead, Noah forced Alma, the only one of his priests who believed Abinadi, to flee for his life.

The two kings' reactions to the message of the gospel typified their individual reigns. One directed his power to proclaim the gospel, while the other used his authority to prevent its spread.

Physical Labor and Service

Another striking contrast between the two kings is their different attitudes toward physical labor and service. King Benjamin labored with his own hands among his people, a fact which he used as a model of service during his farewell address. He stated, "I . . . have labored with mine own hands that I might serve you, and that ye should not be laden with taxes" (Mosiah 2:14). He then told the people they should learn to serve one another.

Conversely, Noah would not labor with his own hands. Instead, he spent his time "in riotous living" (Mosiah 11:14). "He laid a tax of one fifth part of all [his people] possessed. . . . And all this did he take to support himself, and his wives and his concubines; . . . and thus they were supported in their laziness" (Mosiah 11:3–6). Noah used his position to avoid physical labor and service. His indolent lifestyle reflected his reliance on the things of this world.

The Written Word

Another interesting difference between the two kings is their attitude toward the written word. Benjamin was careful to teach his sons to read the sacred records: "And he caused that they should be taught in all the language of his fathers, that thereby they might become men of understanding; and that they might know concerning the prophecies which had been

spoken" (Mosiah 1:2). He taught that knowing the written word is knowing the commandments and mysteries of God (Mosiah 1:5). Benjamin's sons shared his reverence for the written word.

The priests under Noah's direction developed a completely different attitude toward the written word. For them it was a skill to be used for profit. After Noah's death, his priests taught the Lamanites the written word:

> And thus the language of Nephi began to be taught among all the people of the Lamanites. And they were a people friendly one with another; nevertheless they knew not God; neither did the brethren of Amulon teach them anything concerning the Lord their God, neither the law of Moses; nor did they teach them the words of Abinadi; But they taught them that they should keep their record, and that they might write one to another. And thus the Lamanites began to increase in riches, and began to trade one with another and wax great, and began to be a cunning and a wise people, as to the wisdom of the world. (Mosiah 24:4–7)

Noah's priests secularized the written word.

Living Prophets

Benjamin made good use of the prophets, while Noah abused them. Benjamin put down "false prophets, and false preachers and teachers among the people . . . with the assistance of the holy prophets who were among his people" (WofM 1:16). Benjamin carefully cultivated feelings of respect for the Lord's chosen messengers. But there was no reverence for prophets in the court of wicked king Noah. Noah sought the lives of both Abinadi and Alma. Thus Mormon's skillful juxtaposition of Benjamin's and Noah's reactions to the Lord's prophets highlights the differences between the two kings.

Conclusion

For the ancients, character and personality were best seen in a person's deeds. Mormon followed this ancient philosophy in portraying the deeds of the two Nephite kings, Benjamin and

Noah. But the deaths of the two monarchs also characterized their lives. Benjamin peacefully passed the kingdom to his son, retired from the kingship, and spent the last three years of mortality in peace. His obedience secured him a place in God's kingdom. On the other hand, Noah, who spent his life on the lusts and desires of the flesh, pronounced a death sentence on the one messenger who could have saved him from destruction. His cruel treatment of Abinadi became his own death sentence, though his desire for power and dominion consumed his soul long before the physical flames ever touched his body. How fitting it is that Noah was consumed in flames of his own making.

Mormon's graphic account of the two contrasting leaders makes the book of Mosiah vital reading for anyone who would aspire to lead others or who is called to lead others in the latter days. Mosiah II also recognized the great value of studying these two kings and concluded the book of Mosiah with a one-chapter summary of the lessons we should learn from them. Those who have dominion either follow the Messianic model of leadership by service (exemplified by Benjamin) or the satanic model of leadership by domination (exemplified by Noah). Leadership by service builds Zion, while leadership by domination builds Babylon.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible: An Illustrated Encyclopedia. Ed. Arthur Buttrick. 4 vols. New York: Abingdon, 1962.

The Oxford English Dictionary. 2nd ed. 1989.

Packer, Boyd K. Address delivered at Regional Representatives' Seminar, 3 Apr 1987. Copy in possession of the author.

Thomasson, Gordon C. "Mosiah: The Complex Symbolism and the Symbolic Complex of Kingship in the Book of Mormon." Working Paper. TSN-82. Provo, UT: F.A.R.M.S., 1982.

Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary. 1990 ed.

Webster's 1828 American Dictionary. Facsimile. San Francisco: Foundation for American Christian Education, 1967.