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Nephi's Political Testament

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Abstract: The great political question among Book of Mormon peoples was "Who has the right to rule?" Did Nephi's descendants and those who followed them have a legitimate right to rule? Or should the right have belonged to Lehi's oldest son Laman and his descendants? This quarrel is the cause of centuries of political and military struggle. But this was not the only problem. Even within Nephite society, an endless number of dissenters challenged the government. They often split away to join the Lamanites when they could not win control inside the Nephite system. These dissenters typically argued for the Lamanite view, in part because they thought they could line their own nests that way.

By paying close attention to how this struggle was waged, we can see one of the reasons the Book of Mormon was written. Of course it is a witness for Christ and his teachings. But in addition, it provides reasons why we should believe that the tradition of the Nephites was just and correct. The two messages of the book are tied together in such a way that whoever accepts the teachings of Christ accepts that Nephi was a legitimate ruler, and vice versa.

Chapter 20

NEPHI'S POLITICAL TESTAMENT

Noel B. Reynolds

The writers of the Book of Mormon talked a lot about their government and political beliefs. Most of us look only at the Nephite system of judges and the Gadianton robbers, however. Few of us have looked closely at Nephi's political testament and the traditions among the Nephites and the Lamanites about ruling.

The great political question among Book of Mormon peoples was "Who has the right to rule?" Did Nephi's descendants and those who followed them have a legitimate right to rule? Or should the right have belonged to Lehi's oldest son Laman and his descendants? This quarrel is the cause of centuries of political and military struggle. But this was not the only problem. Even within Nephite society, an endless number of dissenters challenged the government. They often split away to join the Lamanites when they could not win control inside the Nephite system. These dissenters typically argued for the Lamanite view, in part because they thought they could line their own nests that way.

By paying close attention to how this struggle was waged, we can see one of the reasons the Book of Mormon was written. Of course it is a witness for Christ and his teachings. But in addition, it provides reasons why we should believe that the tradition of the Nephites was just and correct. The two messages of the book are tied together in such a way that whoever accepts the teachings of Christ accepts that Nephi was a legitimate ruler, and vice versa.

Every group of people wants to be assured that its government is lawful and was founded properly. This is, in part, why stories of national origins and city foundings have been so important to human societies. The stories explain the origins of their laws and their rulers. Such traditions often deal with conflicting versions of the founding, explaining away all but one "authorized" account.

Nephi undertook late in his life to write an account of his people on the small plates. Though we don't know what the large plates—the political history—contained, we can guess from his version of how his people originated that a major issue was who had the right to govern. His small plates defend the Nephite tradition and refute the account advanced by the Lamanites and dissenters. Nephi carefully constructed what he wrote to convince his own and later generations that the Lord had selected him over his older brothers to be Lehi's successor. Thus, one interesting way to read the account is as a political tract produced to show that his rule was authoritative.

We would not expect to find this kind of political argument in Nephi's writings if they were only a journal of what happened to Nephi and his family. Nephi's entries on the small plates were not written as the events happened. Instead, he wrote years after the events, drawing on the journal or notes that he had kept plus "the record of [his] father" (1 Nephi 1:17). Furthermore, all of it was seen through his memory and mature reflections. What we tend to read as a story of flight from Jerusalem is really a carefully designed account explaining to his successors why their religious faith in Christ and their political tradition—the kingship of Nephi—were both true and legitimate.

Several times in the text, Nephi mentioned the competing tradition of Nephite dissenters and Lamanite spokesmen. Essentially, the Lamanites taught their people the following about their ancestors and the "right way" of government:

1. "They were driven out of the land of Jerusalem because of the iniquities of their fathers" [Lehi and Ishmael].

2. "They were wronged in the wilderness by their brethren" when Nephi "took the lead of their journey in the wilderness."

3. "They were also wronged [by Nephi?] while crossing the sea."

4. "They were wronged while in the land of their first inheritance" when Nephi led part of the people away, taking "the ruling of the people out of their hands."

5. "They said that he robbed them" when Nephi "took the records which were engraven on the plates of brass" (Mosiah 10:12–17).

Five hundred years after Nephi wrote his record, a Zoramite dissenter, Ammoron, stated the Lamanite charge simply, "Your fathers [Nephi and ruling descendants] did wrong their brethren, insomuch that they did rob them of their right to the government when it rightly belonged unto them [the Lamanites]" (Alma 54:17).

Zeniff was one of the first to defend the tradition of Nephi's rule. He explained that the younger brother took the lead because he was righteous and was called of God: For "the Lord heard [Nephi's] prayers and answered them, and he took the lead of their journey in the wilderness." Zeniff further claimed that Laman and Lemuel had hardened their hearts while on the sea, and that Nephi "departed into the wilderness as the Lord had commanded him, and took the . . . plates of brass" (Mosiah 10:13–16). This version of the Nephite political tradition seems to have been standardized early in their history.

The tradition was an officially accepted one because it was repeated on ceremonial occasions. For example, when the Nephites met under King Benjamin's direction to offer sacrifices and give thanks to the Lord their God, Mormon listed in the prayers of thanksgiving the key features of the Nephite tradition:

1. The Lord had brought them out of Jerusalem.
2. The Lord had delivered them from their enemies.
3. The Lord had appointed just men to be their teachers.
4. The Lord had given them a just man to be their king, who

had established peace in Zarahemla and had taught them to keep the commandments of God (Mosiah 2:4).

The Book of Mormon describes the Lamanites as constantly seeking to dominate the Nephites. From the first, Nephi claimed, they tried to kill him (1 Nephi 7:16). Hundreds of years later, Zeniff reported that the Lamanites were still teaching their children to hate Nephi's offspring, to murder and rob them, and even to "have an eternal hatred" toward them. From what he had learned growing up in the Nephite kingdom, Zeniff (a descendant of Mulek) said that all this hatred was because Laman and Lemuel "understood not the dealings of the Lord" and had "hardened their hearts against the Lord" (Mosiah 10:14–17). No doubt the older brothers had ground into their families these anti-Nephi teachings. By the second generation, the teachings had resulted in the Lamanites' deadly intention to destroy not only the Nephites, but also their records and traditions (Enos 1:14).

Now, we might think that destroying the Nephites would have been enough. Why would they be concerned about destroying the Nephite records too? Perhaps it was because the Lamanites remembered Nephi's and Lehi's prophecies that those records would be a powerful tool in converting Lamanites to the Nephite beliefs. If so, they would want to eliminate even that possibility by wiping out the books. Samuel the Lamanite knew already before the time of Christ the power in the Nephite records: "As many of them [the Lamanites] as are brought to the knowledge of the truth, and to know of the wicked and abominable traditions of their fathers, and are led to believe the holy scriptures, yea, the prophecies of the holy prophets, which are written . . . are firm and steadfast in the faith" (Helaman 15:7–8). We also have several missionary stories that describe the liberation that took place when the Lamanites allowed themselves to learn of the "incorrectness of the traditions of their fathers" (Alma 9:17; 17:9; 24:7).

Statements of Nephite apostates emphasize how politically powerful the correct records were. For example, while living

among the Lamanites, Mosiah's missionary sons encountered the Amalekites, who had apostatized from the Nephite beliefs. One Amalekite spokesman rejected the Nephite teaching that a Redeemer would come, at the same time belittling all other Nephite traditions: "We do not believe that thou knowest any such thing. We do not believe in these foolish traditions. We do not believe that thou knowest of things to come, neither do we believe that thy fathers and also that our fathers did know concerning the things which they spake, of that which is to come" (Alma 21:8). The famous apostate Korihor displayed this same skepticism (see Alma 30:16).

So did the Zoramite leaders who were angry with Alma for challenging their schemes. The Zoramites even went to the extreme of inserting their denial of the Nephite tradition, "which was handed down to them by the childishness of their fathers," into their one ritual prayer. Instead, they thanked God that they had not been "led away after the foolish traditions" of the Nephites, which "bind them down to a belief of Christ" (Alma 31:16–17). Furthermore, their religious rebellion was soon reflected in a political revolt against Nephite rule, whereby they "became Lamanites" (Alma 43:4).

The Nephites were clear about the link between their religious and political traditions. Mormon wanted us to notice how the Zoramites changed their worship and their political loyalties at the same time because he pointed out the connection of political structure and religion among the Nephites. Five verses later he informed us that the Nephites' only intent was to "preserve their rights and their privileges, yea, and also their liberty, that they might worship God according to their desires. For they knew that if they should fall into the hands of the Lamanites, that whosoever should worship . . . the true and the living God, the Lamanites would destroy" (Alma 43:9–10).

The aims of the religious apostates are clearest in the revolt of Amalickiah and his followers. Amalickiah's intention was to convert the Nephites' free government into a monarchy, with himself as king. The writer indicated that this was first phrased

as a religious argument and that by his flatteries Amalickiah won dissenters from the church (see Alma 46:5–7). Amalickiah's intent was "to destroy the church of God, and to destroy the foundation of liberty" (Alma 46:10). Captain Moroni responded by rallying the Christians to support both their religion and their political system. On his banner, he wrote a "title of liberty," calling upon the people to battle for "our God, our religion, and freedom, and our peace" (Alma 46:12).

In spite of Moroni's quick victory and Amalickiah's flight to the land of Nephi, the struggle continued. After Amalickiah was slain, the Nephites had to face newly recruited Lamanite armies under the leadership of Amalickiah's brother and heir, Ammoron. In answer to Moroni's letter calling on him to repent and give up fighting the Nephites, Ammoron challenged both Nephite authority and religious teachings, saying: "As concerning that God whom ye say we have rejected, behold, we know not such a being; neither do ye; but if it so be that there is such a being, we know not but that he hath made us as well as you. . . . But behold these things matter not" (Alma 54:21–22).

Like Amalickiah and his followers, many of "these dissenters" had "the same instruction and the same information" as the Nephites, even "having been instructed in the same knowledge of the Lord." Yet after dissenting, they adopted "the traditions of the Lamanites; giving way to indolence, and all manner of lasciviousness; yea, entirely forgetting the Lord their God" (Alma 47:36). Like Ammoron and Amalickiah, many of them waged war against the Nephites "to avenge their wrongs, and to maintain and to obtain their rights to the government" (Alma 54:24). In fact, Nephite apostates "became more hardened and impenitent . . . than the Lamanites" (Alma 47:36). Thus, a main factor that determined the group a person felt he belonged to was whether he accepted or rejected the traditions of the Nephite fathers, particularly Lehi's and Nephi's prophecies about the coming of Christ.

The Nephite tradition centered on the message about Christ. As Nephi often stated, his purpose was to persuade his children

to believe in Christ, that they might be saved (see 1 Nephi 6:4; 19:18; 2 Nephi 25:23). Mosiah also recorded that those who grew up after the time of Benjamin's national meeting "did not believe the tradition of their fathers" about either the "resurrection of the dead" or the future "coming of Christ" (Mosiah 26:1–2). From statements like these, we can see that the Nephites built their political position and their religion on the same basis – that the Christ who would come among them had designated Nephi to be their leader.

When a person accepted the religious teachings, he or she also acknowledged Nephi as the Lord's spokesman and designated leader over Lehi's people. Thus, when Nephi determined on his small plates to persuade his descendants and all later readers to believe in Christ, he felt he also had to include proof that he was rightful heir to the office of prophet and that his father had passed on the right to govern. This amounted to proving that the Nephite traditions were correct and that the Lamanite traditions were mistaken. This proof rested upon the central plank of the Nephite tradition, the belief that the Son of God would come down to earth and atone for the sins of all men.

This is at the core because it justifies all other beliefs. Nephi intertwined the argument for Christ with evidence that his own authority as ruler was divinely given. They stand or fall together. Nephi, like Lehi, saw and heard Christ, and he testified that the Savior would come among Lehi's progeny. Furthermore, Christ had spoken to Nephi, appointing him "a ruler and teacher" over his brothers while delivering him from their treachery. Without Christ, the argument for Nephi's authority had no basis; and without Nephi's authority, the Nephite political claims would have collapsed in the face of Laman's seniority in the family.

There are six major stories in 1 Nephi that Nephi seems to have selected to explain and justify his position as leader. Each story has these features:

1. God gave commands to Lehi or Nephi as leader of the party.

2. Laman and Lemuel murmured and rebelled because they lacked the faith to follow the commands and resented what they had lost by leaving Jerusalem.

3. Their disobedience brought a group crisis.

4. The crisis was resolved through God's unmistakable help to Nephi.

5. All repented and were reconciled, having recognized God's hand over them.

On the small plates, Nephi reported how Laman was given chance after chance to obey the Lord and so assume his rightful role as head of the family after Lehi's death. Had he followed Christ, he could properly have led the party. But his (with Lemuel's and the sons of Ishmael's) rebellion, stiff-neckedness, and murmuring caused the Lord to reject them and to choose Nephi in their place. By these accounts, Nephi showed us he was chosen by the Lord, by Lehi, and even by his grumbling brothers, who then followed him—and once even bowed in subjection to him—of their own choice.

Mormon, the editor of much of the Book of Mormon as we now possess it, used material from Nephi's small plates as a key for understanding Nephite politics many centuries later. The difference in time did not mean that Nephi's points had lost meaning, for being a Nephite always depended on accepting the Nephite traditions and records: "Whosoever would not believe in the tradition of the Lamanites, but believed those records which were brought out of the land of Jerusalem, and also in the tradition of their fathers, which were correct, who believed in the commandments of God and kept them, were called the Nephites, or the people of Nephi" (Alma 3:11).

Nephi also supported his claim to authority by indirectly comparing his situation to those of Old Testament leaders. The story of Joseph the son of Jacob and Nephi are similar, for example. Like Joseph, Nephi was resented by his older brothers, for he too was his father's favorite. As Joseph learned by revelation that he would rule over his brothers, so God let Nephi know that he would teach and rule over his brothers. Nephi's

brothers felt the same murderous rage toward Nephi that caused Joseph's brothers to throw Joseph into a pit in the wilderness to die. Like Joseph, Nephi credited his escape to God's power.

In case we might fail to make the Nephi-Joseph connection on our own, Nephi mentioned in three places that Joseph was their ancestor. One place he even reviewed the story for our benefit: "That Joseph who was the son of Jacob, who was sold into Egypt, and 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; see 1 Nephi 6:2; 2 Nephi 3:4). Nephi stressed their lineage even though he wrote that he did not want to use precious space on the plates with genealogy. Remember that Nephi told how, by means of his bow, he provided food and saved his father's family from starvation (1 Nephi 16:23). (Note that the bow was anciently a symbol connected with Joseph—see Genesis 49:23–24.)

Nephi also accused his brothers of doing what Joseph's brothers had done—bringing "down [their father's] gray hairs with sorrow to the grave" (1 Nephi 18:18; compare Genesis 42:38). Lehi, like Jacob, gathered his people together to receive his final blessings. Both of these patriarchs rebuked their older sons for faithlessness and promised the birthright to the younger sons, who had already become the families' actual leaders. These subtle comparisons between Nephi and Joseph are scattered throughout the text and can easily be missed. Together they reveal a subtle but unmistakable pattern.

Nephi also compared himself more openly to Moses, leader of the Exodus from Egypt and the founder of the Israelite nation. The overall pattern is the same as the Exodus: Lehi's family escaped from a wicked land and trekked through wilderness to their promised land. The similarities are numerous: Moses struck down an Egyptian overseer smiting an Israelite slave; Nephi began his career as a leader by killing wicked Laban. Following this, he fled into the wilderness, as Moses had done. Nephi described Laban's death after telling how he had exhorted his brothers to follow him without fearing Laban or his soldiers.

Nephi said that the Lord would protect them as he protected Moses and the Israelites against the Egyptians (see 1 Nephi 4:3).

Also like Moses, Nephi had to deal with murmuring and faithlessness among his people. Again, both leaders went up into a mountain to receive the word of God (1 Nephi 17:7–10). Still later, Nephi compared himself to Moses when his brothers refused to help him build the ship. On that occasion he listed details of the experience of Moses and the Israelites similar to their own history. While he did not explicitly draw a comparison between himself and Moses, the parallels are evident (see 1 Nephi 17:23–47). Thus, like Moses and Joseph, Nephi bolstered his position as the legitimate leader because the Lord chose and supported him.

I have reported elements of the Book of Mormon in which the Nephites' argument for Christ's divinity and for the origin of their own government are tied together. These arguments helped later generations of Nephites to be determined to defend their freedoms and traditions against the Lamanites and Nephite dissenters. Although the arguments that Nephi presented are subtle, they are clear and persuasive, according to the Hebrew style of writing. He recorded numerous incidents proving that God chose him and elevated him above his brothers because of their disobedience. Nephi also referred repeatedly to Israelite heroes who set patterns that parallel his case and thereby justify his cause. Nephi is shown to be like a new Moses and a new Joseph, saving a portion of Israel from captivity and darkness by prophetic teaching and divinely appointed government.