



Type: Magazine Article

Moroni, A Sketch of the Nephite Republic, III

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Source: *The Contributor*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (January 1890), pp. 81–85

Published by: The Contributor Company

Abstract: Roberts relates the reunion of the people of Zeniff and Alma the Elder with the Nephites at Zarahemla. He discusses the bloody revolutions throughout history and compares them to the peaceful “revolution” undertaken by King Mosiah at the end of his reign by changing the mode of government to what Robert characterizes as a “republic” under the reign of the judges. Some modes of operation of the new government are discussed.

THE CONTRIBUTOR.

VOL. XI.

JANUARY, 1890.

No. 3.

MORONI

A SKETCH OF THE NEPHITE REPUBLIC.

III.

VIOLENCE, civil strife, war, are almost inseparably connected in our minds with revolutions. We remember that Rome was saturated with the blood of her citizens whenever marked changes were sought to be made in her constitution. The terrible conflicts which made up the "Social War" grew out of so slight a revolution as extending the franchises of Roman citizenship to the people of the Italian states; and three-hundred thousand people perished in war before the revolution was accomplished. The cruelty and violence attending that revolution which dethroned and beheaded King Charles I, of England, and made the sturdy Cromwell ruler in his stead, is apt to influence our minds as to the character of revolutions. Or perhaps the French Revolution of the last century rises like a huge spectre smeared with blood, to remind us of the horrors of revolution. In the years between 1789 and 1794, France indeed "got drunk with blood to vomit crime," and dreadful was her saturnalia! One million of her people perished in those five years; and the destruction to property was in some proportion to the destruction of life. How pleasant it is to turn from these violent revolutions, accomplished by brute force and baptized in blood, to one prompted by reason and accomplished in peace! Such is the great Nephite revolution which I am about to describe.

King Mosiah, under whose direction the great Nephite revolution, which changed a monarchy of some four and a half centuries standing into a republic, was one of

the most remarkable of the Nephite kings. Under his righteous reign of thirty-three years the Nephites prospered amazingly. It was an era of peace and of colonization. Large cities and villages were founded north and south, east and west of the great city of Zarahemla, the centre of Nephite civilization and population. Both king and people were industrious; and the priests of the land as well as the king, supported themselves by their own labors. Equality, fraternity, liberty, among the Nephites in Mosiah's reign, were not words merely, as alas! they too frequently are, but they were facts realized and enjoyed by his people. God prospered their labors, and wealth flowed unto them from all the streams of their industry. They were a living testimony that "Righteousness exalteth a nation."

Besides the natural increase in numbers during such a period of peace, a considerable addition was made to the Nephite population by reason of their being joined by a large company of people from the land of Nephi.

It will perhaps be remembered by the reader that I spoke in the last number of the migration of the Nephites from the land of Nephi to Zarahemla, under the leadership of the grandfather of the king whose reign we are now considering. Shortly after their arrival in Zarahemla, early in the fourth century of the Nephite annals, a number of men became anxious to return to the land of Nephi, and repossess their inheritances. They returned under the leadership of one Zeniff, but their fate was unknown to their brethren who remained in Zarahemla. Early in

King Mosiah's reign, however, a company of sixteen men, chosen for their strength and powers of endurance, started out to discover, if possible, what had become of this colony. The leader of the company was one Ammon, a descendant of Zarahemla.

After a journey of forty days, they camped in the borders of the land Nephi, and three of their number going down into the land, were captured by the descendants of the colonists they were seeking. Great was the joy of the descendants of Zeniff when they discovered their prisoners were from Zarahemla and in search of them. Their bands were unloosed, messengers were sent to bring in the rest of Ammon's searching party, and the occasion was made one of public thanksgiving and praise to Almighty God.

The experience of Zeniff's colony had been eventful. Arriving in the land of Nephi, the crafty old king of the Lamanites had permitted them to occupy it, desiring to enjoy the fruits of their industry as fast as it should create wealth. The vigilance, courage and faith of Zeniff and his people during his reign, however, prevented their intended spoliation, and they preserved their possessions and liberties against the repeated assaults of the Lamanites. All this was changed under the reign of his son Noah. A licentious voluptuary, he taxed the people to the extent of one-fifth of their increase, to support the splendor of his court. Dissensions broke out among his people because of the oppression he practiced, which, together with an attack made upon them by the Lamanites in the midst of their civil strife, ended in the overthrow of his government and his own assassination.

His son Limhi succeeded to the throne, but bound by the treaty made with the Lamanites to pay a tribute of one-half their substance, and one-half of their yearly increase to them.

Such was their condition when they were found by the party led by Ammon.

That the condition of semi-bondage of the people of Limhi to the Lamanites was irksome need not be stated. A move-

ment looking to an exodus to Zarahemla was set on foot soon after Ammon's arrival, and it was entirely successful, they reached Zarahemla, and considerably augmented the population of the Nephites within the domain of King Mosiah.

Another event which is inseparably connected with this brief account of the return of this colony from the land of Nephi to Zarahemla, is the founding of the church by one Alma.

In the days of the wicked King Noah, a prophet of God named Abinadi was sent to warn the king and his people of the judgments of God that would surely come upon them for their wickedness unless they repented. Him the priests of Noah took, by the commandment of the king, and cast into prison, and afterwards burned him at the stake. His preaching and warning and suffering, however, were not in vain, for among the priests of Noah was a descendant of Nephi, the Alma above spoken of. Though drawn into the stream of voluptuous wickedness by the general corruption of the times, he deeply repented of his sins at the powerful preaching of Abinadi, and pleaded for that prophet's life when sentenced to the stake, for which he had to flee for his own life. While in concealment, he wrote down the teachings of Abinadi, and also went about privately teaching the people, calling upon them to repent of their sins. As many as obeyed his teachings he baptized into a covenant to serve the Lord, and thus founded a church. Being discovered at last by the spies of King Noah, and accused of stirring up the people to rebellion, he was warned by the Lord of the approach of the king's army to destroy him and his converts and he, with his followers, numbering four hundred and fifty souls, fled into the wilderness.

A journey of eight days brought them into a desirable land and there they founded a city and called it Helam. Subsequently they were brought into bondage by the Lamanites, who ruled them with great cruelty. Finally the Lord delivered them under the leadership of Alma, and directed them to Zarahemla, where King Mosiah gladly received them. Thus another important as well as considerable

addition was made to the population of Mosiah's kingdom.

The records that had been kept by Zeniff's colony, as also the record kept by Alma, King Mosiah had read to his people in public assemblies. The result was that a very general desire was expressed for churches to be founded throughout Zarahemla and the settlements of the Nephites. To this a ready assent was given by the good King Mosiah, and Alma was appointed to perform the labor.

Though there were many local organizations called churches—there were seven such in the city of Zarahemla alone—presided over by local priests, assisted by teachers, yet all these constituted but one grand church, presided over by Alma, who was God's high priest. This revival of religion and the organization of the churches increased the righteousness of Mosiah's kingdom, and the good king had the satisfaction of seeing, toward the close of his reign, an impetus given to the prosperity of his people.

Mosiah was indeed a fortunate monarch: loved, almost revered, by his people, to whose peace and prosperity he had contributed so largely. Rebellion, gaunt, red-eyed and fierce had never raised his horrid front against him. Neither had war with the Lamanites laid waste his lands or depopulated his cities. Mild-eyed peace walked smiling through his domain and scattered plenty with a lavish hand. But who so blessed, whose lot with mortals is cast, that he escapes drinking deep draughts from sorrow's bitter cup! Not King Mosiah, notwithstanding all his righteousness. For his sons, of whom he had four, walked not with him in faith before God; but on the contrary, they, with one of the sons of Alma, whose name was Alma, were numbered among the unbelievers and the enemies of religion.

The son of Alma was a man of high attainments, skillful in controversy, artful in flattery, an orator and a scholar—qualities well calculated to beguile the multitude, which is ever pleased with that which is dazzling—often mistaking a high-sounding phrase for profoundest ar-

gument, insolence for brilliancy, and impertinence and often blasphemy for wit. This man, together with the sons of Mosiah, went about the country perverting the truth and seeking the destruction of the church which his father was laboring so zealously to establish.

Certainly it is not necessary to say that the course of these talented but misguided young men was a source of deep affliction to both the king and high priest. The latter prayed most earnestly for the conversion of his son, that an end might come to the scandal and reproach cast upon the church by reason of his son's waywardness. You shall ever find people ready to judge the value of pulpit precept so rigidly by the test of personal example, that they not only watch narrowly the footsteps of the preacher, but those of his family also, and are ready to shake the head significantly and cast suspicion upon his integrity, his sincerity, and disparage the value of his spiritual labors if, for sooth, but one of his own household walk contrary to his doctrines. The prayer of Alma was heard and answered, for an angel of God appeared unto the young men while they were seeking the destruction of the church, and so remarkable was the demonstration of God's power through that messenger, that it wrought the conversion of Alma, the son of the high priest, and also of the sons of Mosiah who were with him at the time. Furthermore, it happened unto them as it did unto Paul of Tarsus, that they who once persecuted the church became its most zealous servants and advocates.

The sons of Mosiah, not content with undoing the mischief they had done, so far as it was possible to undo it by acknowledging their former wickedness and proclaiming their repentance, desired to perform a mission to the Lamanites to preach the gospel to them and lead them from their darkness into the light of truth. This mission Mosiah at first opposed, but finally gave his consent to their undertaking.

These princes, before departing on their missions, evidently renounced all claims to the throne of their father and devoted themselves entirely to the work of the

ministry; and King Mosiah being anxious in his old age to see some settlement of the government, before his death, sent word throughout the land desiring to know of the people whom they would have for their king. The choice of the people was Aaron, most probably the second son of Mosiah. But Aaron was absent on his mission in the land of Nephi, and had, with his brethren, refused the kingdom, hence the kingdom could not be conferred upon him.

This state of things called forth another communication from Mosiah, in which the good old king related the fact of his son Aaron and all his other sons refusing to accept the kingdom. He also pointed out the danger there would be in appointing another man to be king.

Dear as were his sons to him, the king was not blind to the possibility of their returning to their pride, recalling their rejection of the kingdom, and claiming a right to the throne. In such an event civil war would inevitably follow, for at what time and in what nation was there ever a pretender to a throne, however shadowy his claims, but what he obtained a following? In every nation there are plenty of men whose fortunes are so desperate that they are ever ready to join an adventurer that holds out the slightest promise to them of keeping them afloat, by giving them an opportunity to prosper by the turbulence of the times. That his people might be preserved from civil strife, on the one hand, and that he might preserve his sons from possible destruction on the other, King Mosiah proposed a complete revolution in the government.

In proposing this revolution, he appeared not unmindful of the advantages existing in monarchical government. His admiration of that kind of government carried him so far as to lead him to say that if it were possible for a people always to have just men to be their kings, then it would be expedient forever to have kings to rule over them. But on the other hand he points out how difficult, if not impossible, it is always to have just men for kings; how great a state of wickedness one iniquitous king is capable of plunging a whole nation into, and how

difficult a thing it is to dethrone an unrighteous king by means of his courtiers, his fellows in corruption, who live by his bounty, and feed upon the fruits of his oppression, supporting him in his pride, encouraging him in his ungodly revels, flattering his vanity and driving from his presence prudent counselors. While his complete control of his armies and his enactment and enforcement of laws,* leaves him so strongly entrenched behind powerful barriers that it is next to impossible to dislodge him. That it cannot be done only through the smoke and flame and blood of civil strife is certain.

Because of these disadvantages of kingly governments, Mosiah reached the conclusion, and that very properly, that it was not expedient for the Nephites to have a king at all, and proposed that the administration of the affairs of the government should be entrusted to one chief judge and such inferior judges as might be necessary to effectually and justly administer the laws of the land. The judges, both the chief and inferior ones, being chosen by the people; and, indeed, it was to be a part of the new constitution that all business be done by the voice of the people.

Mosiah pointed out the great value of this principle in government, as being this: that it gave to the people their agency. Many people had been corrupted by the iniquity of their kings; for let but the great and high ones in the estimation of a nation, give a loose rein to base passions, and the multitude are only too ready to ape their pride, their folly and their sin. And because of the people being led into unrighteousness by their kings their iniquities were answered upon the heads of their kings. But in the republic proposed by Mosiah, since the supreme power was to be shifted from the king to the people the responsibility for the justice or injustice of the government was shifted also. And they were told by the good king that if the time ever came that the voice of the people chose iniquity,

*The reader must bear in mind that I speak of absolute monarchies—the only *form* of kingly government known to the ancients—as well among the Nephites as among the Asiatics.

then the judgments of God would be upon them, and their destruction would be sure. He might have added also as another advantage of great value in this principle of government by the people, that where the character of government is shaped by the voice of the people, and its laws administered by men of their own choosing, the sentiment and the influence of the people will be on the side of the law, and in favor of just administration. Whereas, when the law-making power and the execution thereof reside in the king or the aristocracy, then it often happens that the people see their dearest rights invaded and their interest sacrificed by the government that should protect both their rights and their interests. And thus it happens that the laws of kingdoms are often looked upon with an unfriendly eye by the people, and their administration blocked by a variety of expedients generally injurious to the stability of government.

The proposition of Mosiah, including all its responsibilities, was readily accepted by his people, and they rejoiced in the liberty granted them. They assembled in their respective cities and settlements and cast their votes for their judges. At this first election, Alma, the son of Alma, the high priest, was elected chief judge of the new republic, and the revolution was an accomplished fact.

It is difficult to determine with precision the entire character of the new constitution. But from what is written in the Book of Mormon this much may be learned: The chief judge, elected by the people, was the supreme governor of the land and chief executive of the laws.* His oath of office bound him "to judge righteously, and to keep the peace and the freedom of the people, and to grant unto them their sacred privileges to worship the Lord their God; to support and maintain the cause of God all his days, and to bring the wicked to justice, according to their crimes."† A similar oath was doubtless administered to the inferior

judges. To a limited extent also legislative powers were granted to him, but these appear to be confined to framing laws, which were not of force until ratified by the voice of the people.‡ No limit appears to have been set to his term of office, but as the voice of the people placed him in office, the same power could also dismiss him from it; hence we may conclude that he held his position during good behavior.

Just how the inferior judges were graded cannot be ascertained, but that they were graded is evident, since Mosiah, in explaining the character of the constitution of the republic he proposed to his people, says: "And if ye have judges, and they do not judge you according to the law which has been given, ye can cause that they may be judged of a higher judge; if your higher judges do not judge righteous judgments, ye shall cause that a small number of lower judges should be gathered together, and they shall judge your higher judges, according to the voice of the people."* A salutary provision not likely to be rejected when the new government was adopted; but the manner in which the judges were graded is unknown, as well as what number of inferior judges were designated to try the chief judge. But it is quite evident that no man was above the law, but all were subject to it, even the chief judge.

The laws of the land consisted of the law of Moses and the enactments of the Nephite kings, which were to remain operative, except in so far as they interfered with the changes made in the executive and judicial departments of government.

Mosiah died when sixty-three years old, in the five hundred and ninth year of the Nephite annals. The high priest Alma, the father of the chief judge of the new government, had also passed away in his eighty-second year. So that the destiny of the Nephites was left to be directed by other minds, and, to them, under a new form of government. *B. H. Roberts.*

*Mosiah, ch. xxix, and Alma, ch. iv.

†Alma, ch. xlix.

‡Alma, ch. ix.

*Mosiah, ch. xlix.