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## *Hidden Treasures: The Life and Legacy of Mosiah I*

BRANDON ZELLER

The small plates of Nephi are exactly that—small. As Jacob wrote, “a hundredth part of the proceedings of this people . . . cannot be written upon these plates” (Jacob 3:13), and at the end of the small plates the record becomes even more scant. Among the shortest tales in scripture is the story of Mosiah I, a great seer, translator, and leader. His life represented a crucial point in the history of the Book of Mormon, when the Lord commanded the Nephites to flee from the land of Nephi and traverse the promised land until He led them to the land of Zarahemla, a central setting throughout the remainder of Nephite history. The tale is told in brief: the events of Mosiah’s life are mentioned only in passing as the recorders hasten to make note of other proceedings in the little space still available on the small plates. Thorough examination of the book of Omni reveals, through this whirlwind of activity, a great prophet scarcely known. Mosiah led an exodus; he discovered the Mulekites and integrated them into Nephite culture; he translated a language unknown to him through the gift and power of God. Yet to know Mosiah as both a prophet and a person, we must heed the words of the prophet Nephi: all scripture must be likened unto him, “that it might be for our profit and learning” (1 Nephi 19:23).

A mere eleven verses in the Book of Mormon are dedicated to the life of Mosiah, and for the most part those verses concern historical events. The events of Mosiah’s life recorded in scripture are as follows: he was warned of the Lord that he should flee out of the land of Nephi with as many Nephites as he could convince to accompany him, he led these Nephites through the wilderness “until they came down into the land which is called the land of

Zarahemla,” he discovered the people of that land, he caused that they should be taught his language, he became their king, and he interpreted a stone “brought unto him with engravings on it” (Omni 1:13, 20). Through studying the course of these events, and by examining characterizations and descriptions of other men the Lord has designated to perform such tasks, we can achieve knowledge of what sort of man Mosiah must have been. Because of the nature of scripture, this knowledge will be chiefly spiritual; however, that may be the best way to get the measure of this man.

#### THE LAND OF NEPHI

In order to profit from Mosiah’s example, the circumstances of his life must be made clear. Chronological notes in the Book of Mormon at the end of the book of Omni are rather imprecise, and thus it is difficult to pinpoint the exact time of Mosiah’s life. The story of Mosiah is set “between 279 and 130 B.C.” in the footnotes of the Book of Mormon. The former date is mentioned as a time when “the Lord did visit them [the Nephites] in great judgment” and “the more wicked part of the Nephites were destroyed” (Omni 1:7, 5). The plates then passed through two generations before the story of Mosiah was recorded, resting in the hands of Chemish and Abinadom before they came to Amaleki, who possessed the plates at the time of Mosiah (see Omni 1:12). The recorders in the book of Omni make successively shorter entries as the chapter progresses, until Amaleki receives the plates. Although the declining length of the recorders’ entries may be attributed to the lack of space on the small plates, the story of Mosiah indicates rising wickedness amongst the Nephites throughout the book of Omni. Many of the recorders, Chemish in particular, seem to have been warriors rather than prophets (see Omni 1:10). Mosiah’s rise as a prophet came at a time when righteousness was uncommon and prophecy was either unheard or unheeded (see Omni 1:11). When examining his life it must be recognized that like many prophets before and after him, Mosiah was a righteous man bred in an unrighteous culture.

#### PROPHETIC WARNINGS

The first insight into Mosiah's life is a reference to an event that was recorded some time after it occurred and that compared him to Lehi. The recorded scripture indicates that Mosiah led a group of people out of the land (see Omni 1:12). Spiritual and historical precedent indicates that such an event would occur only at a time of great wickedness among the people. At such times the Lord invariably warns the people of their impending destruction through His prophets, and only after giving ample notice does He fulfill such devastating promises (see the books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and 3 Nephi). Mosiah's subsequent prominence as a prophet leads to the conclusion that he had been called of God to warn the people of the judgments of the Lord, as Lehi had been. Mosiah must have shared the sorrows of an unheeded prophet, crying repentance until the day he was warned of the Lord to flee, as was Lehi (see 1 Nephi 2:1). Conversely, whereas Lehi led only his family out of the land of Jerusalem, Mosiah led an entire people. Another dissimilarity would have been in the manner of Lehi's prophesying as compared to Mosiah's form. Mosiah lacked knowledge "concerning the manner of prophesying among the Jews," as the Nephites were not taught after this manner (2 Nephi 25:1). His prophecies, had they been recorded, would likely have been in the same basic style and composition as the prophecies of Jacob, who had in fact prophesied of Mosiah's time almost two hundred years earlier (see Jacob 3:4). Mosiah's warnings were not heeded, and he was then directed by the Lord to take as many as would listen and flee from the land.

#### THE EXODUS

However the departure came about, it likely occurred along the same lines as Lehi's departure from Jerusalem (see 1 Nephi 2:4). Both departures were covert affairs, at night and without the knowledge of the general populace. Mosiah's departure would not have been as the Israelite exodus under Moses, when the people were authorized to request and accept gifts from the Egyptians and left as



a public procession in broad daylight (see Exodus 11:2; 13:17). The Jaredite departure from Babel was also of a more organized nature; indeed, the people of Jared did not at first know that they were to leave the land at all after the calamity that engulfed Babylon (see Ether 1:38–42). The Lord, in these examples, shows two patterns for leading His people out of the land: one in haste, and one of a more convenient schedule.

The common element in both patterns is that after a short journey away from their original location, the people of the Lord stop for a time and then receive revelation or a manifestation of the Lord's presence. For Lehi's family this was in the valley of Lemuel, where Lehi received many visions, including the "tree of life" vision (1 Nephi 10:16). The Israelites stopped "in Etham, in the edge of the wilderness," and from thenceforth "the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of a cloud. . . . and by night in a pillar of fire" (Exodus 13:20–21). The Jaredites traveled to the valley of Nimrod, where "the Lord came down . . . in a cloud" and "did go before them, and did talk with them as he stood in a cloud, and gave directions whither they should travel" (Ether 2:1, 4–5). The people of Mosiah were likely the beneficiaries of such divine guidance. Omni 1:13 reports that "they were admonished continually by the word of God," perhaps by His direct voice, as were the Jaredites. The Liahona might also have been a source of direction for Mosiah's people (see Mosiah 1:16). Either case would indicate Mosiah's great faith and the faith of his people.

#### LEADERSHIP

Accordingly, Mosiah must have been a prophet of equal stature to those who led the aforementioned exoduses—namely, Lehi, Moses, and the brother of Jared. All of these prophets had faith enough to be quickened, that they might stand in the presence of the Lord. Each prophet had an experience speaking with God face to face. Lehi saw "One descending out of the midst of heaven" who "came and stood before" him (1 Nephi 1:9, 11). Moses stood on Mount Sinai, "and the glory of God was upon [him]; therefore

Moses could endure his presence” (Moses 1:2). The brother of Jared had enough faith that “the veil was taken from off [his] eyes,” and he saw the Lord face to face (Ether 3:6). Based on what Mosiah accomplished in his life, it can be assumed that his faith was comparable to those prophets of old and that he had a similar prophetic experience.

Precedent would also point to the idea of Mosiah’s having a family, and the Book of Mormon confirms this fact (see Omni 1:23). The stress and unpredictability that come with leading a people do not cater well to a stable family life; the challenges of fatherhood that Mosiah and the other exodus-leading prophets faced were accentuated by their prophetic callings. Moses and Lehi confronted major parenting challenges. Moses, in his worry over dealing with Pharaoh, neglected his priesthood responsibility to circumcise his son, and only through the merits of his wife Zipporah did he avoid the wrath of the Lord in that matter (see Joseph Smith Translation, Exodus 4:24–27). Lehi had frequent and well-documented troubles with his family, especially with his two oldest sons, Laman and Lemuel (see 1 Nephi 3:28). The brother of Jared, conversely, had more responsive children. Although he had twenty-two children (the number of sons is unspecified), each of his sons understood the perils of establishing a kingdom in the promised land and would not take up the crown when it was offered him (see Ether 6:20–26). Mosiah apparently enjoyed a similar level of positive response from his offspring: his son Benjamin grew to be a great prophet and a king beloved of his people (see Mosiah 6:3).

#### TRAVELS

It is certain that the journey Mosiah led would have made his life as a parent more difficult. This journey, unfortunately, is not described in detail in the book of Omni; it is reduced to a single verse, 1:13. Here again other books of scripture become invaluable in their likeness to Mosiah’s experience. The geography of the Book of Mormon is an oft-discussed issue, and the theories behind it are likely as numerous as were the people of Mosiah. Thus it is difficult

to know either how far Mosiah traveled in his journey or in what direction he went. The duration of the journey is not mentioned. From the three other exoduses that have been mentioned, an important idea can be derived. The people of Mosiah almost certainly took a much greater amount of time arriving at their destination than they would have if they had gone directly there. When the Lord leads His people on such a journey it is for the purpose of strengthening and sanctifying them—He does not simply guide them from one place to another. Moses' exodus is the prime example of this sanctification process: the children of Israel wandered forty years in the wilderness of Sinai before they were ready to enter the land of Canaan (see Numbers 14:33). Lehi's people also traveled much longer than the direct distance of their journey dictated: it was probably about eleven years before they reached the promised land (see footnote a, 1 Nephi 18:23). The interval of the Jaredites' entire journey is not specified; however, "they did cross many waters" and "were driven forth, three hundred and forty and four days" across the great sea (Ether 2:6; 6:11). In all cases, the people were led through the wilderness until they became worthy to inherit the promised land, and such would have been the case with Mosiah's people. The trials of Mosiah's patience would increase with every delay in reaching the destination. The time spent wandering is as much a refining fire for the leader as for the led, as became apparent in Moses' case (see Exodus 18:18). Mosiah's character undoubtedly went through one of its most strenuous tests on this journey.

#### ZARAHEMLA

Reaching the promised land was only a start for Mosiah. Once the journey to the land of Zarahemla had been completed, he began to show himself as a unique prophet and leader. Mosiah discovered an "exceedingly numerous" people in the land to which he had been led (Omni 1:17). Michael Hobby, author of *The Mulekite Connection*, points out a connection between the Jaredites and the Mulekites (see Mosiah 25:2), proposing that the Mulekites fled from the land northward in the days of the Jaredites' final battles.<sup>1</sup> Before



the Nephites' arrival in the land of Zarahemla, the Mulekites had been anything but a peaceful people. "They had had many wars and serious contentions" (Omni 1:17), and furthermore did not speak the same language as the Nephites. Thus it appears miraculous that the Nephites were not attacked or threatened upon their arrival. The Nephites likely took preemptive military action and seized control of Zarahemla,<sup>2</sup> though Mosiah's order for the seizure of Zarahemla would have been as much for his people's protection as for any notion of conquest. The Lord did not intend to destroy the people of this promised land, as He had the Ammonites, Amorites, and others in the Israelite exodus (see Joshua 10). Mosiah was called as a teacher and a peacemaker, rather than as a captain of war.

Mosiah brought with him several of the chief Nephite artifacts, such as the Liahona, the brass plates, and the sword of Laban (see Mosiah 1:16). The brass plates were of particular interest to the Mulekites, for they had kept no records and did not possess a precise recollection of their own genealogy (see Omni 1:17). After Zarahemla and others of the Mulekites were taught in the language of Mosiah, they were able to read these records and determine their heritage, and they "did rejoice exceedingly" (Omni 1:14). Not only did the brass plates bring knowledge of Mulekite heritage, but they also brought knowledge that the Mulekites were of the royal tribe of Judah, while the Nephites were of the seed of Joseph.<sup>3</sup> The implications of their heritage might have led the Mulekites to question Mosiah's rule over them. Mosiah was able to avoid the immediate consequences of such a claim, yet it would plague future generations and governments in the Nephite nation (see Alma 51:5).

#### TRANSLATION

As Mosiah's reign went unchallenged he became more beloved by his people; his dynasty would extend over three generations and begin many of the traditions that defined Nephite culture. One of these was the tradition of choosing leaders "that had the spirit of revelation and also prophecy," a tradition that lasted until the days of Mormon, the last leader of the Nephites (3 Nephi 3:19). Mosiah



demonstrated the spirit of revelation when “there was a large stone brought unto him with engravings on it; and he did interpret the engravings by the gift and power of God” (Omni 1:20). The stone told of Coriantumr, last king of the Jaredites, and “the slain of his people” (Omni 1:21). Mosiah’s translation was necessary because of the corruption of the Mulekites’ language. The Mulekites spoke a form of the Jaredite language, yet the decline of the Jaredite civilization had resulted in mass illiteracy among the people. The Mulekites were victims of the feral society they had first been assimilated into, and when Mosiah discovered them, they were incapable of reading or writing their own language.<sup>4</sup>

The Doctrine and Covenants defines *translation* as a work of the Spirit, to be accomplished only when the translator is sanctified and worthy before the Lord (see D&C 6:25–27; 9:7–10). Mosiah would also have made use of the Urim and Thummim, the same Urim and Thummim the Prophet Joseph Smith used to translate the Book of Mormon. That Mosiah was worthy to use those holy instruments would mean he had been subject to a similar degree of spiritual preparation as was Joseph Smith in anticipation of his translation of the Book of Mormon (see Joseph Smith—History 1:33–54). Mosiah had both the firmness of mind and greatness of spirit required to do the work of translation.

#### CONCLUSION

Mosiah I was a man of God, “a seer [that] the Lord raised up unto his people” (Moses 6:36). There is little told in scripture of the time period between Jacob and King Benjamin, yet in the book of Mosiah it is made known that the Lord did not abandon his people—they were still capably led. Mosiah’s example is a great indicator of the Lord’s pattern in dealing with His people. The plan has been laid forth, and it is followed in each dispensation and in every instance. “Surely the Lord God will do nothing, but he revealeth his secret unto his servants the prophets” (Amos 3:7). For the people of Nephi around 200 B.C., the Lord’s will was revealed through Mosiah. He was not the leader of a short, desperate flight from the

city of Nephi, but the spiritual leader of a divinely appointed exodus that was organized and structured as many other journeys of the Lord's people have been. Once Mosiah reached the land of Zarahemla, he did not subjugate the Mulekites but taught them and brought them once again to a knowledge of the gospel. His legacy is apparent in his dynasty: Benjamin and Mosiah II were some of the most beloved kings in Nephite history. The story of Mosiah I is truly a hidden treasure in the Book of Mormon.

NOTES

1. Michael M. Hobby, *The Mulekite Connection* (Salt Lake City: Zarahemla Foundation, 1992), 16.
2. Hobby, *Mulekite Connection*, 24.
3. Hobby, *Mulekite Connection*, 25.
4. Hobby, *Mulekite Connection*, 20–21.