

The Book of Mormon and the American Revolution

Richard L. Bushman

The Book of Mormon, much like the Old Testament, was written to show Israel “what great things the Lord hath done for their fathers,” and to testify of the coming Messiah.¹ Although cast as a history, it is history with a high religious purpose, not the kind we ordinarily write today. The narrative touches only incidentally on the society, economics, and politics of the Nephites and Jaredites, leaving us to rely on oblique references and occasional asides to reconstruct total cultures. Government is dealt with more expressly than other aspects, however, perhaps because the prophets were often rulers themselves and because the most significant reforms in the history of Nephite government were inspired by a prophet-king. From their comments and Mormon’s editorial interjections, it is possible to get a rough idea of the theory and practice of politics in Nephite civilization.

While we value these scraps of information, the political passages, it must be recognized, expose the book to attack. The more specific the record, the more easily its verity can be tested. Details about government make it possible to ask if the political forms are genuinely ancient, or if they bear the marks of nineteenth century creation. The late Thomas O’Dea, a sympathetic but critical scholar, thought that “American sentiments permeate the work.”

In it are found the democratic, the republican, the anti-monarchical, and the egalitarian doctrines that pervaded the climate of opinion in which it was conceived and that enter into the expressions and concerns of its Nephite kings, prophets, and priests as naturally as they later

1. The quotation is from the title page of the Book of Mormon. The Lord’s opening words to Moses on Sinai as recorded in Exodus were: “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery” (Exodus 20:2), and the memory of that event was used ever after to recall Israel to its covenant obligations.

come from the mouths of Mormon leaders preaching to the people in Utah.²

That kind of indictment would be precluded were the Book of Mormon exclusively and narrowly religious. As it is, O’Dea purports to find evidence of nineteenth century American political culture in the Book of Mormon—for example, the prophecy of the American Revolution early in Nephi’s narrative, and later, the switch from monarchy to government by elected judges. On first reading, both have a modern and American flavor. O’Dea, to be sure, wrote in the mode of higher criticism which assumes that an accurate prophecy of a specific event can occur only after the event. Even if one discounts for that assumption, however, the question remains whether the spirit and content of some of the political passages in the Book of Mormon do not partake more of American republicanism than of Israelite or ancient Near Eastern monarchy.³

O’Dea’s observations comport with the widely accepted view of the book of Mormon which holds that it “can best be explained, not by Joseph’s ignorance nor by his delusions, but by his responsiveness to the provincial opinions of his time.”⁴ One of the first critics of the Book of Mormon, Alexander Campbell, noted in 1831 that the record incorporated among other conventional American ideas, commonplace sentiments about “free masonry, republican government, and the rights of man.”⁵ A comparison of the political cultures of the Nephites and of

2. Thomas F. O’Dea, *The Mormons* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 32.

3. O’Dea’s evidence is cited at *ibid.*, p. 268, notes 19–21. Many of his references are to choices made by the “voice of the people.” For a comment on the function of popular consent in monarchies as well as republics, see note 18 below. The same note also contains observations on Moroni’s war for liberty which indicate it did not follow an American pattern. Alma 43:48, 49; 46:35, 36; 48:11; 51:7. The antimonarchical sentiments which O’Dea cites are shown in this essay to be strangely un-American. 2 Nephi 5:18; Mosiah 2:14–18; 6:7; 23:6–14; 29:13–18; 23. 30–31; Alma 43:45; 46:10; 51:5; 8; 3 Nephi 6:30; Ether 6:22–26. For a comment on the idea of equality see note 23 below.

4. Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith*, 2nd ed. (New York: Knopf, 1971), p. 69.

5. Alexander Campbell, *Delusions: An Analysis of the Book of Mormon* (Boston: B. H. Green, 1832), p. 13. Reprinted from the *Millennial Harbinger*, 7 February 1831.

Joseph Smith's America thus bears on the larger question of the origin of the English text of the Book of Mormon.

The Political Milieu of Joseph Smith's New York

There is little reason to doubt that however the book originated, Joseph Smith must have absorbed the ordinary political sentiments of his time. The air was thick with politics. The Revolution, by then a half century old, still loomed as the great turning point in American and world history. Americans annually celebrated the nation's birthday with oratory, editorials, and rounds of toasts. In 1824 and 1825, Lafayette, absent from the United States for thirty-eight years, toured all twenty-four states with his son George Washington Lafayette. The following year, 1826, was the jubilee anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, and Fourth of July orators exerted themselves as never before. A few days after the celebration, news spread that on the very day when the nation was commemorating its fiftieth birthday, two of the most illustrious heroes of the Revolution, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, had died within six hours of one another. A new round of patriotic rhetoric poured forth to remind the nation of its history and the glories of republicanism. All this was reported in the *Wayne Sentinel*, Palmyra's weekly, along with coverage of yearly electoral campaigns and debates on current political issues. Joseph Smith could not easily have avoided a rudimentary education in the principles of American government and the meaning of the American Revolution before he began work on the Book of Mormon in 1827.⁶

Patriotic orations served various purposes for the politicians who delivered them, but certain conventional usages recur: a set of attitudes and rhetorical patterns apparently shared by Americans of all persuasions. The patterns varied little from region to region, probably because newspaper editors commonly reprinted orations and essays from other

6. An account of Lafayette's visit is found in Nathan Sargent, *Public Men and Events*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1875), 1:89–94. The *Wayne Sentinel* reported on Lafayette's progress almost weekly. (For representative accounts, see the 7 July, 1, 8, 15, 22, September, 6, 20 October, and 3, 24 November 1824 issues.) When news of the deaths of Adams and Jefferson reached Palmyra, the *Sentinel* edged all its columns in black (see 14 July 1826 issue). Political interest in New York reached a high in the election of 1828 when 70.4% of adult white males voted. See Richard P. McCormick, "New Perspectives on Jacksonian Politics," *American Historical Review* 65 (January 1960): 292.

areas, but we can be assured of sampling the political atmosphere in Joseph Smith's immediate environment if we rely primarily on three sources: the *Wayne Sentinel*, upstate New York oratory, and the school books for sale in Palmyra's bookstore.⁷ Young Joseph may not have spent much time with any of them, but if any provincial sources influenced Joseph Smith, these must be the ones. They shaped, or expressed, the ideas of his neighbors, local politicians, and those who gathered in taverns and stores to talk politics. Presumably, O'Dea would see such sentiments to be at the root of Book of Mormon political ideas.

My purpose is to test that conclusion by comparing some of the most obvious contemporaneous ideas about government and the American Revolution with political ideas and practices in the Book of Mormon. There are three that were prominent in the political literature of the 1820s: First, the depiction of the American Revolution as heroic resistance against tyranny; second, the belief that people overthrow their kings under the stimulus of enlightened ideas of human rights; and third, the conviction that constitutional arrangements such as frequent elections, separation of powers, and popularly elected assemblies were necessary to control power.

Heroic Resistance or Divine Deliverance

The most common of all conventions in orations, essays, and editorial columns was the dramatic structure of the Revolution, still familiar today. The Revolution was a struggle of heroes against oppressors, a brave people versus a tyrant king or corrupt ministry. That theme was rehearsed whenever the orators honored the Revolutionary veterans in the audience. A large portion of his hearers, one speaker said, were too young to know "the divine enthusiasm which inspired the American bosom; which prompted her voice to proclaim defiance to the thunders of Britain." It was from the soldiers themselves, the "venerable asserters of the rights of mankind, that we are to be informed, what were the feelings which swayed within your breasts, and impelled you to action; when, like the stripling of Israel, with scarcely a weapon to attack, and without a shield for your defence, you met, and undismayed, engaged with the gigantic greatness of the British power." The greatness

7. The relevant schoolbooks most frequently advertised in the *Sentinel* were *American Speaker*, *American Reader*, *American Preceptor*, *Columbian Orator*, and *English Reader*. (For illustrative ads, see *Wayne Sentinel*, 30 June, 10 November 1824; 27 October, 24 November 1826; 18 May 1827; and 28 September 1828.)

of Jefferson was that “on the coming of that tremendous storm which for eight years desolated our country, Mr. Jefferson hesitated not, halted not . . . he adventured, with the single motive of advancing the cause of his country and of human freedom, into that perilous contest, throwing into the scale his life and fortune as of no value.” Similarly Lafayette “shared in the dangers, privations and sufferings of that bitter struggle, nor quitted them for a movement, till it was consummated on the glorious field of Yorktown.” For many Americans, the courage of the heroes in resisting oppression was the most memorable aspect of the Revolution. The editors of the “Readers” and “Speakers,” the textbooks of that generation, consistently favored passages that dwelt on that theme.⁸

The narrative conventions are worth noting because of the Book of Mormon’s brief description of the American Revolution. While Joseph Smith might alter costumes and the locale of the narrator, the spirit of the event was less malleable. A responsive young provincial, it would seem, would absorb this first and retain it longest. Yet coming to Nephi’s prediction of the Revolution after reading Fourth of July orations, an American reader even today finds the account curiously flat. Just before the Revolution prophecy, Nephi tells of “a man among the Gentiles,” presumably Columbus in Europe, who “went forth upon the many

8. Caleb Bingham, *The American Preceptor; Being a New Selection of Lessons for Reading and Speaking. Designed for the Use of Schools*, stereotype ed. (New York: B. & J. Collins for C. Bingham, 1815), p. 144; *Wayne Sentinel*, 11 August 1826, 1 September 1824. Among the favorite selections were passages from the Boston Massacre orations of Joseph Warren, Thomas Dawes, Benjamin Church, and John Hancock. See William Bentley Fowle, *The American Speaker, or Exercises in Rhetorick; Being a Selection of Speeches, Dialogues and Poetry from the Best American and English Sources, Suitable for Recitation* (Boston: Cummings, Hilliard, 1826), pp. 74–90.

The orator at Albany in 1817 observed that forty-one years had passed “since the dauntless representatives of an oppressed but high minded people, having exhausted the gentle spirit of entreaty, and become persuaded of the utter uselessness of all further attempts at conciliation, dared to raise the arm of independence. . . . The country, bleeding at every pore, but not disheartened, reciprocated the lofty sentiment, and confiding in the equity of their cause, looked to heaven and then aimed a deathblow at the head of tyranny. ’Twas one of the sublimest spectacles earth ever witnessed.” “Patriots of ’76,” he said in the customary address to the veterans, “to you the scene must be most animating. You toiled, you suffered, you were willing to bleed and die in the glorious cause.” Hooper Cumming, *An Oration, Delivered July 4, 1817* (Albany: Printed by I. W. Clark, 1817), pp. 5, 14.

waters” to America. And it came to pass that the Spirit of God then “wrought upon other Gentiles; and they went forth out of captivity, upon the many waters.” The gentiles did “humble themselves before the Lord; and the power of the lord was with them” (1 Nephi 13:12, 13, 16). Then the Revolution is depicted in this fashion:

[The] mother Gentiles were gathered together upon the waters, and upon the land also, to battle against them. And I beheld that the power of God was with them, and also that the wrath of God was upon all those that were gathered together against them to battle. And I, Nephi, beheld that the Gentiles that had gone out of captivity were delivered by the power of God out of the hands of all other nations. (1 Nephi 13:17–19)

By American standards, this is a strangely distorted account. There is no indictment of the king or parliament, no talk of American rights or liberty, nothing of the corruptions of the ministry, and most significant, no despots or heroes. In fact, there is no reference to American resistance. The “mother gentiles” are the only warriors. God, not General Washington or the American army, delivers the colonies.

The meaning of the narrative opens itself to the reader only after he lays aside his American preconceptions about the Revolution and recognizes that the dramatic structure in Nephi’s account is fundamentally different from the familiar one in Independence Day orations. The point of the narrative is that Americans escaped from captivity. They did not resist, they fled. The British were defeated because the wrath of God was upon them. The virtue of the Americans was that “they did humble themselves before the Lord” (1 Nephi 13:16). The moral is that “the Gentiles that had gone out of captivity were delivered by the power of God out of the hands of all other nations.” The theme is deliverance, not resistance.

The theme of deliverance by God is more notable in Nephi’s prophecy because it recurs in various forms throughout the Book of Mormon. Three times a people of God suffer from oppressive rulers under conditions that might approximate those in the colonies before the Revolution: Alma under King Noah, the people of Limhi under the Lamanites, and once again Alma under the Lamanites. In none do revolutionary heroes in the American sense emerge.⁹ In each instance the people escaped

9. In one instance an individual not numbered among the people of God attempts to assassinate King Noah, but the wily monarch escapes by subterfuge. (See Mosiah 19:2–6.)

from bondage by flight.¹⁰ They gathered their people, flocks, and tents and fled into the wilderness when their captors were off guard. When they learned that the corrupt and spiritually hardened King Noah had dispatched an army to apprehend them in their secret meeting place, Alma's people "took their tents and their families and departed into the wilderness" (Mosiah 18:34). Limhi's people, an exploited dominion of a Lamanite empire, departed "by night into the wilderness with their flocks and their herds" (Mosiah 22:11). Alma's people, after escaping King Noah, fell into the hands of the Lamanites who "put tasks upon them" and "taskmasters over them." When they cried to the Lord for succor, they were told to "be of good comfort, for I know of the covenant which ye have made unto me; and I will covenant with my people and deliver them out of bondage." The deliverance came in due course, but not by way of confrontation. "The Lord caused a deep sleep to come upon the Lamanites. . . . And Alma and his people departed into the wilderness. . . ." The point seemed to be that the people obtained their liberty by obedience rather than by courage or sacrifice. After successfully eluding their captors, the people thanked God because he had "delivered them out of bondage; for they were in bondage, and none could deliver them except it were the Lord their God" (Mosiah 24:9, 13, 19–21).

Godly people in the Book of Mormon defended themselves against invaders—in that sense they resisted—but they never overthrew an established government, no matter how oppressive. When we step back to look at the larger framework we can see that their actions were consistent. The deliverance narrative grew out of the Nephites' conception of history as naturally as resistance in the American Revolution sprang from Anglo-American Whig views. Book of Mormon prophets saw the major events of their own past as comprising a series of deliverances beginning with the archetypal flight of the Israelites from Egypt. Alma the Younger pictured the Exodus from Egypt and Lehi's journey from Jerusalem as the first of a number of bondages and escapes.

I will praise him forever, for he has brought our fathers out of Egypt, and he has swallowed up the Egyptians in the Red Sea; and he led them by his power into the promised land; yea, and he has delivered them out of bondage and captivity from time to time. Yea, and he has also brought our fathers out of the land of Jerusalem; and he has also, by his

10. Hugh Nibley discusses flight as part of the tradition of escape from crumbling societies in *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1964), pp. 107–14.

everlasting power, delivered them out of bondage and captivity, from time to time even down to the present day. (Alma 36:28–29)

Among those bondages reaching “down to the present day” were those of his father and Limhi who, like their illustrious predecessors, were

delivered out of the hands of the people of king Noah, by the mercy and power of God. And behold, after that, they were brought into bondage by the hands of the Lamanites in the wilderness . . . and again the Lord did deliver them out of bondage. . . . (Alma 5:4, 5)

Understandably the prophet-historians delighted in Alma’s and Limhi’s deliverances because they illustrated so perfectly the familiar ways of God with his people. Events took on religious meaning and form as they followed the established pattern of divine intervention.

Nephi’s prophecy of the Revolution, therefore, makes sense in terms of its own culture as an act of divine deliverance. Any other rendition of the prophecy would have offended later Nephite sensibilities just as its present form puzzles us. In the context of the Book of Mormon, heroic resistance could not give revolution moral significance. Only deliverance by the power of God could do that.¹¹ Once the pattern of Nephite interpretation of history comes into focus, Nephi’s account of future events becomes comprehensible.

There are two points to be made here. The first is that Book of Mormon accounts of the Revolution and of the behavior of godly people in revolutionary situations differ fundamentally from American accounts of the Revolution. The second is that there is a consistency in the Book of Mormon treatment of these events. Each deliverance fits a certain view of providential history. The accounts disregard a significant convention of American patriotic oratory of the late 1820s in order to respect one of the book’s own conventions.

Enlightenment and Popular Opposition to Monarchy

Heroic resistance did not exhaust the meaning of the Revolution for the orators of the 1820s. Beyond their display of sheer courage, the patriots of 1776 were honored for adopting the true principles of government.

11. There is no evidence that Book of Mormon people believed revolution to be sinful. The people of Limhi considered delivering “themselves out of bondage by the sword,” but gave up the idea because of the superiority of Lamanite numbers. See Mosiah 22:2. The point is that resistance was not necessary to make a compelling story. Flight and deliverance had a greater moral impact.

“This is the anniversary of the great day,” the *Wayne Sentinel* editorialized on 4 July 1828, “which commenced a new era in the History of the world. It proclaimed the triumph of free principles, and the liberation of a people from the dominion of monarchical government.” The adoption of free principles, namely the end of “monarchical government,” and the institution of “a government, based upon the will of the People, free and popular in every feature,” effected a “sublime and glorious change in the civil and moral condition” of the United States and the world. The Revolution was “the glorious era from which every republic of our continent may trace the first march of that revolutionizing spirit, which, with a mighty impetus has disseminated the blessings of free governments over so large a portion of our globe.” Revolutionary principles were shaking all the nations of the earth. “Whole states are changed, and nations start into existence in a day,” the jubilee orator in Palmyra declared. “Systems venerable for their antiquity have been demolished. Governments built up in ages of darkness and vassalage, have tottered and fallen.”¹²

And why had this political earthquake occurred? “Knowledge and a correct estimate of moral right have opened the eyes of men to see the importance of free institutions, and the only true, rational end of existence.” The principles of the Revolution were awakening people everywhere and moving them to throw down their masters. The *Sentinel*, a month after the jubilee celebration, quoted Jefferson’s aspiration that the Declaration of Independence would “be to the world what I believe it will be; the signal of arousing men to burst the chains under which monkish ignorance and superstition had persuaded them to bind themselves, and to assume the blessings of free government.” The American Revolution was the beginning of a world revolution in which “man, so long the victim of oppression, awakes from the sleep of ages and bursts his chains.”¹³

12. *Wayne Sentinel*, 4 and 18 July 1828.

13. *Ibid.*, 21 July and 11 August 1826. The orator who pronounced the eulogy on Adams and Jefferson at nearby Buffalo in 1826 elaborated the same themes. “Looking retrospectively through the lapse of half a century, we behold those stern patriots ardently engaged in the great work of political reformation. Until then, the human mind, shackled and awed by the insignia of power, had remained unconscious of its own noble faculties. Until then, man had failed to enjoy that exalted character designed in his creation. Until then, he had yielded to the dictates of usurpation and the arrogant pretensions of self-created kings. Here and there the rays of mental light had burst upon the earth; but like the flashes of the midnight storm, they had passed away, and all again

Does any of that struggle seep into the Book of Mormon? Do enlightened people in its pages overthrow monarchs enthroned in ignorance? The most famous passage on monarchy in the Book of Mormon does in a general way echo the American aversion to monarchy. Jacob, brother of the first Nephi and son of Lehi, prophesied that “this land shall be a land of liberty unto the Gentiles. . . . For he that raiseth up a king against me shall perish, for I, the Lord, the king of heaven, will be their king . . .” (2 Nephi 10:11, 14). Yet when we examine more closely the Nephite’s own attitude toward kings, principled opposition to monarchy is scarcely in

was darkness. . . . To them and a few worthy compatriots, were reserved the signal honors of broaching a new theory; of solving that, until then mysterious problem of self government; of opposing successfully the blasphemous doctrine of the divine right of kings; of redeeming the rights of man from the chaotic accumulations of ignorance, superstition and prejudice; of unfolding to the world the true source of temporal enjoyment, and the legitimate object of human society; of emancipating the human mind from the thralldom of ages, and restoring man to his proper dignity in the great scale of being.” Sheldon Smith, “Eulogy Pronounced at Buffalo, New York, July 22d, in 1826,” in *A Selection of Eulogies Pronounced in the Several States, in Honor of those Illustrious Patriots and Statesmen, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson* (Hartford, Conn.: D. F. Robinson & Company, 1826), pp. 92, 95.

Orators enjoyed taking inventory of democracy among the nations of the earth and analyzing the reasons for the continuance of tyranny. Why despotism in nations where the conditions were otherwise favorable, asked the speaker at Troy in 1825. “If they were not debased in spirit—if they were not groping in the darkness of ignorance, or faltering in the twilight of the mind, no tyrant would strip them of their rights—no despotic throne would cast its portentous and chill shadow over the land of their birth. . . .” O. L. Halley, *The Connexion between the Mechanic Arts and Welfare of States. An address, Delivered before the Mechanics of Troy, at their Request on the 4th of July, 1825* (Troy, N. Y.: n.p., 1825), p. 7. For the most part Americans were optimistic about the principles of democracy. William Duer at Albany in 1826 predicted that before another jubilee, the principles of the Declaration “will take root and flourish in every soil and climate under heaven! The march of Light, of Knowledge, and of Truth, is irresistable, and Freedom follows in their train.” L. H. Butterfield, “The Jubilee of Independence, July 4, 1826,” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 61 (April 1953): 138. “The old monarchies of Europe must be entombed in some great political convulsion, if they listen not in season to the low but deep murmur of discontent, among their subjects, which is growing louder with the progress of intellectual light. . . .” William Chamberlain, Jr., *An Address Delivered at Windsor, Vt. before an Assembly of Citizens from the Counties of Windsor, Vt. and Cheshire, N. H. on the Fiftieth Anniversary of American Independence* (Windsor: n.p., 1826), p. 24.

evidence. Enlightened people in the Book of Mormon do not rise up to strike down their kings as the Fourth of July scenario would have it. In fact, the opposite is true. The people persistently created kings for themselves, even demanded them. Shortly after their settlement in the New World, the followers of Nephi asked him to be their king. Nephi demurred, being “desirous that they should have no king,” but they continued to look on Nephi as “a king or a protector” and by the end of his life he had acquiesced (see 2 Nephi 5:18; 6:2). As he approached death, “he anointed a man to be a king and a ruler over his people,” thus initiating the “reign of the kings” (Jacob 1:9).¹⁴ Nephi’s establishment of monarchy set the precedent followed throughout Nephite political history with respect to kingmaking. When a segment of the nation migrated to another part of the continent under the leadership of the first Mosiah, they made him king over the land (see Omni 12). This process was repeated not long afterwards following another migration: Zeniff, the leader of the migrants, “was made a king by the voice of the people” (Mosiah 7:9; cf. 19:26). It was quite natural that when Alma broke away with yet another band, his people should be “desirous that Alma should be their king, for he was beloved by his people” (Mosiah 23:6). Unlike Nephi, Alma firmly declined, and a few years later, kingship among the people of Nephi at large was ended.

The abandonment of monarchy, however, did not occur by revolution nor at the instigation of the people. The occasion for the change was the refusal of the sons of Mosiah II to accept the kingship. Mosiah feared the contention that might ensue from an appointment outside the royal line and proposed the installation of judges chosen by the voice of the people (see Mosiah 29). Mosiah’s lengthy argument against monarchy, written down and distributed through the countryside, persuaded the people and “they relinquished their desires for a king. . . . They assembled themselves together in bodies throughout the land to cast in their voices concerning who should be their judges. . . . And thus commenced the reign of the judges . . . among all the people who were called the Nephites” (Mosiah 29:38, 39, 44).¹⁵

14. Mormon reported much later that “the kingdom had been conferred upon none but those who were descendants of Nephi,” implying hereditary monarchy. (See Mosiah 25:13) Jacob, Nephi’s brother, said that to honor the first Nephi, subsequent rulers “were called by the people, second Nephi, third Nephi, and so forth, according to the reigns of the kings” (Jacob 1:11).

15. Hugh Nibley suggests that rule by judges was familiar to Nephites because of precedents in Israel: “In Zedekiah’s time the ancient and venerable council

There is nothing in these episodes of an enlightened people rising against their king. The people did not rise nor were they enlightened about the errors of monarchy. Quite the contrary. In every instance, the people were the ones to desire a king, and in three of five cases they got one. The aversion to kingship was at the top. Nephi, Alma, and Mosiah were reluctant, not the people. When monarchy finally came to an end, it was because the king abdicated, not because the enlightened people overthrew him. In the American view, despot kings held their people in bondage through superstition and ignorance until the true principles of government inspired resistance. The Book of Mormon nearly reversed the roles. The people delighted in their subjection to the king, and the rulers were enlightened.

Book of Mormon opposition to monarchy was not a matter of fixed principle either. Americans believed the patriots of 1776 had broached “a new theory,” and discovered the “first principle” of government which was “diametrically opposed” to the inequalities of monarchy. “There is no neutral ground, no midway course,” a Boston orator said in 1827.¹⁶ That was far from the case in the Book of Mormon. Alma and Mosiah’s opposition to kingship was no theoretical breakthrough, nor was it advocated as a fundamental political truth. It was simply that wicked kings had the power to spread their iniquity.

He enacteth laws, and sendeth them forth among his people, yea, laws after the manner of his own wickedness; and whosoever doth not obey his laws he causeth to be destroyed . . . and thus an unrighteous king doth pervert the ways of all righteousness. (Mosiah 29:23)

A good king was another matter. “If it were possible that you could always have just men to be your kings,” Alma said, “it would be well for you to have a king” (Mosiah 23:8). Mosiah made the same point.

of elders had been thrust aside by the proud and haughty *judges*, the spoiled children of frustrated and ambitious princes. . . . Since the king no longer sat in judgment, the ambitious climbers had taken over the powerful and dignified—and for them very profitable—“*judgment seats*,” and by systematic abuse of power as judges made themselves obnoxious and oppressive to the nation as a whole while suppressing all criticism of themselves—especially from the recalcitrant and subversive prophets.” Nibley, *An Approach*, p. 82. The provision for impeachment of corrupt judges in Mosiah’s time could have reflected the trouble these Judges had given the Israelites. Cf. Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert and the World of the Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1952), pp. 20–26.

16. William Powell Mason, *An Oration Delivered Wednesday, July 4, 1827, in Commemoration of American Independence*. . . (Boston: From the press of N. Hale, city printer, 1827), p. 17.

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 . . . then it would be expedient that you should always have kings to rule over you. (Mosiah 29:13)

There was nothing intrinsically wrong with monarchy. It was not “diametrically opposed” to good government. It was simply inexpedient because it was subject to abuse.

The Reign of the Judges and American Constitutional Government

The Nephite government was no more resistant to monarchy in practice than it was in theory, and in fact came to occupy the very middle ground which, according to the Boston orator, could not exist. The institution of judgeships, rather than beginning a republican era in Book of Mormon history, slid back at once toward monarchy. The chief judge much more resembled a king than an American president. Once elected, he never again submitted himself to the people. After being proclaimed chief judge by the voice of the people, Alma enjoyed life tenure. When he chose to resign because of internal difficulties he selected his own successor (see Alma 4:16).¹⁷ That seems to have been the beginning of a dynasty. In the next succession, the judgeship passed to the chief judge’s son and thence “by right” to the successive sons of the judges (see Alma 50:39; Helaman 1:13). Although democratic elements were there—the judges were confirmed by the voice of the people—the “reign of the judges,” as the Book of Mormon calls the period, was a far cry from the republican government Joseph Smith knew.¹⁸ Life tenure and hereditary succession

17. There was a democratic element in the transmittal of authority: Alma “selected a wise man who was among the elders of the church, and gave him power according to the voice of the people” (Alma 4:16). But Alma’s selection was the major part of it: “Now Alma did not grant unto him the office of being high priest over the church, but he retained the office of high priest unto himself; but he delivered the judgment-seat unto Nephiah” (Alma 4:18).

18. The confirmation of the chief judges by the voice of the people is the only element of the Nephite constitution which comes close to republicanism, and in the context of life tenure and hereditary succession, this “election” is closer to the traditional acclamation of the king than to a popular plebiscite. We forget that kings have usually been thought to rule by the consent of their people and that at the ascent of a new king to the throne this consent is normally exhibited anew. Sometimes the election is merely ritualistic; in other cases, such as the selection of William III by the Convention Parliament in 1688, the consent of the people’s representatives was as essential as the popular election of an American president. There was a popular element in Nephite

would have struck Americans as only slightly modified monarchy. The citizens of Palmyra in the middle 1820s were urged to “remember at all

monarchy, too. While still monarch, Mosiah had sent “among all the people, desiring to know their will concerning who should be their king” (Mosiah 29:1). Zeniff was earlier “made a king by the voice of the people” (Mosiah 7:9; cf. Mosiah 19:26). The army of Israel “made their commander Omri king of Israel by common consent” (1 Kings 16:16 [NEB]).

Marc Bloch in his study of medieval European society asks, “How was this monarchical office, with its weight of mixed traditions handed on—by hereditary succession or by election? Today we are apt to regard the two methods as strictly incompatible; but we have the evidence of innumerable texts that they did not appear so to the same degree in the Middle Ages. . . . Within the predestinate family . . . the principle personages of the realm, the natural representatives of the whole body of subjects, named the new king.” Marc Bloch, *Feudal Society*, tr. L. A. Manyon, 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 2:383–84.

One episode that may to a casual reader have a republican flavor is General Moroni’s elevation of the “title of liberty,” on which he wrote: “In memory of our God, our religion, and freedom, and our peace, our wives, and our children” (Alma 46:12). Around this emblem he rallied the people against a movement to raise up a king. While the word liberty and the opposition to monarchists strike a familiar note, the details of the story, beginning with the peculiar designation, “the title of liberty,” are strangely archaic.

Moroni made the scroll in the first place by rending his coat, and proceeded to enlist the people in the cause by “waving the rent part of the garment in the air,” and crying, “Behold, whosoever will maintain this title upon the land let him come forth in the strength of the Lord, and enter into a covenant that they will maintain their rights, and their religion, that the Lord God may bless them” (Alma 46:20). Responding to the call, the people “came running together with their armor girded about their loins, rending their garments in token, or as a covenant, that they would not forsake the Lord their God” (Alma 46:21). They “cast their garments at the feet of Moroni” and covenanted that God “may cast us at the feet of our enemies, even as we have cast our garments at thy feet to be trodden under foot, if we shall fall into transgression” (Alma 46:22). Whereupon Moroni launched into an elaborate comparison with Joseph “whose coat was rent by his brethren into many pieces” and expressed hope for the Nephites’ preservation in similitude of Joseph’s. (Alma 46:23.)

It is difficult to see where Joseph Smith could have encountered precedents for that ritual in his American environment. Hugh Nibley has suggested that the title of liberty resembles the battle scroll of the Children of Light in the Qumran community. (See Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon* [Salt Lake City: Council of the Twelve Apostles, 1957], pp. 178–89; Nibley, *Since Cumorah: The Book of Mormon in the Modern World* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1967], pp. 273–75.)

times the terms of office should be short—and account to the public certain and soon.” A point urged in favor of Jackson in 1828 was that

his election will break the chain of succession which has been so long practically established and by which the presidents have virtually appointed their successors, and which if not interrupted, will render our elections a mockery, and our government but little better than a hereditary monarchy.¹⁹

Book of Mormon government by Jacksonian standards was no democracy. Joseph Smith’s contemporaries had they examined the matter closely would certainly have called the elections a mockery and the government little better than a hereditary monarchy.²⁰

Looking at the Book of Mormon as a whole, it seems clear that most of the principles traditionally associated with the American Constitution are slighted or disregarded altogether. All of the constitutional checks and balances are missing. When judges were instituted, Mosiah provided that a greater judge could remove lesser judges and a number of lesser judges try venal higher judges, but the book records no instance of impeachment. It was apparently not a routine working principle. All other limitations on government are missing. There was no written constitution defining ruler’s powers. The people could not remove the chief judge at the polls, for he stood for election only once.

19. *Wayne Sentinel*, 3 November 1826; 5 September 1828; cf. 12 September 1828. A common argument against an incumbent was the danger of aristocratic pretensions occurring in men held in office too long. In 1826 the party opposing the reelection of Governor Clinton resolved “that the continuance of the office of governor in one family, for a period longer than twenty-eight years, out of forty-nine, in a state containing a population of nearly two millions, is at war with the republican principle upon which our government is founded, and would tend to the establishment of an odious aristocracy.” *Wayne Sentinel*, 13 October 1826. Jacksonians in 1828 argued that one of the evils of the election of 1824 was that it established a system for passing on the presidency. Were it perpetuated “the sovereignty of the people would be an idle name. The president and his successor would save us from the trouble of an election—the heir apparent would create the king—the king would nominate the heir-apparent to the crown.” *Wayne Sentinel*, 10 October 1828.

20. Under the influence of their own cultural conditioning, Mormons and non-Mormons alike have read American principles into the Book of Mormon, even though closer analysis will not sustain that view. Alexander Campbell saw republicanism in the book as did B. H. Roberts. (See Campbell, *Delusions*, p. 13; and B. H. Roberts, *New Witness for God: The Book of Mormon*, 3 vols. [Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1909], 2:212; cf. p. 209.)

There were not three branches of government to check one another, for a single office encompassed all government powers. The chief judge was judge, executive, and legislator rolled into one, just as the earlier kings had been (see Mosiah 29:13). In war time he raised men, armed them, and collected provisions (see Alma 46:34; 60:1–9). He was called interchangeably chief judge and governor (see Alma 2:16; 50:39; 60:1; and 3 Nephi 3:1). He was also lawmaker. There is no ordinary legislature in the Book of Mormon. When the editor said in the heading of Mosiah 29 that Mosiah “recommends representative form of government,” he could not have meant representatives elected by the people to enact laws. The only representation was in the choice of judges, not in the selection of legislators. In the early part of the Book of Mormon, the law was presented as traditional, handed down from the fathers as “given them by the hand of the Lord,” and “acknowledged by this people” to make it binding (see Mosiah 29:25; Alma 1:14). But later the chief judge assumed the power of proclaiming or at least elaborating laws. Alma gave Nephiah the “power to enact laws according to the laws which had been given” (Alma 4:16). Any major constitutional changes, such as a return to formal kingship, required approval of the people, but day to day legislation, so far as the record speaks, was the prerogative of the chief judge (see Alma 2:2–7; 51:1–7). Perhaps most extraordinary by American standards, nothing was made of taxation by a popular assembly.²¹ The maxim “no taxation without representation” had no standing in Nephite consciousness.²² These salient points in enlightened political theory, as nineteenth century Americans understood it, were contradicted, distorted, or neglected.²³

21. Despite abuses of the taxing power, no recommendation was ever made for an elected assembly. (See Mosiah 11:3, 6, 13; and Ether 10:6.)

22. The nonrepublican forms of Book of Mormon government compel us to recognize that the “just and holy principles” which protect human rights can be embodied in various constitutional arrangements.

23. The word *inequality* in Mosiah 29:32 catches the eye of modern Americans, but in context the word assumes a meaning foreign to American thought. In the preceding verses, Mosiah explains the thinking behind his image, namely, that wicked kings enact iniquitous laws and compel their people to submit, thus causing them to sin. (See Mosiah 29:17, 18.) A good king like Mosiah would enact no laws of his own, but rather would judge the people by the law handed down from the fathers, which ultimately came from God. (See Mosiah 29:15, 25.) Under bad monarchs, the king was responsible for the people’s sins; under good ones, the people were responsible for themselves. One of the reasons for eliminating kings was to ensure “that if these people commit sins and iniquities

Ancient Precedents

In the context of nineteenth century political thought, the Book of Mormon people are difficult to place. They were not benighted Spaniards or Russians, passively yielding to the oppression of a monarch out of ignorance and superstition, nor were they enlightened Americans living by the principles of republican government. The Book of Mormon was an anomaly on the political scene of 1830. Instead of heroically resisting despots, the people of God fled their oppressors and credited God alone with deliverance. Instead of enlightened people overthrowing their kings in defense of their natural rights, the common people repeatedly raised up kings, and the prophets and the kings themselves had to persuade the people of the inexpediency of monarchy. Despite Mosiah's

they shall be answered upon their own heads. For behold I say unto you, the sins of many people have been caused by the iniquities of their kings; therefore their iniquities are answered upon the heads of the kings" (Mosiah 29:30, 31). Then Mosiah makes the reference to inequality. "And now I desire that this inequality should be no more in this land . . ." (Mosiah 29:32). It seems clear that inequality refers to the disproportionality of one sinful man, the king, having power to lead his people into iniquity.

This must be kept in mind when reading Mosiah 29:38. It is reported that the people became "exceedingly anxious that every man should have an equal chance." An equal chance to do what? As Americans, we immediately assume an equal chance to get ahead in the world or to have a voice in government. The verse actually reads "every man should have an equal chance throughout all the land: yea and every man expressed a willingness to answer for his own sins" (Mosiah 29:38). Having so committed themselves, the people went out to choose judges "to judge them according to the law which had been given them." With a twist of mind we can scarcely understand today, the privilege of being judged according to the traditional law was a major part of the "equality" and "liberty" in which the Nephites "exceedingly rejoiced" (Mosiah 29:39; cf. 25, 41). A similar principle underlies the American Constitution. The Lord suffered it to be established, he says in the Doctrine and Covenants, so that "every man may be accountable for his own sins in the day of judgment" (D&C 101:78).

The discourse of Mosiah, viewed against the practice of hereditary descent of the chief judgeship, raises the possibility that the major distinction between judge and king was the lawmaking power. Mosiah did not contest the right of the king to make laws, only to make iniquitous ones. A judge, however, could not even claim legislative powers and thus perforce governed by the divine law passed down from the fathers. (See Mosiah 29:15, 25.) Seemingly by definition a lawmaker was suspect because he usurped the power of God, the maker of the traditional law. When the prophets said that the Lord should be king, they meant, at least in part, that he should make the laws.

reforms, Nephite government persisted in monarchical practices, with life tenure for the chief judges, hereditary succession, and the combination of all functions in one official.

In view of all this, the Book of Mormon could be pictured as a bizarre creation, a book strangely distant from the time and place of its publication. But that picture would not be complete. A pattern running through the apparent anomalies provides a clue to their resolution. Book of Mormon political attitudes have Old World precedents, particularly in the history of the Israelite nation. Against that background its anomalies become regularities. The Hebrews, for example, cast their history as a series of deliverances. Moses was not a revolutionary hero from an American mold. His people fled just like Alma's and Zeniff's, and the moral of the story was that God had delivered them from captivity. Moses was not lauded for courageous resistance. The Book of Mormon deliverance narrative, incongruous amidst Fourth of July orations, is perfectly conventional biblical discourse.

The same is true for the popular demand for kings. Biblical people too raised up kings among themselves, sometimes successfully, sometimes not. The most famous instance was the anointing of Saul. There the Book of Mormon prototypes are laid down precisely. The people demanded a king of Samuel who tried to persuade them otherwise, warning them of the iniquities a king would practice on them, just as Alma and Mosiah warned their people (see 1 Samuel 8:1–22; 10:18–25; Deuteronomy 17:14).²⁴ This basic plot was not singular to Saul either. Earlier, the Israelites had requested Gideon to be their king, and he had refused because “the Lord will rule over you” (Judges 8:22–23). On another occasion, the Israelite army, after hearing of the assassination of their king, “made their commander Omri king of Israel by common consent,” much as the voice of the people confirmed kings among the Nephites (see 1 Kings 16:16).²⁵ Whereas the Book of Mormon practice of making kings at the behest of the people clashed with American assumptions, it fit the biblical tradition.

The same holds for reliance on traditional law instead of a representative legislature and indifference to the separation of powers.²⁶ Not

24. There was another biblical tradition that credited God with instituting kings among the Israelites. Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*, tr. John McHugh, 2 vols. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961), 1:94.

25. See also Judges 9:1–6; 2 Samuel 2:4; 1 Kings 16:21, 22; 2 Kings 11:12; 8:20.

26. de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 1:149–52.

every biblical political tradition reappeared in the Book of Mormon, but there are biblical precedents for most of the Nephite practices which are not at home in provincial upstate New York. The templates for Book of Mormon politics seem quite consistently to have been cut from the Bible.²⁷

With so many similarities before us, it is tempting to conclude that Joseph Smith contrived his narrative from the biblical elements in nineteenth century American culture and leave it at that. But the problems of interpretation are not so easily dismissed. Biblical patterns work differently in the Book of Mormon than in the culture at large. While American orators blessed God for delivering them from British slavery, they never permitted their gratitude to shade the heroism of the patriots. The acknowledgment of divine aid was more a benediction on America's brave resistance. Similarly, Americans believed God inspired the Constitution, but no one suggested that it was patterned after the government of ancient Israel. No one proposed to eliminate an elected legislature or to make the presidency hereditary because a king ruled the Jews. In fact, no Americans, including the Puritans of Massachusetts Bay, followed biblical political models as closely as Book of Mormon people. Biblical language was used to sanctify American history and American political institutions, but Hebrew precedents did not deeply inform historical writing nor shape political institutions. The innermost structure of Book of Mormon politics and history are biblical, while American forms are conspicuously absent.

How does all this affect the interpretation of the book—the problem raised at the outset? At the very least, the dictum that the Book of Mormon mirrored “every error and almost every truth discussed in New York for the last ten years” should be reassessed.²⁸ Scholars confine themselves unnecessarily in deriving all their insight from the maxim

27. This constitution of the Book of Mormon is confirmed by the recent discovery that certain sections of the book follow the intricate patterns of chiasmus characteristic of Hebrew writing. (See John W. Welch, “Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies* 10 (Autumn 1969):69–84.) In many other details, which Hugh Nibley more than any other scholar has mastered, the Book of Mormon follows Hebrew and Near Eastern forms. (See Hugh Nibley, *An Approach*, 2nd ed.; Nibley, *Since Cumorah*; and Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*.) Nibley points out similarities to the Egyptian as well as the Jewish culture. At the time of Lehi's Exodus, the Jewish nation was under the political shadow of Egypt, and was soaking in Egyptian patterns of thought and behavior.

28. Campbell, *Delusions*, p. 13.

that Joseph Smith's writings can best be explained "by his responsiveness to the provincial opinions of this time." That principle of criticism obscures the Book of Mormon, as it would any major work read exclusively in that light. It is particularly misleading when so many of the powerful intellectual influences operating on Joseph Smith failed to touch the Book of Mormon, among them the most common American attitudes toward a revolution, monarchy, and the limitations on power. The Book of Mormon is not a conventional American book. Too much Americana is missing. Understanding the work requires a more complex and sensitive analysis than has been afforded it. Historians will take a long step forward when they free themselves from the compulsion to connect all they find with Joseph Smith's America and try instead to understand the ancient patterns deep in the grain of the book.

Essay written for the Hugh Nibley festschrift, "Tinkling Cymbals," ed. John W. Welch, (unpublished), assembled on the occasion of Dr. Nibley's retirement. Copies of all festschrift essays are on file in casual publication in Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University. Other essays from the Nibley festschrift will appear in future issues of *BYU Studies*, with Stephen E. Robinson's "The Apocalypse of Adam" scheduled for winter 1977.

Richard L. Bushman is professor of history at Boston University.