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The Captivity of the Fathers

Author(s): John A. Tvedtnes

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Chapter 27

THE CAPTIVITY OF THE FATHERS

Now I say unto thee: Go, and remember the captivity of thy fathers in the land of Helam, and in the land of Nephi; and remember how great things he has done for them; for they were in bondage, and he has delivered them. (Mosiah 27:16)

The admonition of Mosiah 27:16 was delivered by an angel to Alma the younger when he appeared to chastise the young man and his friends for their wrongdoing. Alma heeded the warning, and fourteen years later, while recalling his experience with the angel,¹ he wrote,

Yea, and I also remember the captivity of my fathers; for I surely do know that the Lord did deliver them out of bondage, and by this did establish his church; yea, the Lord God, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, did deliver them out of bondage. Yea, I have always remembered the captivity of my fathers; and that same God who delivered them out of the hands of the Egyptians did deliver them out of bondage. (Alma 29:11-12)

THE BONDAGE OF ALMA AND HIS PEOPLE

Alma's people had twice been delivered from bondage. The Nephites who had resettled the land of Nephi suffered

¹ For a discussion of Alma's later reflections on the appearance of the angel, see John A. Tvedtnes, "The Voice of an Angel," in Noel B. Reynolds, *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins* (Provo: FARMS, 1997).

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oppression under their wicked king Noah (Mosiah 11:1-14). The king and his priests had slain Abinadi, a prophet sent to warn them (Mosiah 17:5-20). But Alma's father, Alma the elder, believed the prophet and fled to the waters of Mormon, where he taught and baptized (Mosiah 17:2-4; 18:1-31). When the king discovered their location, he sent an army to destroy them, but Alma and his people fled (Mosiah 18:32-35). They settled in a land they named Helam, where they prospered for a time (Mosiah 23:1-20).

Abinadi had prophesied that the people would be brought into bondage to their enemies, meaning the Lamanites (Mosiah 11:21-25). The Lamanites took the land of Nephi and made Limhi king in the place of his father Noah. Limhi's people were rescued and led to the land of Zarahemla by a group from that city, led by Ammon. A Lamanite army tried to prevent their escape but became lost in the wilderness and stumbled across the Amulonites, former priests to king Noah who had fled during the earlier war.

While seeking the way back to the land of Nephi, these Lamanites and Amulonites encountered Alma's people at Helam. They placed them under bondage until the Lord miraculously delivered them and brought them safely to the land of Zarahemla (Mosiah 23:21-24:25).

Some years later, in a discourse delivered in the city of Zarahemla, Alma the younger related the story of the dual deliverance of his people from bondage in the cities of Nephi and Helam (Alma 5:1-5). He added:

And now behold, I say unto you, my brethren, you that belong to this church, have you sufficiently retained in remembrance the captivity of your fathers? Yea, and have you sufficiently retained in remembrance his mercy and long-suffering towards them? And moreover, have ye sufficiently retained in remembrance that he has delivered their souls from hell? (Alma 5:6)

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DELIVERY FROM SPIRITUAL BONDAGE

What interests us here is the fact that Alma tied the deliverance from physical bondage to God's power to deliver his people from spiritual bondage as well. But the comparison seems to have been first made in the record kept by his father. This becomes clear as we examine the words uttered by Alma the elder at the waters of Mormon:

Behold, here are the waters of Mormon (for thus were they called) and now, as ye are desirous to come into the fold of God, and to be called his people, and are willing to bear one another's burdens, that they may be light; Yea, and are willing to mourn with those that mourn; yea, and comfort those that stand in need of comfort, and to stand as witnesses of God at all times and in all things, and in all places that ye may be in, even until death, that ye may be redeemed of God, and be numbered with those of the first resurrection, that ye may have eternal life—Now I say unto you, if this be the desire of your hearts, what have you against being baptized in the name of the Lord, as a witness before him that ye have entered into a covenant with him, that ye will serve him and keep his commandments, that he may pour out his Spirit more abundantly upon you?
(Mosiah 18:8-10)

Alma inquired after the “desire of [the] hearts” of his people, asking them to enter into a “covenant with [God],” “to be called his people” and “to stand as witnesses of [him].” They were also to “bear one another's burdens, that they may be light” and “comfort those that stand in need of comfort.” If they remained faithful to this covenant, they would “be redeemed of God.”

COMPARING PHYSICAL AND SPIRITUAL BONDAGE

These same elements are found in the story of their deliverance from Lamanite/Amulonite bondage. Forbidden to pray vocally, the people called upon God in their hearts, and the Lord “did know the thoughts of their hearts” (Mosiah 24:12). He responded by speaking to their souls. He reminded them “of the covenant which ye have made with me” (Mosiah 24:13) and called them “my people” (Mosiah 24:14). He promised to “deliver them out of bondage” (Mosiah 24:13, 16-17), that they might “stand as witnesses for me” (Mosiah 24:14).

To remind them of their covenant to “bear one another’s burdens, that they may be light,” and “to comfort those that stand in need of comfort,” the Lord counseled them to “be of good comfort” (Mosiah 24:13, 16). He would “ease the burdens . . . that even you cannot feel them upon your backs” (Mosiah 24:14).

And now it came to pass that the burdens which were laid upon Alma and his brethren were made light; yea, the Lord did strengthen them that they could bear up their burdens with ease, and they did submit cheerfully and with patience to all the will of the Lord. (Mosiah 24:15)

The people were miraculously delivered soon afterward (Mosiah 24:16-25). It is obvious that Alma’s speech at the waters of Mormon influenced the wording of his account of the deliverance of the people from bondage in the land of Helam. But there is more to the story. We note, for example, that Alma tied the bearing of burdens to patience (Mosiah 24:15-16). The Hebrew root meaning “bear” or “carry” is *sbl*, whence the noun *sēbel*, “burden,” and the modern Hebrew term *sablānūt*, “patience, longsuffering.” By telling the people to “bear one another’s burdens” (Mosiah 18:8), Alma was instructing them not only to help one another, but to be tolerant of others and patient. Amulek, who served as a missionary companion to Alma’s son, Alma the

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younger, expressed similar thoughts when addressing the Zoramites:

I would exhort you to have patience, and that ye bear with all manner of afflictions; that ye do not revile against those who cast you out . . . But that ye have patience and bear with those afflictions, with a firm hope that ye shall one day rest from all your afflictions. (Alma 34:40-41)

CONCLUSION

Many years later, when the younger Alma instructed his son Helaman in the care of the sacred records and other matters, he told him to “do as I have done, in remembering the captivity of our fathers” (Alma 36:2, 28-29). Moroni used similar terminology in his letter to the Nephite governor Pahoran (Alma 60:20). Alma’s diligence in obeying the angel’s instructions influenced later generations.