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Oaths in the Book of Mormon

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And because of their oath they had been kept from taking up arms against their brethren; for they had taken an oath that they never would shed blood more; and according to their oath they would have perished; yea, they would have suffered themselves to have fallen into the hands of their brethren. (Alma 53:11)

Oaths and covenants play a special role among both Nephites and Lamanites, whether righteous or wicked.¹ This is because of the special emphasis placed on oaths and covenants in the law of Moses. The Lord declared, "If a man vow a vow unto the Lord, or swear an oath to bind his soul with a bond; he shall not break his word, he shall do according to all that proceedeth out of his mouth" (Numbers 30:2). Oaths were made in the name of the Lord. "Thou shalt fear the Lord thy God, and serve him, and swear by his name" (Deuteronomy 6:13).

The first Book of Mormon example of an oath made in the name of the Lord is found in 1 Nephi 3:15, where Nephi vowed to fulfill the Lord's commandment to obtain the brass plates. He began with the words, "As the Lord liveth, and as we live."

Nephi fulfilled the oath by dressing in Laban's clothing and ordering Laban's servant Zoram to bring the plates outside the city with him. When Zoram discovered the deception, he was about to flee but was held back by Nephi, who did not want the

¹ The Nephites who heard king Benjamin's speech entered into an oath and a covenant to keep the Lord's commandments (Mosiah 5:5-8; 6:1-3). The covenant associated with baptism is mentioned in Mosiah 18:10, 13 (see Alma 7:15); 21:31-32; 24:13. For oaths among members of the Nephite secret combination known as the Gadianton Robbers, see Helaman 1:11; 2:3; 6:22; 3 Nephi 6:28-30; 7:11.

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people of Jerusalem alerted to their departure. Nephi recorded:

I spake with him, that if he would hearken unto my words, as the Lord liveth, and as I live, even so that if he would hearken unto our words, we would spare his life. And I spake unto him, even with an oath, that he need not fear; that he should be a free man like unto us if he would go down in the wilderness with us. And I also spake unto him, saying: Surely the Lord hath commanded us to do this thing; and shall we not be diligent in keeping the commandments of the Lord? Therefore, if thou wilt go down into the wilderness to my father thou shalt have place with us. And it came to pass that Zoram did take courage at the words which I spake . . . and he promised that he would go down into the wilderness unto our father. Yea, and he also made an oath unto us that he would tarry with us from that time forth . . . When Zoram had made an oath unto us, our fears did cease concerning him. (1 Nephi 4:32-37)

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To modern readers, it seems strange that a simple oath or promise should allay the fears of both Zoram and of Lehi's sons. It makes sense only in the context of ancient Israelite practice. The Lord told Moses:

When thou shalt vow a vow unto the Lord thy God, thou shalt not slack to pay it: for the Lord thy God will surely require it of thee; and it would be sin in thee. But if thou shalt forbear to vow it shall be no sin in thee. That which is gone out of thy lips thou shalt keep and perform; even a

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freewill offering, according as thou hast vowed unto the Lord thy God, which thou hast promised with thy mouth. (Deuteronomy 23:21-23)²

The Lord also commanded Israel, “And ye shall not swear by my name falsely, neither shalt thou profane the name of thy God” (Leviticus 19:12). This is the meaning of the third of the Ten Commandments, “Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain” (Exodus 20:7). Taking the Lord’s name in vain meant making a vow in the Lord’s name and not keeping it.³ Because it was part of the ten commandments, the breaking of an oath made in the Lord’s name could lead anciently to the death penalty.

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In an extreme case, the Old Testament judge Jephthah swore that if the Lord would help him win a certain battle, he would offer to him in sacrifice the first thing he met upon returning home. He undoubtedly expected to see one of his animals as he neared his house. But it was his daughter who came running to greet the returning warrior. Despite the serious nature of killing an innocent human being, Jephthah sacrificed his daughter to fulfill the oath (Judges 11:30-40). The New Testament also has an example of a rash oath made by a group of men who “bound

² Jesus, commenting on the law of Moses, taught his disciples to not swear by anything holy, “but let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil” (Matthew 5:33-37).

³ In our modern world, where profanity is so commonplace, we often think that this commandment referred to profane use of the Lord’s name. We have even redefined the verb “to swear” to mean “to utter profanities.” The Bible often forbids profaning the Lord’s name, but that is not what was originally intended by the third commandment.

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themselves under a curse, saying that they would neither eat nor drink till they had killed Paul⁴ (Acts 23:12; see also verse 14). They did not succeed in slaying the apostle, but we are not told whether the men starved to death.

Rash oaths are known from the Book of Mormon as well. The leaders of a Lamanite army, angry that the Nephite general Moroni's new fortifications had foiled their plans to destroy the city of Ammonihah, swore to attack the city of Noah (Alma 49:17); they were repelled because Noah, too, had been fortified. Their leader, Amalickiah, angrily swore to drink Moroni's blood (Alma 49:27). Giddianhi, leader of the Gadianton band of robbers, swore to exterminate the Nephites but was unable to accomplish his purposes (3 Nephi 3:8).

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These examples of unfulfilled oaths are rare. We learn from the Book of Mormon that even the Lamanites, who didn't believe in the ancient prophets, were strict in keeping their oaths. The Lamanite converts who called themselves Anti-Nephi-Lehies (and were later named the children of Ammon) swore that they would never again take up arms against their brethren (Alma 27:28-29), and we learn that they never broke this oath (Alma 53:11, 14-18; 43:1).⁴

When the Lamanites defeated the Nephites living in the city of Nephi, the Lamanite king took an oath that his people would not slay the Nephites, while the Nephite king, Limhi, swore that his people would pay half of their produce in tribute (Mosiah 19:25-26). The Lamanites, believing that the Nephites had broken

⁴ For a discussion of this topic, see John A. Tvedtnes, "Sons of Mosiah: Emissaries of Peace," in Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin, *Warfare in the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1990). The Ammonites' sons who were too young to take the oath were not bound by it and served with Helaman in defending Nephite lands against a Lamanite invasion (Alma 56:3-9).

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the peace, attacked the Nephites and the Lamanite king was captured (Mosiah 20:14-15). The king discovered that the Nephites were not only innocent of the charges, but that they intended to keep their bargain (Mosiah 20:22). He swore that his people would not slay them—a promise that they were careful to keep, even though they mistreated them otherwise (Mosiah 20:24; 21:3).⁵

During one of the Nephite-Lamanite wars, the Nephites, led by Moroni, had gained the advantage over the Lamanites. Moroni called for a cease to the fighting and promised the Lamanites that they could go home if they would promise not to come again to war against them (Alma 44:6-7). Zarahemnah, the Lamanite leader, was willing to deliver up his weapons, “but we will not suffer ourselves to take an oath unto you, which we know that we shall break, and also our children” (Alma 44:8). Moroni insisted that without the oath there would be more bloodshed (Alma 44:11). Some of the Lamanites threw down their weapons of war “and entered into a covenant of peace. And as many as entered into a covenant they suffered to depart into the wilderness” (Alma 44:15). The battle then resumed until the Lamanites were so defeated that Zarahemnah and the rest of his men entered into the same covenant (Alma 44:19). “And after they had entered into a covenant with him of peace they were suffered to depart into the wilderness” (Alma 44:20).

This action set a precedent for Nephite treatment of their enemies. Soon afterward, Moroni placed himself and his soldiers under covenant to maintain the liberty of their country against another Lamanite invasion (Alma 46:20-22, 31). Moroni swore to defend his people, their rights, country, and religion “even to the loss of his blood” (Alma 48:13). He later wrote, “I, Moroni, am

⁵ See the discussion in S. Kent Brown, “Marriage and Treaty in the Book of Mormon: The Case of the Abducted Lamanite Daughters,” in his book *From Jerusalem to Zarahemla: Literary and Historical Studies of the Book of Mormon* (Provo: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1998), 99-112.

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constrained, according to the covenant which I have made to keep the commandments of my God” (Alma 60:34). Moroni’s planned campaign against the Lamanites was delayed by the fact that a group of Nephite dissenters, led by a man named Amalickiah, rose up in support of the Lamanites, and Moroni’s army was forced to confront them first. The defeated Amalickiahites who covenanted to defend their country were freed. The rest were slain (Alma 46:35), while Amalickiah and a few of his men went over to the Lamanites.

At one point during the war that ensued, four thousand Lamanite prisoners covenanted with Moroni that they would not again make war against the Nephites and were allowed to go to live with the children of Ammon (Alma 62:15-17). A generation later, Moroni’s son Moronihah also allowed Lamanite captives to leave in peace (Helaman 1:33). Still later, repentant Gadianton robbers captured during a war were freed upon taking an oath to no longer commit murder (3 Nephi 5:4-5; 6:3).

CONCLUSION

Even the vilest of people were trusted by the Nephites once they had taken an oath to keep the peace. Stories such as these from the Book of Mormon should encourage us, as members of the Lord’s Church, to likewise keep our covenants.