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PROPHET OR LOSS: MOSIAH₁/ZENIFF, BENJAMIN/NOAH, MOSIAH₂/LIMHI AND THE EMERGENCE OF THE ALMAS

Val Larsen

Abstract: *Mormon's overwhelmingly dominant rhetorical purpose is to testify of Christ, which he and his protagonists often directly do. But he also communicates his testimony more subtly through carefully crafted historical narratives. His use of frame narratives is especially artful. In the Book of Mosiah, Mormon frames the dispiriting account of Zeniff and Noah's rule with the story of its aftermath: the suffering of Limhi and his people, which is recounted both before and after the central Zeniff/Noah narrative and which underscores the folly in the narrative it frames. The Limhi story is, in turn, framed by a Mosiah family narrative that features prophet kings Mosiah₁, Benjamin, and Mosiah₂ and that, likewise, underscores the folly in the Zeniff/Noah/Limhi story through pointed contrasts with Mosiah₁/Benjamin/Mosiah₂, the antitypes of the Zeniff-family kings. Benjamin's great discourse on Christ, the most important component of the Mosiah narrative is also set within a frame narrative, a coronation account, which creates a political subtext in that great spiritual sermon and that, likewise, underscores the folly of the Zeniff family's failure to follow the prophets God sent them. The article concludes by discussing the emergence of the Almas as the first family of Nephite history, the connecting thread that runs through Mormon's account of the next ten generations of Nephite history.*

In the Book of Mormon, Mormon uses narrative to illustrate important truths. One truth he copiously illustrates is that bad things happen, even to good people, if they choose to reject the counsel of God that comes to them through prophets. One way Mormon artfully teaches this truth is by recounting the parallel histories of two contemporary dynasties, the prophet-led Mantic dynasty of Mosiah₁ in the land of

Zarahemla and the contrasting Sophic dynasty of a good man, Zeniff, in the land of Nephi.¹

Things must be alike in important ways to form a clear contrast. We contrast apples with oranges, not with prepositions. Understanding this, Mormon illustrates his truth about the importance of prophets by recounting historical narratives that are similar on a large number of dimensions but that repeatedly prove to be type and antitype when the parallels are closely examined. To be specific, Mormon develops his theme that it is foolish to reject the guidance of God that comes to us through prophets by comparing and contrasting the lives of the similarly situated monarchs Mosiah₁ and Zeniff, Benjamin and Noah, and Mosiah₂ and Limhi.

Mormon develops these contrasts and marks the emergence of the Almas as the first family of the Nephite nation, as the connecting thread that will run through the succeeding ten generations of Nephite history, using a sophisticated literary technique, the frame narrative. (A frame narrative is a story that has another story embedded in it, with the main story both preceding and following the embedded story.²) In the Book of Mosiah, three comparatively short frame narratives comment on and add new dimensions of meaning to the longer, embedded main narratives that they frame.

Mosiah₁/Zeniff

Let us begin with the contrast between the first Mosiah, Mosiah₁ and his antitype, Zeniff. The contrast between these two kings clearly illustrates the superiority of prophetic leadership.

Zero Sum

The parallels between Mosiah₁ and Zeniff are in many respects so exact that they constitute the literary equivalent of a mathematical equation, Zeniff being the minus that cancels Mosiah₁'s plus. Warned by God that

1. For an extended discussion of the Sophic and Mantic faith traditions among the Nephites, see Val Larsen, "Josiah to Zoram to Sherem to Jarom and The Big Little Book of Omni," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 44 (2021): 217–64, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/josiah-to-zoram-to-sherem-to-jarom-and-the-big-little-book-of-omni/>.

2. One well-known example is Hamlet, which contains a play embedded within the play. *The Princess Bride* is another example. There, the grandfather reading a story to his grandson, with which the movie opens and closes, is a frame narrative within which the story of Westley and Buttercup is embedded.

the Nephites must leave their homeland, the prophet king, Mosiah₁, whose name means “deliverer,” “savior,” or “Yahweh delivers/saves,”³ leads an exodus of those who “would hearken unto the voice of the Lord” (Omni 1:12–13) from the land of Nephi to the land of Zarahemla. The specific point of departure is the temple in the land of Shilom, probably meaning the land or place of peace, *shalom*, “which had been a resort for the children of Nephi” (Mosiah 11:13) but which they must now leave behind because peace with the Lamanites is no longer possible. (In Hebrew, which is spelled without vowels, both *Shilom* and *Shalom* are spelled שלם, sh-l-m.)⁴ During their journey, Mosiah₁ and his people are blessed by the Lord, Yahweh, and “led by the power of his arm” (Omni 1:13).⁵ Having arrived in Zarahemla, they successfully integrate with a related people, the Mulekites, from whom they have been separated for 400 years. For the most part, the two peoples live in peace and prosperity during the three generations of the dynasty.

Zeniff does the exact opposite. Inspired by Satan⁶ or just following his own will, Zeniff leads those who regret having followed Mosiah₁ on an exodus from the land of Zarahemla back to their 400-year homeland, the land of Nephi. During this ill-advised journey, Zeniff and his people are not blessed. In their first attempt to return, they become divided among themselves, and the majority are killed in fratricidal war. In their second attempt, they are “smitten with famine and sore afflictions; for [they] were slow to remember the Lord [their] God” (Mosiah 9:3).

3. Book of Mormon Onomasticon, s.v. “Mosiah,” <https://onoma.lib.byu.edu/index.php/MOSIAH>.

4. See Matthew L. Bowen, “Possess the Land in Peace: Zeniff’s Ironic Wordplay on Shilom,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 28 (2018): 115–70, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/possess-the-land-in-peace-zeniffs-ironic-wordplay-on-shilom/>.

5. Bradley notes the similarity of the names Mosiah and Moses, an apt coincidence in the names of great exodus leaders. Don Bradley, *The Lost 116 Pages: Reconstructing the Book of Mormon’s Missing Stories* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2019), 241.

6. See Benjamin’s warning, discussed later, that his people should “beware lest there arise contentions among you, and ye list to obey the evil spirit, which was spoken of my father Mosiah” (Mosiah 2:32) and that his people should not “transgress the laws of God, and fight and quarrel one with another, and serve the devil, who is the master of sin, or who is the evil spirit which hath been spoken of by our fathers” (Mosiah 4:14). Benjamin probably has his own father, Mosiah₁, and his warning about the evil spirit particularly in mind. The most obvious application of Mosiah₁’s teachings would have been to Zeniff and the other break-away Nephites who fought among themselves after rejecting Mosiah₁’s leadership (Mosiah 9:3).

Having arrived in the land of Nephi, they attempt to live peacefully with a related people, the Lamanites, from whom they have been separated for 400 years. This attempted cohabitation is an abysmal failure. After an initial deceptive peace, the two peoples live as armed adversaries engaged in more or less perpetual war during the three generations of the dynasty.

This negative outcome in the land of Nephi is no surprise. Background information in the Book of Omni helps clarify God's reasons for leading the Nephites out of their four-century homeland. The situation in the land of Nephi was bad when Mosiah₁ left, and it had been bad for a long time. We see this in the accounts of Omni, Amaron, and Abinadom, the last three Small Plates scribes who lived out their lives in the land of Nephi. Abinadom, the seventh generation from Lehi and last in the line, appears to be a professional soldier whose life work is war. He declares, "I, with my own sword, have taken the lives of many of the Lamanites" (Omni 1: 2, 10).⁷ It is clear that a negative equilibrium has emerged in the land of Nephi. Abinadom's life seems much like that of his grandfather Omni, who wrote, "I fought much with the sword to preserve my people ... from falling into the hands of their enemies, the Lamanites" (Omni 1: 2).

In the report of Amaron, who stands between Omni and Abinadom, we see that genocidal battles are producing destruction on all sides: "[A]nd the more wicked part of the Nephites were destroyed. For the Lord would *not* suffer..., yea, he would *not* suffer that the words should *not* be verified, which he spake unto our fathers, saying that: Inasmuch as ye will *not* keep my commandments ye shall *not* prosper in the land" (Omni 1:5–6). This string of negations reflects negative conditions in the land of Nephi that make righteous living impossible there. Omni declares himself to be a "wicked man," and Abindadom says he knows of no contemporary "revelation ... neither prophecy." So, it is apparent why the Lord calls Mosiah₁ as a prophet and warns "that he should flee out of the land of Nephi, and as many as would hearken unto the voice of the Lord should also depart out of the land with him" (Omni 1:2, 12).

7. Welch notes that prior to the migration to Zarahemla, the Nephite civilization was "perilously close to failure." John W. Welch, "Benjamin, the Man: His Place in Nephite History," in *King Benjamin's Speech: "That Ye may Learn Wisdom,"* ed. John W. Welch and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo, UT: The Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1998), <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/mi/45>.

But it is also apparent why Zeniff and others longed to return to the four-century homeland of their people. Zeniff and his companions are not alone in the longing they feel to return to the land of Nephi. Though they were compelled to leave it, the land of Nephi remains the home of the heart for the Nephite people throughout the remainder of their history. Nephites always “go up to the land of Nephi” just as the Jews in the Bible always go “up to Jerusalem.”⁸ The direction from which the city or land is approached makes no difference, nor does their long absence from it. The journey to the respective emotional homelands of the Jews and Nephites is always an ascent.⁹ Like the Jews, these Zeniffite Nephites likely saw their covenant with God as a covenant of place, which made departure from their Promised Land an extraordinary trauma.¹⁰

The Good I Would I Do Not, the Evil I Would Not, I Do

So, after following Mosiah₁ to Zarahemla, Zeniff chooses to reject his prophetic leadership. This doesn't mean Zeniff was a wicked man. He

8. There is one exception. Ammon₁ is described as going “down into the land of Nephi” (Mosiah 7:6), but his point of departure was the sacred and elevated hill Shilom. Bradley offers various reasons to think that the Shilom hill was an especially sacred place for the Nephites, perhaps the most sacred site in the land of Nephi. Being so sacred, it might be the one place one went up to and from which one could descend into the surrounding land of Nephi. Its special importance is marked by being Mosiah₁'s point of departure and Ammon₁'s arrival place. Bradley, *Lost 116 Pages*, 255–56, 272, 274.

9. For an excellent discussion of the Promised Land ideology of the Zeniffites and how it relates to topography and their understanding of Isaiah, see Daniel L. Belnap, “The Abinadi Narrative, Redemption, and the Struggle for Nephite Identity,” in *Abinadi: He Came Among Them in Disguise*, ed. Shon D. Hopkin (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2018), 27–66.

10. “This covenantal understanding, with its focus on place, is crucial to understanding the effect on the Jewish people of Jerusalem's destruction announced by Lehi. Jerusalem had been the center of Israelite identity since the moment, hundreds of years earlier, when King David relocated the capital of Israel from Hebron to Jerusalem. Ever after, Jerusalem was ‘the Jewish Holy City,’ and ‘it would be hard to overstate the titanic trauma that the destruction of Jerusalem, and of its temple, inflicted on the Jewish psyche when the Babylonians conquered the land and city.” Terry Givens, *2nd Nephi: A Brief Theological Introduction* (Provo, UT: Neal A Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2020), 18. When Mosiah left it, the Nephites had been living in their capital city in the land of Nephi essentially the same amount of time that the Jews had lived in Jerusalem as their capital at the time it was destroyed. The enduring hold of a covenant land on the imagination of a people is clearly illustrated by the 1940s return of the Jews to Palestine, by the reestablishment of Israel as a nation after a 2,000-year absence.

wasn't, and that is a key part of Mormon's message. The importance of following prophets is all the more apparent because Zeniff was a good, not a bad man. And yet, by rejecting prophetic leadership, he placed himself in circumstances that turned him into precisely the kind of person he least wanted to be. And he left his descendants in very difficult straits.

Zeniff starts out as a member of an expedition that is returning to the land of Nephi to recover their lost homeland by resuming the fight Mosiah₁ has eschewed and fled. This is a war party led by "an austere and a blood-thirsty man" (Mosiah 9: 2), a man whose focus in life seems to be much like that of Omni and Abinadom. This leader sends Zeniff to spy on the Lamanites and determine how they can be destroyed. But while observing, Zeniff "saw that which was good among them [and] was desirous that they should not be destroyed" (Mosiah 9:1). He may have seen the mutual love of Lamanite spouses, parents' love for their children and children's devotion to their parents, acts of kindness between friends and strangers. He recommends that, instead of attacking, the returning Nephites make a treaty with the Lamanites and live peaceably among them. The blood-thirsty leader rejects this counsel, and a battle breaks out between the proponents of peace and the proponents of war. After more than half of the expedition is killed, the group returns to Zarahemla.¹¹

The attempt to resume the centuries-long war having failed, Zeniff now organizes and leads a second expedition that includes women and children and that intends to make a treaty with and live peaceably among the Lamanites. Zeniff successfully negotiates a treaty with King Laman, who cedes to Zeniff and his people the land of Lehi-Nephi (Mosiah 9:6). The name of this land suggests that Zeniff has recovered the place and way of life of his fathers, Lehi and Nephi. So does the opening of Zeniff's record, which echoes Nephi's opening of his: "I, Zeniff, having been taught in all the language of the Nephites, and having had a knowledge of the land of Nephi, or the land of our fathers' first inheritance... therefore I..." (Mosiah 9:1-2; 1 Nephi 1:1). King Laman also cedes the land of Shilom. Prospects seem good that Zeniff and his people can live in peace, *shalom*, with the Lamanites. In the succeeding twelve years, they do.

But according to Zeniff, King Laman has just been biding his time. Suddenly, without warning, he initiates an unprovoked attack on the Nephites in the land of Shilom that destroys the peace (Mosiah 9:14).

11. The destructiveness of this disagreement probably reflects the underlying quarrelsomeness of those who chose to reject Mosiah₁'s leadership and return to the Land of Nephi to resume the war with the Lamanites. Even those who prefer peace when they get there are prepared to fight to the death against their compatriots.

(King Laman may have perceived some unreported Zeniffite act as a provocation and *casus belli*.) Zeniff is forced to refound his people as an armed camp.¹² He supplies his followers “with bows, and with arrows, with swords, and with cimeters, and with clubs, and with slings, and with all manner of weapons which we could invent” (Mosiah 9:16). Putting his trust in the Lord because he is a good man, he leads his people into battle, and they kill 3,043 Lamanites. Zeniff experiences great sorrow and lamentation for the 279 Nephites who have lost their lives but now seems to feel no sorrow for the thousands of Lamanites who have died because he led his people back to the land of Nephi. To prepare for battle, Zeniff says, “I and my people did cry mightily to the Lord that he would deliver us out of the hands of our enemies” (Mosiah 9:17). This prayer is ironic. God had already delivered Zeniff and his people by inspiring Mosiah₁ to lead them out of the Land of Nephi. They voluntarily returned to the peril that now inspires them to cry for deliverance from their enemies. Because they returned, 3,322 people have unnecessarily died, and the killing is far from over.

In the wake of this battle, Zeniff’s views of the Lamanites change. He now sees King Laman as a cunning and crafty man and the Lamanites as “an idolatrous people; ... desirous to bring us into bondage, that they might glut themselves with the labors of our hands” (Mosiah 9:10–12). When King Laman dies and his son takes over, the Lamanites again break the peace by attacking Zeniff and his people in the land of Shilom (Mosiah 10:8). But like his blood-thirsty predecessor, Zeniff has sent out spies so as to be prepared for battle. He arms all males who can bear a weapon and, in his old age, leads them as they kill Lamanites “with a great slaughter, even so many that we did not number them” (Mosiah 10:20). Like his former leader, Zeniff now regards the Lamanites as implacable enemies with whom there can never be any peace. They are a “wild, and ferocious, and a blood-thirsty people” (Enos 1:20, Mosiah 10:12). They are wrongly “wroth ... wroth ... wroth ... wroth” with the Nephites because of their false traditions (Mosiah 10:14–16). “And they have taught their children that they should hate [Nephites], and that they should murder them, and plunder them, and do all they could to destroy them; therefore, they have an eternal hatred towards the children of Nephi” (Mosiah 10:17). Zeniff has now become his blood-thirsty nemesis, a man who perceives no good in

12. Zeniff highlights the unprovoked nature of the attack as follows: “*When my people were watering and feeding their flocks, and tilling their lands, a numerous host of Lamanites came upon them*” (Mosiah 9:14).

the Lamanites, no possibility of peace with them, who seemingly without remorse organizes his people to massively slaughter them.

As he recounts these events shortly before his death, Zeniff seems to perceive the ironic tragedy of his life and of the exodus he led. All this information is given in his personal account of events. It is he who reprehends the blood-thirsty man, who attests that he himself saw much good among the Lamanites, and who then catalogs his subsequent personal involvement in their remorseless slaughter. In writing his account, Zeniff seems to have assessed his life objectively, to have maintained some emotional distance from the events he describes and to have perceived his own fatal flaw. The good man that is still in him describes his original desire to return to the land of his fathers as “over-zealous” (Mosiah 9:3). He implicitly acknowledges that he was wrong to have rejected the leadership of Mosiah₁, for the consequence of going his own way is that he and his people “have suffered many years in the land” (Mosiah 10:18).

Mormon underscores the folly of Zeniff by placing Zeniff’s first person account of the exodus he led inside a frame narrative that unmistakably features the failure of the effort. The first part of the frame narrative ends with a panegyric celebrating the power and importance of a seer who is “a great benefit to his fellow beings” (Mosiah 8:12–18), followed by quotations from Abinadi and the Brass Plates that condemn the people for rejecting the shepherd that God sends them.

O how marvelous are the works of the Lord, and how long doth he suffer with his people; yea, and how blind and impenetrable are the understandings of the children of men; for they will not seek wisdom, neither do they desire that she should rule over them! Yea, they are as a wild flock which fleeth from the shepherd, and scattereth, and are driven, and are devoured by the beasts of the forest. (Mosiah 8: 20–21)¹³

13. John Gee suggests these verses allude to Proverbs 8:12–17 and Mosiah 17:17. John Gee, “Limhi in the Library,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1, no. 1 (1992): 64. Citing the description of Mosiah in Omni 1:13 and Alma’s allusion to Mosiah₁, Bradley writes, “The language here of hearkening to a voice and being led to safety away from threats evokes images of a shepherd leading his flock away from dangerous wolves. For example, Alma₁, after reminding his listeners how ‘the Lord did deliver them out of bondage by the power of his word; and we were brought into this land’ (Alma 5:5), launches into a sermon describing Christ as ‘the good shepherd’ and repeatedly instructs them to ‘hearken unto the voice’ of that shepherd so that they might be protected (5:37–60).” Bradley, *Lost 116 Pages*, 244.

These verses highlight the error of Zeniff in the narrative that immediately follows. In rejecting the leadership of Mosiah¹, Zeniff blindly rejected wisdom. In returning to the land of Nephi, he fled the seer, the shepherd God had appointed to rule over him. As a consequence, his people will be scattered and driven and devoured by enemies. And yet God will suffer with them, will bear their burdens that they may be light (Mosiah 24:14), and will ultimately return them to the shepherd and fold they wrongly left (Mosiah 22:11–13).

Guidance from God through prophets and personal revelation is necessary because human beings cannot by themselves accurately estimate or control the consequences of their actions. It is noteworthy that Zeniff, who was initially well disposed toward the Lamanites, used the exact same phrase to describe them as Enos had used five generations earlier, both calling them a “wild, and ferocious, and a blood-thirsty people” (Enos 1:20, Mosiah 10:12). The general tenor of each man’s negative characterization of the Lamanites is also similar (Enos 1:14, 20; Mosiah 9:12, 10:11–17).¹⁴ It is likewise noteworthy that Enos, like Zeniff, was personally well disposed toward the Lamanites. He prayed passionately that they would eventually be redeemed (Enos 1:11–18).

Given each man’s positive personal disposition toward them, the ideology Enos and Zeniff articulate that characterizes the Lamanites so negatively should be seen as a social fact, as a reflection of social structures and patterns of aggregate thought and action that transcend the individual and limit the range of choices available to individuals. However sincerely King Laman and Zeniff may have wished for their two peoples to live together in peace, history had entrenched attitudes and perceptions that would load automatically in both parties when some inevitable friction arose between their two peoples.¹⁵ The cultural cartridges would automatically load and explode with the symmetry of Nephite and Lamanite mutual animosities being matched by the symmetry of their weapons (Mosiah 9:16, 10:8). In Zeniff’s narrative, we see how quickly his

14. I am indebted to Kylie Turley for pointing out this connection between Enos and Zeniff. Kylie Nielson Turley, “Enos, Not Enos: An Alternative Explanation for the Content and Style of Enos 1:20–23” (presentation, Book of Mormon Studies Association Annual Conference, Orem, UT, October 5–7, 2023).

15. Once attacked, Zeniff attributes bad faith to King Laman (Mosiah 9:11–13). While Zeniff may have had some factual warrant for this attribution of bad faith, no particular warrant would have been necessary. Even if the war were started by a mere misunderstanding, the attribution of malevolence would inexorably follow as it always does when two peoples go to war.

views are reconfigured and reinstate the hatreds that made it necessary for the Lord to lead the Nephites out of their ancestral homeland.

Ironically, though we have no writings of Mosiah₁, who was a prophet and seer,¹⁶ the writings of Zeniff have been incorporated in scripture as a historical example of what happens when a people reject the guidance of prophets.¹⁷ While prophets' plain teachings in prophecies and sermons are an important part of Mormon's third testament of Christ, much of the truth in the Book of Mormon is communicated more subtly through carefully crafted parallel or contrasting historical narratives that show rather than tell a truth, in this case, the truth that we should welcome and follow the counsel of prophets.¹⁸

The Benjamin/Noah Nexis

We turn now to the contrast between Mosiah₁'s son, Benjamin, and Zeniff's son Noah. Here again, the importance of prophetic leadership is starkly illustrated.

Type and Antitype

Mosiah₁ is succeeded by Benjamin, Zeniff by Noah. In the lengthier accounts of these two kings' reigns, the striking similarities and more fundamental differences between these contrasting dynasties that have/don't have prophetic leadership are more extensively and sharply drawn.¹⁹

16. To be sure, Bradley's work on the lost 116 pages suggests that this deficit is a function of that loss. The lost pages apparently did contain much information about Mosiah₁, probably including some of his teachings. Bradley, *Lost 116 pages*, 243–44, 247–49.

17. Mormon's featuring of Zeniff probably reflects, in part, his own family history and Nephite chauvinism. There are grounds for thinking that Mormon, who incorporated Zeniff's writings in his book, is a descendant of Zeniff and a member of the Alma family. See, for example 3 Nephi 5:12, Mosiah 17:2, and 3 Nephi 5:20.

18. Heather Hardy, "Another Testament of Jesus Christ: Mormon's Poetics," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 16, no. 2 (2007): 16–27, 93–95. Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 152–79. Val Larsen, "In His Footsteps: Ammon₁ and Ammon₂," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 3 (2013): 85–113, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/in-his-footsteps-ammon-and-ammon/>.

19. Matthew L. Bowen shows how Mormon contrasts king Noah with the biblical Noah in "'This Son Shall Comfort Us': An Onomastic Tale of Two Noahs," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 23 (2017): 263–98, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/this-son-shall-comfort-us-an-onomastic-tale-of-two-noahs/>. He notes the contrast between Noah and Benjamin as well, p. 281, but does not extensively comment on it.

The accounts of their reigns come to us in two distinct genres. Most of what we know about Benjamin, we learn from a sermon he delivered during the coronation ceremony that transferred power from him to his son, Mosiah₂. So, Benjamin comes to us largely unmediated.

What we know about Noah, we learn from Mormon's summary of his life. So, Mormon mediates the portrayal of this king, skillfully framing his Noah narrative with the account of its disastrous aftermath. The narrative of the Zeniff dynasty begins in Mosiah chapter 7 *in medias res*.²⁰ We arrive in the land of Nephi and find Zeniff and Noah's people, now led by Limhi, in desperate straits. They are trapped in painful bondage to the Lamanites. Conditions are so bad that they would gladly become slaves of the people who remained in Zarahemla if those wiser Nephites could somehow rescue them from their current misery (Mosiah 7:15). Having made it obvious in this frame narrative that the return to the land of Nephi was a disastrous error, Mormon now gives us, in chapters 9 and 10, Zeniff's first person history of the return and then, in chapters 11 through 19, a third person account of Noah's reign. The frame narrative recounting the misery of Limhi and his people then resumes and underscores the errors of Zeniff and Noah who each, in his own way, rejected the leadership of a prophet, Zeniff rejecting Mosiah₁ and Noah, Abinadi.

If we read the Book of Mormon sequentially, Benjamin is well known to us when we first encounter Noah. Having just read the account of Benjamin's life, we are equipped to see that Noah is the antitype of Benjamin, a kind of photographic negative that has all the same features, but always with the opposite moral shade, dark replacing light. The number and specificity of the paired but opposite attributes suggest that Mormon wants us to compare and contrast these two kings. Consider these similarities and differences on specific attributes:

1. As noted above, Benjamin and Noah occupy similar dynastic positions. Both are the son of a man who led a migration across the wilderness separating the land of Nephi from the land of Zarahemla. The father of both then became the first king of his people in the new land to which he had led them.

20. Mormon's use of *in medias res* to meld together two narratives that run on parallel tracks in the lands of Zarahemla and Nephi is artful. It neatly inserts the history of Zeniff's people into his ongoing account of what is happening in Zarahemla. Mormon uses the same literary technique in Alma chapter 17 to integrate the adventures of Ammon, Aaron, Omner, and Himni in the land of Nephi into his history of contemporaneous events in the land of Zarahemla.

- Both Benjamin and Noah are the father of the last king in the dynasty.
2. Both kings are visited by a divinely commissioned messenger — an angel in Benjamin’s case, Abinadi in Noah’s — who foretells the coming of Christ and explains that redemption comes only through him. They respond in opposite ways to this messenger.
 3. Both appoint priests, but the behavior and messages of the priests are diametrically opposed. Benjamin and his priests speak sharply to the people (Words of Mormon 1:17). They make it clear that they themselves and their people are sinners who must repent (Mosiah 2:25–26). Noah and his priests flatter the people (Mosiah 11:7). They suggest that neither they themselves nor their people are guilty of any sin (Mosiah 12:13–14).²¹
 4. Benjamin tells his people that they are nothing, even less than the dust of the earth (Mosiah 2:25; 4:11). Noah teaches his people that they are of great consequence, that they are exceptionally strong, that fifty of them are equal to thousands of the Lamanites (Mosiah 11:18–19).
 5. Benjamin fills his people with the Spirit. Overcome, they fall to the earth (Mosiah 4:1). Noah fills his people with alcoholic spirits and they, presumably, also fall to the earth (Mosiah 11:15).
 6. Righteous Benjamin seems to have the one wife that Lehi allowed (Jacob 3:5)²² and he forbids adultery (Mosiah 2:13). Wicked Noah has many wives and concubines and causes his people to commit whoredoms (Mosiah 11:2).
 7. Benjamin works constantly to support himself and his family by his own labors (Words of Mormon 1:18). He serves the people. Noah is idle. He devotes his time to leisure activities and sensual recreation. Neither he nor his priests support themselves (Mosiah 11:6). The people serve him.²³

21. There may be subtle wordplay on a Hebrew meaning of the name Noah. Genesis 5:29 connects the name Noah, in Hebrew נח NH, with the verb comfort, in Hebrew נחם NHM. The flatterer Noah comforts his people when he should admonish them because of their sins.

22. Benjamin has just three sons, a number that suggests he had just one wife.

23. For a thoughtful discussion of this contrast, see Bradley J. Kramer, *Beholding the Tree of Life: A Rabbinic Approach to the Book of Mormon* (Draper, UT: Greg Koffer Books, 2014), 139–43.

8. Benjamin does not tax his people (Mosiah 2:12, 14). Noah taxes his heavily (Mosiah 11:5).
9. Benjamin considers himself to be no better than his people (Mosiah 2:26). Noah sets himself and his priests above the people (Mosiah 11:9–11).
10. Benjamin does not imprison his people (Mosiah 2:13). Noah does (Mosiah 12:17).
11. Benjamin leads his army into battle, sharing their risk (Words of Mormon 1:13). The first thing we read about him is how he leads his people to victory over the Lamanites and establishes peace in the land of Zarahemla that endures until the time of his death (Omni 1:24; Mosiah 1:1). Noah sends his army into battle while remaining safely behind (Mosiah 11:18). The last thing we read about Noah is how he flees from the Lamanites, leading his men not into but from battle (Mosiah 19:9–11).
12. Benjamin's people gather to and depart from the temple as families (Mosiah 2:5, 6:3). During his sermon, he instructs parents to care for their children, to feed and clothe them and teach them to keep God's commandments (Mosiah 4:14). As they return home with born-again parents who have no more desire to do evil but to do good continually, the prospects of the children seem good. Noah's people initially depart from the tower as families (Mosiah 19:9), but Noah then instructs the men to abandon their wives and children who are being slaughtered by the Lamanites (Mosiah 19:10–11). As the fathers abandon them, the prospects of the children are poor.
13. Benjamin concerns himself with the wellbeing of his successor son Mosiah₂. He carefully stages Mosiah₂'s ascension to power through a coronation ceremony. In the political subtext of his coronation sermon (discussed below), he tells the people that they must not rebel against Mosiah₂, that they must obey his commands and make governance easy, by dealing justly with their neighbors and taking care of the poor. Noah takes no thought for his successor son, Limhi. He selfishly leaves him in the lurch, surrounded by people who are being killed and who are taken captive when the killing stops. Sorely oppressed and constantly threatened by the Lamanites, Limhi struggles to provide his people with the bare essentials of life: food, shelter, and physical security.

14. Benjamin and Noah both (a) build a tower next to the temple (Mosiah 2:7; 11:12), (b) confront personal mortality and impending death on the tower (Mosiah 2:26), (c) having experienced political rebellion,²⁴ seek to end it and unify their people, (d) by delivering from the tower a saving message that urges the people to seek immediate salvation, (e) are then immediately replaced as king by their son, with each son (f) being subordinate to a still greater king who lays first claim on the service of the people who (g) covenant to serve that greater king in order to escape his wrath.
15. At the beginning of the narrative Benjamin's people are divided into two distinct groups, the Mulekites and the Nephites (Mosiah 1:10). As his reign ends, he unifies them under a common name (Mosiah 6:1–2). Noah's people are unified as Noah's reign begins but are triply divided as his reign ends by the departure of Alma (Mosiah 18:34), the rebellion of Gideon (Mosiah 19:2–4), and the men's abandonment of their wives and children (Mosiah 19:11–12).
16. Each king dies soon after leaving the tower on which he delivered the saving message. Benjamin dies peacefully, beloved of his people, his salvation assured (Mosiah 6:5). Noah dies violently, at the hands of his own people who revile him. The manner of his fiery death, which Abinadi prophesied (Mosiah 17:18), prefigures his damnation (Mosiah 19:20).
17. Benjamin saves his people from falling into the hands of their enemies, and they live in peace at the time of his death (Mosiah 2:31). Noah's people are in the hands of their enemies at the time of his death (Mosiah 7:15).
18. In sum, Benjamin follows in the footsteps of the righteous father he succeeds as king (Omni 1:23, 25) and lives in harmony with the kingship code of Deuteronomy (17:14–20). Noah does not emulate the goodness of his father (Mosiah 11:1) and violates all the provisions of the kingship code.

24. The rebellion against Noah is obvious. The rebellion Benjamin faces and hoped to permanently end is less fully described but nonetheless clear. It is explicitly mentioned in Words of Mormon 1:12. Benjamin seems to have a well-founded fear that divisions will open between his Nephite and Mulekite subjects. His fears are fully realized in the wake of Mosiah₂'s reign. See Larsen, "In His Footsteps," 90–94.

Two Temple Towers

As he develops the contrast between King Benjamin and King Noah, Mormon offers deep reflections on the importance of moral norms for societal wellbeing. He powerfully illustrates the social and familial consequences that follow from keeping or breaking the law of chastity.²⁵ Implicit both in his symbols and in his narrative is a profound sexual ethic that properly places this essential aspect of our mortal lives within God's plan for our exaltation. Mormon situates sexuality within his larger history of a family and a nation and, thus, more fully than elsewhere in scripture, demonstrates how important it is that human intimacy take the forms prescribed by God. Mormon's teachings on this topic are especially relevant to problems in our time.

But understanding this part of Mormon's message may be a challenge for some. Western popular culture is so corrupt in its essentially pornographic and egotistical conception of sexuality that faithful members of the restored Church of Jesus Christ may sometimes attempt to suppress thoughts about sex lest they follow the corrupt channels excavated so deeply in the modern mind. But our mind, like nature more broadly, abhors a vacuum. We will have thoughts, and in this matter, almost above all others, it is important that they be appropriate ones. In his account of Noah and his people, Mormon very effectively illustrates what we should not think and should not do. (This is the less valuable part of his message because, in our culture, Noah's behavior is ubiquitous, and the consequences of that behavior redundantly illustrated.) In his account of King Benjamin and his people, Mormon gives us something much more valuable that is not well represented in our culture, a framework within which we can perceive the sacred character and true purposes of human sexuality.²⁶ Within the horizon of this correct understanding, thoughts about procreative love can help

25. Eve had to choose between two injunctions: don't partake of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil but do multiply and replenish the earth. She, and then Adam, wisely partook. If they hadn't, they would not have had children and joy. More than any other aspect of human life, how one uses the power to procreate, to multiply and replenish, determines what one and those around one will know of good or evil, of joy or sorrow.

26. "The powers associated with procreation, and the marital institution that Mormons see as instituted before the fall, together endow sexuality with an uncompromised status as holy, divine, and in some sense, eternal. Consequently, Mormon doctrine absolutely proscribes sexual relations before or outside marriage." Terryl L. Givens, *Wrestling the Angel: The Foundations of Mormon Thought: Cosmos, God, Humanity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 208.

us more deeply understand the kind of relationship we should have with each other and with God. In other words, Mormon helps us understand what sex should mean to us, not just what it should not mean.

Benjamin's temple tower. The centerpieces of the comparison/contrast between Benjamin and Noah are parallel temple tower narratives. If we are to appreciate its power, this most complex and integrated part of Mormon's narrative must be read with attention to implicit sexual symbolism that sets up a dramatic contrast between the relationships of righteous Benjamin and wicked Noah with their respective peoples. The stark differences between the two kings are symbolized by the highest and lowest forms of physical love. Benjamin is associated with sealed, procreative love and the genesis of new life. Noah is associated with promiscuous, sterile lust and loss of life. These alternative modes of physical love are of a piece with the general character of each man, the self-sacrificing altruism of Benjamin and the selfish egoism of Noah.

As the Book of Mosiah opens, King Benjamin summons his people to the temple so that he can provide for an orderly succession and deliver to them a last, powerful, saving message. Both the modern function of the temple, sealing families, and the ancient function, symbolizing and anticipating the redeeming sacrifice of Christ, make the temple the ideal location for what follows.²⁷ Benjamin has proven himself to his subjects through long years of unselfish service. His relationship with them is clearly one of mutual respect and love. As the people assemble at the temple, they praise God for giving them this man as their king (Mosiah 2:4). The intimacy of Benjamin and his subjects, their unsurpassed love for each other, makes it appropriate that their last formal encounter should be symbolized by the most intimate of acts and should be metaphorically procreative.²⁸

Because the multitude is so great, Benjamin orders that a tower be erected so that the people can hear him speak. It is possible to read this tower as being symbolically phallic. Arranged around the tower, their doors appropriately facing the tower, are the tents of Benjamin's people.²⁹

27. While sealing families is a salient aspect of modern temples, temples are also suffused with symbols that signify the atonement of Christ.

28. The theme of procreation is primed in chapter 3 by a mention of Christ's parents that places them in the middle of the atonement, between the Savior's suffering in Gethsemane and his suffering on the cross. (See Mosiah 3:7–9.)

29. The occasion seems to be the feast of tabernacles. The people in the Old World used dwellings made of stone and tree branches to construct their tabernacles. The materials they used memorialized what was used to house them during the 49 years in Sinai. Benjamin's people may be memorializing their own time in the

The people, gathered as families, sit inside their tents while they listen to Benjamin's final sermon. For those who read looking for potentially figurative meanings, it would be hard to conceive of a womb symbol more apt than these cloth or skin tents. And if we read the text in that way, it is appropriate that each family group, all the people who are genetically related, should be gathered together in one symbolic womb. To the people thus assembled at the temple, from the top of the tower, King Benjamin begins to speak the *word* that will produce a new birth. Alma later calls this *word* a *seed* that is planted in the heart of the believer and there begins to swell (Alma 32:28).³⁰ A symbolic reading would be attentive to the double meaning of the word seed in the biblical languages and in Latin. In each of these languages, a single word signifies both seed and semen: זרע (zera) in Hebrew, σπέρματος (spermatos) in Greek, and *semen* in Latin.

Again, if we read Mormon's account with attention to potential symbolism linked to his explicit birth metaphor, we may see that Benjamin's words, symbolically, have the effect of semen implanted in a womb. They precipitate a metaphorical birth.³¹ Having heard their king's words, the people fall from their symbolic womb to the ground as they would in a traditional squatting birth. "And now it came to pass that when King Benjamin had made an end of speaking the words which had been delivered unto him . . . he cast his eyes round about on the multitude, and behold they had fallen to the earth, for the fear of the lord had come upon them." In a figurative reading, the people, after dropping out of the symbolic womb, are filled with new life as the Spirit enters them: "the Spirit of the Lord came upon them, and they were filled with joy" (Mosiah 4:1–3; 5:2).³²

desert using the type of dwelling Lehi used during his time there while traveling to these people's Promised Land. John A. Tvedtnes, "King Benjamin and the Feast of Tabernacles," in *By Study and Also by Faith*, vol. 2, eds. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2010), 197–221; Terrence L. Szink and John W. Welch, "An Ancient Israelite Festival Context," in *King Benjamin's Speech*, eds. John W. Welch and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998), 183–90. On the time in Arabia, see Godfrey Ellis, "Nephi's Eight Years in the 'Wilderness': Reconsidering Definitions and Details," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 57 (2023): 281–356, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/nephis-eight-years-in-the-wilderness-reconsidering-definitions-and-details/>.

30. Alma probably alludes to Benjamin when he says, "And now, [God] imparteth his word by angels unto men" (Alma 32:23. Cf. Mosiah 3:2–3).

31. In the Bible, when a birth is mentioned, the sex that produced it is also often mentioned. Examples include Genesis 4:1, 19:34–38; 30:4–5, 38:2–3, and Isaiah 8:3. Here symbolic birth is preceded by symbolic sex.

32. This is analogous to baptism where one is born of a watery womb and then filled with the spirit as one is confirmed.

While sexual symbolism may be present in this passage, the birth metaphor is explicitly present. Again addressing his born-again subjects, Benjamin declares their lineage and gives them a new name: “Ye shall be called the children of Christ, his sons and his daughters; for behold, this day he hath spiritually begotten you; for ye say that your hearts are changed through faith on his name; therefore, ye are born of him and have become his sons and daughters. . . . [And ye] shall be called by the name of Christ” (Mosiah 5:7). Benjamin’s people have a double paternity.³³ While Benjamin himself is in some sense their spiritual father, at a deeper level he is, as he freely confesses, at best a godfather. These spiritual newborns take the name of their true father, Christ. And they have their father’s attributes: they are sinless, having been purified of sin through his grace (Mosiah 4:2–3). And like their new spiritual father, they “have no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually” (Mosiah 5:2).

To understand this account of Benjamin and his people symbolically, to appreciate the sexual symbolism that may be an integral part of the message, we must shed the corruption of our culture and view sex as Benjamin and Mormon and Paul and John and God seem to view it. If it is properly understood, sex signifies a wonderful oneness: emotional, mental, spiritual, and physical unity. If the relationship has its proper form, it is the closest possible earthly bond between two human beings. Husband and wife cleave to each other and become one flesh (Genesis 2:24), one flesh both in the intimate closeness of their emotional and physical contact and in the result of that contact, a child who is formed as a combination of each parent’s attributes. Parents thus become godlike, having the sacred power to create new life.

If we understand it in this way, this union can be a potent, multidimensional symbol for the kind of love and oneness of mind and heart that should exist between Christians and their Savior and between the members of the heavenly Zion community. Just as Mormon does here in the Book of Mormon, Paul and John in the New Testament use the union of the sexes to signify the intimate bond that exists between Christ and his people. They repeatedly cast Christ as the bridegroom, his faithful followers as the bride (Ephesians 5:22–33; Revelation 21:2, 9–10). Using a symbol that is still more shocking if wrongly viewed,³⁴ Christ marked

33. In the text, they have double paternity, since the Father and Son are not differentiated in these passages. In reality, they have three spiritual fathers, the Father, the Son, and Benjamin.

34. Viewed anthropologically, the sacrament would be described as ritual cannibalism. See Newell D. Wright and Val Larsen, “The Holy Ghost in the Book

his oneness with us by having us symbolically eat his body and drink his blood. Like Mormon's procreation metaphor that suggests we are given a new spiritual life by being born of Christ, these sacrament symbols suggest that we are preserved in that life by being spiritually nourished and drawing spiritual strength and power from the sacrificed body of Christ.

As this episode closes, Benjamin's subjects, who have been born of Christ and been given his name and attributes, covenant to serve their new, higher Lord so that they may escape his wrath: "And we are willing to enter into a covenant with our God to do his will, and to be obedient to his commandments in all things that he shall command us, all the remainder of our days, that we may not bring upon ourselves a never-ending torment, . . . that we may not drink out of the cup of the wrath of God" (Mosiah 5:5). Benjamin now tells them that "whosoever doeth this shall be found at the right hand of God" (Mosiah 5:9). In Hebrew, the name Benjamin, a combination of בן *ben* and ימין *yamin*, means "son of the right [hand]."³⁵ Through this sermon, Benjamin has rid his garments of his people's blood and is about to join the choirs above in singing God's praises while seated at his right hand (Mosiah 2:28), the place where the Messiah also sits or stands (Acts 7:55–56; Doctrine and Covenants 76:23).³⁶ Wordplay on Benjamin's name suggests that his now covenant people will join him there. Noah's people, on the other hand, will be on the disfavored left hand of their new lord.

Having concluded the coronation ceremony, Benjamin is now replaced by his son, Mosiah₂, and shortly thereafter, as he has anticipated while speaking from the tower, he dies (Mosiah 6:5).³⁷ On this and all other

of Moroni: Possessed of Charity," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 57 (2023): 71–72, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/the-holy-ghost-in-the-book-of-moroni-possessed-of-charity/>.

35. See Book of Mormon Onomasticon, s.v. "Benjamin," <https://onoma.lib.byu.edu/index.php/BENJAMIN>.

36. Bradley notes, "As his father's name had anticipated the Messiah and pointed to him, Benjamin's own name also anticipated the Christ. In giving his people a name before his death and teaching them the meaning of that name, Benjamin built on the meaning of the name he had been given at birth. Not only was Benjamin a 'son of the right hand' in similitude of the Christ, the Only Begotten Son (cf. Moses 1:6), all who would live fully in covenant relationship with the Lord would bear the name Christ and stand at his right hand." Bradley, *Lost 116 Pages*, 275.

37. Benjamin's reflections on death are an important part of this narrative that links the temple with birth, spiritual rebirth, and the atonement. Ancient and modern temples symbolically mark our passage through the death that is a birth, a passage from this life into a new, higher form of life. Benjamin anticipates that

points mentioned, Mormon now gives us the moral mirror image of all we have seen in his account of Benjamin and his people and their Lord.

Noah's two towers. We turn now to King Noah. The first thing Mormon says about Noah is that he “did walk after the desire of his own heart. And he had many wives and concubines. And he did cause his people to commit ... whoredoms” (Mosiah 11:2). Like Benjamin, Noah builds a tower next to the temple in Shilom, in this case “a very high tower” (Mosiah 11:12). But if we read symbolically, the phallic tower Noah builds represents a sterile, corrupt sexuality, just the opposite of everything Benjamin’s tower may stand for. Noah builds the tower as a symbol of his power, of his ability to impose himself upon his own people and upon the Lamanites. From the top of the tower, he is able to overlook his own land, the land of Shilom, and the Lamanites’ land, the land of Shemlon, and, beyond that, “all the land round about” (Mosiah 11:12). In the image of King Noah standing on top of this tower eyeing all the lands that surround him, both those that belong to him and those that don’t, Mormon creates a perfect symbol of all that is worst about male sexuality: aggression, violence, egotism, promiscuity. And having mentioned this first tower, if we read symbolically, he makes Noah’s promiscuity quite clear, for he tells us that, not satisfied with one tower, Noah “caused a [second] great tower to be built on the hill north of the land of Shilom...” (Mosiah 11:13). Since this second tower plays no role in the narrative, it is possible that Mormon mentions it because it symbolizes the material and sexual excesses of King Noah. Having mentioned this second tower, in the next verse Mormon reiterates Noah’s promiscuity: “and [Noah] spent his time in riotous living with his wives and his concubines; and so did also his priests spend their time with harlots” (Mosiah 11:14).

We will focus now on the very high tower near the temple in Shilom that is the antitype of Benjamin’s tower and on the end of Noah’s life. Given the oppressive, wicked, riotous lifestyle of King Noah, it cannot surprise us that his relationship with his people was less than ideal. After suffering under his misrule for a number of years, some of the people “began to breathe out threatenings against the king” who had just chased away Alma, and

passage for himself. Women have historically faced a real possibility of death as they brought forth new life. With about a one-percent death rate, most people would have known at least one woman who died in childbirth. Claudia Hanson provides historical estimates. See Hanson, “Data on Maternal Mortality” (paper, Gapminder Foundation, Stockholm, SE, July 1, 2010), <https://www.gapminder.org/documentation/documentation/gapdoc010.pdf>.

the more righteous part of the people (Mosiah 19:3). Others continued to support Noah. Both factions gather near the temple. Here we have a striking parallel with Benjamin and his people, but everything is transformed. While both peoples gather at the temple with the same political purpose — the replacement of the king — Benjamin’s people come together because they love and wish to honor and obey him. Noah’s people gather because some of them hate the king and want to overthrow him.

When in due course Noah is forced to repair to his tower, he doesn’t go there to deliver an eagerly awaited message to his loving and beloved people as Benjamin does. He flees there chased by Gideon, a representative of those among his people who have turned against him. Gideon bears a sword, which if read symbolically, could be another phallic symbol, and he is about to consummate the relationship of Noah and his people by running Noah through with the sword, a consummation that differs pointedly from that enjoyed by Benjamin and his people.

Part of Benjamin’s message from the tower was that rebellion against him or his son was “rebellion against God” and made a man “an enemy to all righteousness” (Mosiah 2:31 – 37). But Gideon, who is rebelling against Noah, will later be described as a righteous man, “an instrument in the hands of God” (Alma 1:7–8), and the people living with Gideon in the land of Gideon, which was named after him (Alma 2:20; 6:7–8), will be especially notable for their righteousness (Alma 7:17–19; 30:21). Thus, Gideon’s rebellion against Noah is the opposite of rebellions against Benjamin or his son. It seems to have God’s implicit endorsement.

Standing on his tower, Noah, like Benjamin before him, confronts death (Mosiah 19:4–6). But there are differences. As he faces death on the tower, Benjamin claims, overly modestly, to be concerned with his own welfare. He says,

I ... have caused that ye should assemble yourselves together, that I may be found blameless, and that your blood should not come upon me, when I shall stand to be judged of God of the things whereof he hath commanded me concerning you. I say unto you that I have caused that ye should assemble yourselves together that I might rid my garments of your blood, at this period of time when I am about to go down to my grave, that I might go down in peace. (Mosiah 2:27–28)

While Benjamin, who will “go down in peace,” claims to be concerned about his own welfare, his life and his sermon both make it perfectly clear that his first concern is and always has been the welfare of his people. Now as Noah stands on his tower in Shilom, he too is anxious to keep his

garments unspotted with blood, not the figurative blood of his people, but rather his own literal blood, which Gideon is about to spill. As he looks about desperately for some way to save himself from Gideon's wrath, Noah spots an invading army of Lamanites in the distance.³⁸

And now the king cried out in the anguish of his soul, saying: Gideon, spare me, for the Lamanites are upon us, and they will destroy us; yea, they will destroy my people. And now the king was not so much concerned about his people as he was about his own life; nevertheless, Gideon did spare his life. (Mosiah 19:7–8)

As he confronts death, unlike Benjamin, Noah claims to be concerned first of all with the welfare of his people. But Mormon emphasizes that he is really concerned only about himself. We can't take either Benjamin or Noah precisely at his word. Benjamin is more generous and unselfish than he lets on. Noah is less generous and more selfish than his words indicate.

The parallel with Benjamin continues. Having caused his people to be gathered to the temple, having repaired to his tower, having confronted death, Noah now delivers to his people what is, ostensibly, a saving message. He informs them that the Lamanites have invaded their land and commands them to flee into the wilderness, "and he himself did go before them" (Mosiah 19:9). The people depart as one group but are soon divided into two. Caring only about himself, Noah maximizes the distance between himself and the dangerous Lamanites. Unfortunately, the women and children prove to be too slow to escape. The Lamanites catch up with the fleeing Nephites and begin to kill them. At this point, Noah commands the men to abandon their wives and children and save themselves.

We now learn how deep this promiscuous man's familial commitments run. And we see that the effect of Noah's saving message is just the opposite of Benjamin's. Benjamin's people gathered as two separate nations, Nephites and Mulekites, but having heard their king's message, returned to their home as one people with a shared spiritual identity as children of Christ (Mosiah 6:3). Benjamin's people gathered as families and returned to their homes as unified families. With his message, Benjamin bound them in a bond of love to their Lord, their king, their fellow Christians, and their families. Noah, on the other hand, urged men to abandon their wives and children. He destroyed marriages, divorced men from their wives, made orphans of their children — all

38. Clearly, the Lamanites, like the Nephites, have spies who have detected the civil unrest in the land of Shilom, which makes this an opportune moment to attack.

that we would expect from the illicit, aggressive, egocentric sexuality that his towers may symbolize and his life clearly embodied.

It can come as no surprise that the men who chose to abandon their families and flee with Noah do not thank him for saving them. In the end, filled with shame, they enact Talionic justice, “burning for burning” (Exodus 21:25), and execute Noah in the same way he had previously executed Abinadi. They “scourge his skin with faggots, yea, even unto death” (Mosiah 17:13, 18). The men who have killed Noah repent of following him and return, determined to die with their wives and children. Noah experiences the obverse of the Spirit that comes to burn within Benjamin and his people, a fire that burns the body without touching the soul. The manner of his death prefigures his damnation in hell just as the burning in Benjamin and his people’s bosoms and the burning of Abinadi prefigure their exaltation in heaven.

Like the people who heard Benjamin’s saving message, the people who heard Noah’s message from the tower plead for mercy, presumably prostrating themselves before the new lord whose advent their king has announced from the tower (Mosiah 19:13). Here as in the Benjamin narrative, their lord has compassion (Mosiah 19:14). They, too, are born again, into a new life, but in this case, a life of slavery under the cruel overlordship of the Lamanite king. Though Noah’s son, Limhi, is permitted to continue as their immediate leader, he and his people must covenant “to deliver up their property, even one half of their gold, and their silver, and all their precious things, and thus they should pay tribute to the king of the Lamanites from year to year” (Mosiah 19:15). This penalty makes their lives unbearable. When they rebel and are again defeated, their cruel overlord subjects them to still deeper levels of degradation (Mosiah 21:2–13). God, the overlord of Benjamin’s people, by contrast, returns blessings that greatly exceed any sacrifice that is made in serving him (Mosiah 2:21–24).

We have in these accounts of Benjamin and Noah, and their respective peoples, case studies in the consequences of accepting or rejecting prophets and associated divine and devilish social norms and sexual ethics. Mormon gives us two contrasting constellations of related facts and symbols. On the one hand, there is a prophet, a temple, families gathered together in love, procreative sexuality that implies both physical birth and spiritual rebirth, the preaching of the Gospel of Christ, the burnings of the Spirit, and people prostrated before their Heavenly King. These things are all tied together in an integrated network of causes and effects that yield civil peace and prosperity in this world and salvation in the world to

come. On the other hand, there is a murdered prophet, showy buildings, divided families, sexual license, corrupt priestcraft, burning bodies, and people prostrated as slaves before an earthly king. These things, too, are tied together in a causal network that yields the dissolution of civic bonds in this world and damnation in the world to come.

Mosiah₂/Limhi: The Seer and the Scholar

As noted above, a central motif in this section of the Book of Mormon is the importance of having and following prophets. Mosiah₁ and Benjamin, who are prophets, are contrasted with Zeniff and Noah, who are not. This motif is further developed through a third comparison, between Mosiah₂ who is a prophet and Limhi who is not. Mosiah₂ is a divinely endorsed ruler of his people. He stands in the legitimate governing line established by his grandfather, Mosiah₁, and maintained by his father, Benjamin. The account of his coronation, with which the Book of Mosiah opens, positions him as the rightful leader of the Nephites and sets him up to be the deliverer or savior of the Zeniffites who have gone astray.

His counterpart, Limhi, represents a kind of best-case test of non-prophetic leadership. He is a wise, courageous, learned leader who is devoted to his people and eager to follow the counsels of God. And yet, he and his people remain in desperate straits from which only a prophet, Mosiah₂, can rescue them. The Ur error of the Zeniffites was to reject the counsel and leadership of a King Mosiah and return to the land of Nephi against his advice. The only solution for all their pressing problems is to return to the land of Zarahemla (with the help of Mosiah₂'s agent, Ammon₁) and there accept the counsel and leadership of a King Mosiah, i.e., to undo the Ur error that is the source of all their troubles.

In this section of the text, as in the earlier sections, the central point of the narrative — the necessity of prophetic leadership — is underscored by a series of quite specific points of comparison or contrast that link Mosiah₂ with Limhi.

1. After having been separated for three generations, at approximately the same time, Limhi sends an expedition to look for Mosiah₂'s people (Mosiah 8:7; 21:25), and Mosiah₂ sends an expedition to look for Limhi's people (Mosiah 7:1–2). Limhi's expedition fails in such a way that it forebodes the complete destruction of his people. Mosiah₂'s expedition succeeds and saves Limhi's people from the doom that their failed expedition forbode.

2. As they send forth emissaries, Mosiah₂, Limhi, and their respective people are in very different circumstances. Mosiah₂ and his people “prosper in the land, and [their] enemies have no power over [them]” (Mosiah 2:31). Limhi and his people are impoverished and totally dominated by their enemies (Mosiah 21:2–13).
3. Both Mosiah₂ and Limhi are attentive to the voice of the people (Mosiah 21:6; 29:26).
4. Mosiah₂ and Limhi each read the record of Zeniff, including an account of wicked Noah and his priests, the death of Abinadi, and the departure of Alma₁ and the righteous from the land of Nephi. This history fills the people who hear it with sorrow and presages a major change in governance (Mosiah 8:5; 21:29–30; 25:5–9; 29:17–18).
5. Mosiah₂ and Limhi both summon their people to the temple where they listen to King Benjamin’s discourse. Having heard the discourse, both peoples repent, are spiritually reborn, and enter into a covenant with God (Mosiah 2:1, 9; 7:17, 8:3).
6. Mosiah₂’s people and Limhi’s are instructed by their king to take care of the poor or otherwise deprived (Mosiah 4:16–22; 21:17).
7. Mosiah₂ and Limhi are men of the book. Each man’s relationship with a text or texts is underscored (Mosiah 1:2–7; 8:5–12).
8. Ammon₁ describes a seer, and he and Limhi offer a panegyric on seers. Mosiah₂ is a seer (Mosiah 8:13–19).
9. Mosiah₂ has Jaredite interpreters that permit him to translate plates in unknown languages. Limhi has Jaredite plates that he is eager to read but can’t, not knowing the Jaredite language (Mosiah 8:12–14; 21:25–28). Having heard Mosiah₂ possessed the interpreters and power to translate, Limhi “rejoiced exceedingly, and gave thanks to God,” then says Mosiah₂’s interpreters “were prepared for the purpose of” interpreting Limhi’s plates and unfolding their mysteries (Mosiah 8:19, cf. 28:14–15).
10. Mosiah₂ ends his dynasty and is supplanted as ruler by Alma₂ (Mosiah 29:42). Limhi ends his dynasty and is supplanted as Zeniffite leader by Alma₁ (Mosiah 25:15–18; 29:42).

11. Mosiah₂ and Limhi have religious authority, including the power to appoint priests, but yield authority to Alma₁ and the church he founded (Mosiah 6:3, 11:5; 25:17, 19; 27:1)
12. Broadly, Mosiah₂'s people "were filled with joy" and "were exceedingly rejoiced" (Mosiah 4:3; 29:39–40); Limhi's people "have great reason ... to mourn" (Mosiah 7:23).

Prophet, Priest, and King

Mosiah₂ is a man of the book. When Mosiah₂ and his brothers first appear, we learn that Benjamin, their father, "caused that they should be taught in all the language of his fathers, that ... they might know concerning the prophecies which had been spoken by the mouths of their fathers ... [and] concerning the records which were engraven on the plates of brass" (Mosiah 1:2–3). Benjamin tells Mosiah₂, "I would that ye should remember ... the plates of Nephi, [that] they are true; and we can know of their surety because we have them before our eyes" (Mosiah 1:6). This emphasis on the Brass Plates and Plates of Nephi is no accident. Possession of these records is probably the foundation of the family's power, power that Benjamin is about to pass on to Mosiah₂ in a coronation ceremony. When Mosiah₁ and his Nephite followers arrived in the Mulekite land of Zarahemla, there were fewer of them than of the indigenous Mulekites (Mosiah 25:2–3). Mosiah₁ probably became the combined people's king because, along with undocumented charisma and a likely marriage to a daughter of the Mulekite king,³⁹ he had a documented key possession, the Brass Plates, and the ability to read from them the two peoples' shared history.

After establishing the Mosiah family's grounding in the written word, the narrative transitions to the coronation ceremony. At his father Benjamin's command, Mosiah₂ summons the people to the temple where Benjamin speaks to them from a tower. Benjamin's tower discourse has two themes. The overwhelmingly dominant main theme of the discourse is an extraordinarily powerful call for all who hear it to come unto Christ, the Messiah, keep his commandments, and be saved. But the discourse begins and ends with a frame narrative that focuses on the role of the earthly king and on the coronation of Mosiah₂. That secondary theme frames the main part of the discourse and throughout the discourse

39. The relationship of the two peoples could have been sealed by a marriage between either Mosiah₁ or his son, Benjamin, with a daughter of the Mulekite king, Zarahemla. Mosiah₂ was also probably married to a Mulekite woman. See Larsen, "In His Footsteps," 93, 100.

appears as a subtextual shadow of the main theme. The shadow discourse calls upon all who hear it to embrace Mosiah₂ as their new king and keep his commandments, which will be aligned with the commandments of God. This shadow discourse is developed or underscored, in part, by word play and visual display. It implicitly anticipates and comments on the story of the Zeniffites, which immediately follows it in the Book of Mormon.

In one respect the secondary, coronation theme is given top billing. Benjamin opens the discourse with the frame narrative, describing how he was chosen and consecrated as king and then spent his life selflessly serving the people and, through his service to them, serving God (Mosiah 2:10–15). He then calls upon his people to be good citizens: “Behold, ye have called me your king; and if I, whom ye call your king, do labor to serve you, then ought not ye to labor to serve one another?” (Mosiah 2:18). By doing so, you will serve God, for “when ye are in the service of your fellow beings ye are only in the service of your God” (Mosiah 2:17). Benjamin acknowledges his own frail humanity, that he is no better than his people, and that all are deeply indebted to God. He then tells the people, “ye behold that I am old, and ... I can no longer be your teacher and king; ... but the Lord God ... hath commanded me that I should declare unto you this day, that my son Mosiah is a king and a ruler over you” (Mosiah 2:26, 29–30). Having affirmed that Mosiah₂ is God’s choice as king, Benjamin attempts to transfer the legitimacy he and his father have earned to his son. “And now, my brethren, I would that ... as ye have kept my commandments, and also the commandments of my father, and have prospered ..., even so ... ye shall keep *the commandments of my son, or the commandments of God* which shall be delivered unto you by him.” Benjamin equates the commandments of Mosiah₂ with the commandments of God. And obeying Mosiah₂ will ensure that “ye shall prosper in the land, and your enemies shall have no power over you” (Mosiah 2:31), the precise opposite of what happens in the Zeniffite narrative that follows.

Along with the beginning, the end of a discourse is typically its most salient part. At the end of this discourse, presumably standing together on the tower side by side where they have been the entire time, King Benjamin consecrates “his son Mosiah to be a ruler and king over his people, and [gives] him all the charges concerning the kingdom” (Mosiah 6:3). Mosiah₂ is taking on the responsibilities of prophet, priest, and king, and “those who were called to any one of [these] three offices were anointed in ancient Israel: prophets (see 1 Kings 19:16), priests (see

Exodus 29:7–9; Leviticus 8:10–12), and kings (see 1 Samuel 10:1).⁴⁰ To be anointed is to become, in Hebrew, a *messiah*, in Greek, a *christ*, those words meaning *the anointed one* in their respective languages. So, when he was anointed, *Mosiah* became a *messiah*.

In Hebrew as in English, the words *Mosiah* מושיע and *Messiah* משיח are similar, the main difference in Hebrew being the final consonant, but even the last consonants are similar in their points of articulation. In our English translation of Benjamin’s discourse, *the anointed one* is referred to as *Christ*, using the term most familiar in the Christendom of Joseph Smith’s day, but Benjamin may have used the term more familiar to his audience, *Yeshua Messiah* ישוע המשיח. Be that as it may, Benjamin’s audience probably understood that the Christ he repeatedly mentions is the promised *anointed one*, the Savior and Deliverer of humanity.⁴¹ So in addition to being connected with Christ in the main part of the discourse by the homophony of *Messiah* and *Mosiah* (Royal Skousen says Joseph Smith pronounced these two words identically),⁴² *Mosiah*₂ would have been connected to the Savior both by his anointing and by the meaning of his name: *savior*, *deliverer*, or *Yahweh delivers/saves*.

If we recognize the strong connection between *Mosiah* and the *Messiah*, the discourse on the Messiah featured in the main part of Benjamin’s sermon will have as its shadow a political subtext that instructs

40. David Rolph Seely and Jo Ann H. Seely, “Jesus the Messiah: Prophet, Priest and King,” in *Jesus Christ: Son of God, Savior*, ed. Paul H. Peterson, Gary L. Hatch, and Laura D. Card (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2002), 248–69.

41. In the time of Nephi, the Nephites understood that the Messiah and Christ were one (2 Nephi 25:19). But knowledge of Christ seems to have been lost in the period between Jarom and Benjamin. Thus, the need for an angel to restore the knowledge of Christ to Benjamin (*Mosiah* 3:2–8). On the loss of knowledge of Christ, see J. Christopher Conkling, “Alma’s Enemies: The Case of the Lamanites, Amlicites, and Mysterious Amalekites,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 14, no. 1 (2005): 108–17; Gary L. Sturges, “The Book of *Mosiah*: Thoughts about Its Structure, Purposes, Themes, and Authorship,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 4, no. 2 (1995): 107–35; Larsen, “Josiah to Zoram,” 217–64.

42. Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon*, vol. 1, *The Original Manuscript* (Provo, UT: The Foundation For Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2014), 259. Note Joseph’s handwritten emendation of 1 Nephi 12:18 to add “*Mosiah*” (Messiah) is visible on the Book of Mormon Printer’s Manuscript. “Printer’s Manuscript of the Book of Mormon, circa August 1829–circa January 1830,” p. 19, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/printers-manuscript-of-the-book-of-mormon-circa-august-1829-circa-january-1830/23>. See Bradley, *Lost 116 Pages*, 274.

the people on the relationship they should have with their prophet, priest, and king and with their fellow citizens in his kingdom. This subtext is a kind of political echo of the spiritual, Christocentric primary meaning of the words. At the point of transition from the explicit political frame to the central theological discourse, Benjamin says,

O my people, beware lest there shall arise contentions among you, and ye list to obey the evil spirit, which was spoken of by my father Mosiah. For behold, there is a wo pronounced upon him who listeth to obey that spirit; for ... the same drinketh damnation to his own soul [and] receiveth for his wages an everlasting punishment, having transgressed the law of God.... [He] cometh out in open rebellion against God; [he] becometh an enemy to all righteousness.... The demands of divine justice ... fill his breast with guilt, and pain, and anguish, which is like an unquenchable fire.... But wo, wo unto him who knoweth that he rebelleth against God! For salvation cometh to none such. (Mosiah 2:32–33, 36, 38; 3:12)

Mosiah₁ faced rebellion when the Zeniffites rejected his leadership. Benjamin also faced rebellion early in his rule (Words of Mormon 1:12). Benjamin is trying to protect his son from a like experience. In the subtext of his spiritual sermon, Benjamin frames political contention and rebellion against Mosiah₂, the new king, as a gross sin against God that will result in eternal damnation. For some of the Zeniffites, eternal damnation was the consequence of their rebellion against Mosiah₁. And all of them “suffered these many years in the land” as a consequence of their rebellion against the leadership of their divinely appointed king (Mosiah 10:18).

In the shadow discourse underwritten by the frame narrative, Benjamin underscores the importance of having prophet leaders such as Mosiah₁, Benjamin, and Mosiah₂ who declare Christ, establish law, and execute the law as just judges. The people should subordinate themselves to these leaders: “The Lord God hath sent his holy prophets ... to declare [Christ] to every kindred, nation, and tongue, that thereby [they might] rejoice with exceedingly great joy. ... [A]nd he appointed unto them a law, even the law of Moses” (Mosiah 3:13–14). Given the blessings of good governance, “behold he judgeth, and his judgment is just,” it behooves the people to become “as a child, submissive, meek, humble, patient, full of love, willing to submit to all things which the Lord [and their lord] seeth fit to inflict upon him, even as a child doth submit to his father” (Mosiah 3:18–19).

In addition to accepting the governance of their prophet leader, the people should be good citizens, treating each other fairly, avoiding behavior that would fill the inbox of their king with problems to resolve. They should “not have a mind to injure one another, but to live peaceably, and to render to every man according to that which is his due. ... Whosoever ... borroweth of his neighbor should return the thing that he borroweth, according as he doth agree” (Mosiah 4:13, 28). “And ye will not suffer your children that they go hungry, or naked; neither will ye suffer that they ... fight and quarrel one with another, and serve the devil” (Mosiah 4:14).

The king’s subjects should meet the welfare needs of fellow citizens who fall on hard times. “Ye yourselves will succor those that stand in need of your succor; ye will administer of your substance unto him that standeth in need; ... and ye will not suffer that the beggar putteth up his petition to you in vain, and turn him out to perish. ... Ye should impart of your substance to the poor, every man according to that which he hath, such as feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and administering to their relief, both spiritually and temporally, according to their wants” (Mosiah 4:16, 26).

Having heard all this teaching, in the main text, the people commit themselves to obey the commands of, and thus become, the sons and daughters of their heavenly King, the Messiah, Christ. In the political frame’s shadow or echo of the main text, they commit themselves to obey the commands of and become the sons and daughters of their earthly king, the anointed messiah Mosiah₂. They declare, “We are willing to enter into a covenant with our God to do his will, and to be obedient to his commandments in all things that he shall command us, all the remainder of our days” (Mosiah 5:5). Benjamin then says, “Because of the covenant which ye have made ye shall be called the children of Christ, his sons, and his daughters” (Mosiah 5:7). “And now, king Benjamin thought it was expedient ... that he should take the names of all those who had entered into a covenant with God to keep his commandments. And ... there was not one soul, except it were little children, but who had entered into the covenant and had taken upon them the name of Christ [or Messiah]” (Mosiah 6:1–2). In the next verse Benjamin anoints Mosiah, making him a messiah king. In the political subtext, the people have taken upon them the name of the messiah Mosiah₂ and become the people of Mosiah₂ who are obligated to keep his commandments much as they have taken upon them the name of the Messiah, Christ, become Christians, and committed themselves to keep the commandments of Christ.

After being anointed king, Mosiah reigns in peace and prosperity for three years. His credentials as a righteous, divinely appointed and anointed monarch are well established by his coronation ceremony and subsequent good governance. His bona fides clearly demonstrated, he dispatches the Ammon₁ expedition to find the Zeniffites who rejected their divinely endorsed political and religious leaders and who are suffering the consequences of their rebellion (Mosiah 7:1–2).

Scholar, Priest, and King

In a deeply insightful analysis entitled “Limhi in the Library,” John Gee has shown that Limhi is profoundly a man of the book and that the scriptures helped him be a righteous man: “Limhi knew his scriptures. . . . [His] passionate interest in records and scriptures might . . . explain why he was righteous in spite of the wickedness of his father (Mosiah 11:1–15; 19:17), the court (Mosiah 11:4–11; 12:25–29), and the people in general (Mosiah 7:24–25; 23:9, 12). Furthermore, unlike Noah and his priests (Mosiah 12:25–30; 13:7–8, 11), Limhi takes these things seriously (Mosiah 7:26; 21:31–35). We need look no further than Limhi for reasons to be serious about studying our scriptures.” Most of the things Limhi says cite a written text: scripture or some official history. Limhi’s words, as reported, “seem to show a man [who] had spent a good deal of time studying and memorizing the records of his people. Limhi was probably more comfortable in the library than the throne room.”⁴³

In his scholarly work, Limhi paid particular attention to the words of prophets. He knows his people are miserable — “great are the reasons which we have to mourn” (Mosiah 7:24) — and he attributes that misery to their rejection of prophets. Citing Zeniff’s confession that he was “over-zealous to inherit the land of his fathers,” Limhi says the people now suffer great evil because “they would not hearken unto [the Lord’s] words” (Mosiah 7:21, 25). Having rejected counsel that came to them through Mosiah₁, “there arose contentions among them, even so much that they did shed blood among themselves” (Mosiah 7:25), an apparent allusion to the infighting reported by Amaleki (Omni 1:28) and Zeniff (Mosiah 9:2) and an example of the spirit of contention Mosiah₁ warned against (Mosiah 2:32).

Still more egregiously, “a prophet of the Lord have they slain, a chosen man of God, [Abinadi,] who told them of their wickedness” (Mosiah 7:26). Using the formula “the Lord hath said,” “and again, he saith,” “and again,

43. Gee, “Limhi in the Library,” 64.

he saith” (Mosiah 7:29–31), Limhi cites three passages from the Brass Plates that warn people they will suffer the consequences of their actions, and then says, “And now, behold, the promise of the Lord is fulfilled, and ye are smitten and afflicted” (Mosiah 7:32). Then as noted above, just before we begin to read the record of Zeniff, Limhi cites passages from the Brass Plates and Abinadi that condemn those who reject wisdom and flee the shepherds, i.e., Mosiah₁ and Abinadi, that God has appointed to lead them (Mosiah 8:20–21). From reading and experience, Limhi clearly understands that his people need to be guided by prophets.

All of that information about Limhi is reported in the flashback frame narrative. Chronologically, Limhi first comes on the scene when, during a Lamanite attack, he courageously refuses to abandon the women and children when his father commands him to do so (Mosiah 19:11, 16). Probably as a consequence of that courage, he is the one among Noah’s many sons who becomes king. Gee notes that “whereas Zeniff ‘did confer the kingdom upon’ Noah (Mosiah 10:22–11:1), Limhi had ‘the kingdom conferred upon him by the people’ (Mosiah 19:26).”⁴⁴ Chosen by the people to be king, Limhi makes a treaty with the Lamanite king, and his people live in peace for two years.

The Lamanites suddenly break this peace when the priests of Noah kidnap their daughters. While not entirely unprovoked like the first attack when Zeniff was king (Mosiah 9:11–14), this unwarranted attack on Limhi’s people redundantly demonstrates the structural problem that makes peace impossible. It demonstrates that Mosiah₁ was justified in leading the Nephites out of the land of Nephi as the Lord commanded. Limhi and his people repel the initial, unexpected attack and find the wounded Lamanite king among the dead on the battlefield. The people suggest that Limhi kill the king, but he wisely rejects their suggestion, in part, perhaps, because he regards the attack as a fulfillment of Abinadi’s prophecy (Mosiah 20:21). Instead, he summons the Lamanite king, finds out the cause of the attack, with Gideon’s help persuades him that the abduction was the work of Noah’s priests, and then with the help of the king brokers a peace with the Lamanites who are massing for an attack that is likely to annihilate the remaining Nephites. Limhi’s wisdom and diplomatic skill thus saves his people from annihilation.

This episode highlights the difference in the grace available to us through Sophic secular leaders like Limhi and that available through Mantic prophet leaders like Mosiah₂. Limhi delivers temporary, secular salvation through ministrations of the Lamanite king. “The king of the

44. *Ibid.*, 54.

Lamanites did bow himself down before [his attacking people], and did plead on behalf of the people of Limhi” (Mosiah 20:25). Mosiah₂ and other prophets bring eternal, spiritual salvation through the ministrations of the Christ the King, who in the Garden of Gethsemane, bowed himself down before God and did plead on behalf of all humanity, taking our sins and suffering upon himself, and thus saving all who receive him from both sin and death.

Though saved by their Lamanite lord from immediate death, in the wake of this event, Limhi’s people are abused by Lamanites, who “smite them on the cheeks, ... put heavy burdens upon their backs, and drive them as they would a dumb ass ... that the word of the Lord [pronounced by Abinadi] might be fulfilled” (Mosiah 21:3–4). Thus abused, the people were “desirous to go against [the Lamanites] to battle. And they did afflict the king sorely with their complaints” (Mosiah 21:6). Limhi reluctantly grants their request, and they are beaten badly by the Lamanites. Motivated by the subsequent suffering of widows and orphans, the Nephites again go into battle and are again defeated, then a third time go to battle and are a third time defeated. While Limhi reluctantly allowed the first attack, there is no indication that he led it or authorized the subsequent attacks. And the fact that the Lamanites left him in office suggests that they knew he counseled the submission the people ultimately accept. Following their third defeat, Limhi’s people “did *humble themselves even to the dust*, subjecting themselves to the yoke of bondage, submitting themselves to be smitten, and to be driven to and fro, and burdened, according to the desires of their enemies. ... In the depths of humility ... they *did cry mightily to God*; yea, even all the day long ... *that he would deliver them out of their afflictions*” (Mosiah 21:13–14).

Through hard experience, Limhi’s people have become like Mosiah₂’s wiser people, who without hard experience, “viewed themselves in their own carnal state, even less than the dust of the earth” and who “cried aloud with one voice, saying: O have mercy, and apply the atoning blood of Christ that we may receive forgiveness of our sins” (Mosiah 5:2). Limhi’s people, like those of Mosiah₂, are now ready to be summoned to the temple to hear Ammon₁ repeat King Benjamin’s discourse and to receive the salvation it offers them. And Limhi is eager to reconnect them with Alma₁ or the prophets in Zarahemla who can deliver the needed message and facilitate the making of required covenants. He understands that his abilities as scholar, priest, and king are not adequate to the task of saving his people.

Recognizing, before Ammon₁’s arrival, the need to reconnect with prophets from whom the Zeniffites have wrongly separated themselves,

Limhi tasks a few men to go north and find Zarahemla, or Alma₁ (Mosiah 8:7; 21:31). Rather than Zarahemla, the expedition finds the destroyed civilization of the Jaredites, “a land which was covered with dry bones; yea, a land which had been peopled and which had been destroyed; and they, having supposed it to be the land of Zarahemla, returned to the land of Nephi” bringing with them a record of that people written in an unknown language on twenty-four gold plates (Mosiah 21:26–27). The dead Jaredites the expedition discovers are emblematic. Mormon uses them here as Amalaki had in the Book of Omni⁴⁵ and as Moroni later will in the Book of Ether. The annihilated Jaredites serve as surrogate and symbol for Nephites who are poised at the threshold of utter destruction because they have rejected the counsel of prophets. They foreshadow the fate that awaits a people who have turned away from God, unless they turn back to Him.

Limhi seemingly saw the relevance of the twenty-four plates to his and his people’s fate. Along with his *per se* love of the written word, the perceived relevance of the record may explain his inordinate interest in knowing the content of the plates. Commenting on his eagerness, Gee writes, “Limhi, as a passionate scripturist, was the first to want to read the record of a lost people contained in twenty-four golden plates, that matter engaging his attention (Mosiah 8:6–21) even before he attempted to rescue his people (Mosiah 21:36–22:16) or get out of the fifty-percent tax bracket (Mosiah 7:22; 19:15).”⁴⁶ Thus, one of the first things Limhi asks Ammon₁ is this: “Knowest thou of anyone that can translate? For I am desirous that these records should be translated into our language; for, perhaps, they will give us a knowledge of a remnant of the people who have been destroyed, from whence these records came” (Mosiah 8:12). Ammon₁ replies that the prophet Mosiah₂ is a seer who can translate records in unknown tongues. “And now, when Ammon had made an end of speaking these words the king rejoiced exceedingly, and gave thanks to God” (Mosiah 8:19). Here, Limhi seems to rejoice more as a scholar than as the king of a people in need of rescue.

Mosiah₂’s emissary Ammon₁ gives Limhi hope both that he can know the content of the plates and that his people may correct their Ur error by returning to the land of Zarahemla. Limhi summons his people to the temple and Ammon₁ delivers to them Benjamin’s discourse (Mosiah 7:17; 8:3). Now humble like Mosiah₂’s people and, like them, having heard Benjamin’s words, King Limhi “entered into a covenant

45. For a discussion of how Amaleki uses the Jaredites, see Larsen, “Josiah to Zoram,” 257–59.

46. John Gee, “Limhi in the Library,” 66.

with God, and also many of his people to serve him and keep his commandments. And it came to pass that king Limhi and many of his people were desirous to be baptized; but there was none in the land that had authority from God” (Mosiah 21:32–33). In addition to the Messiah preached in the main text of Benjamin’s discourse, Limhi’s people need to be connected with the messiah Mosiah₂ preached in the subtext of that discourse, who has authority from God.

While they are able to hear the word and are resolved to abide by the will of God, while they are eager to make the covenant Benjamin’s people made (Mosiah 5:5), Limhi and the Zeniffites are not yet able to fully commit themselves to the path God has marked for them. To fully repent as a people and be baptized, they must return to Zarahemla to be led by the prophets they have rejected, Mosiah₂, who is surrogate for the rejected Mosiah₁, and Alma₁, who is surrogate for Abinadi, the prophet they killed in the land of Nephi. Advised by Gideon on the means and guided by Mosiah₂’s emissary Ammon₁ (or more precisely wordplay and explicit text suggest, by God),⁴⁷ Limhi and his people do return to Zarahemla, are received with joy by Mosiah₂, their *savior* or *deliverer*, and are baptized by Alma₁. They are, thus, fully reestablished in the place and reincorporated in the polity God had led them to through the ministrations of the prophet Mosiah₁. After suffering and, more miraculously than in Limhi’s case, escaping oppressions similar to those Limhi and his people suffered (Mosiah 24:8–20), Alma₁ and the more righteous Zeniffites who accepted

47. The relevant explicit text is Mosiah 25:16. “And [Alma₁] did exhort the people of Limhi ... that they should remember it was the Lord that did deliver them.” The names of Ammon₁ and Ammon₂, both of whom are cast in the role of savior, probably derive from an Egyptian name for God. “AMMON is the most common name in the EGYPTIAN Empire. Nibley sees this name in other Book of Mormon names, i.e., AMINADAB, AMINADI, AMNIHU, AMNOR, Helamon (HELAMAN), etc. Nibley’s connection of AMMON to Hem is perhaps his best evidence that this is the correct etymology. In EGYPT, the high priest of AMMON was called *ntr h.m* tp, ‘chief servant of the God,’ while in the Book of Mormon, the name of [a companion of] the earlier AMMON is Hem, hence ‘servant’ in EGYPTIAN. Were this a single occurrence, we might ignore it, but Nibley has shown connections between other such pairs of names in EGYPT and the Book of Mormon. EGYPTIAN *imn* (variously transliterated Amun, Amen, Amon, AMMON ...) is the name of the chief god of Thebes, capital of Upper EGYPT. It has been pointed out, in this connection, that the LAMANITE king LAMONI thought AMMON to be the ‘Great Spirit.’ The name comes from the root *mn* or *imn*, ‘establish, make firm; be firm, remain; eternal.’” Book of Mormon Onomasticon, s.v. “Ammon,” <https://onoma.lib.byu.edu/index.php/AMMON>. For an extended discussion, see Larsen, “In His Footsteps,” 95, 99.

Abinadi's teachings also return to Zarahemla. Because they have a prophet, Alma₁, among them, they are able to return and be reincorporated without the aid of an emissary of the prophet Mosiah₂.

The Emergence of the Almas

While the book of Mosiah highlights the superiority of Mosiah family leadership over Zeniff family leadership, a still more important political theme of the book is the emergence of the Alma family as the first family of Nephite politics.

Prophet, Priest, and Chief Judge

The return of the Zeniffites to the land of Nephi and its aftermath poses a governance problem for Mosiah₂ and a rhetorical problem for Mormon. Mosiah₂'s task is to process all the contradictory evidence he now has on governance best practice and then mark the future political path of his people. Mormon's task is to efface the Mosiah family that has distinguished itself and mark the emergence of what will prove to be the first family of Nephite history, the Alma family that will be the connecting thread in the Book of Mormon narrative for the next ten generations.⁴⁸ The two agendas converge in the close relationship that seems to exist between the two families and in Mosiah₂'s nomination of Alma₂ as the first Chief Judge in the new political regime he establishes.

The considerations that drive Mosiah₂'s decision to end the monarchy are fairly straight forward. On the positive side of the ledger for continuing the monarchy are Mosiah₁, Benjamin, and Mosiah₂ himself. Of Benjamin, Mosiah₂ says, echoing Alma₁, "If ye could have men for your kings who would do even as my father Benjamin did for this people ... it would be expedient that ye should always have kings to rule over you" (Mosiah 23:8; 29:13).⁴⁹ But considerations on the negative side of the ledger outnumber the positive considerations. Mosiah₂ cites the corruption and disaster inflicted upon the subjects of King Noah and the Jaredites and the monarchical powers that led to that corruption and disaster (Mosiah 28:11–18; 29:16–24). He also mentions the past and possible future corruption of his own elite sons, who have now repented,

48. There are eight documented generations of the Alma family from Alma₁ to Amos and Ammaron. There is much evidence that Mormon and Moroni are also members of the Alma family.

49. Mosiah₂ consistently echoes things Alma said when he refused to be king (Mosiah 23:6–13). The echoes suggest that Mosiah₂ got his political theory from Alma₁.

renounced any right to rule, and left the land of Zarahemla on a mission to the land of Nephi (Mosiah 29:6–10).

That mission, which like the mission of Ammon₁ is an ironic antitype of the Zeniff migration, proves to be dispositive in ending the monarchy. Probably motivated by hero worship of his namesake, Ammon₁,⁵⁰ and by a desire to escape the adulation and privileged status that contributed to his personal descent into sin, Ammon₂ proposes to his father that he be permitted to undertake a religious and political mission to the land of Nephi. Like Zeniff before him, Ammon₂ believes there is good in the Lamanites. Like Zeniff, he has the political goal of fostering peace between the Lamanites and the Nephites (Mosiah 28:1–9). Like Zeniff's, his migration is the reverse of Mosiah₁, his great grandfather's, migration. But critically, unlike Zeniff but like Ammon₁, Ammon₂ is on a mission authorized by God through his prophet (Mosiah 28:5–8), and unlike Zeniff, Ammon₂ bears the gospel of Christ.⁵¹

Sallying forth with the approval of God and his prophet, Ammon₂ and his companions succeed in converting the Lamanites in the very lands where the Zeniffites miserably failed: the city of Nephi and the lands of Shemlon and Shilom (Alma 23:11–12). The other three sons of Mosiah₂ join Ammon₂ in his quest, thus leaving no son of Mosiah in Zarahemla who can become monarch.⁵² Lacking a successor (Mosiah 29:6), recognizing the harm a bad monarch can do (Mosiah 29:16–24, 35–36), fully aware of the burden being king places on the man who wears the crown (Mosiah 29:33–34), and probably persuaded by his friend and close associate Alma₁ (Mosiah 23:6–13), Mosiah₂ proposes that kings be replaced by chief judges who are selected by the people and subject to removal by a group of lower judges (Mosiah 29:25–29).

While the people were the ultimate arbiters, Mosiah₂ apparently tapped Alma₂ as the first chief judge. Just before he asks the people whom they want to succeed him as their ruler (Mosiah 1:16; 28:20), Mosiah₂ gives Alma₂ the interpreters, other sacred artifacts, and all the historical records that had been kept by the kings. After the people predictably name his oldest son, Aaron, who has already departed for

50. Larsen, "In His Footsteps," 96–99.

51. While their mission (like that of Zeniff) brings war rather than the peace they intended between Nephites and Lamanites, the sons of Mosiah₂ who are on a divinely authorized mission, do find the good in the Lamanites that Zeniff thought he saw. And they don't lose sight of that good,

52. On Ammon₂ as the leader of the mission back to the land of Nephi, see Larsen, "In His Footsteps," 99–100.

the land of Nephi and is, therefore, unavailable, Mosiah₂ proposes a new form of government, a form inspired by experiences of Alma₁ (Mosiah 23:6–13), in which a chief judge takes the place of the king. The people, who love Mosiah₂ dearly “and esteem him more than any other man” (Mosiah 29:40) then appoint as their first chief judge Alma₂, the man to whom Mosiah₂ had previously given tokens of the right to rule, artefacts the kings had long possessed, and whom, indirectly, Mosiah₂ had empowered to head their religion (Mosiah 25:19; 29:42), another power customarily held by the king. Mosiah₂’s preference that Alma₂ succeed him must have been obvious to the people, and his influence over them was unrivaled.

But why did Mosiah₂ tap Alma₂ to be the first chief judge? We have some evidence that may help us answer this question. Alma₁ and his family were an integral part of Mosiah₂’s court after their arrival in Zarahemla. This is apparent in the extraordinary powers Mosiah₂ confers on Alma₁ before tapping Alma₂ to be his successor. This conferral of power is surprising. In addition to anointing Mosiah₂ as king at the end of his discourse, Benjamin had appointed priests to teach the gospel of Christ and remind the people of the covenant they had made (Mosiah 6:3). Thus, when Alma₁ arrived in Zarahemla, there was an established religious order in the land with a man, Mosiah₂, at the head of the religion and with priests set apart to administer it (Mosiah 27:1). The Zeniffites, including Alma₁, could have been integrated into that religion, their separate faith and they disappearing as Limhi and his kingdom did after he rejoined the polity in Zarahemla.

But that does not happen. Instead, in Mormon’s account, after Alma₁ arrives in Zarahemla, the gospel dispensation of Benjamin and Mosiah₂ is supplanted by the dispensation of Abinadi and Alma₁. Mosiah₂ is portrayed as authorizing this displacement of his father’s gospel dispensation (Mosiah 25:14–15, 19–24; 26:8, 37). He authorizes Alma₁ to organize churches and appoint priests, with “every priest preaching the word according as it was delivered to him by the mouth of Alma” (Mosiah 25:21). The people who join the religion Alma₁ administers are “called the people of God. And the Lord did pour out his Spirit upon them, and they were blessed, and prospered in the land” (Mosiah 25:24). This name for those who follow Christ as directed by Alma₁, “the people of God,” becomes normative for all who accept Christ, indicating that Alma₁’s churches become the sole venue for the communal worship of Christ (Mosiah 26:5, 20–22).

When conflict arises among believers and must be adjudicated, Alma₁ brings the disputants before Mosiah₂ to be judged. But Mosiah₂ says, “I judge them not; therefore, I deliver them into thy hands to be judged” (Mosiah 26:12). If the disputes are secular or civil, Mosiah₂ is, inexplicably, conferring upon Alma₁ the power of the state that eventually passes to Alma₂. However, these disputes are probably theological, not civil, so Mosiah₂ here probably just endorses Alma₁’s authority as high priest and leader of all who follow Christ, as the leader fully empowered to adjudicate religious disputes and regulate religious affairs in the kingdom (Mosiah 26:37), tasks that previously fell to the king.⁵³ Later, when conflict arises between those who do and do not follow Alma₁, Mosiah₂ exercises state power to prohibit unbelievers from persecuting believers (Mosiah 27:1–2), the same power Alma₂ will later exercise and thereby spark a religious civil war (Alma 1:2–15; 2:1–19).

Mosiah₂ and Alma₁ occupy Zarahemla’s two positions of pinnacle power, Mosiah₂ being the king, Alma₁ the high priest (Mosiah 29:42). Unsurprisingly, given their intimate association in the court, a close friendship exists between their elite sons, Alma₂ and Aaron, Ammon₂, Omner, and Himni. Alma₂ was probably likewise intimately acquainted with the daughters of the Mosiah family. There is reason to believe that he married a daughter of Mosiah₂ or, more likely, of Mosiah₂’s brother Helaman₁. (Mosiah₂ may have had no daughters.) Alma₂’s first son, Helaman₂, was probably named after the wife’s father or uncle, Helaman₁. If this plausible supposition be granted, Mosiah₂ tapped as his successor the man in the kingdom who was most closely related by blood and marriage to the kingdom’s two most powerful men. A man with these credentials would be well positioned to preserve legitimacy inherent in the previous regime as a new regime and form of government emerged to supplant it.⁵⁴

53. For thoughts on the division of civil and religious authorities, see Godfrey Ellis, “The Rise and Fall of Korihor, a Zoramite: A New Look at the Failed Mission of an Agent of Zoram” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 48 (2021): 49–94, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/the-rise-and-fall-of-korihor-a-zoramite-a-new-look-at-the-failed-mission-of-an-agent-of-zoram/>.

54. Alma₂ did lack one requisite for political legitimacy in the land of Zarahemla: Mulekite blood. The sons of Mosiah₂ were probably at least half and likely more than half Mulekite. Alma’s lack of Mulekite blood was probably a contributing factor to the rebellion of Mulekite kingmen with noble, Davidic roots, who sought to overthrow the government of Alma₂. On the Mulekite blood and the Davidic uprising, see Larsen, “In His Footsteps,” 85–113.

Mormon marks the emergence of Alma₂ as the main man in Zarahemla by the way he narrates the conversion of Alma₂ and the sons of Mosiah. Though Mosiah's sons are the princes in the kingdom whose political prominence positions them to be the main protagonists, Mormon makes Alma₂ the main character in this story. After opening with the princes, he shifts the focus to Alma₂, making Mosiah₂'s sons supporting characters: "Now the sons of Mosiah were numbered among the unbelievers; and also one of the sons of Alma was numbered among them...; he became a very wicked and an idolatrous man. And he was a man of many words. ... And he became a great hinderment to the prosperity of the church. ... While he was going about to destroy the church of God ... with the sons of Mosiah ... the angel of the Lord appeared unto them ... saying: Alma, arise and stand forth, for why persecutest thou the church of God?" (Mosiah 27:8–13). The narrative remains focused primarily on Alma₂ and Alma₁, marking the displacement of the Mosiah family and the emergence of the Almas as the first family, the designated prophet leaders, of the Nephite nation.⁵⁵

Conclusion

In all his writings, Mormon's main theme is the Messiah, and his main purpose is to testify of Christ. But he is also the historian of the Nephite nation, and he often communicates his powerful testimony of the Messiah through artful historical narratives. In the Book of Mosiah, his main rhetorical purpose as a historian is to mark the emergence of the Almas as the first family of Nephite history. Most of the book is devoted to narrating their Zeniffite backstory, then the story of Alma₁ and Alma₂. But Mormon makes his main narratives resonate more powerfully by embedding them in smaller frame narratives that comment on and develop important subthemes in the embedded main narrative. The Book of Mosiah has three important frame narratives.

The first frame narrative is the coronation frame of Benjamin's great gospel discourse. That frame creates a political subtext that marks Mosiah₂ (and Benjamin and Mosiah₁) as the legitimate rulers of the Nephites and Mulekites in their respective times. That first frame narrative and the

55. While ten chapters in the Book of Alma are dedicated to recounting the mission of Mosiah₂'s sons to the Lamanites, that entire narrative is embedded as a seam in an inconsequential journey Alma₂ takes from the land of Gideon to the land of Manti. This frame positions the single most extensive Mosiah family narrative as an incidental aspect of an inconsequential act of Alma (Alma 17:1, 27:16).

narrative it frames are a component part of the second frame narrative, the account of Benjamin and Mosiah₂'s rule, which precedes and follows the main narrative in the Book of Mosiah, the history of the Zeniffites. The Zeniffite narrative which is embedded in the Benjamin and Mosiah₂ narrative then has its own narrative frame, the Limhi narrative in which the Zeniff and Noah narratives are embedded. The Limhi frame leaves no ambiguity in the Zeniff and Noah narratives. We know that the actions of Zeniff and Noah have been disastrous for their people before we start reading about them. The plight of Limhi and his people makes that clear.

But the frame narrative that most fully and powerfully comments on the narrative it frames is the Mosiah₂ and Benjamin frame of the Zeniffite history. The core message developed by the interaction of these frame and embedded narratives is the importance of being led by prophets. The extended contrast between Benjamin and Noah makes a slam dunk case for the necessity of prophetic leadership. But arguably, the case is made most strongly by the failures of two good men, Zeniff and Limhi, and the contrasting success of their prophet counterparts, Mosiah₁ and Mosiah₂. The fact that good men cannot adequately lead their people and avoid catastrophe without divine guidance from living prophets marks the fact that catastrophe is not contingent on bad people being in power. The problem is structural. In the absence of prophets, scholars reading scripture become our source for knowledge of God and his will. These narratives demonstrate that Sophic scholarship and practical wisdom are inadequate substitutes for Mantic prophets. Unless we have the ongoing guidance of God that living prophets provide, we are bound to go astray as individuals and as a people. This is a lesson the world needed to learn as the fullness of the gospel of Christ was restored by the Book of Mormon and the Prophet Joseph Smith. It is the lesson the Book of Mosiah teaches by contrasting the parallel dynasties of the Mosiah and Zeniff families.

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