

STUDY NOTES

Lesson 3: Mosiah Chapters 1-2

*5 I am the vine, ye are the branches:
He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth
much fruit:
for without me ye can do nothing.
John 15:5*

We don't know a lot about the reign of King Benjamin, but what we do know opens a window for us on what it means to be a righteous priesthood holder—whether the office of that priesthood is to be a king or a bishop or an apostle or a father. King Benjamin was a man who recognized his own human frailty and did not ask his subjects to put their faith in him as a man. Rather he used all his strength to fight for his people—to fight the enemy in their behalf—and to turn their attention and hearts toward God, the One in whom they should put their faith and trust.

He is a type for a righteous leader. He shows us what it means to act out of love for those you serve. He shows what great blessings can come through the man who serves and loves and fights for his people. As women, we can see that the principles that governed his leadership and effectiveness as a ruler, can govern our actions towards those we love and serve as well. Truth is not gender specific. Faith in Christ, humility and love are the great well-springs of human goodness that allow us to be as effective in our spheres as King Benjamin was in his.

A MODEL FOR MEN

To rightly understand what happens in the beginning of the book of Mosiah, we must back up to the few verses in The Words of Mormon in which Mormon summarizes the earlier years of King Benjamin's reign. It is a story of war. King Benjamin was a fighter. He recognized that enemies threatened his people and he fought those enemies with all his strength and might, "with the strength of his own arm with the sword of Laban." (W of M v.13) Mormon lists the specific enemies that King Benjamin fought. They are: 1) the Lamanites "who came down out of the land of Nephi," 2) the false Christs, false prophets and false teachers that threatened the people, and 3) the contentions and dissensions that arose among the people.

Benjamin would have agreed with a later prophet, Moroni, who told his son, "let us labor diligently; for if we should cease to labor, we should be brought under condemnation; for we have a labor to perform whilst in this tabernacle of clay, that we may conquer the enemy of all righteousness, and rest our souls in the kingdom of God." (Moroni 9:6) In every one of his "battles," by extension, he fought against "the enemy of all righteousness" who was behind all these threats and attacks—the devil.

This idea of the warrior/king, the leader who both loves and fights for his people, is a powerful type or symbol for men to model their lives after. To "fight with the sword" is an appealing image to the masculine heart. They want to be men and warriors, providers and protectors. When this built in masculine paradigm goes awry, they become contentious brawlers, power hungry despots or abusive bullies, taking out frustrations by use of force. But, as you can see in the life of King Benjamin, fighting is not a bad thing when it is turned against the true enemies that threaten the children of men. Those of us who have influence on the next generation of young men, would do well to teach them about the marvelous example of King Benjamin, the warrior king who fought so selflessly for the welfare of his people. It is an image that has tremendous power. The idea of the self-sacrificing warrior/king is what makes William Wallace of "Braveheart", or the legendary King Arthur or Aragorn from "Lord of the Rings", such compelling figures.

SCRIPTURAL MODELS

King Benjamin is not the only example of a scriptural type of this kind. In the scriptures, this warrior/king often has the added dimension of prophet. Abraham was a prophet/leader of his people who led his men out in battle to rescue his nephew, Lot (see Genesis 14). Enoch was also a prophet/leader who led his people to fight against their enemies (see Moses 7:13). The greatest of all examples of this kind of leadership is Christ, who embodies all these qualities. He is the loving Good Shepherd who gently leads his people; He is the King of Israel to whom all men and women bow the knee; and He is the Lord of Hosts, who will come at the head of the armies of Heaven, dressed in red robes and riding a white horse, leading

the charge against all the enemies of righteousness, and conquering the earth that has been falsely claimed by Satan (see Revelation 19:11-16; D&C133:46-48). It is a grand and sweeping story. By studying the life of King Benjamin, we see how an earthly man can take on the Christ-like characteristics that give his lifetime of service to others real power.

As we get further into the book of Mosiah, we will visit this theme again in its reverse image—that of the king who selfishly cares only for the power and prerogatives of rank and who cares nothing for his subjects. Sad to say, because of what it reveals about human nature, anytime in the Bible or Book of Mormon that there is a succession of kings, the line always fails because eventually someone comes to the throne who cares only about power and not about the people he should be serving.

WHO ARE THE TRUE KINGS (AND QUEENS)?

This life is a test to discover who the “true kings” are, in other words, to discover who has a heart of real charity. Then, when this short test of life is over, those who pass the test can be made kings and given eternal thrones to serve in a line of true kings forever, because they can be trusted with power, not having sought it, but having sought for the welfare of their brethren.

If, as women, we feel that we are missing from the picture, it is because it takes imagination to see ourselves in the pages of Mosiah. But we are there. In fact, it is only the true gospel of Jesus Christ that can reveal to a woman her true place in eternity. Just as this life is a test that determines who is a true king, so earth life also reveals who are the true queens. Where there are kings there are always queens. There was certainly a queen who ruled with Benjamin. We don't know her name but we know the results of her labors. Like her husband, she did not serve for recognition from the world. But without her, Benjamin could not have been the king he was. And without her there would have been no Mosiah, the righteous son of Benjamin, who grew up loving the principles that both his parents surely taught him.

The test for both men and women is the same—one is just the flip side of the coin from the other. Men, who tend to get the honor and recognition, must prove their worth to God by not caring about that honor and recognition. Like Benjamin, they must do what they do for the good of those they serve. And women, who traditionally do their work behind the scenes and with little recognition, must be equally willing to give up the spotlight, by not abandoning their posts because the pay is poor. Both must reject all the honor and glitter—men, by paying no attention to it, women, by not becoming bitter at its absence.

LEARNING THE LANGUAGE OF SCRIPTURE

King Benjamin was a good father by teaching his children the language of the scriptures. In his case, this was a real language, what the Book of Mormon writers called “reformed Egyptian” (Mormon 9:32). Imagine having to teach children a foreign language in order to read the scriptures! But this is what they did. As the language we speak in contemporary society moves further and further from the language spoken when the scriptures were originally recorded, sometimes it seems like a foreign language. Reading the scriptures can seem like going to a Shakespeare play. We need translation to understand some of the words and phrases. That is why familiarity with the language of the scriptures from a young age is so important. The prophets have encouraged daily scripture study in our homes. If we hear or read this language every day, it will eventually become second nature to us; we will become men and women “of understanding,” like Benjamin's children. (Mosiah 1:2) Familiarity with the words of God is the goal.

ALWAYS BEFORE OUR EYES

We have Mormon's short version of the things King Benjamin taught his children as he prepared to pass the torch to that generation. Not surprisingly he tells them to keep the commandments so that they might prosper, one of the great themes of the Book of Mormon. Hand in hand with that advice goes the admonition to “keep the commandments always before their eyes”, that is, to read the written word of God faithfully so that they can be molded to the will of God. Without this written word, he tells them, they would have dwindled in unbelief and be no different than their brethren, the Lamanites.

This stark truth plays out around us all the time. When members of the church do not go through the steps King Benjamin recommends to his sons, that is: 1) know the language of the scriptures so that they might be people of understanding, 2) become familiar with the prophecies of God, i.e., what God's redemptive plan is for their life and the world, 3) keep His commandments always before their eyes and 4) search the scriptures diligently, then they become as Lamanites. No, they don't shave their heads and wear loincloths. But they do “dwindle in unbelief.”

Many a member of the church has left the church simply because they did not “continue in the word.” That is not, of course, the reason they give for leaving. Their stated reason may be something they found out about Joseph Smith's human frailties, or something their bishop did that they didn't like;

but if you followed the string back, back, back, it would lead you to a place where they let go of the iron rod—the word of God. If you cling to God's word, you will stay on the path. Which is why Benjamin said what he did to his sons, and why we say it to you.

REMEMBER YOUR STORY

Benjamin turns over to his son Mosiah, the brass plates of Laban, the Liahona, or compass, the sword of Laban, and the “interpreters” or seer stones.¹ All these things are important parts of the history of the Nephites. Understanding what these things are means remembering the stories of where they came from and how they figured into the founding stories of their nation. Each of these items had great significance and could be used to teach a whole cartload of sermons. Without personal histories, we are rootless. Whether our story begins with the story of a poor immigrant great grandparent who came to America for economic opportunity or an ancestor who came to “gather to Zion,” all of us are formed by the stories of our forbears. We are made out of them, and these stories can have powerful effects on our lives. It is important to treasure the tokens and remnants of those stories that we have: personal histories, pictures and precious objects like a family Bible. One of the great strengths of the restored gospel is the understanding of the importance of the welding link between generations. Treasure it and pass it on!

A NEW NAME

The first chapter of Mosiah contains a few things that might be confusing to 21st century women. That is not surprising since the book arose out of a culture so different from our own. In fact, one of the evidences of the book's authenticity is the lack of explanation for differences between our culture and the cultures of the Book of Mormon peoples. We tend to take for granted the cultural tradition that we inherit at birth and so a writer does not explain things he assumes his audience will understand. For us, for example, a name is something your parents give you at birth, which consists of a family name and a given name, which stay static throughout life, women adding the name of their husband's family at marriage. But this is by no means a universal tradition. Other cultures have very different naming patterns. In many Native American cultures, it is assumed that a person will have names added to them as they grow and become an adult, childhood names discarded as one grows up. Names change as identity changes.

Biblically, God gave new names to several of His servants to signify a new direction and calling in their life. Thus Jacob became Israel, Abram became Abraham, Sariah became Sarah, and Simon became Peter. If our prophet today declared that he was giving the Mormon people a new name next general conference, we would be surprised. Mormon, author of the record, and the people of Benjamin, accept the idea without question. We can see we are getting a glimpse into a culture different from our own.

THE FEAST OF TABERNACLES

Another thing that Mormon seems to think we don't need an explanation for is why all the people were gathered in the capital city of Zarahemla with animals intended for sacrifice. Benjamin's request that his son gather the people “on the morrow” (Mosiah 1:10) would be next to impossible if the people were scattered over hundreds of miles. But if they were already “in town” for something, it makes perfect sense. If we came out of a Mosaic law tradition like these people did, we would understand automatically that there were special feast days during which the people were commanded to gather to the temple². One of the required feast days of Mosaic law is known as the feast of Tabernacles or Succoth, a Hebrew word meaning temporary shelters. This holy day was a day of thanksgiving and occurred at the time of year of the final crop harvest. Its purpose was to remind Israel of the ways that God had delivered them from bondage. Even today, Jews celebrate this festival by building huts or booths out of branches of greenery or sheets, in token of the tents and temporary shelters the people had to erect after being delivered from their homes in Egypt. As you read the story of King Benjamin's people coming together to hear his words and being camped in tents with their families near the temple, notice the evidences that scholars think represent an occasion of this festival in Book of Mormon times.

A HUMBLE MAN

King Benjamin gives an accounting of his reign over his people, before turning over the government of the kingdom to a new generation. He knows that it is human nature to put rulers and leaders “on a ped-

¹ The “interpreter” or Urim and Thumim is not mentioned in the list of Mosiah 1:16. We assume that these were passed down because scripture mentions that Mosiah 1, Benjamin's father, had them and later that Mosiah 2, Benjamin's son, had them.

² The other two feast days that required going to Jerusalem to the temple, in the Old World, were Passover and Pentecost.

estal". (In many cultures this becomes overt. Thus Roman Emperors became "gods" as did Egyptian Pharaohs, with people bowing to them and offering sacrifices to them.) It is important to King Benjamin that his people correctly understand his relationship to them and to God. Only God is worthy of worship. He spends the beginning of his address telling his people not to think of him as "more than a mortal man." "I am like yourselves, subject to all manner of infirmities in body and mind." (Mosiah 2:11)

Benjamin certainly has an exemplary record to report. His service to them has been motivated by a desire to serve God. Most kings tend to take advantage of their power to personally enrich themselves, but Benjamin says he has not sought for gold or silver. In fact, he has demonstrated remarkable humility by working with his own hands to provide for the needs of his household, rather than burden the people with heavy taxes. He lists other things he has not done: he has not put them into prisons or into slavery, or laid any thing on them which was "grievous to be borne." He has served them with all his "might, mind and strength." He adds that he is not saying these things to boast.

IN THE SERVICE OF YOUR GOD

Well then, why IS he telling them these things? Because he is recommending to them his own truly remarkable way of living. He wants them to know that by being in right relationship to God, they can begin to enjoy a new way to live in their relationships with each other. His love and service to them has been born out of a profound love for and gratitude to his God. If they develop this same right relationship with God, then they too will find themselves serving their fellow man out of a desire to show their love and gratitude to God. It all has to begin with this basic understanding of who we are and who God is.

To begin to get this right, we must first realize just what we owe to God. Everything! He created us, he preserves and supports us from moment to moment, He prospers us when we obey Him and He even gives us the gift of "[doing] according to your own will," (Mosiah 2:21) or the gift of moral agency, as we call it. God is absolutely trustworthy, never "varying from what He has said." And then Benjamin says something that is especially important for LDS women to understand. God can never be in our debt. The minute we obey Him, he does "immediately bless us." We have been paid.

ETERNALLY IN GOD'S DEBT

Sometimes it will be repeated in a Sunday school class that God gives us a free gift of resurrection but that "exaltation must be earned." It should be pointed out that scripture never, ever says such a thing. If we earned exaltation, God would owe it to us because we had "earned" it by our wonderful lives and he would have to pay it to us. What silliness. Jesus Christ truly earned exaltation by his perfect life. He is the only one who can say that. The scriptures say rather that we "inherit" eternal life by becoming the sons and daughters of Christ (Mosiah 5:7) through covenant and taking upon ourselves His name. He earned it. We inherit it from Him. King Benjamin's speech helps us keep that perspective by strongly reminding us that, rather than God being in our debt, "ye are eternally indebted to your heavenly Father, to render to him all that you have and are; . . . therefore, of what have ye to boast?" (Mosiah 2:24, 34)

Then, to drive the point home, King Benjamin gives the people a vivid word picture of their true situation. He tells them they are "even less than the dust of the earth"! We are used to a world in which self-esteem reigns supreme. We strive always to be positive. But King Benjamin tells the truth and it is the truth that sets us free. Dust obeys God perfectly. (see Helaman 12:5-8) If God commanded dust to move three feet to the left, it would immediately move. If God commands men to do something, they think about it. Maybe they'll do it tomorrow. It is this tendency to disobey what God asks of us that King Benjamin wants his people to realize. This is the universal tendency of fallen man. This is "enmity" against God. This is "us" pitting our wills against God's.³

The main point King Benjamin is making is that it is our obligation to "render to him all that you have and are" by obeying God's commandments. This is man's primary responsibility toward God in return for all that He has done for us. We are obligated to obey God. Those who do not, but who choose disobedience, will be judged after they die. Then they will find that they are in an "awful situation." They will be faced with "the demands of divine justice" and they will "shrink from the presence of the Lord." These are sobering thoughts. King Benjamin intends them to be so. But he knows that great good will come from the people seeing their spiritual situation in such stark reality and so he is willing to give this rather harsh message. He knows they must understand the "bad news" before they can appreciate fully the "good news" of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

³ Which brings to mind the statement from the comic strip "Pogo"; "We have met the enemy, and he is us."

