



1-31-1994

## ***Dissent.* Perspectives from the Book of Mormon**

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### **BYU ScholarsArchive Citation**

Wardle, Lynn D. (1994) "*Dissent.* Perspectives from the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*: Vol. 3 : No. 1 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol3/iss1/5>

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BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY • PROVO, UTAH

**Title** Dissent: Perspectives from the Book of Mormon

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**Reference** *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 3/1 (1994): 53-73.

**ISSN** 1065-9366 (print), 2168-3158 (online)

**Abstract** Most scriptural references to *dissent* are in the Book of Mormon. The Book of Mormon teaches that dissension is a cause of evil, suffering, and destruction; some dissenters undergo a hardening, while others may be reclaimed; preaching the gospel is the best way to reclaim dissenters; after patient endurance, compulsion may be necessary to stop dissenters from causing severe harm to the innocent, but compulsion should be avoided when possible; both spiritual and civic responses may be used to quell dissent; responding to dissent is not the task of leaders only; dissent is inevitable in our society and the church; and the Lord blesses the faithful who endure the trials and temptations of dissent.

## Dissent: Perspectives from the Book of Mormon

Lynn D. Wardle

**Abstract:** Most scriptural references to *dissent* are in the Book of Mormon. The Book of Mormon teaches that dissension is a cause of evil, suffering, and destruction; some dissenters undergo a hardening, while others may be reclaimed; preaching the gospel is the best way to reclaim dissenters; after patient endurance, compulsion may be necessary to stop militant dissenters from causing severe harm to the innocent, but compulsion should be avoided when possible; both spiritual and civic responses may be used to quell dissent; responding to dissent is not the task of leaders only; dissent is inevitable in our society and the church; and the Lord blesses the faithful who endure the trials and temptations of dissent.

The Book of Mormon, more than any other volume of scripture, clearly teaches important lessons about dissent, dissension, and righteous responses thereto. The term *dissent* or some derivative of it (e.g., *dissenter*, *dissenters*, *dissented*, *dissenting*, *dissension*, *dissensions*, etc.) is used a total of 57 times in 53 verses of the scriptures.<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, 53 of the 57 usages (93% of the references) occur in the Book of Mormon,<sup>2</sup> the

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<sup>1</sup> The revealed preface to the book of Helaman contains a reference to dissensions; it is counted herein even though it is not technically a "verse" of scripture.

<sup>2</sup> The only scriptural references outside of the Book of Mormon to *dissent* or derivative terms are: Acts 15:2 (Paul and Barnabas have dissension with

volume of scripture revealed for the specific benefit of people in our day.

Most of the Book of Mormon references to *dissent* are in seven clusters. They are:

- Mosiah 26–27 (dissension grows in rising generation; Alma<sub>2</sub> and the sons of Mosiah are key provocateurs);<sup>3</sup>

- Alma 31, 34 (Alma<sub>2</sub> takes veteran missionaries to preach to Zoramite dissenters; the sermons to poor the Zoramites);<sup>4</sup>

- Alma 45 (because of dissent church regulation is necessary, and dissent arises after Helaman appoints new priests);<sup>5</sup>

- Alma 46–53 (Amalickiah manipulates dissent to rise to power; Moroni raises the title of liberty to counter dissent; Lamanites strengthened by Nephite dissenters who foment war; Moroni given authority to compel dissenters to defend country; 4,000 armed dissenters put to death by Moroni);<sup>6</sup>

- Alma 60–62 (Moroni's epistle to Pahoran and Pahoran's reply; Moroni and Pahoran unite forces to put down rebellious dissenters);<sup>7</sup>

- Helaman 3–5 (numerous Nephite dissensions; strengthened Lamanites conquer and possess Nephite lands; Nephi leaves judgment seat to preach; many dissenters reconverted; Nephi and Lehi in prison convert 300 Lamanites including former dissenters);<sup>8</sup>

- Helaman 11, and 3 Nephi 1–3 (during thirty-year period Gadianton robbers grow and Nephite government falls because of dissent).<sup>9</sup>

Judaizers in the church); Acts 23:7, 10 (when brought before the council, Paul causes a dissension among his Pharisee and Sadducee accusers); D&C 10:48 (Book of Mormon prophets desired that the gospel recorded in the Book of Mormon might come to the Lamanites and to all their brethren who had dissented and become Lamanites).

<sup>3</sup> Mosiah 26:5; 27:9.

<sup>4</sup> Alma 31:8; 34:2.

<sup>5</sup> Alma 45:21, 23.

<sup>6</sup> Alma 46:6–7, 11, 27–28; 47:35–36; 48:24; 51:15–16, 19–20; 53:8–

9.

<sup>7</sup> Alma 60:32; 61:14, 17; 62:6, 40.

<sup>8</sup> Helaman 3:1, 3, 14, 17; 4:1, 3, 4–8; 5:17, 27, 35.

<sup>9</sup> Helaman 11:24, 25; 3 Nephi 1:28; 2:18; 3:10.

These scriptures refer to many different kinds of dissent, from political dissent to religious dissent, from dissent by disputing to dissent by withdrawal, from dissent in the form of contention, to persecution, to armed rebellion, to acts of treason during wartime. The responses to dissent also vary depending on the type of dissent and the circumstances—from patient endurance to expulsion, from private prayer to civic debate, from preaching the gospel to organized military resistance, from forgiveness to capital punishment. Because the types of dissent are diverse, the circumstances in which dissent occurs vary, and the responses to dissent differ, the scriptures referring to dissent cannot be lumped together thoughtlessly. While the focus of this study is not on the different categories of dissent, the types of dissent involved in each incident discussed below should be clear to readers familiar with these episodes. Taken out of context, the inspired messages may be lost or distorted. However, these scriptural references to dissent and dissensions are valuable sources for serious study. From such reflective analysis I have identified ten principles or characteristics of dissent.

**First, dissension invariably is associated with and frequently identified as a cause of evil, suffering, and destruction.<sup>10</sup>**

Despite the variety of forms of dissent, some mild and seemingly innocuous, dissent is never described or linked with anything good or positive in the Book of Mormon. Every reference to dissent portrays it as a problem, an evil condition, and a harbinger of even greater problems and evils. For example, Alma<sub>2</sub> was “a great hinderment to the prosperity of the church of God” because he “[caused] much dissension among the people” (Mosiah 27:9); the dissenters who joined the Lamanites “cause[d]

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<sup>10</sup> On only one occasion did a righteous man deliberately stir up dissension—Paul deliberately provoked an uproarious dispute between the sadducees and pharisees to divide and distract his accusers (Acts 23:6–10). In another sense, the Doctrine and Covenants refers to the Lord’s intention to shake the heavens and earth to establish his people and liberate humanity from the shackles of the adversary (D&C 21:6; 43:18; 84:118). Doubtless that type of disruption of the established order of things will bring much good.

much sorrow unto those Nephites who did remain in the land" (3 Nephi 1:28); dissent and intrigue caused the loss of Nephite land and cities (Alma 53:8); iniquity and dissensions caused the Nephites to be "placed in the most dangerous of circumstances" (Alma 53:9; 46:7). Frequently, the Book of Mormon notes that dissension directly led to war. Often it was the dissenters from the Nephites who "stirred up to anger" the Lamanites against the Nephites and caused them to "[commence] a war with their brethren" (Helaman 4:4; 11:24; see also Alma 46-47). The Gadianton robbers existed because of, and their success depended upon, "dissenters that went forth unto them" (Helaman 11:25; 3 Nephi 2:18; 7:12). It is no wonder that Mormon declared that contention among the Nephites was "a cause of all their destruction" during the great series of wars described in Alma (Alma 51:16).

The *dissent* terms are often used in conjunction with other terms that suggest the meaning of dissent. The word with which *dissent* is combined most frequently is *contention* (see, e.g., Jarom 1:13; Words of Mormon 1:16; Alma 51:16; Helaman 3:1, 3, 14, 17; and 3 Nephi 2:18). It is also combined with *iniquity* or *wickedness* (Alma 53:9; 60:32; 62:40; and 3 Nephi 2:18). It is used occasionally in connection with *bloodshed* (Helaman 4:1), *murder* (Alma 62:40), *war* (Jarom 1:13; Helaman 3:14), and *intrigue* (Alma 53:8-9). It is also associated with *disturbances* (Helaman 3:17) and *pride* (see Helaman 3:1). But *dissent* is not applied to personal searching, doubting, groping, or struggling to know the truth or come to Christ that so often are crucial to the conversion process. Apparently the writers of the Book of Mormon distinguished between honest, personal inquiry and yearning for righteousness and the kinds of activities they characterized as *dissent*.

### **Second, dissension may lead to the hardening of the dissenters.**

Thus, speaking of one group of Nephites who had dissented and joined the Lamanites, Mormon observed that "not long after their dissensions they became more hardened and impenitent, and more wild, wicked and ferocious than the Lamanites—drinking in

with the traditions of the Lamanites; giving way to indolence, and all manner of lasciviousness; yea, entirely forgetting the Lord their God" (Alma 47:36). In the days of Moroni the Nephites were in danger of being "massacred by the barbarous cruelty of those who were once their brethren, yea, and had dissented from their church, and had left them and had gone to destroy them" (Alma 48:24). During one period of great Lamanite conversion to the gospel, Mormon noted that none of the Amulonite dissenters and only one of the Amalekite dissenters was converted to the gospel, "but they did harden their hearts, and also the hearts of the Lamanites in that part of the land wheresoever they dwelt" (Alma 23:14).

**Third, dissenters may be reclaimed, reconverted, and repent before they become too hardened in their iniquity.**

For example, Alma<sub>2</sub> was "a very wicked and idolatrous man" who caused "much dissension among the people," "stealing away the hearts of the people," "going about to destroy the church of God" (Mosiah 27:8-10). Likewise, the four sons of King Mosiah "were numbered among the unbelievers" who went about with him "rebell[ing] against God," and "secretly . . . seeking to destroy the church" (Mosiah 27:8-11). Yet these influential dissenters were reconverted, repented, and dedicated their lives to teaching the people the gospel, "traveling round about through all the land, publishing to all the people the things which they had heard and seen, and preaching the word of God in much tribulation," enduring great persecution from unbelievers "impart[ing] much consolation to the church, confirming their faith, and exhorting them with long suffering and much travail to keep the commandments of God" (Mosiah 27:32-33). "And thus they were instruments in the hands of God in bringing many to the knowledge of the truth, yea, to the knowledge of their Redeemer" (Mosiah 27:36). Had these dissenters not been reclaimed, the Nephites, Lamanites, and modern church would have been without some of the greatest leaders and teachers of faith of whom we have any record (Alma 4-43).

Likewise, after many Nephite dissenters had strengthened and agitated the Lamanites and the Lamanites had defeated the Nephites and obtained possession of their lands, Nephi and Lehi, the sons of Helaman, began a great missionary effort that involved a conversion of the Nephites, dissenters, and Lamanites. They preached with such great power "that they did confound many of those dissenters who had gone over from the Nephites, insomuch that they came forth and did confess their sins and were baptized unto repentance, and immediately returned to the Nephites to endeavor to repair unto them the wrongs which they had done" (Helaman 5:17). While Nephi and Lehi were imprisoned in a Lamanite prison, a marvelous heavenly manifestation occurred. With the assistance of an imprisoned Nephite dissenter who helped the Lamanite prisoners understand the experience, all three hundred souls in the prison who witnessed the miraculous event were converted and went forth testifying of their conversion "insomuch that the more part of the Lamanites were convinced of them" and changed their policy of hostility and war toward the Nephites, "[and] it came to pass that they did yield up unto the Nephites the lands of their possession" (Helaman 5:21-49, 50-52). Thus, reconversion of dissenters may greatly bless the lives of many.

#### **Fourth, the first and best method of reclaiming dissenters is to preach the gospel to them.**

For instance, Mormon noted that in the days of Helaman, "because of their wars with the Lamanites and the many little dissensions and disturbances which had been among the people it became expedient that the word of God should be declared among them" (Alma 45:21). A couple of generations later Nephi and Lehi, the sons of Helaman,

did preach with great power insomuch that they did confound many of those dissenters who had gone over from the Nephites, insomuch that they came forth and did confess their sins and were baptized unto repentance, and immediately returned to the Nephites to endeavor to repair unto them the wrongs which they had done. (Helaman 5:17)



Perhaps the most emphatic declaration of this principle is the explanation of Alma<sup>2</sup>'s decision to lead a missionary team to reclaim the Zoramite dissenters. Mormon wrote:

And now, as the preaching of the word had a great tendency to lead the people to do that which was just—yea, it had more powerful effect upon the minds of the people than the sword, or anything else, which had happened unto them—therefore Alma thought it was expedient that they should try the virtue of the word of God." (Alma 31:5)

During his ministry in America the Savior taught his twelve disciples:

Ye shall not suffer any one knowingly to partake of my flesh and blood unworthily, when ye shall minister it; . . . Nevertheless, [if he repents not] ye shall not cast him out from among you, but ye shall minister unto him and shall pray for him unto the Father, in my name; and if it so be that he repenteth and is baptized in my name, then shall ye receive him, and shall minister unto him of my flesh and blood. . . . Nevertheless, ye shall not cast him out of your synagogues, or your places of worship, for unto such shall ye continue to minister; for ye know not but what they will return and repent, and come unto me with full purpose of heart, and I shall heal them; and ye shall be the means of bringing salvation unto them. (3 Nephi 18:28–32)

Preaching the gospel to the descendants of dissenters was part of the reason for the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. Concerning the prophets whose writings are contained in the Book of Mormon, the Lord revealed to the Prophet Joseph Smith: "Yea, and this was their faith—that my gospel, which I gave unto them that they might preach in their days, might come unto their brethren the Lamanites, and also all that had become Lamanites because of their dissensions" (D&C 10:48).

**Fifth, there are times when firmness, even physical compulsion, is necessary to stop militant dissenters.**

Two series of incidents from the life of the great Nephite general, Moroni, illustrate this principle. The first involved the liberty-threatening dissensions among the Nephites in the early years of the lengthy series of wars described in detail in the book of Alma. Certain Nephite dissenters were stirred up and led by a talented and ambitious demagogue named Amalickiah, who wanted to be king. He was supported by other ambitious people, especially lower judges of the people, who also wanted to be rulers. Because of their selfish ambition "they were led away . . . to dissensions" (Alma 46:6). Moreover, "there were many in the church who believed in the flattering words of Amalickiah, therefore they dissented even from the church; and thus were the affairs of the people of Nephi exceedingly precarious and dangerous" (Alma 46:7). Moroni, the chief commander of the army of the Nephites, "was angry with Amalickiah" when he "heard of these dissensions" (Alma 46:11), so he fashioned the title of liberty from a piece of cloth torn from his coat and, after uttering a great prayer for the sake of the believers in Christ in the land, "he went forth, and also sent forth in all the parts of the land where there were dissensions, and gathered together all the people who were desirous to maintain their liberty, to stand against Amalickiah and those who had dissented" (Alma 46:28). This effort by Moroni succeeded in thwarting Amalickiah's attempt to usurp control of the Nephite government. Amalickiah then decided to lead his dissenters to join the Lamanites, but Moroni's army headed them off because "he knew that [Amalickiah] would stir up the Lamanites to anger against them, and cause them to come to battle against them" (Alma 46:30). The followers of Amalickiah who would make a covenant to support the cause of freedom were apparently taken back into Nephite society, while "those who would not enter into a covenant . . . he caused to be put to death" (Alma 46:35). Amalickiah and a few of his leaders escaped, and within a short time he had obtained leadership over the Lamanite armies, which then attacked the Nephites.

In these dangerous times, another group of people who followed Morianton, after losing a territorial dispute with the people

in another city, decided to move *en masse* to the northern lands. Again, Moroni's army stopped them forcibly, to prevent them from making an alliance which could "lead to the overthrow of their liberty" (Alma 50:32). Again, the dissenters were allowed to return to their lands "upon their covenanting to keep the peace" (Alma 50:36).

A short time later, just six years after Amalickiah's initial efforts to be established as the king of the Nephites, a group of Nephites "of high birth . . . who sought power and authority over the people" (Alma 51:8) attempted to change the law "in a manner to overthrow the free government and to establish a king over the land" (Alma 51:5), but "the voice of the people" rejected their proposal. Soon thereafter the Lamanites attacked the Nephites. The king-men "were glad in their hearts; and they refused to take up arms, for they were so wroth with the chief judge, and also with the people of liberty, that they would not take up arms to defend their country" (Alma 51:13). Moroni was incensed by this elitist dissension in time of national crisis, and he sought and obtained "power to compel those dissenters to defend their country or to put them to death. For it was his first care to put an end to such contentions and dissensions among the people; for behold, this had been hitherto a cause of all their destruction" (Alma 51:15-16). Moroni led his armies against the king-men, killed "four thousand of those dissenters," imprisoned their surviving leaders, and compelled the rest of the dissenters to raise the title of liberty and take up arms in defence of their country (Alma 51:19-20). Thus, three times in the space of six years Moroni used lawful force to compel dissenters physically to fulfill their responsibilities to the community in time of crisis.

The second sequence in which Moroni used force against dissenters was near the end of the long series of wars between Nephites and Lamanites. At this time, the Nephite army had been making some gains in their campaign to expel the invading Lamanites, but they suffered a tremendous setback in losing the city of Nephiah and the lives of many Nephites, due to the failure of the central government to send reinforcements. Moroni wrote an angry epistle to the chief judge, Pahoran, warning him to send support to the army or Moroni would "cleanse" the "inward vessel" (Alma 60:23). Pahoran wrote back explaining

that the king-men had risen up and driven him from the center of government and the dissenters had made an alliance with the Lamanites. He called on Moroni to join him in resisting these rebellious dissensions "with our swords," by marching at the head of part of his army, joining up with Pahoran, and "we will go speedily against those dissenters, in the strength of our God according to the faith which is in us" (Alma 61:17). Moroni did so, and he and Pahoran defeated the armies of the dissenters, led by Pachus.

And the men of Pachus received their trial, according to the law, and also those king-men who had been taken and cast into prison; and they were executed according to the law; yea, those men of Pachus and those king-men whosoever would not take up arms in the defence of their country, but would fight against it, were put to death. (Alma 62:9)

Mormon observed that it was necessary "that this law should be strictly observed for the safety of their country; yea, and whosoever was found denying their freedom was speedily executed according to the law" (Alma 62:10). It probably is not merely coincidental that within one year after this "cleansing of the inward vessel" and "strictly" enforcing the law against the dissenters, that the Lamanite armies that had invaded the Nephite lands were conclusively defeated, completely driven out of Nephite lands, and peace was finally restored, after more than a dozen years of continual war (Alma 62:9–10, 38–42). Thus, in times of war, when internal rebellions threaten the lives and liberties of the people, when ample opportunity to repent has been afforded, the use of military force under righteous leadership to put down treacherous dissent has been justified.

**Sixth, force is used against dissenters only when necessary to prevent them from causing severe harm to righteous others, and after patiently enduring the problems caused by dissent.**

In both of these sequences, Moroni and Pahoran were long-suffering and tolerant before they resorted to the use of force

against the dissenters. Pahoran had refrained from using force against the dissenters who had driven him from the seat of government because he was deeply concerned whether that was justified (Alma 61:19), and Moroni had not written a threatening letter to Pahoran until he and his armies had patiently endured great privations and suffering for years, and many innocent people had died (Alma 59:5–60:5).

Likewise, Moroni did not abruptly take up arms against the dissenters in the earlier years but used force against them only after their rebellion reached the point that it put the lives and liberties of the righteous and innocent in jeopardy, and even then he readily forgave and accepted the dissenters after he defeated them (Alma 46:35; 50:36; 51:19–20). Indeed, it might be speculated that Moroni and the righteous Nephites endured much more war and destruction because of Moroni's policy of enduring dissent and readily forgiving and reaccepting dissenters. Perhaps the internal disruptions that Moroni and Pahoran had to put down in year 31 of the reign of the judges would not have occurred if Moroni had not so quickly reaccepted the dissenting followers of Amalickiah in year 19 of the reign of the judges, or the king-men who rebelled a few years later (Alma 46:35–36; 51:19–20; 61:3–8; 62:2–10). But patient suffering to give the rebellious full opportunity to use their agency to work through their dissent and repent, or to seal their own condemnation, was Moroni's policy. It seems to be the Lord's policy in our day as well (D&C 98:23–48).

These two sequences also illustrate that the righteous only resort to slaying dissenters when the dissenters had undertaken to do something that immediately and seriously threatened the lives and liberties of the righteous innocent who would not agree with the dissenters. Thus, Moroni did not use military force against Amalickiah until Amalickiah had departed with his followers for the land of Nephi, where he intended to (and later did) strengthen the armies of the Lamanites and stir them up to attack the Nephites (Alma 46:30–31). Likewise, Moroni did not use force against Morianton until he attempted to lead his dissenting people to another land which, under the circumstances of the time, would have "serious consequences among the people of Nephi, yea which . . . would lead to the overthrow of their liberty" (Alma

50:32). Again, Moroni did not use military force against the king-men until "the Lamanites were coming into the borders of the land" (Alma 51:14).

The progression of tactics used by Moroni to respond to the totalitarian plans of Amalickiah is revealing. First he entered into the debate—expressing himself in words and by symbols (i.e., the title of liberty) (Alma 46:11–28). Then he organized others and sent his message and ideas throughout the land, rousing many others to oppose Amalickiah, and even causing some of the dissenters who followed Amalickiah to "[doubt] . . . the justice of the cause in which they had undertaken" (Alma 46:28–29). Moroni did not use force to stop Amalickiah and the dissenters who followed him until Amalickiah attempted to lead his supporters to join the enemy Lamanites—who only a year earlier had invaded the Nephite lands and killed thousands of Nephites (Alma 43–44). And, of course, after he had defeated the followers of Amalickiah, Moroni readily accepted them back into the fold of Nephite society upon their simply making a covenant to support the freedom of the Nephites (Alma 46:35–36).<sup>11</sup>

The Book of Mormon also shows that enforcement of the laws may quell dissent (Words of Mormon 1:15–18; Alma 62:9–11). Law enforcement may involve the use of force or compulsion. However, law also functions in important ways without strict enforcement. Indeed, the most important functions of law may be the noncompulsory functions of expressing community values, giving notice of what is expected, admonishing persons to do what is deemed appropriate, educating the public by the formal processes of enactment and declaration, and channeling human behavior by the threat of enforcement. In enlightened societies, most law enforcement is by public education and citizen self-enforcement, i.e., citizen compliance without police compulsion. Even in times when there is turmoil, external law enforcement by

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<sup>11</sup> While other factors may have restrained and limited his response, Moroni's use of military force against the dissenting king-men also shows this pattern of patient suffering until the lives of the innocent are in jeopardy (Alma 51:13–17). Likewise, regardless of political or military constraints that may have been relevant, Moroni did not strictly enforce the laws requiring faithfulness and loyalty until thirteen bloody war years after Amalickiah's rebellion (Alma 62:10).

police and courts is done in large part for its deterrent effect. Thus, the enactment and prudent enforcement of laws may be significant parts of an overall plan of noncompulsory response to dissent.

Strict enforcement of severe laws is not always necessary. Mormon observed that in time of great national crisis, with Lamanites invading externally and dissenters rebelling internally, "it became expedient that this law should be strictly observed" and violators "speedily executed according to the law" (Alma 62:10). The negative implicit in this statement is that when there were not such extreme crises, it was not expedient that the laws be enforced so strictly, speedily, and by such severe methods.<sup>12</sup>

The content of the laws enforced in the Book of Mormon also shows a careful regard for the rights of dissenters to think and believe what they want to, a respect for their rights of conscience. Thus, "the law could have no power on any man for his belief" (Alma 1:17; 30:9), but for their illegal actions dissenters could be punished (Words of Mormon 1:15–16; Alma 1:16–18; 30:10–11).

I believe that Moroni, Helaman, Pahoran, and others patiently endured a great deal of affliction without reacting coercively, and apparently without insisting on strict or speedy enforcement of the laws, precisely because they respected the rights of conscience of the dissenters. Some things (indeed, most important things) cannot be accomplished by compulsion. For instance, Zion cannot be built by force. Becoming "one" is a voluntary process, not a matter of compulsion (4 Nephi 1:2–3; Moses 7:18). Thus, Moroni used as little coercion as the circumstances required, asserting military force only as a last resort, and repeatedly allowing dissenters who had taken arms in rebellion to "escape" strict justice (Alma 46:35; 50:36; 51:20–21). Perhaps he believed (as I do) that punishment and force could not convert their consciences. Force could stop the dissenters from doing irreparable damage to others, but the sword ultimately can only be used as a shield. Repentance and conversion are matters of conscience. Because the conscience usually revolts when force is applied, force should be avoided

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Jarom 1:5; Mosiah 29:15 (strict laws enforced in times of peace and prosperity).

whenever possible if the goal is to reclaim the dissenters, as it always should be.

Thus, there is a need to endure the affliction and adversity caused by dissenters patiently (though not silently: D&C 101:76; 121:41), for eventually some of the dissenters and persecutors will repent, will be reconverted, and will advance (perhaps complete) the work we have begun (cf. 3 Nephi 18:30–32). Without the dissenters who will repent—if we endure the afflictions they cause and work to reclaim them—we cannot build Zion.

### **Seventh, a two-sided approach involving spiritual revival plus civil defense is effective to quell dissent.**

Pahoran's inspiring reply to Moroni when Moroni had written a stern letter admonishing him to send support to the Nephite armies states this principle well.

Therefore, my beloved brother, Moroni, let us resist evil, and whatsoever evil we cannot resist with our words, yea, such as rebellions and dissensions, let us resist them with our swords, that we may retain our freedom, that we may rejoice in the great privilege of our church, and in the cause of our Redeemer and our God. (Alma 61:14)

We should use words to persuade whenever possible; "persuasion" is the first principle of righteous priesthood influence, and the second is "long-suffering" (D&C 121:41). When persuasion fails and it is necessary to maintain freedom and church from those who would destroy them, then "in the cause of our Redeemer and our God," as inspired, resort to the sword may be justified.

For instance, King Benjamin used a dual words-plus-force-of-law approach to establish peace during his lengthy reign. In his reign "he had somewhat of contentions among his own people. And . . . also . . . the armies of the Lamanites came down out of the land of Nephi, to battle against his people" (Words of Mormon 1:12–13). King Benjamin personally led his people against their external enemies, the Lamanites, "until they had driven them out of all the lands of their inheritance" (Words of



Mormon 1:14). Then, having established the physical security of his people, he enforced the laws against the “false Christs,” “false prophets, and false preachers and teachers among the people” until “their mouths had been shut, and they [were] punished according to their crimes” (Words of Mormon 1:15–16). Still there were “many dissensions away unto the Lamanites” (Words of Mormon 1:16), but King Benjamin was supported by “many holy men in the land, and they did speak the word of God with power and with authority; and they did use much sharpness because of the stiffneckedness of the people” (Words of Mormon 1:17). With the great combined efforts of the king and the prophets, by law enforcement and preaching, they “did once more establish peace in the land. And now there was no more contention in all the land of Zarahemla, among all the people who belonged to king Benjamin, so that king Benjamin had continual peace all the remainder of his days” (Words of Mormon 1:18; Mosiah 1:1).

In Moroni’s day it was not merely the secular authorities (generals and chief judges) who established the peace. The high priest of the church, Helaman, worked closely with Moroni to quell dissent. Before the lengthy Nephite-Lamanite wars began, he tried to set the church in order because the dissensions that soon were to plague the nation were evident in the church (Alma 45:20–22). Just as Moroni, the great general, prayed and preached powerfully (Alma 46:16–27), Helaman, the great prophet, took up the sword and led an army (the 2000 stripling warriors) (Alma 56–58). The establishment of peace did not merely mean that the Lamanites were defeated, but also that the gospel was widely preached and that the people repented (Alma 62:45–51).

**Eighth, responding to dissent is a responsibility of all the members of the community, not just the leaders.**

For example, King Benjamin was able to overcome dissensions and war to establish peace (and lay the foundation for his great sermon in Mosiah 2–6) because he was not the only person working to quell the dissensions. Rather, he succeeded in eradicat-

ing dissent "with the assistance of the holy prophets who were among his people" (Words of Mormon 1:16).

For . . . there were many holy men in the land, and they did speak the word of God with power and with authority; and they did use much sharpness because of the stiffneckedness of the people—Wherefore, with the help of these, king Benjamin, by laboring with all the might of his body and the faculty of his whole soul, and also the prophets, did once more establish peace in the land (Words of Mormon 1:17, 18).

Likewise, Moroni did not act alone in defeating the rebellion of Amalickiah and the dissenters he led. Rather he made public proclamations to motivate others to action. The response was tremendous: "behold, the people came running together with their armor girded about their loins, rending their garments in token or as a covenant" (Alma 46:21). Then Moroni "sent forth in all the parts of the land where there were dissensions, and gathered together all the people who were desirous to maintain their liberty, to stand against Amalickiah and those who had dissented" (Alma 46:28). Note that Amalickiah did not abandon his plan to usurp control of the Nephite government until he "saw that the people of Moroni were more numerous than" his supporters, and that "his people were doubtful concerning the justice of the cause in which they had undertaken" (Alma 46:29). Opposition to the plans of the dissenters was essential to thwarting Amalickiah's designs.

Similarly, because of "the many little dissensions and disturbances which had been among the people" when Helaman became the high priest of the church, he found it expedient "that the word of God should be declared among them, yea and that a regulation should be made throughout the church" (Alma 45:21). Then Helaman "and his brethren" went forth to preach, and they "did appoint priests and teachers throughout all the land, over all the churches" (Alma 45:22-23). Many members of the church were involved, but there was order.

Responding to dissent is not just the responsibility of the leaders of society. The Lord has revealed in our day that "men should be anxiously engaged in a good cause, and do many things of

their own free will, and bring to pass much righteousness," and not wait to be commanded in all things (D&C 58:26–29). Thus, response to dissenters must have significant community support to overcome successfully the problems of dissent. Nevertheless, all things must be "done in order" (D&C 58:55). The leaders of the community must lead, and the community must support, the response to dissent; likewise, members of the church should follow the counsel and example of church leaders in responding to dissent within the church.

**Ninth, dissent periodically occurs in both the church and in the nation, and some dissensions will develop despite the greatest care to prevent dissension.**

It is noteworthy that dissension in the Nephite church was associated with contention in the nation (Alma 45:21–46:7; Helaman 4:1). In other words, there may be a spill-over effect. The spillage may move in both directions. For instance, dissension within the church preceded (and perhaps spiritually caused) the great civil dissensions that soon plagued the entire Nephite nation as it plunged into a terribly destructive series of wars with the Lamanites, who were led and strengthened by Nephite dissenters (Alma 45:20–24; Alma 46–62).

Dissension is often caused by pride (Alma 45:23–24; Helaman 3:1; 3 Nephi 6:10). Often dissension is encouraged by self-promoting, wicked demagogues like Amalickiah and Pachus. Frequently they are supported by other ambitious people who see dissent as the fast track to fame and glory or power (Alma 46:4–5; 51:5–8; 61:3–4, 8). Clearly, however, not all who are misled by such persons are of the same venal character (as the reconversion of many dissenters shows). As a byproduct of pride, dissent simply seems as inevitable in the fallen world as the cycle of humility-obedience-prosperity-pride that is described repeatedly throughout the Book of Mormon.

Dissension in the church may develop when one prophetic administration ends and another begins. Thus, after Alma<sub>2</sub> turned over the management of the affairs of the church to his son, Helaman, and "after Helaman and his brethren had appointed priests and teachers over the churches . . . there arose a dissension

among them, and they would not give heed to the words of Helaman and his brethren" (Alma 45:23). A new "regulation" also was implemented by the new high priest that may have provoked dissatisfaction among some persons in the church (Alma 45:21).

Thus, even diligent care and watchfulness and righteous leadership cannot always prevent *all* dissent. For instance, an influential group of lower Nephite judges who aspired to have greater power "were led away by Amalickiah to dissensions, notwithstanding the preaching of Helaman and his brethren, yea, notwithstanding their exceedingly great care over the church" (Alma 46:6). Mormon commented: "Thus we see how quick the children of men do forget the Lord their God, yea, how quick to do iniquity, and to be led away by the evil one" (Alma 46:8).

Thus, dissent and the attendant evils of persecution may be unavoidable in the plan of salvation in which "it must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things" (2 Nephi 2:11). Dissension from the church and society performs a self-cleansing function that leaves the remainder of the church or nation better able to unify and to progress in harmony. Perhaps dissension is one manifestation of the wheat-and-tares separation that is inevitable (Matthew 13:24–30; D&C 86:1–7; see also Jacob 5:65–69). In the last days things will be shaken and turned upside down in order to liberate those who have been ensnared by Lucifer (1 Nephi 14:15–17; 2 Nephi 23:6–11; 28:19; Jacob 3:11; 3 Nephi 21:8–22; D&C 45:43). Dissent appears to be one of the causes of such turmoil and unshackling.

### **Tenth, the Lord blesses the faithful who suffer through the trials and persecution that dissent brings.**

This is true for both individuals and for the community. For individuals, dissent provides the environment in which refinement occurs. Patient endurance in times of dissent brings blessings to the humble and faithful who suffer. For example, following one period of great dissension, then prosperity,

pride . . . began to enter into the church—not into the church of God, but into the hearts of the people who professed to belong to the church of God—And they

were lifted up in pride even to the persecution of many of their brethren. Now this was a great evil, which did cause the more humble part of the people to suffer great persecutions, and to wade through much affliction. Nevertheless they did fast and pray oft, and did wax stronger and stronger in their humility, and firmer and firmer in the faith of Christ, unto the filling their souls with joy and consolation, yea, even to the purifying and the sanctification of their hearts, which sanctification cometh because of their yielding their hearts unto God. (Helaman 3:33–35)

Moreover, time and again periods of peace and prosperity followed periods of dissent in societies that endured and overcame dissent. For example, in King Benjamin's day there were "much contention and many dissensions away unto the Lamanites," but by "laboring with all the might of his body and the faculty of his whole soul, and also the prophets, [they] did once more establish peace in the land" (Words of Mormon 1:16, 18). And King Benjamin's people enjoyed "continual peace all the remainder of his days" (Mosiah 1:1). Likewise, Mormon writes that just three years after putting down the rebellion of the dissenter Amalickiah (and only three years before the dissension of Morianton and his people), "there never was a happier time among the people of Nephi, since the days of Nephi, than in the days of Moroni, yea, even at this time, in the twenty and first year of the reign of the judges" (Alma 50:23).

Because dissent seems inevitable in the fallen world, that does not mean that it is acceptable to the Lord, his disciples, or in his church. In his ministry in America, Jesus Christ explicitly commanded his disciples:

And there shall be no disputations among you, as there have hitherto been; neither shall there be disputations among you concerning the points of my doctrine, as there have hitherto been. For verily, verily I say unto you, he that hath the spirit of contention is not of me, but is of the devil, who is the father of contention, and he stirreth up the hearts of men to contend with anger, one with another. Behold, this is not my doc-

trine, to stir up the hearts of men with anger, one against another; but this is my doctrine, that such things should be done away. (3 Nephi 11:28-30; see also 3 Nephi 11:22; 27:3)

On another occasion he promised them, "blessed are ye if ye have no disputations among you" (3 Nephi 18:34).

He also taught that "it must needs be that offenses come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!" (Matthew 18:7; Luke 17:1-2; D&C 54:4-6).

The efforts of the righteous to prevent and quell dissent are not in vain, even if dissent does not immediately abate. Indeed, especially in difficult times, the efforts of the righteous to respond to dissent are essential. Commenting retrospectively on the war-filled period of Nephite history, Mormon noted that "there had been murders and contentions, and dissensions, and all manner of iniquity among the people of Nephi; nevertheless for the righteous' sake, yea, because of the prayers of the righteous, they were spared" (Alma 62:40).

## Conclusion

The Book of Mormon provides valuable lessons about living in times of dissent. More than any other volume of scripture it addresses the problems of dissent. It reveals that there are different forms of dissent (some of which have not been described in this article), that it occurs in different contexts, and that the responses to dissent vary depending on the type of dissent and the circumstances.

The Book of Mormon relates that dissent within the church and nation intensified in the century prior to the coming of the Savior to the Nephites. If that pattern is repeated in the last days preceding the second coming of Christ, it is likely that dissent will continue to grow in the Church, in affiliated institutions, and in the society and nation generally in the future. It seems that many patterns described in the Book of Mormon are being echoed in our time. In the Book of Mormon, dissent in the nation led to contention, rebellion, exodus, treason, sorrow, war, destruction, conquest, and eventually the dissolution of the government. Within the church dissent was associated with contention, pride,

false doctrine, unresponsiveness, apostasy, and much individual wickedness and iniquity. But the Book of Mormon has been given to us that we may profit from the lessons of the past. It teaches us how the faithful within the church and nation may righteously face, endure, respond to, overcome, and be refined by the challenges of dissent. It gives us the firm hope that Christ came and will come again to establish his glorious kingdom among his disciples who faithfully resist, endure, and overcome the trials and temptations of dissent.

Kevin Christensen

Abstract: In an article criticizing the methodology of the Book of Mormon, David Wright described critical scholarship and narrative as contrasting paradigms used to approach the scriptural text. This article explores the nature of paradigm debate in general and discusses critical flaws in Wright's critical approach and discusses critical flaws in his definition of believing paradigms.

What is new proved was once only imagin'd

William Blake

"The Marriage of Heaven and Hell"

Several points made in David P. Wright's article on "Historical Criticism: A Necessary Element in the Search for Religious Truth"<sup>1</sup> deserve some expansion and comment. He does well to begin by talking about paradigm debate, but he does not explain the phenomenon sufficiently. Indeed, what he does not explain about paradigm debate leads directly to why I am not impressed by his position.

<sup>1</sup> Mary Lynn Johnson and John E. Grant, eds., *Blake's Poetry and Designs* (New York: Norton, 1979), 82.

<sup>2</sup> David P. Wright, "Historical Criticism: A Necessary Element in the Search for Religious Truth," *Journal of Mormon Studies* 1997: 23-24.