



1-31-1995

The Book of Mormon's Message on Brotherhood

Sidney B. Sperry

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms>

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Sperry, Sidney B. (1995) "The Book of Mormon's Message on Brotherhood," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*: Vol. 4 : No. 1 , Article 27.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol4/iss1/27>

This Feature Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Book of Mormon Studies by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.



NEAL A. MAXWELL INSTITUTE
FOR RELIGIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY • PROVO, UTAH

Title The Book of Mormon's Message on Brotherhood

Author(s) Sidney B. Sperry

Reference *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 4/1 (1995): 239-45.

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

Abstract The Book of Mormon exhibits the intimate relationship between God and his people. The brother of Jared's experience is a fine example. The driving force of the prophets was moral and religious, rather than economic and political. Social injustice was condemned by Nephi, Jacob, Alma, and Captain Moroni. Although little is said about the status of the family, respect for women and family affection are standard. Workers were well treated and friendship was promoted between Nephites and Lamanites. The Book of Mormon displays a high caliber of personal religion and brotherhood.

The Book of Mormon's Message on Brotherhood

Abstract: The Book of Mormon exhibits the intimate relationship between God and his people. The brother of Jared's experience is a fine example. The driving force of the prophets was moral and religious, rather than economic and political. Social injustice was condemned by Nephi, Jacob, Alma, and Captain Moroni. Although little is said about the status of the family, respect for women and family affection are standard. Workers were well treated and friendship was promoted between Nephites and Lamanites. The Book of Mormon displays a high caliber of personal religion and brotherhood.

God's Covenant Relationship with His People

One of the conspicuous religious characteristics found in the Book of Mormon is the warm personal relationship existing between God and his people. To the Nephite branch of Israel, God was not a remote being, shut off from men by an impenetrable veil and acting only through secondary causes and impersonal laws. He was a living, personal, dynamic being who entered into a covenant relationship with these people even as with the ancient Hebrews.

The idea of a covenant between God and his people is expressed more than 115 times in the Nephite record. The close

relationship existing between the Nephites and God enabled them to understand more completely the conduct that God required of them. Therefore, we should not underrate or deprecate the significance of this sacred book as a means to the solution of many of our own religious problems.

To be sure, Nephite society, even in its period of full flower, must have been relatively simple and primitive compared with our own vast, complex, and highly organized social structure. Nevertheless, we can use much of the religious teaching of the Nephites just as it stands, because it expresses eternal principles of righteousness that through generations of time remain immutably the same.

One of the finest examples of the intimate relationship that exists between God and his people is detailed in the book of Ether. In this account, a great prophet known only as the brother of Jared went up on a high mountain and prayed that the Lord would touch sixteen small stones so that they would give off light. These stones were to illuminate eight ships in which the prophet's people were to cross the sea to a new continent. The Lord did as he was asked and touched the stones one by one with his finger. The veil was lifted from the eyes of the brother of Jared, and he saw the finger of the Lord; yet he feared and fell down before him. The Lord knew the great faith of the man before him and revealed himself to the prophet. The premortal Savior then said:

Behold, I am he who was prepared from the foundation of the world to redeem my people. Behold, I am Jesus Christ. . . . In me shall all mankind have life, and that eternally, even they who shall believe on my name; and they shall become my sons and daughters.

And never have I showed myself unto man whom I have created, for never has man believed in me as thou hast. Seest thou that ye are created after mine own image? Yea, even all men were created in the beginning after mine own image.

Behold, this body, which ye now behold, is the body of my spirit, and man have I created after the body of my spirit; and even as I appear unto thee to be in the spirit will I appear unto my people in the flesh. (Ether 3:14-16)

Social Issues in the Book of Mormon

Students of religion are interested in discovering the attitude of Book of Mormon prophets toward injustice, poverty, wealth, cruelty, luxury, slavery, and other social questions.

We know that Nephi, as a prophet-king, ruled with justice, equity, and righteousness. But we know little or nothing about the attitudes of the kings who succeeded him, at least until the days of the elder Mosiah (Omni 1:12), with regard to such social issues. However, judging from the prophetic writings of Jacob, Enos, Jarom, and Amaleki, we can justly assume the existence of a great deal of social injustice during their time.

Jacob bitterly attacked the illicit marriage practices of Nephites who took unto themselves many wives and concubines, and excoriated the men who were guilty of breaking the hearts of their legitimate wives and children. Jacob chastised his erring brethren in this manner:

And the hand of providence hath smiled upon you most pleasingly, that you have obtained many riches; and because some of you have obtained more abundantly than that of your brethren ye are lifted up in the pride of your hearts, and wear stiff necks and high heads because of the costliness of your apparel, and persecute your brethren because ye suppose that ye are better than they.

And now, my brethren, do ye suppose that God justifieth you in this thing? Behold, I say unto you, Nay. But he condemneth you, and if ye persist in these things his judgments must speedily come unto you.

Think of your brethren like unto yourselves, and be familiar with all and free with your substance, that they may be rich like unto you. But before ye seek for riches, seek ye for the kingdom of God. (Jacob 2:13–14, 17–18)

The prophet Alma shows concern for brotherhood among the Nephites by denouncing those who mock and persecute their fellowmen; moreover, he takes to task lovers of luxury and riches who think they are better than their less fortunate brethren:

Is there one among you that doth make a mock of his brother, or that heapeth upon him persecutions?

Wo unto such an one. . . .

. . . yea, will ye still persist in the wearing of costly apparel and setting your hearts upon the vain things of the world, upon your riches?

Yea, will ye persist in supposing that ye are better one than another? (Alma 5:30-31, 53-54)

Careful study reveals that the Nephites had highly enlightened views on the use of riches and also on pride, power, inequality, authority, and "the vain things of the world" (see 3 Nephi 6:12-15).

It is a curious fact that the Book of Mormon uses the word *injustice* only twice (Alma 42:1, 55:19); but the word *justice* is used about sixty times. The word *cruelty* is used only once and *cruel* twice; yet, the Nephite record uses *mercy* about eighty-four times, *merciful* forty-six times, and *compassion* twelve times.

The Nephite position on *slavery* (used only once) may be judged from the following passage, which refers to Moroni, a great general:

And Moroni was a strong and a mighty man; he was a man of a perfect understanding; yea, a man that did not delight in bloodshed; a man whose soul did joy in the liberty and the freedom of his country, and his brethren from bondage and slavery. (Alma 48:11)

Moreover, in all periods of Nephite history, a great antipathy to bondage is expressed.

When the Nephite people reached the acme of their social and religious development after the coming of Christ, they lived in a state that the world today might well envy: The Book of Mormon records that:

The people were all converted unto the Lord, upon all the face of the land, both Nephites and Lamanites, and there were no contentions and disputations among them, and every man did deal justly with one another.

And they had all things common among them; therefore there were not rich and poor, bond and free,

but they were all made free, and partakers of the heavenly gift. (4 Nephi 1:2-3)

Throughout the Book of Mormon it is evident that the driving force of the prophets was moral and religious, rather than economic and political. The prophets did not attack social and economic distinctions as such among their people, but seem to have regarded equal economic opportunity and social station as the ideal. Their main concern was with right and wrong, with justice and oppression, with mercy and man's inhumanity to man.

It should not be inferred from their frequent concern with the rich and riches that the Nephites were socialists. Riches and the rich were denounced only when fundamental human rights and well-being were violated.

The constant humanitarianism of the prophets of the Book of Mormon, their drive against iniquity and all forms of oppression, and their passionate concern for the happiness and welfare of their people confer on their teachings a perennial value and everlasting validity.

Perhaps because the Book of Mormon is only an abridgment, we find little said about the status of the family. However, enough is said to give us a fair idea of the relations existing between husbands and wives and children and parents. We can assume that the early Nephites and Jaredites had family customs very similar to those of other normal Mideast peoples of their times. Ordinarily, Mideast society was a man's society. That is the reason relatively little is said in the Old Testament about women. Possibly the same reasoning would also apply to the Book of Mormon.

It must not be supposed that women and children were not loved and respected. But the man's place in society was emphasized more than is the custom today. That it was the ideal of Nephite husbands to love their wives is shown by the Book of Mormon in many ways. The prophets, too, believed in happy families (see Jacob 2:31-32; 3:5-7, 10).

Members of Nephite families had normal affection for each other, as is noted in a descriptive passage that describes a situation following defeat in battle:

And now there was a great mourning and lamentation among the people of Limhi, the widow mourning

for her husband, the son and the daughter mourning for their father, and the brothers for their brethren. (Mosiah 21:9)

In another place we read that:

The Nephites were inspired by a better cause, for they were not fighting for monarchy nor power but they were fighting for their homes and their liberties, their wives and their children, and their all. . . .

And again, the Lord has said that: Ye shall defend your families even unto bloodshed. (Alma 43:45, 47)

Little is said in the Book of Mormon about the status of hired servants. No mention is made of workers' guilds or the equivalent of our modern unions. Reference is often made to skilled workmanship in various fields of endeavor, but the social state of workers and the conditions under which they worked are rarely dealt with. Since in normal times the Nephites and Jaredites were spiritually enlightened peoples, it is likely that the status of the hired servant and worker was reasonably good.

The Nephites and Jaredites, like most peoples, practiced the art of friendship. Though no stories of warm personal relationships such as those of David and Jonathan or Ruth and Naomi of the Old Testament are recorded in the Nephite scripture, we do find instances of friendship that must have been unusually fine (see 2 Nephi 1:30-31; Alma 17:1-3; 31:6).

That the Nephites did attempt to promote friendly relations between themselves and their traditional enemies, the Lamanites, is pointed out a number of times in the Book of Mormon (see Mosiah 28:1-8).

The Nephite attitude toward borrowing from one's neighbor is beautifully expressed in the following words:

And I would that ye should remember, that whosoever among you borroweth of his neighbor should return the thing that he borroweth, according as he doth agree, or else thou shalt commit sin; and perhaps thou shalt cause thy neighbor to commit sin also. (Mosiah 4:28)

A strong humanitarian strain runs through the entire Book of Mormon, sufficient to conclude that the principles of personal religion and brotherhood as taught in that book are of a surprisingly high caliber.