



Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel

Volume 15 | Number 3

Article 10

10-2014

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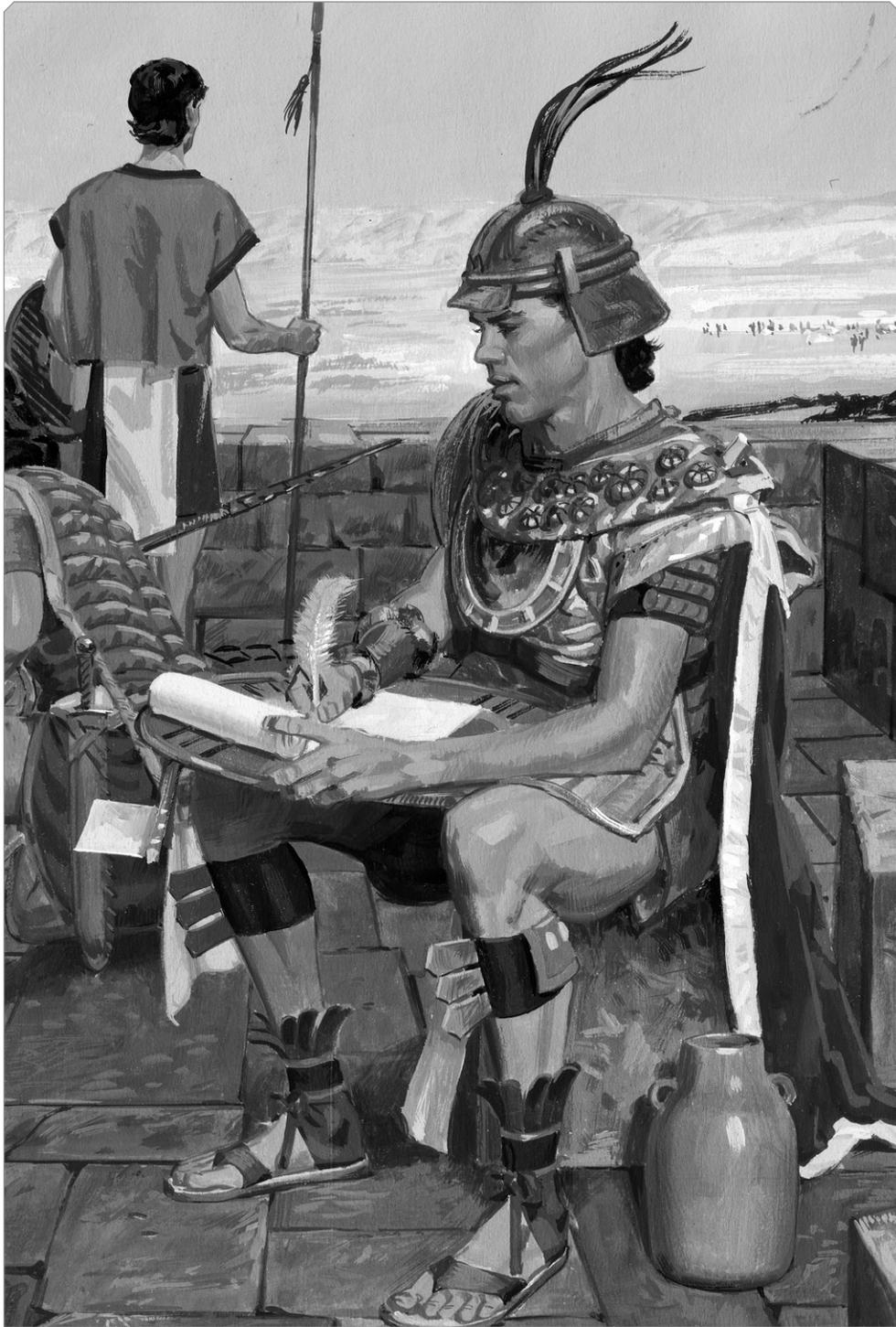
Oralyn Moran

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Moran, Oralyn. "Moroni and Pahoran." *Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel* 15, no. 3 (2014): 102-115. <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/re/vol15/iss3/10>

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Moroni writes an epistle to Pahoran.

By Jerry Thompson, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

Moroni and Pahoran

ORALYN MORAN

OraLyn Moran (oralyn.moran@gmail.com) is an ESL instructor in the Department of Linguistics and English Language at BYU.

The text of the Book of Mormon provides us a lengthy cast of characters. Through the course of the narrative we know quickly and clearly which of those ancient people were righteous and which were wicked. This helps us so that even as children we know we want to be like Nephi, Alma, and Mormon, and we feel warned to avoid the mistakes and wickedness of Laman, Korihor, and Amalickiah.

There is, however, one instance where we see two men, both presumably righteous, in conflict with each other: Captain Moroni and Chief Judge Pahoran (see Alma 61). This creates an internal conflict for us as well. Many have written thoughtfully and well on this topic, with the predominant interpretation being sympathetic to Pahoran. In the continued spirit of academic analysis, this article will offer another interpretation, one that will hopefully give a different insight into the actions and character of each man and be congruent with Mormon's evident respect for Captain Moroni. Additionally, this article will show how certain cultural blinders may unknowingly influence us in our interpretation of why each man reacted as he did. There are great lessons to be learned from this new perspective.

Hugh Nibley offers one of the best examples of the internal conflict we feel regarding Moroni and Pahoran. On August 19, 1983, Nibley delivered the BYU commencement address, which he entitled, “Leaders to Managers: The Fatal Shift.”¹ He explains how Amalickiah was a manager rather than a leader, and he contrasts him with Moroni’s charismatic leadership. He concludes his point by saying, “By all means, brethren, let us take Captain Moroni for our model, and never forget what he fought for—the poor, the outcast, and the despised; and what he fought against—pride, power, wealth, and ambition; or *how* he fought—as the generous, considerate, and magnanimous foe, a leader in every sense.” Then, in the 1990 publication *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, Nibley, with what seems to be a much more informal audience, again refers to Moroni in the context of a discussion on war. This time Nibley’s tone is more glowering than glowing: “A good example is Moroni getting on his high horse when he writes to Pahoran. Speaking as a general in the midst of war, he blows his top and writes very indiscreet letters.”²

The two quotes seem to contradict each other in tone and substance. While Nibley could surely explain the apparent incongruence if he were here today, this incongruence seems to be reflected in the general Latter-day Saint population and how many of us still view Captain Moroni. Officially, Captain Moroni is a stellar leader. Lambert, in the entry on Moroni in *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, characterizes Moroni as an impressive military strategist, a great patriot, and a leader in righteousness.³ Much like in Nibley’s commencement speech, we acknowledge his great qualities. However, many of us have at least some ambivalence toward Moroni when it comes to his interaction with Pahoran. While we probably would not use the terms “high horse” or “blowing his top,” we see his letter as a mistake and an emotional overreaction. We know we’re supposed to admire him, because Mormon makes it plain that he is an example of the best of men. Consequently, in our discussions about the interaction between Moroni and Pahoran we say things like, “Moroni was a really good man; he just made a mistake.” We can’t imagine how someone with unconditional love could write a letter like that to another righteous member of the Church. However, in this ambivalence, we are in disagreement with Mormon, who set Moroni up as the kind of man to emulate and to shake the foundations of hell. His recommendation is wholehearted and without nuance.

Interestingly, we have no such mixed feelings about Pahoran. We talk about the “Pahoran principle,” meaning we should not take offense but meet

railing with gentleness. Much has been written on this, and it certainly is a good “take away” from the story. We see him as a victim of difficult circumstances beyond his control when the kingmen take control of the government away from him. And in spite of all this adversity, he is able to respond to Moroni’s accusations and threats with equanimity and graciousness. He seems to epitomize long-suffering and unconditional love. That certainly makes him seem great. If Mormon hadn’t specifically stated what a great man Captain Moroni was, most of us would think that Pahoran was just as great, if not greater.

Mormon and Captain Moroni

This contrasts fairly sharply with Mormon’s thought. Mormon seems to establish a connection with Captain Moroni early. In Alma 43:16–17, he first identifies Moroni as a newly appointed chief captain over all the Nephites. In these verses he stresses that “he [Captain Moroni] was only twenty and five years old when he was appointed chief captain over the armies of the Nephites.” It’s interesting, given Mormon’s own young age when he was appointed chief captain, that he stresses Moroni’s youth. It is also interesting to note that in “the war chapters,” as Alma 43–63 are commonly referred to, Mormon’s record becomes much less abridged. We see much more detail per year. Moroni appears on the scene in the eighteenth year of the judges and appoints his son as his replacement in the thirty-fifth year of the judges. So seventeen years are covered in twenty chapters. While the entire book of Alma is in more detail, the war chapters present little preaching of doctrine. Presumably, Moroni wishes to illustrate doctrine rather than preach it. In Alma 48:17–18, Mormon editorializes, “if all men had been, and were, and ever would be, like unto Moroni, behold, the very powers of hell would have been shaken forever.” He then likens Captain Moroni to Alma and his sons and the sons of Mosiah: “for they were all men of God.” Then, he specifically mentions Helaman and his brethren, stating that “they were no less serviceable” (v. 19). Perhaps Mormon slows down his narrative in order to illustrate and underscore what it means to be a man of God.

The question arises why Mormon made the editorial decisions he did. Why did he include the letters to and from Pahoran? Were they to support his assertion that Moroni was a man of God, or were they to show, as many in our dispensation have stated, that even great men make mistakes? There is nothing in Mormon’s narrative to support the latter. There is no apology from

Captain Moroni, nor even any hint of chagrin, only rejoicing to find out that Pahoran is not a traitor. Also, it seems unusual for Mormon to set up Moroni in such superlative terms, then include his letter to Pahoran, if his intent were to show what we view as Captain Moroni's pique.

Another problem with this “fallible Moroni” view is that it is inconsistent with the character that Moroni has displayed thus far. Moroni was always guided by principle. Early in his chief captainship he shows humility by appealing to the prophet Alma for help in knowing where the Nephites should go to best defend themselves against the Lamanites (see Alma 43:23–24). The integrity of the Nephite cause is uppermost in his mind and determines his actions: “And he also knowing that it was the only desire of the Nephites to preserve their lands, and their liberty, and their church, therefore he thought it no sin that he should defend them by stratagem” (Alma 43:30). When the Nephites quailed in the face of the Lamanite horde, Captain Moroni “inspired their hearts with these [same] thoughts—yea, the thoughts of their lands, their liberty, yea, their freedom from bondage” (Alma 43:48). This passion for righteous defense is eventually made into the title of liberty, which becomes the mission statement for the entire Nephite nation, guiding them through very difficult times to an ultimate, righteous victory. Such consistent, righteous leadership does not sound like a quality of someone who would impulsively write an angry letter. Moroni's control is well documented in his ability to stop on the head of an emotional dime in heated battle and offer peace to the Lamanites (see Alma 43:51–54). In Alma 48:11–13, Mormon characterizes Moroni as

a strong and mighty man; he was a man of 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;

Yea, a man whose heart did swell with thanksgiving to his God, for the many privileges and blessings which he bestowed upon his people; a man who did labor exceedingly for the welfare and safety of his people.

Yea, and he was a man who was firm in the faith of Christ, and he had sworn with an oath to defend his people, his rights, and his country, and his religion, even to the loss of his blood.

Such a man, a man of perfect understanding, a man firm in the faith of Christ, would not let his temper get the best of him. Mormon saw Moroni as a man in control of his emotions in battle, as well as in his interaction with Pahoran.

Our Cultural Blind Spot

However, Pahoran grabs our sympathies. His response to Moroni is measured and peaceful. He explains his problem—the kingmen having ousted him from control of the government. We feel for his difficult situation, believing that he was doing his best, given the conditions. Does Mormon, the abridger, share our feelings?

To answer that question we need to take an internal look at the parts of our culture that provide the frame for our interpretation. First, all the wars and difficulties borne by the Nephites seem very remote to us. We don't experience the fear of death that the Nephites dealt with on a daily basis. We don't feel the starvation that the two thousand stripling warriors experienced as they struggled to defend their land. We don't mourn the loss of brothers, sisters, mothers, fathers, and children captured, enslaved, and murdered by the Lamanites. Those are things Book of Mormon people understood, but most of us do not. Thus it is very easy for us to sit in our own “thoughtless stupor” as we interpret actions and make judgments.

Second, our culture sets us up to sympathize with Pahoran and fault Moroni. We as a society are susceptible to excuses, regardless of their merit. In a famous psychological study that has come to be known as the “Copy Machine Study,” Dr. Ellen J. Langer showed that we accept just about any excuse when the cost to do so is low. In the study, Dr. Langer stationed a “plant” at a busy graduate school office. This was in the 1970s and 1980s, when people relied on a copy machine rather than a computer printer for copies. The plant would approach the person making copies and ask to “butt in” to make copies. About 60 percent of the time the interruption was allowed. We probably believe that it is a sign of our goodness and empathy that we would honor someone's request based on urgency. However, Dr. Langer took it a step further. The plant would again ask to interrupt someone at the copy machine but furnished the reason as “because I have to make copies.” Even with such a meaningless reason (after all, they *all* had to make copies), the people stepped aside nearly 95 percent of the time. Our internal scripts compel us to honor excuses. Dr. Langer discovered that meaningless excuses lost their power only when the plant had a huge amount of copying. At that point the people saw a higher cost to themselves and became more discerning about the excuse.⁴

Pahoran's Case

The “Copy Machine Study” has great implications for us in judging the conflict between Pahoran and Moroni. Pahoran offered an excuse for his behavior. In Alma 61:3 Pahoran explains that the kingmen had “risen up in rebellion.” He explains his dilemma and we naturally accept it, many times adding on a good measure of sympathy. Unfortunately, the companion of that type of sympathy is recrimination for Moroni and his accusations. Once we know of the excuse and accept it, Moroni begins to look like quite the cad. Accepting the excuse costs us nothing, since we do not feel the same threat, starvation, and mourning that the Nephites did. However, if we stop to review Pahoran and the merit of his excuse or reason from the viewpoint of those enduring the consequences, we inevitably begin to see Captain Moroni in much better terms.

Some of the first to pay the price for Pahoran's inability to send troops and supplies were the 2,060 stripling warriors. These were presumably seminary-aged (or younger) young men sent to fight a man's war. Having fought vigorously and valiantly, they were left with no food, no reinforcements, and no communication to tell them why. Alma 58:7 says, “And it came to pass that we did wait in these difficult circumstances for the space of many months, even until we were about to perish for the want of food.” This is not the hyperbolic starvation that we joke about with growing teenage boys. These boys were on the verge of death by starvation. When reinforcements were sent, the number was not only inadequate, but embarrassingly inadequate. Perhaps if Arnold Friberg had painted two thousand emaciated stripling warriors marching to fight a battle, we would begin to understand the injustice. Would it have helped them to know why they were not receiving more help? It would certainly have helped them in planning what to do. Yet, though a small contingent of men was able to arrive, a message from Pahoran did not.

If we were to make a modern-day analogy, it would be like our sending two thousand seminary students to Afghanistan to fight a war and then abandoning them with no word as to why. Could Pahoran have at least notified them of the problem? If he was able to send a small contingent of men, he certainly could have sent word so they would at least know they had not been forgotten. We would owe that to our youth, and the Nephites owed it to theirs.

The next group who were affected by Pahoran's silence were the people of the city of Nephihah. Because Moroni had not been informed of the

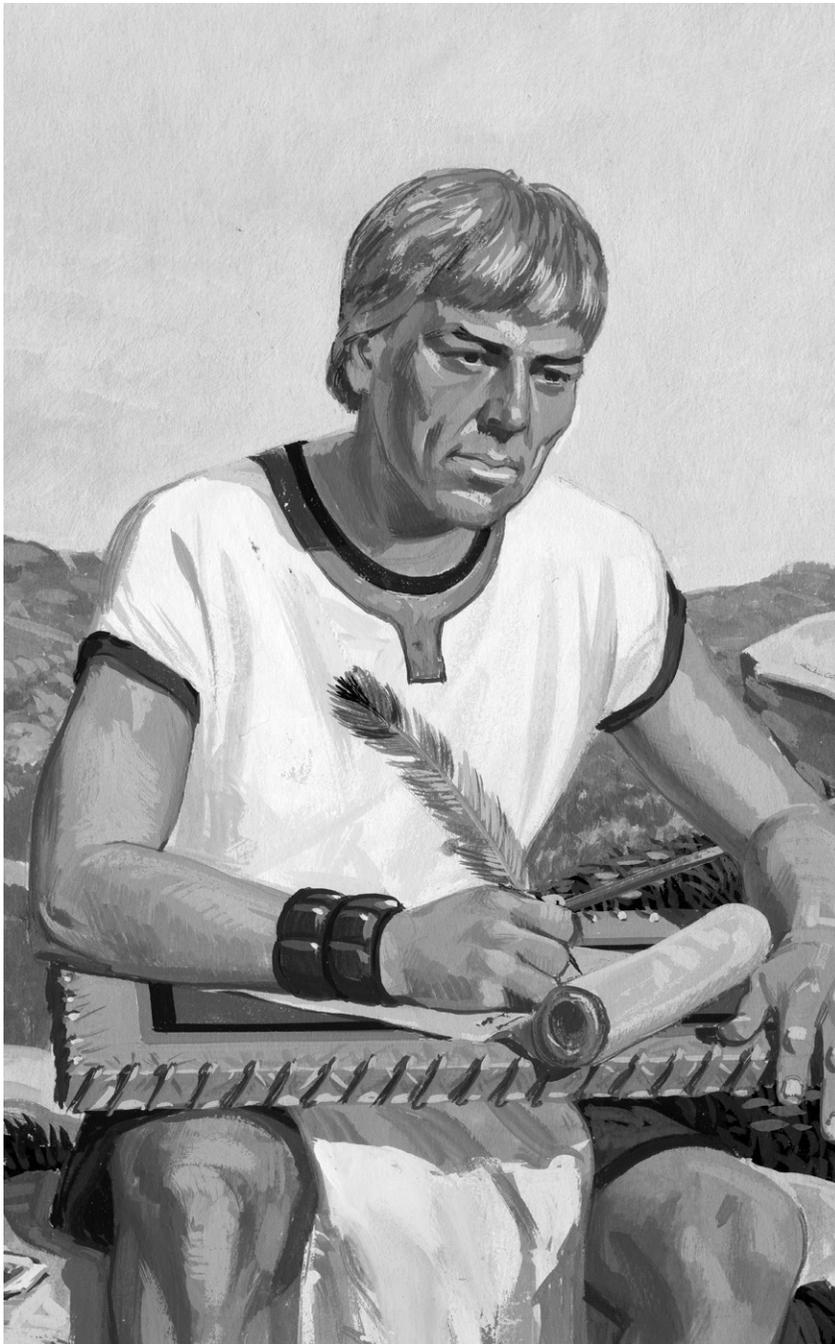
problems with the government, the city of Nephihah fell. We read that as one more event in the account of the war. The Nephites, however, knew the people whose lives were lost because of the “exceedingly great slaughter” (Alma 59:7). Had Moroni known of the problems in Zarahemla, he would have known to protect the people of Nephihah better, and many lives would have been saved. If those lost lives had belonged to our brethren or sisters, we would certainly look at Pahoran's reason for not reinforcing the city more closely.

We know why Pahoran did not send reinforcements. We do not know why he did not send letters informing people of the problem. We might wonder if his messengers might have been captured. However, we know that “soon after Moroni had sent his epistle unto the chief governor, he received an epistle from Pahoran, the chief governor” (Alma 61:1). We have to wonder why he was able to respond quickly to a threat from Moroni but not to appeals for assistance.

In his response to Moroni, Pahoran states, “I was somewhat worried concerning what we should do, whether it should be just in us to go against our brethren” (Alma 61:19). Two millennia later we can read this verse and admire Pahoran's desire to make the right decision. However, his contemporaries surely must have wondered about it. About ten years earlier, during the judgeship of Nephihah, Pahoran's father, Captain Moroni had to order the execution of “whomsoever of the Amalickiahites that would not enter into a covenant to support the cause of freedom” (Alma 46:35). Then, five years before, the kingmen rose up against the newly elected Pahoran. Once again, “Moroni commanded that his army should go against those king-men, to pull down their pride and their nobility and level them with the earth, or they should take up arms and support the cause of liberty” (Alma 51:17). Surely Pahoran did not wonder at the justifiability of going against their brethren in these former occasions. Why would he wonder about it in this new but familiar situation? In addition, we are left to wonder if Pahoran turned to God for guidance in this decision as Moroni did.

Strength and Weakness

With all of these things in mind, Pahoran becomes a much more puzzling person. Why would he debate the justifiability of going against his brethren when it had already been done twice? Why did the kingmen rebel, once immediately after Pahoran was installed as chief judge, and then again when Moroni was no longer there to back him up? Was this a reflection



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Pahoran responds to Moroni's epistle.

on Pahoran? Why would he not inform the entire Nephite nation of the rebellion instead of limiting his proclamation to “this part of the land” (Alma 61:6)? Why wouldn't he immediately inform his armies of the coup so they would understand why more reinforcements weren't coming instead of allowing them to languish in a starved state? Why did it take the deaths of many of his citizens, whom he had sworn to protect, and the consequent threatening letter from Captain Moroni before he shared the problem with his chief captain?

The answers to these questions may reveal in Pahoran what many of us find in ourselves. We correctly honor him for his “long-suffering” in not reviling against Moroni's accusations and threats. Given the anger and contention that we so often see in our day, we value his example. But what if his greatest strength (long-suffering) was also his greatest weakness (passivity)? If his enemies knew him to be even a little passive, they would be very anxious to take advantage of it, once when he became chief judge and then again when his chief captain was busy elsewhere. If he knew the armies needed support, but he didn't know how to get it for them, he might send smatterings of supplies and troops (“the best he could”) without explaining why. He might try to fix the problem himself “in this part of the land,” not wanting to distract Captain Moroni and the other armies. If he loved peace but felt unsure about enforcing it, he would worry about the justifiability of going against his brethren. And once his chief captain laid out a strong plan for correcting the situation, he would embrace it and encourage it. Besides being a sterling example of long-suffering, perhaps Pahoran also serves as a cautionary example of what Elder Dallin H. Oaks described as the dangers of our strengths becoming our downfall.⁵ But Pahoran also illustrates Elder Richard G. Scott's statement that “the Lord sees weaknesses differently than He does rebellion.”⁶

It appears that both Moroni and Mormon see Pahoran as a good man. Moroni's heart “was filled with exceedingly great joy because of the faithfulness of Pahoran, that he was not also a traitor to the freedom and cause of his country” (Alma 62:1). And Mormon writes of the two of them working together, “having restored peace to the land” (Alma 62:11). But Mormon clearly sees Moroni as the “strong” and “mighty” man (Alma 48:11), “resisting iniquity” (Alma 48:16) to the point that “if all men had been, and were, and ever would be, like unto Moroni, behold, the very powers of hell

would have been shaken forever; yea, the devil would never have power over the hearts of the children of men” (Alma 48:17).

While Moroni’s letter to Pahoran was harsh in a Church context, in the context of loss of life, starvation of valiant youth, and war, we can begin to understand how his letter was inspired and how it did indeed shake the powers of hell. This interpretation shows Pahoran to be a good man. However, regardless of interpretation, his actions could not be characterized as shaking the powers of hell except when he worked in concert with Moroni. Perhaps that is why Pahoran’s name was not included in Mormon’s list of other men of God who were “no less serviceable” (Alma 48:18–19).

Why Is It Important?

Many might wonder why it’s important to discern the difference between Moroni and Pahoran. The Lord answers that question through Isaiah: “Wo unto them that call evil good, and good evil, that put darkness for light, and light for darkness, that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter” (2 Nephi 15:20). Mormon makes it clear that Captain Moroni is an example worth following, but he doesn’t say the same for Pahoran. It is important that we understand why lest we follow the wrong example.

Next, it is important for us to understand our cultural weakness for accepting excuses. This is not to say that we shouldn’t have and extend compassion for others. It does mean, however, that we should discern between compassion and pity. In many scriptural instances, including with Moroni and Pahoran, the Lord shows us that we should be willing to help all those who are willing to try. Pahoran expressed the desire to fight against the kingmen, though he had not yet mustered sufficient force to do so. Captain Moroni turned his attention to gathering people to reinforce Pahoran, and they successfully defeated the kingmen. The Savior illustrated this issue also with the woman taken in sin. He did not condone her sin (“go and sin no more” acknowledges that she was in a state of sin). He did, however, give her a chance to repent. We, too, should be willing to work with weaknesses—whether our own or others’.

This is an important concept because unless we understand it, we can get confused about how to show love. We often think we must accept excuses in order to show love. When we do so, we tend to follow the same pattern of sympathy and recrimination many have done with Pahoran and Moroni, respectively. We see through Moroni that if the excuse allows undesirable

behavior to continue, we should not indulge it. Just as mercy cannot rob justice, accountability must accompany compassion.

Pahoran also serves as a cautionary tale of how an uncontrolled strength can also be a weakness. His slowness to anger is definitely a lesson worthy of emulation for our day. On the other hand, his apparent passivity likewise becomes a warning to us against seeking peace at any price.

Finally, as religious educators we must draw the lesson that we must stand for and behind our youth. They need to know that as they seek to righteously do their duty, we will do all in our power to support and succor them. To do less must surely be displeasing to God.

Men such as Pahoran can offer us encouragement. When our strengths are still our weaknesses, we can know that as we strive to do our duty, the Lord will accept our offerings even though we don’t yet have the strength of Captain Moroni. Most of us are not born with that kind of strength and will. But with patience, work, and the grace of God, the *good* in us can become *great*.

Perhaps a review of how I came to these insights would suggest greater and more comprehensive applications of the principles so far discussed. They came as a result of my academic training and personal experience. I have taught English as a second language for many years and have become very aware of the importance of cultural awareness, of other cultures as well as of one’s own. An example will illustrate. A senior missionary couple was serving in a Latin American area several years ago. Their emails to family and friends reflected the typical frustrations with language learning. But they also commented several times on how the people would sit outside their homes and watch the traffic go by. They were incredulous that people could find the traffic that entertaining, and their emails started reflecting a hint of disdain. Two of their correspondents with a knowledge of Latin culture wrote to them to explain that while the American culture is one of *doing*, the Latin culture is one of *being*. The people weren’t sitting watching traffic because it was entertaining or because they were lazy. They were doing it because it gave them a chance to talk and visit and develop relationships, much like people did in America decades ago by sitting on their porches. Once the missionary couple understood this fundamental difference, they realized they had been offending people by curtailing their visits to just a few minutes in order not to impose on their time. The new cultural understanding of both their own

culture and the Latin culture allowed them to become much more effective missionaries and to love the people with greater understanding.

As we attempt to understand scripture stories, we have to keep in mind that the past, in many ways, is a foreign country. While we may not be able to describe what that culture is, it is helpful for us to at least understand our own cultural tendencies. These form the framework through which we interpret meaning.

In addition to understanding cultural differences through my profession, personal experience has provided the greatest lessons. There was one experience in particular that started me on a path to a new way of viewing the world. It happened years ago when I had gone through a very hard experience. I decided I would go to the temple and pour my heart out to Heavenly Father, and I expected that he would comfort (pity) me. I was in for a big surprise. I found, to my amazement, that God did not feel one little bit sorry for me. I wondered why and realized that it was because things were going to turn out so well for me that pity was out of the question. That experience was the first of many that slowly taught me that pity is antithetical to respect; you cannot respect anyone you pity. I learned that excuses are a cheap appeal for pity. On the other hand, I learned that God has tremendous compassion. The difference is that with compassion, there is always an expectation of getting better. Respect is fundamental to compassion. When someone is pitied, there is little expectation that he or she can get better. In that sense it is damning; it is very difficult to help raise someone you pity. And when we accept excuses based on pity, we validate in that person a sense of helplessness and hopelessness. The people we pity believe they cannot do better because no one requires them to.

All of this applies to Captain Moroni because he believed everyone was capable of choosing the right. He gave his enemies abundant opportunities to make the right decisions in laying down their weapons and covenanting to keep the peace. And when Pahoran complained of the “helplessness” of his position, but showed a willingness to follow Moroni’s plan once it was laid out, Moroni worked to help him achieve it. Like Nephi, Moroni knew that unto each person it is given to act, rather than to be acted upon (see 2 Nephi 2:26), and he expected others to act accordingly. He showed compassion to Pahoran by helping him meet that standard. And as religious educators, we can do the same for our students. We can show faith in each student’s ability to overcome and triumph as we help him or her to achieve the lofty goals the

Lord has given us. As we drop our belief in and reliance on excuses, we will be able to hasten the Lord’s work and even help shake the foundations of hell. **RE**

Notes

1. Hugh W. Nibley, “Leaders to Managers: The Fatal Shift,” *Dialogue* 16, no. 4 (Winter 1983).
2. Hugh W. Nibley, “Warfare and the Book of Mormon,” in *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1990), 130.
3. Neal E. Lambert, “Moroni,” in *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, ed. Dennis L. Largey (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 556–57.
4. Philip J. Hilt, “Scientist at Work: Ellen J. Langer; A Scholar of the Absent Mind,” *New York Times*, September 23, 1997.
5. Dallin H. Oaks, “Our Strengths Can Become Our Downfall,” *Ensign*, October 1994, 11–19.
6. Richard G. Scott, “Personal Strength through the Atonement of Jesus Christ,” *Ensign*, November 2013, 83.