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Captain Moroni's Revelation

Duane Boyce

Moroni reports receiving a revelation in which the Lord told him, “If those whom ye have appointed your governors do not repent of their sins and iniquities, ye shall go up to battle against them” (Alma 60:33). Moroni reports this revelation straightforwardly, but because Pahoran, the chief governor of the Nephites at the time, turns out to be innocent of the charges contained in Moroni's subsequent epistle and in the revelation itself (see Alma 61), it is easy to think that Moroni's revelation (or at least his report of it) is mistaken in some way. Indeed, this conclusion would seem to be the general default reading of this passage.¹ The logical implication of this conclusion is that Moroni must have some defect. Even though he presents the message as a quotation from the Lord, either he did not actually receive a revelation, or he misunderstood the revelation he did receive, or, at a minimum, he recorded his revelation inaccurately.

An Overlooked Detail

Such an interpretation overlooks a significant detail in the text, however: Pahoran is not the only recipient of the epistle Moroni wrote following

1. This seems to be the case not only among lay members but also in scholarly circles. Grant Hardy, for example, refers to this revelation at various points and calls it—and/or Moroni's report of it—“mistaken” and an “off-the-mark revelation.” Indeed, Hardy speaks of the revelation as a “claim” made by Moroni. See Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 176, 177, and Kindle location 6815.

this revelation. Because Moroni mentions Pahoran by name (60:1) and because Pahoran both takes the letter personally and responds to Moroni (Alma 61), it is easy to think that Pahoran was the only one who received this epistle. But this is a mistake. In addition to Pahoran, Moroni directed his epistle “to *all* those who have been chosen by this people to govern and manage the affairs of this war” (60:1, emphasis added). It would seem natural for Moroni to mention Pahoran by name since he was the preeminent civil authority among the Nephites, but we learn from the text that Pahoran was not alone. Multiple leaders had governing power in Nephite society, and, as a group, they were responsible for mobilizing the Nephite population and supporting the Nephite armies (v. 2). It was to these multiple leaders—not only Pahoran—that Moroni sent his epistle.

We see this fact evidenced numerous times in Moroni’s letter. Throughout his epistle, he consistently speaks in the plural. On fifteen separate occasions, he makes it clear that he is talking to all the governors of the Nephites. For instance, he refers to “all” who were responsible for managing the war (v. 1) and says that he is speaking by way of condemnation “unto *them*” (v. 2). He also speaks of what “*ye yourselves* know” (v. 2), describes the Nephite leaders as sitting upon their “*thrones*” (v. 7), writes to them as “*brethren*” (v. 10), and says that “the blood of thousands shall come upon your *heads*” (v. 10). He then speaks again of their “*thrones*” (v. 11) and also of the government and “*their exceeding slothfulness*” and “*their exceedingly great neglect*” (v. 14). Later, Moroni speaks of what “*ye yourselves* are seeking” (v. 18), questions whether they are “*traitors*” to their country (v. 18), and again refers to those receiving his epistle as sitting upon their “*thrones*” (v. 21). He then speaks of “*any among you*” and of “*those*” who are usurping power (v. 27) and admonishes them to “*bestir yourselves*” (v. 29, emphasis added throughout). And it turns out that this usage of the plural is completely consistent with what the Lord had initially told Moroni—namely, that if the “governors” did not repent, he was instructed to go to battle against “them” (v. 33).

We learn in Pahoran’s response that Moroni was right: Pahoran had experienced dissensions, and the government was riddled with treason (Alma 61)—which is exactly what Moroni’s revelation had indicated. Pahoran’s innocence does not falsify the revelation, therefore, because the revelation was not specifically about Pahoran. Because the government was generally corrupt, the message contained in the revelation was completely accurate.

The Substantial Accuracy of Moroni's Epistle

A similar point applies to Moroni's epistle. If we think he wrote only to Pahoran, then, judging by Pahoran's response, Moroni was seriously mistaken. What we have seen, however, is that Moroni did not write only to Pahoran. His audience was more general. Thus, while it is true that Moroni was mistaken in lumping Pahoran in with all the other governors, this error is minuscule in the scheme of things. The epistle is certainly far less erroneous than it is frequently thought to be.

Recognizing this feature of the text informs our perspective on Captain Moroni. His only mistake was not being sufficiently nuanced in his greeting. To be more exact in his opening, he could have said: "I know that many, if not all, of you are guilty of sins and iniquities in not supporting our defensive war effort. Whoever you are, what I'm about to say is directed to you." Moroni actually does capture a nuance of this sort in one place in his letter, of course. He speaks of rousing whatever governors might have at least a "spark" of freedom remaining in them and of making extinct "those who have desires to usurp power" (v. 27). This indicates that Moroni thought that some of the governors might be different from others and that they could and would join him in uniting against the Lamanite assault. Moroni thus appears to have had in mind the possibility of both better and worse governors, even though he didn't display this possibility in his opening greeting. However, although it would have been technically more accurate if he had done so, it would seem unfair to fault Moroni for such inexactness given the circumstances. In the context and exigencies of war, it seems completely understandable that capturing nuance was not Moroni's highest concern.

What we see in the end is that, except for this lack of nuance in his greeting, Moroni's epistle was accurate, just as his revelation had been. It was both consistent with that revelation and subsequently confirmed in its essence by Pahoran himself.²

2. It is also possible that Moroni's epistle was more accurate regarding Pahoran than we generally think—that is, that Pahoran actually did deserve some of the generalized condemnation Moroni meted out. This notion is not implausible, since Pahoran was the chief judge, with ultimate authority over Nephite affairs, and yet he was equivocal in his response to the "exceedingly numerous" dissenters who (1) were actively seeking to overthrow Nephite society; (2) had driven Pahoran out of Zarahemla and occupied the city; (3) had appointed

Captain Moroni's Spiritual Character

Once we understand that the revelation Moroni reports receiving is completely accurate, we can understand something else we might not have appreciated previously—namely, that Moroni was a person of sufficient spiritual refinement that he could receive revelation from the Lord in complete sentences. We don't notice this quality if we think Moroni's revelation (or at least how he quoted it) contained errors. But once we understand that the revelation was accurate, we can appreciate that it confirms numerous other indications in the text of Moroni's commitment and faithfulness to the Lord.³

Because Moroni is immersed so fully in defending Nephite lives from Lamanite assault and because we observe his military activities in such detail, it is easy to overlook indications of his spiritual refinement and to see him one-dimensionally. This tendency is especially reinforced if we think he errs on something as significant as receiving revelation from the Lord. When we correct our misreading, however, we can see Moroni more richly: he is a man who, though immersed for years in defensive military action, nevertheless qualifies for specific, tangible spiritual direction from the Lord, and receives it.

their own king; (4) had formed an official alliance with the Lamanites—specifically to help them conquer the Nephites; and (5) were preventing the delivery of men and supplies to support the Nephite army (Alma 61:3–8). Although Pahoran reports that he had assembled sufficient support that the insurrectionists “do fear us and durst not come out against us to battle” (61:7), he also tells us that he was unsure if pursuing military action against his Nephite brethren was just (61:19)—this, despite their armed treason and their explicit alliance with the Lamanites to overthrow the society Pahoran had been appointed to lead and protect. Considering these elements of the text, it wouldn't be unreasonable to conclude that Pahoran's inaction placed him—at least to some degree—among those who deserved the Lord's condemnation, in which case Moroni's epistle, regarding Pahoran himself, is not as inaccurate as it might appear on the surface.

3. Although this is a topic that deserves attention in its own right, it is too large a matter to be addressed here. Relevant passages, however, include Alma 44:3–6, 11; 46:12, 13, 16–18, 20, 23–27; 54:10; 60:25, 28, 34–36; and 62:2. Mormon also describes Moroni in significant spiritual terms; see Alma 48:7, 10, 12, 13, 16–18.

Duane Boyce received his academic training in psychology, philosophy, and the clinical treatment of families. He received a PhD from Brigham Young University and conducted his postdoctoral study in developmental psychology at Harvard University. He was a member of the Moral Studies Group at BYU and served on the faculty there. He is a founding partner of the Arbinger Institute, a worldwide management consulting and educational firm, and is the author or coauthor of five books. He has published academic essays on scriptural topics in *BYU Studies Quarterly*, *The FARMS Review*, *Religious Educator*, *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship*, and the *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture*. He is author of the recent book, *Even unto Bloodshed: An LDS Perspective on War* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2015).