

The Sons of Mosiah: Emissaries of Peace

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“Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God” (Matthew 5:9). Jesus repeated this beatitude from the Sermon on the Mount during his visit to the Nephites (see 3 Nephi 12:9). It should be read in the context of a passage from Isaiah: “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings; that publisheth peace; that bringeth good tidings of good; that publisheth salvation; that saith unto Zion, Thy God reigneth” (Isaiah 52:7).

This verse is cited in 1 Nephi 13:37 and 3 Nephi 20:40 and has generally been tied to missionary work. It implies that bringing the gospel (“good tidings”) is a means of establishing peace. Abinadi, when asked to explain it (see Mosiah 12:20-21), tied it to Isaiah 53:8-10 (or Mosiah 14:8-10), explaining that the “seed” of Christ are his followers and that they are the ones who publish peace and bring good tidings (see Mosiah 15:10-18). Thus, Abinadi confirmed Christ’s statement that those who establish peace are the children of God.

Jesus noted that the “children of the prophets” and of Abraham are the “seed” through which all the kindreds of the earth are to be blessed, through preaching the gospel (see 3 Nephi 20:25-27). He then quoted Isaiah 52:7 (3 Nephi 20:40). A similar thought is found in Doctrine and Covenants 98:16: “Therefore, renounce war and proclaim peace, and seek diligently to turn the hearts of the children to their fathers, and the hearts of the fathers to the children.”

Alma the Younger, speaking of his conversion and that of his friends, the sons of Mosiah, wrote of being “born of God” (Mosiah 27:23-31). The record then notes that he and the sons of Mosiah went about trying to repair the damage they had done to the Church (see Mosiah 27:32-37). “And how blessed are they! For they did publish peace; they did publish good tidings of good; and they did declare unto the people that the Lord reigneth” (Mosiah 27:37). This is immediately followed by their request to Mosiah to allow them to go to teach the Lamanites.

The mission of the sons of Mosiah among the Lamanites has generally been seen as one of the greatest missionary efforts in the Book of Mormon. This is undoubtedly true. One cannot diminish the importance of the spiritual conversion of many thousands of Lamanites to the gospel and of the miracles and faith that accompanied that conversion.

There is, however, another aspect to the mission that is generally overlooked. It is that the Nephite princes were seeking a means whereby their nation could be relieved of the burden of war with their Lamanite neighbors.

Mosiah’s sons

returned to their father, the king, and desired of him that he would grant unto them ... that they might impart the word of God to their brethren, the Lamanites — that perhaps they might bring them to the knowledge of the Lord their God, and convince them of the iniquity of their fathers; that perhaps they might cure them of their hatred towards the Nephites, that they might also be brought to rejoice in the Lord their God, that they might become friendly to one another, and that there should be no more contentions in all the land. (Mosiah 28:1-2.)

The Book of Mormon stresses that they were going to “a people who delighted in murdering the Nephites, and robbing and plundering them” (Alma 17:14). Many long years of war had taken their toll on the Nephites. Taking young men away from agricultural and other pursuits for military service undoubtedly had an adverse effect on the economy, in addition to the loss of life. If the sons of Mosiah could somehow change the hatred of the Lamanites for the Nephites to an acceptance of the Nephites as brothers in the gospel, this would certainly improve the lot of both peoples.

That the emissaries had a measure of success in establishing peace is evidenced in a number of ways. First, we note that prosperity returned to the Nephites during the absence of the sons of Mosiah. The resulting pride and wickedness prompted Alma to relinquish his position as chief judge to go and preach to the people. Indeed, there were but few Lamanite attacks during this period. And Nephite dissenters led those of which we do read! Even the very lengthy and costly war recorded in the last chapters of Alma – after the sons of Mosiah had returned home with their converts – was instigated by defectors from Nephite ranks.

The success of the Nephite missionaries is summed up as follows:

Thousands were brought to the knowledge of the Lord, yea, thousands were brought to believe in the traditions of the Nephites.... For they became a righteous people; they did lay down the weapons of their rebellion, that they did not fight against God any more, neither against any of their brethren.... These are they that laid down the weapons of the rebellion, yea, all their weapons of war.... And they began to be a very industrious people; yea, and they were friendly with the Nephites; therefore they did open a correspondence¹ with them. (Alma 23:5, 7, 13, 18.)

When the unconverted Lamanites, led by Nephite dissenters, massed to attack the new converts, “there was not one soul among all the people who had been converted unto the Lord that would take up arms against their brethren; nay, they would not even make any preparations for war” (Alma 24:6). Indeed, they buried their weapons and covenanted not to shed blood (see Alma 24:17-19).

Apparently, the major factor that led the sons of Mosiah to hope they could establish peace through preaching the gospel was that the Lamanites were known for keeping their covenants. For example, at the time Limhi became king in the land of Nephi, the king of the Lamanites covenanted with him that his people would not slay the Nephites (see Mosiah 19:25). When the Lamanites believed that Limhi’s people had broken their covenant by stealing Lamanite brides, they went to war (see Mosiah 20). But the Lamanite king, when convinced that the Nephites were innocent, repeated his earlier oath (see Mosiah 20:24), which his people reluctantly kept (see Mosiah 21:3). During the great wars of a generation later, the Nephites were willing to spare Lamanites who swore an oath of peace with them (see Alma 44:2-14; 62:16-17, 27-30).

In the battle of Lamanites against their pacific brethren, the unconverted fellow Lamanites slew many because they would not defend themselves. As more Lamanites saw the faith of the converts, they, too, buried their weapons of war (see Alma 25:14). In consequence, “Ammon, and Aaron, and Omner, and Himni, and their brethren did rejoice exceedingly, for the success which they had among the Lamanites” (Alma 25:17). This success was measured not only in spiritual terms, but in the fact that a large number of Lamanites were no longer willing to wage war. Ammon noted, “For if we had not come up out of the land of Zarahemla, these our dearly beloved brethren, who have so dearly beloved us, would still have been racked with hatred against us, yea, and they would also have been strangers to God” (Alma 26:9).

Ammon appears to stress the trade-off of war for peace more than the spiritual aspects of the Lamanite conversion. He further noted that the converts would rather sacrifice their own lives than to take up arms against others (see Alma 26:31-34). The converted Lamanites settled in the Nephite land of Jershon, “and they did look upon shedding the blood of their brethren with the greatest abhorrence; and they never could be prevailed upon to take up arms against their brethren” (Alma 27:28). Clearly, the missionaries from Zarahemla had accomplished a political, as well as a spiritual, miracle.

Subsequent missionaries to the Lamanites followed the same pattern. When “the Nephites greatly feared that the Zoramites would enter into a correspondence with the Lamanites,” Alma decided to follow the method already proven successful by the sons of Mosiah (some of whom he took with him on his mission to the Zoramites). We read: “As the preaching of the word had a great tendency to lead the people to do that which was just—yea, it had 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). The effect of the preaching of Nephi and Lehi (sons of Helaman) among the Lamanites is recorded in Helaman 5:51-52: “As many as were convinced did lay down their weapons of war, and also their hatred and the traditions of their fathers. And it came to pass that they did yield up unto the Nephites the lands of their possession.”

This last example in particular brought general peace, free trade, and prosperity (see Helaman 6:7-13). From the text itself, we can see that one of the primary goals of the Nephite missionaries to the Lamanites was to pacify neighboring enemies. They did this by disabusing them of the “traditions of their fathers,” by which the Lamanites believed that the Nephites had wronged them. These traditions were replaced by the “traditions of the Nephites,” that is, the teachings concerning God and the Christ to come. In this manner, the message of the Prince of Peace truly brought peace to peoples who were otherwise enemies.²

Notes

¹ Some have suggested that the word “correspondence” implies that the Lamanites had opened trade relations with the Nephites. This is highly unlikely, however. When, at length, the converted Lamanites, led by Ammon and his brethren, fled their land, their king expressed fear that, if they went to Zarahemla, the Nephites would destroy them (see Alma 27:5-7). The sons of Mosiah went ahead of the group to determine if they would be welcome. Had there been regular contact between the two groups, they would have known that they would be welcome and could at least have sent messages in advance of their departure. Alma’s surprise at seeing his friends again and learning of their successful mission is further evidence that there had been no communication between the Nephite and Lamanite peoples (see Alma 17:1-4; 27:16-20). According to Alma 24:7-9, the “correspondence” was with the Nephite missionaries who had accompanied Ammon and his brethren.

² In Mosiah 29:14, we read that Mosiah taught the commandments of God and established peace, so that there would be no wars or contentions in the land. Here, too, there is a direct tie between teaching the gospel and establishing peace.