

The Stealing of the Daughters of the Lamanites

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A minor story in the Book of Mormon provides an example of how complex the task of reading the book can be. It also illustrates how much richer our understanding can be when we remember that the Book of Mormon is an ancient record with connections to other ancient records, particularly the Old Testament. In the book of Mosiah, a band of wicked priests hid in the wilderness and kidnapped some young women to be their wives (see 20:1-5). This story can be read as an adventure tale. If looked at carefully, however, it shows the kind of connections between the Book of Mormon and the Old Testament that demonstrate that the Book of Mormon is an ancient book.

The story of kidnapping by the wicked priests is a minor part of the record of the people of Zeniff. When King Noah, ruler over the Zeniffites, rejected the prophet Abinadi's message and had him killed, the priest Alma and his followers separated from the rest of the people. Soon thereafter, the Lamanites attacked the people of Zeniff. As they fled from the Lamanites, King Noah commanded them to abandon their families. Instead, they executed Noah and attempted to kill his priests (see Mosiah 17-19). These priests escaped into the wilderness, led by Amulon, one of their number, and later kidnapped some daughters of the Lamanites to be their wives. Angered by the kidnapping and assuming the Zeniffites were guilty, the Lamanites attacked them. Peace was restored when the Lamanites learned who the real kidnappers were (see Mosiah 20).

A Biblical Parallel

This story of the abduction of young Lamanite women is similar to a story in the Bible in which men from the tribe of Benjamin kidnap daughters of Israel at Shiloh. The end of the book of Judges contains three stories about the tribe of Benjamin. In the first, Benjaminites abused and murdered a Levite concubine (see Judges 20). In the second, the other eleven tribes gathered to punish the offenders, and a civil war resulted (see Judges 19). The third story tells of the kidnapping (see Judges 21).

After destroying most of the tribe of Benjamin, the Israelites realized that this tribe was in danger of extinction. To preserve the tribe, the Benjaminites needed wives. But the Israelites had vowed not to allow their daughters to marry the Benjaminites. To get around their vow, they instructed the Benjaminites to kidnap the daughters of the Israelites who lived at Shiloh while the young women danced in the vineyards. As the daughters of Shiloh gathered, the Benjaminites lay hidden. The girls danced, and the Benjaminites stole them to be their wives.

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The similarities between the stories in Mosiah and Judges are complex and carefully stated:

[Judges:] Then they said, Behold, there is a feast of the Lord in Shiloh yearly in a place which is on the north side of Bethel, on the east side of the highway that goeth up from Bethel to Shechem, and on the south of Lebonah. Therefore they commanded the children of Benjamin, saying, Go and lie in wait in the vineyards; and see, and behold, if the daughters of Shiloh come out to dance in dances, then come ye out of the vineyards, and catch you every man his wife of the daughters of Shiloh, and go to the land of Benjamin (Judges 21:19-21).

[Mosiah:] Now there was a place in Shemlon where the daughters of the Lamanites did gather themselves together to sing, and to dance, and to make themselves merry. And it came to pass that there was one day

a small number of them gathered together to sing and to dance (Mosiah 20:1-2).

The Bible clearly mentions the incident as a yearly ritual. The Book of Mormon mentions it as a regular occurrence, not telling us how often (“one day”). In both stories the kidnapped virgins became the wives of the abductors. The record says that the priests of Noah, “being ashamed to return to the city of Nephi, yea, and also fearing that the people would slay them, therefore they durst not return to their wives and their children” (Mosiah 20:3), so they watched the dancers and kidnapped substitute wives. When the narrative returned to the story of Amulon and his fellow priests, the daughters of the Lamanites were then called “their wives” (Mosiah 23:33).

In both stories, the abductors, like peeping toms, waited and watched the spectacle. The Benjaminites lay in wait in the vineyards watching the dancing. The wicked priests also found the place where the girls danced, then “they laid and watched them” (Mosiah 20:4). We know that the priests hid because in the next verse they “came forth out of their secret places” and abducted twenty-four of the dancing maidens. Not only is the watching stressed in both stories, but also the lying in wait. These were not crimes of passion, but ones of premeditation.

The Meaning of Parallels

Some Book of Mormon critics have seen the parallels between the two stories and concluded that Joseph Smith merely copied the story from Judges. They conclude that any similarities in stories indicate plagiarism. Biblical scholars take a more sophisticated approach than do these critics to texts that may appear to borrow from other texts. Scholars often see similarities between stories as evidence of the writer’s sophistication and of the richness of the text.

For example, the first of the stories about the Benjaminites, telling of the rape and death of a concubine, is similar to an earlier Bible story of Lot and his two visitors at Sodom. The story in Judges tells of a Levite and his concubine who were returning home from a visit to her father’s house in Bethlehem. At a late hour they arrived at Gibeah, a Benjaminite city. Only one old man was willing to take the travelers in. As the host entertained, the men of the city gathered outside and demanded that the host bring the Levite outside so they could rape him. The host protested this violation of the law of hospitality and offered his own virgin daughter and the Levite’s concubine as substitutes. The Levite instead pushed his concubine out to the mob, who “abused her all the night until the morning” (Judges 19:25). In the morning she was dead.

This story is obviously similar to the story of Lot’s visitors in Genesis 19. In both stories the guests were taken in, the inhabitants of the cities threatened a homosexual rape, and the host offered two women as substitutes to spare the men. Obviously readers are meant to see a relationship between the two stories. Biblical scholars see this as an example of conscious borrowing intended both to enhance the meaning of the second story and to emphasize how wicked Gibeah had become. The story in Genesis 19 can easily be read and understood with no awareness of the story in Judges 19, but to understand Judges 19 in any complete way the reader must see the connection to Sodom. The Levite was portrayed unfavorably compared to Lot’s divine visitors. The visitors to Sodom effected a divine rescue, while the Levite threw out his own concubine to save himself.¹

I believe that, in a similar way, the story of the abduction in Mosiah means more when we see it in light of the story in Judges. I feel that the author of the story in Mosiah borrowed consciously from the story in Judges, which he knew from the plates of brass, to help make his point.

The story of the abduction of the daughters of Shiloh is the final story in Judges. One of the main purposes of Judges was to justify the establishment of a king. Judges described the evil the Israelites did in the Lord's sight (see Judges 3:7; 4:1), explaining that they did evil because there was no king over the people (see Judges 17:6; 18:1). Judges ends with three stories about the tribe of Benjamin that illustrate this evil. The stories are preceded by a statement about the lack of a king over the land: "And it came to pass in those days, when there was no king in Israel . . ." (Judges 19:1). The third story ends with a similar statement: "In those days there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25). The topsy-turvy world described in Judges 17-21 demonstrates that doing what is right in one's own eyes is often the same thing as doing what is evil in the Lord's eyes.²

By emphasizing parallels to the kidnapping story in Judges, the author of the story in Mosiah seems to me to have strengthened the moral point. The wicked priests led by Amulon were also evil, doing what was right in their own eyes rather than following the Lord.

Other Parallels

Understandably, the text shows disapproval of all that Amulon and his fellow priests did. The parallel case from Judges of doing what is right in man's eyes is only one way the text shows this disapproval. There are other parallels that further discredit Amulon and his companions.

After the Lamanites captured Amulon and his people, the record states that "Amulon did gain favor in the eyes of the king of the Lamanites" (Mosiah 24:1). In gaining the favor of the Lamanites, these priests clearly lost favor with God. There is a note of disapproval in the narrator's words when he says that the people of Amulon not only found favor in the eyes of the Lamanite king, but also that the king appointed these men to be teachers over all his people (see Mosiah 24:1). As teachers, these priests taught the Lamanites the language of the Nephites (see Mosiah 24:4), "nevertheless they knew not God; neither did the brethren of Amulon teach them anything concerning the Lord their God, neither the law of Moses; nor did they teach them the words of Abinadi" (Mosiah 24:5).

On the other hand, Alma taught his people how God delivered both the followers of Limhi and Alma out of bondage (see Mosiah 25:10, 16). He also taught them "repentance and faith on the Lord" (Mosiah 25:15) as he organized them into congregations. The author emphasizes how different from Alma the priests of Noah were. He says directly that the priests of Noah didn't teach the Lamanites Abinadi's words. He also specifically mentions that Alma "went about privately among the people, and began to teach the words of Abinadi" (Mosiah 18:1). Both Alma and Amulon entered the narrative as priests of Noah. Upon hearing the words of Abinadi, Alma repented, but Amulon refused to repent. Alma taught the prophet's words in secret, while Amulon and his priests utterly refused to teach them to the Lamanites.

The reader is led to see the contrasting lives, not just of Alma and Amulon, but of the people of Limhi and Alma and the people of Amulon. Both Alma and Amulon led colonies into the wilderness: Alma and his people, when Noah's soldiers discovered their "movement," "took their tents and their families and departed into the wilderness" (Mosiah 18:32, 34). Amulon and his followers also fled into the wilderness, but at Noah's command they left their families behind (see Mosiah 19:11-23).

The wicked priests abandoned their wives when King Noah "commanded them that all the men should leave their wives and their children, and flee before the Lamanites" (Mosiah 19:11), then they went about trying to find substitute wives. The other Zeniffites would rather have perished than leave their wives and children behind (see

Mosiah 19:12). Thus those who remained behind “caused that their fair daughters should stand forth and plead with the Lamanites that they would not slay them” (Mosiah 19:13). The daughters inspired “compassion” among the Lamanites, for they “were charmed with the beauty of their women” (Mosiah 19:14). Later, Amulon would do the same thing, sending out the Lamanite daughters he and the other priests had kidnapped to plead for mercy (see Mosiah 23:33-34).

The text has set up parallel examples for the reader to compare. The Zeniffites sent men out to find those who had fled their children and wives, “all save the king and his priests” (Mosiah 19:18), and had vowed that they would return to their wives and children or die seeking revenge if the Lamanites had killed them (Mosiah 19:19). The parallel stories of sending the two sets of daughters to beg for mercy from the Lamanites teach the reader that what appear to be the same actions actually differ when performed by the good-hearted on the one hand or the evil-hearted on the other.

When we compare the people as the text invites us to do, we contrast the care the men of Limhi showed for their wives and children with the abandonment by the priests of Noah. All of these events define the lack of moral character of the priests. The fact that the Lamanite king was willing to permit the stealing of the Lamanite daughters by welcoming Amulon and the priests into his kingdom speaks badly of this king, just as the Israelites’ encouragement of the Benjaminites to kidnap their own daughters speaks badly of all Israel. The people of Limhi, on the other hand, “fought for their lives, and for their wives, and for their children” (Mosiah 20:11). These differences reveal not only the character of the priests of Noah, who abandoned their families rather than fall into Lamanite hands, but also of the Nephites, who decided to face death with their families rather than abandon them.

The text is clearly unsympathetic to the people of Amulon. The connection between the two stories of abduction is a hint from the author that their actions were reminiscent of a time, reported in Judges, when the Israelites didn’t follow God’s law but did what was right in their own eyes. The priests are portrayed as indifferent to God, in spite of their position, which should have made them more anxious to follow God.

The Book of Mormon story of the stealing of the Lamanite daughters cannot be accounted for by the simplistic claim that it was just copied from the Bible. The Book of Mormon makes sophisticated use of the story to make its own point. Critics of the Book of Mormon believe that the author of the text used the earlier story from Judges, and I agree. But unlike them, I believe that the parallel enhances the book and reveals it to be an ancient document rather than a modern imitation.

Footnotes

1. Stuart Lasine, “Guest and Host in Judges 19: Lot’s Hospitality in an Inverted World,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 29 (June 1984): 40.

2. Lasine, 55.