For the Peace of the People: War and Democracy in the Book of Mormon

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Title  For the Peace of the People: War and Democracy in the Book of Mormon

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Abstract  King Benjamin, in an attempt to establish and promote peace, created a form of government that may be understood as democratic. The political system is not a democracy in the way the term is understood today, but the democratic elements become especially clear when viewed next to its autocratic Lamanite counterpart. Davis demonstrates how a democratic system tends to bring more peace to a nation and, interestingly, also more victory when war does come upon them. The young Nephite state encountered the types of risks experienced in the modern progression to democracy, further illustrating how difficult a task it would have been for Joseph Smith to create this world. Although the democratic state played a role in the Nephite nation, the most important lesson in the Book of Mormon’s politics is that God makes all the difference.
When King Mosiah changes the form of Nephite government, he acts with certain purposes in mind. Among these is the establishment of peace. In his speech proposing a reign of judges instead of kings, he explains, “I myself have labored with all the power and faculties which I have possessed, to teach you the commandments of God, and to establish peace throughout the land, that there should be no wars nor contentions” (Mosiah 29:14; see also 29:40). How can altering the institutions of governance alone make a society more peaceful? Although Mosiah himself may not have known exactly how the institutional changes he implemented would affect the prospects for peace, modern study of political regimes illuminates how his decision was inspired.

Understanding the institutional structure of the Nephite society allows limited but definable predictions about what political outcomes we should expect and how they should transpire. In this paper I first explain the ways in which the regime established by Mosiah may be understood as democratic. Next I argue that the democratic features of Mosiah’s state are sufficient to predict that it will be inclined toward peace but comparatively strong in war. However, democratic transitions also entail significant risks, and the initial problems encountered in the reign of the judges correspond to the contemporary understanding of the perils of democratization. In each of these aspects, modern research about political behavior helps give us a clearer glimpse into the politics of the Book of Mormon. But while the relationship between politics and war found in the Book of Mormon makes sense from the perspective of modern political science, it differs from the widespread political understanding of Joseph Smith’s time. That does not mean the Book of Mormon’s political institutions offer “evidence” in favor of its authenticity. Instead I hope to show that considering the nuances of the Nephite state can deepen our appreciation for the Book of Mormon’s complex internal unity. I will consider the expected proclivity of the Nephite state for conflict, its expected success in conflict, and, finally, what internal events we might anticipate in early Nephite “democracy.” To begin, I seek to clarify the term democracy.

Ryan W. Davis
UNDERSTANDING BOOK OF MORMON GOVERNANCE

The Book of Mormon reveals a significant amount of information about the types of political institutions governing both the Nephite and Lamanite populations. Much of what we observe in its politics has a familiar feel. Nevertheless, a common mistake is to map the transition from monarchy to the reign of the judges too easily onto familiar political structures. Mosiah’s new regime is not a democracy as the term is understood in contemporary society. Unlike American democracy, there is no legislative branch. By modern standards, other nondemocratic elements include that the chief judge is not apparently limited in his term of office and that judges not only govern but also “reign,” to point out a few examples (see Alma 1:2; 60:21). And although political dynasties do occur in democratic states, the anticipation of familial succession seems especially strong in Nephite governance. Further, it is unclear whether the “voice of the people” implies democratic choice in creating the set of possible political options or only in choosing among a set arranged by leaders.

Part of the problem in understanding Book of Mormon politics is that Nephite society is temporally and culturally removed from our experience, and part of the problem is in “the paucity of democracy as an analytic concept.”

A state’s level of democracy is best thought of as a continuum between poles of complete democracy and autocracy. The relevant question is whether the state is democratic in ways that will meaningfully influence the policy outcomes under consideration.

It is in this limited but important sense that the regime established by Mosiah should be considered a democracy. First, although the “voice of the people’ entered only marginally into the appointment of an officer who essentially enjoyed life tenure and hereditary succession,” interaction need not be expansive to have a substantial impact. In Nephite politics, the withdrawal of authority through the voice of the people was a very real possibility (see Alma 2:3; Alma 51:7; Helaman 5:1–2), creating incentives for officials to avoid alienating large constituencies.

Second, the system of laws put into effect may be characterized as liberal in the sense of being, to a significant extent, value neutral. That is, people in Mosiah’s system were free to select whatever personal projects they wanted to pursue. The reader is plainly told that people were afforded the liberty to teach doctrine contrary to the church’s—provided the law had no control over a person’s belief (see Alma 1:15–18; 30:7). The institutions of a liberal democracy do not prescribe values to subjects, but rather aim to create a situation of fairness in which citizens may autonomously select values. The process is determined; the ends are not. Authority for choosing personal goals has been devolved from a king or sovereign to the collectively sovereign people. It is in this way, I think, that the “freedom” Mosiah grants his people comes in the form of greater responsibility (see Mosiah 29:31–32).

As Madison recognized, democracy is unstable unless it is carefully crafted to balance power within the government. In Mosiah’s system this balance is achieved by allowing a group of lower judges to challenge the rule of a higher judge and higher judges to revise the decisions of lower judges.
tively to be efficacious. However, if any one actor seeks to gather powers already divided among others, the actor will face incentives to avoid relinquishing them. Consequently, the authority of government must not completely reside in any one location. As James Madison recognized, democracy is unstable unless it is carefully crafted to balance power within the government.8 In Mosiah’s system this balance is achieved by allowing a group of lower judges to challenge the rule of a higher judge and higher judges to revise the decisions of lower judges (see Mosiah 29:28–29). The arrow of power points both directions, providing for the kind of stability found within democratic regimes.

The democratic elements within Nephite governance are particularly clear when juxtaposed with the autocratic Lamanite counterpart. Much less is known about the Lamanite state, but we are told that Lamoni’s father is recognized as “king over all the land” (Alma 20:8). As such, he had authority to “govern” or interfere in the decisions of lesser kings (Alma 20:26). The general recognition of his authority suggests the presence of a unitary political state, and his ability to intervene at his discretion indicates the extent of his personal power. Together these features characterize Lamanite politics as autocratic. The combination of a liberal, democratic Nephite state and an illiberal, nondemocratic Lamanite regime forms a specific type of international structure, about which predictions can be made.

SEEKING FOR PEACE

If the Book of Mormon presents two types of regimes existing alongside each other, what are the most basic expectations that can be articulated about their interaction? Immanuel Kant, the Prussian philosopher of note, was the first theorist to seriously consider the international implications of a democratic regime type. From his writings, a large literature has developed around the thesis that democratic states are more peaceful than nondemocracies, regardless of leaders or culture.9 Though I cannot represent the many theoretical variants of this view, the fundamental idea is simple: under democracy, leaders are constrained from fighting wars because their peoples are involved in making the choice to fight. Because the populace bears more of the costs of war than elites, they are more likely to oppose bellicose leaders, giving officials second thoughts about aggression. Second, populations are more likely to be peaceful because democratic countries may be less likely to see foreign populations as necessarily antagonistic.10 Although the basic point has not been accepted by everyone, the “democratic peace” has been described as the closest thing to an empirical law in international politics.11

One way the democratic peace has been empirically tested is through examining particular case studies closely. That way, the correspondence of the specific case to the theory may be checked at different points to see whether each theoretically anticipated element is present. This increases the number of observations without increasing the number of studies and is considered an appropriate way of investigating the democratic peace thesis.12 Through this process we can assess causality by focusing on just a few instances of a social phenomenon. The question is not just if something happened as expected but how it happened. Below, I will apply this technique to the Book of Mormon. Clearly the democratic regime set up by Mosiah fought wars frequently (by modern standards), but his state’s pacific nature may still be evaluated through
contrasting the desires of actors in different positions.

When the norms and institutions of Nephite democracy are considered, several indicators demonstrate a tendency to avert war insofar as it was possible. Prefacing the long series of chapters on war, Mormon describes at length how Captain Moroni and the Nephites did not desire to fight, engaging in bloodshed only with extreme compunction (see Alma 43:29, 54). Pahoran, the democratically elected leader of Moroni’s day, is even more loath to participate in acts of war. Late in the conflict, Pahoran still worries “whether it should be just in us to go against our brethren,” despite such internal war maneuvers being conducted by the Nephite government not long before (Alma 61:19). Apparently, this was in fact a “social norm” established within the Nephite state and, in times of conflict, externalized. Mormon editorializes:

Now the Nephites were taught to defend themselves against their enemies, even to the shedding of blood if it were necessary; yea, and they were also taught never to give an offense, yea, and never to raise the sword except it were against an enemy, except it were to preserve their lives. (Alma 48:14)

What can be made of this analysis? To say that the Nephites had traditions against conflict does not prove these norms were necessarily connected to democratic governance. Any reader of the Book of Mormon knows, of course, that this disinclination to go to war was according to the instructions of God. The word of God is all-important; still, a few hints indicate that institutions do matter. Ammon recounts that, before the transition to democracy, the Nephites had believed any effort to convert their Lamanite brethren would ultimately be doomed to fail. Rather than use the word of God to convert them, the Nephites advocated the opposite:

And moreover they did say: Let us take up arms against them, that we destroy them and their iniquity out of the land, lest they overrun us and destroy us. (Alma 26:25)

We contrast this with the Nephites’ reception of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies. Nowhere can the Nephites’ prior prejudice be found. When Ammon “tr[ies] the hearts” of the Nephites to see if they will allow the converted Lamanites to assume residence in Nephite territory, the Lamanite king is so concerned that he suggests he would prefer to perish (Alma 27:10, 15). However, when the “voice of the people” is returned, it is in support of the peaceful integration of former adversaries. The change from advocating offense to reconciliation is substantial. This is particularly significant if, as John Sorenson has suggested, the practice of peaceful acceptance of other peoples was a consistent feature of the Nephite state. The cultural explanation for the democratic peace offers one way of explaining why the Nephites did not consider other peoples a threat while the Lamanites did (see Alma 17:20).

Contrasting several antidemocratic foils with Mosiah’s system sheds further light on the problem. The Book of Mormon is replete with leaders who incite conflicts in which their constituents are made to suffer for their leaders’ gain. A mere mention of the names Laman, Amalickiah, Ammoron, Gadianton, Zerahemnah (and, less conspicuously, Giddianhi, Tubaloth, and Amlici) is probably sufficient. Typically leaders have a profound and possibly deterministic effect on society’s direction. The judges and lawyers of Ammonihah conspired to roll back the state’s democratic institutions and were willing to resort to violence to achieve their goals (see Alma 8:17; 10:27). Likewise, the Zoramites’ decision-making process was secretive, deciding policy not by public discussion (the voice of the people) but by private fact-finding (see Alma 35:5). Gadianton, the arch-villain, thrived through the preservation of internal and external mysteriousness (see Helaman 2:4). The secret combination must recoil against democracy. Exclusive, violent societies tend to be undemocratic. Excepting a few excep-
tional monarchs, nondemocratic decision making typically foments injustice and conflict.

By my count, there are only two instances in the Book of Mormon in which a populace goads a righteous leader into conflict. The first example is that of Limhi’s people (see Mosiah 21:6), and the second is Mormon’s decision to lead the Nephites despite their wickedness (see Mormon 5:1–2). In both cases, the government in place (one might argue there is not really much of a government at all in the latter case) is nondemocratic. Also, by my count, in the only other instance of a populace attempting to coerce a righteous leader into conflict, Gidgiddoni tells the Nephites that such an act of aggression would necessarily end in failure (see 3 Nephi 3:20–21). Part of the reason may be that the institutions Gidgiddoni faced were structurally more averse to aggression. This contrasts especially with occasions on which Lamanite kings attempt to compel their fearful subjects to prepare for war against the Nephites. Indeed, Lamanites and dissenters even figured the Nephites’ pacific disposition into their battle plans, perhaps using it as a reason to adopt the tactic of surprise (see Alma 2; 25:1–3; 49; Helaman 4). This as well is consistent with modern social science’s finding that democracies are frequently targeted by aggressors.

Of course, none of this proves that democracy made the difference. It is difficult to envision Moroni, for instance, doing or believing something because he was “institutionally constrained.” But this may not tell the whole story. Leaders like Moroni and Pahoran do not gain power arbitrarily. Rather, they have authority; their ability to use power is invested to them by a larger set of people (see Alma 43:17; 46:34). When kings rule without electoral consent, they may make war for personal reasons or for the benefit of a boisterous or influential minority. When this selectorate is expanded to an electorate, the interests that government actors represent become more diverse, incorporating many who always prefer to avoid war. In either case, the leader may act to appease or satisfy those who give him power. Deciding who these people are has much to do with state-level policy preferences. Usually the more democratic the authorizing body, the more inclined toward peace its representatives will be. The Nephites did fight, particularly to regain lost territory (see Helaman 4), but their wars were undertaken from a broadly peaceful viewpoint.

**Winning in War**

In the preceding section I have considered one of the major facets of democratic peace theory and illustrated how the Book of Mormon might be contemplated through its lens. I will now turn to the second major theoretical proposition, that democracies fight more effectively than nondemocracies. Two related explanations for this view can be provided. First, David Lake has used an economic rationale to explain why democracies are not only disinclined to conflict, but, perhaps paradoxically, are also more likely to win conflicts they do enter. All states provide protection to their citizens, but not all states provide protection equally. In autocratic states, elites are secure in their control of the government as a result of barriers to political participation. Because they are unlikely to be removed from office, autocratic rulers can tax their peoples more heavily while providing fewer services in return—including the service of protection from foreign aggressors. In other words, the state is less secure because rulers can line their pockets with state
revenues rather than devoting funds to protecting its people.

In a democracy leaders may be removed from office more readily, so they are less inclined to sacrifice collective protection for personal gain. The result is that society is typically not exploited by the state, and the economy functions more efficiently, producing greater aggregate wealth. Because democracies have more wealth, they face incentives to pay for more protection (e.g., maintaining a larger army). Because they have more to lose in confrontation with autocratic states, their citizens are more willing to dedicate the human and material resources necessary to prevail in conflict. This forms the basis of the second explanation, which is that democratic soldiers fight better than autocratic soldiers. Democratic soldiers have more at stake in the state and expect worse treatment if captured. This particularly equips democracies to prevail in protracted conflicts with nondemocratic rivals. Because the Book of Mormon contains a remarkable number of conflicts within a democratic/nondemocratic dyad, we can check this theoretical prediction.

Before Mosiah’s implementation of a democratic system, conflicts between the Nephites and the Lamanites show a decidedly mixed record. A decisive Nephite defeat is alluded to in the opening verses of the book of Omni (see 1:6–7), but King Benjamin thereafter wins a decisive victory (see Omni 1:24; Words of Mormon 1:13). Zeniff, a just Nephite king, wins a battle against the Lamanites (see Mosiah 10:20), but his grandson Limhi, also a just king, loses three consecutively (see Mosiah 21:3–12). In the postdemocratic wars tragically reported by Mormon, the record is similarly ambiguous.

The case of King Noah deserves particular mention. Among the first things we learn about Noah is that he lays a stiff tax on his people, extracting his society’s wealth for personal gain (see Mosiah 11:3–4). Maintaining much panoply in glorifying
his people (see Mosiah 11:18–19), Noah’s real investment is in his own fortune, building “elegant and spacious buildings,” ornamentations, and “a great tower” (11:8–14). Noah’s priests speak “flattering words” to the people (a point emphasized repeatedly). Apparently convinced, the people continue to “labor exceedingly” to support the elites and king (11:6). The story is typical of a despotic, autocratic regime: a demagogic leader exploits his people by fomenting partisan allegiance while using the state to pursue purely personal desires. Soon enough, in such cases, economic output begins to lag. In a profligate display of idleness, he causes himself and his people to become “wine-bibber[s]” (11:15). Wealth is neither produced nor utilized efficiently. Inevitably, under such conditions, security suffers. Noah fails to supply “a sufficient number” of guards for his fields (11:17), and a conflict with the Lamanites ensues. Still, he is superficially triumphant as the enemy is “driven back”—ominously—“for a time” (11:18).

As the text suggests, victory will be short-lived. Despite his success, “the forces of the king were small, having been reduced” (Mosiah 19:2). The reader might even infer that Noah has exploited his people precisely to the possible limit—his collection of taxes is such that a “lesser part” of the people overcome the barriers to political participation, and they begin to “breathe out threatenings against the king” (Mosiah 19:3). Hence, he has maximized wealth by approaching the threshold where the political participation necessary to eliminate him is almost attained. By this time it is simply too late for the regime; King Noah realizes he cannot even hope to mount an effective defense against the Lamanites when conflict becomes inevitable (see Mosiah 19:11).

A very different picture emerges after the transition to democracy in Mosiah 29. For Book of Mormon democracy to be compatible with the social scientific theory presented here, several different expectations need to be satisfied. The Nephite state would need to show a higher level of success in military conflict, and this success would need to correspond with greater wealth and a greater willingness of the populace to sustain military operations. An examination of the postdemocratization period reveals each of these features distinctly.

Although some variance in delineating is possible (see table 1 on page 50 for my coding), there are roughly fourteen military conflicts between Mosiah 29 and 3 Nephi 7, at which point the period of democratic rule ends with the collapse of Mosiah’s system. The outcomes of these conflicts are also variant, but overall, the Nephite state’s success is remarkable. At least ten conflicts appear to be clear Nephite victories, with the remaining four offering ambivalent but noteworthy cases.

In its first crucible, Alma’s regime displays significant strength and solidarity; even after incurring serious casualties in two early battles with the Amlictes (see Alma 2:17, 28), the Nephites have sufficient force (and, just as important, sufficient political will) to send “a numerous army” against an Amlicite and Lamanite wave (Alma 3:23). Next, after failing to heed Alma’s prophetic warnings, the substantial Nephite city of Ammonihah suffers a categorical defeat at the hands of a Lamanite invasion (see Alma 16:2). The clearest example of a Nephite loss over the expanse of the reign of the judges, this battle at first appears to show that Mosiah’s system is an inadequate assurance of protection. However, on closer examination this begins to look more like the exception that proves the rule. The people of Ammonihah, though part of the Nephite system of governance, were not democratic participants as much as undemocratic subversives (see Alma 8:17).

The Nephites win further victories in the brief but severe battle in Alma 28, the conflict against Zarahemnah (Alma 43–44), the great war extending roughly from Alma 46 through 62, the short but independent conflict in Alma 63, the war against Coriantumr (Helaman 1:14–34), and the battles against Giddianhi (3 Nephi 4:1–14) and Zemnarihah (3 Nephi 4:15–33). Overall, the extent of military success for the Nephite democracy is astonishing. All battles are uncertain, but the only really close call in this group is in the war of Alma 46–62, a conflict which stands out so distinctly that it is commonly spoken of as “the war” between the Nephites and Lamanites. Although the Nephites finally rout the Lamanite aggressors, they come so close to defeat that even the great Moroni, who had before guaranteed victory in his polemical epistle to Ammoron (see Alma 54:5–14), begins to doubt the outcome (see Alma 59:11–12). The Book of Mormon leaves no room to speculate about why the Nephites brush up against destruction at this point in their history. It is not because their system of government goes bad but because it comes perilously close to being overthrown. Moroni makes clear:
## Table 1: War in the Nephite World

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Passage</th>
<th>Leaders/Groups</th>
<th>Regime Type</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Omni 1:5–7</td>
<td>Amaron (records war)</td>
<td>Nondemocratic</td>
<td>279 BC</td>
<td>Defeat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Omni 1:24</td>
<td>King Benjamin</td>
<td>Nondemocratic</td>
<td>279–130 BC*</td>
<td>Victory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mosiah 10:20</td>
<td>Zeniff</td>
<td>Nondemocratic</td>
<td>160 BC</td>
<td>Victory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mosiah 11:18–19</td>
<td>Noah</td>
<td>Nondemocratic</td>
<td>150 BC</td>
<td>Victory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mosiah 19</td>
<td>Noah</td>
<td>Nondemocratic</td>
<td>145 BC</td>
<td>Defeat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mosiah 20:11</td>
<td>Limhi</td>
<td>Nondemocratic</td>
<td>145–122 BC*</td>
<td>Victory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mosiah 21:6–8</td>
<td>Limhi</td>
<td>Nondemocratic</td>
<td>145–122 BC*</td>
<td>Defeat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mosiah 21:11</td>
<td>Limhi</td>
<td>Nondemocratic</td>
<td>145–122 BC*</td>
<td>Defeat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alma 2:17–38</td>
<td>Alma vs. Amlici</td>
<td>Democratic</td>
<td>RJ 5, 87 BC</td>
<td>Victory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alma 3:20–24</td>
<td>Alma (Nephites) vs. Amlicites/Lamanites</td>
<td>Democratic</td>
<td>RJ 5, 87 BC</td>
<td>Victory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alma 16:2–3</td>
<td>Ammonihah/Nehors vs. Lamanites</td>
<td>Democratic</td>
<td>RJ 11, 81 BC</td>
<td>Defeat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alma 16:5–8</td>
<td>Zoram</td>
<td>Democratic</td>
<td>RJ 11, 81 BC</td>
<td>Victory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alma 28:1–3</td>
<td>Nephi vs. Lamanite</td>
<td>Democratic</td>
<td>RJ 15, 76 BC</td>
<td>Victory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alma 43–44</td>
<td>Moroni vs. Zerahemnah</td>
<td>Democratic</td>
<td>RJ 18, 74 BC</td>
<td>Victory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alma 63:15</td>
<td>Moronihah</td>
<td>Democratic</td>
<td>RJ 39, 52 BC</td>
<td>Victory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helaman 1:14–34</td>
<td>Moronihah vs. Coriantumr</td>
<td>Democratic</td>
<td>RJ 41, 51 BC</td>
<td>Victory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helaman 4</td>
<td>Moronihah</td>
<td>Democratic</td>
<td>RJ 57–62, 35–30 BC</td>
<td>Undecided</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helaman 11</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>Democratic</td>
<td>RJ 80, 12 BC</td>
<td>Defeat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helaman 11</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>Democratic</td>
<td>RJ 81, 11 BC</td>
<td>Undecided</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Nephi 4:1–14</td>
<td>Gidgiddoni/Lachoneus vs. Giddianhi (robber)</td>
<td>Democratic</td>
<td>RJ 110, AD 18</td>
<td>Victory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Nephi 4:15–33</td>
<td>Gidgiddoni/Lachoneus vs. Zemnarihah</td>
<td>Democratic</td>
<td>RJ 113, AD 21</td>
<td>Victory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mormon 2:4</td>
<td>Mormon vs. Lamanites</td>
<td>Nondemocratic</td>
<td>AD 327–328*</td>
<td>Defeat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mormon 2:9</td>
<td>Mormon vs. Aaron</td>
<td>Nondemocratic</td>
<td>AD 331</td>
<td>Victory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mormon 2:16</td>
<td>Mormon vs. Lamanites</td>
<td>Nondemocratic</td>
<td>AD 345</td>
<td>Defeat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mormon 3:7</td>
<td>Mormon vs. Lamanites</td>
<td>Nondemocratic</td>
<td>AD 361</td>
<td>Victory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mormon 3:8</td>
<td>Mormon vs. Lamanites</td>
<td>Nondemocratic</td>
<td>AD 362</td>
<td>Victory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mormon 4:2</td>
<td>Nephi vs. Lamanites</td>
<td>Nondemocratic</td>
<td>AD 363</td>
<td>Defeat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mormon 4:7–8</td>
<td>Nephi vs. Lamanites</td>
<td>Nondemocratic</td>
<td>AD 364</td>
<td>Victory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mormon 4:13–14</td>
<td>Nephi vs. Lamanites</td>
<td>Nondemocratic</td>
<td>AD 367</td>
<td>Defeat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mormon 4:15</td>
<td>Nephi vs. Lamanites</td>
<td>Nondemocratic</td>
<td>AD 367</td>
<td>Victory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mormon 4:16–6:15</td>
<td>Nephi vs. Lamanites</td>
<td>Nondemocratic</td>
<td>AD 375–385</td>
<td>Defeat</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“Outcome” and “Regime Type” columns reference the Nephite state (i.e., What is the outcome for the Nephite regime?). “Time” is given in years according to the reign of the judges (RJ), when appropriate, prior to the date. *Indicates “between” dates given.

Explanatory Note: Conflicts are delineated, as much as possible, according to textual breaks. When forces disengage and then return, with an observed outcome to the first engagement reported, two battles are counted. Typically, this breaks battles into the smallest components recognizable. The exception is the prolonged conflict from Alma 46 to Alma 62, which is coded as one. This is because there is no separation of forces, and because it is explicitly treated as one war (Alma 62:41).

Summary: During the democratic period, the Nephites win 71 percent of military conflicts and lose 21 percent. During the nondemocratic period, the Nephites win 47 percent of conflicts and lose 53 percent.
We could have withstood our enemies that they could have gained no power over us . . . had it not been for the war which broke out amongst ourselves; yea, were it not for these king-men, who caused so much bloodshed among ourselves. (Alma 60:15–16)

Though not its central focus, the Book of Mormon repeatedly details the importance of institutions. From the early recognition that those in positions of institutional authority played a pivotal role in deciding the Nephites’ survival (see Alma 10:27) to the series of conflicts revolving around who had the right to control such positions (see Alma 54:17; 3 Nephi 3:16), we see continued awareness of this fact. Another hint is Mormon’s dark adumbration that the Gadiantons will “prove the overthrow, yea, almost the entire destruction of the people of Nephi” (Helaman 2:13). Accustomed to the pattern of institutions mattering, we see this prophecy already in the early stages of fulfillment once the robbers “obtain the sole management of the government” (Helaman 6:39). Within this pattern we can make sense of Moroni’s focus on cleansing the “inward vessel” of government before looking to external foes (Alma 60:24).

The only battle excluded at this point is that in which the combined forces of the Nephite dissenters and Lamanites drive deep into Nephite lands fighting against Moronihah (see Helaman 4). For some time the battle stalls in what looks to be a protracted stalemate (see Helaman 4:18), and the Nephite state faces an exceptional circumstance in which its very existence is jeopardized (see 4:20).

However, this test reveals something about the state’s capability when pushed to its limits. After the crushing Lamanite assault, Moronihah succeeds in the difficult task of rolling back the invasion in “many parts of the land” (Helaman 4:9). While Nephite commanders knew that holding ground is preferable to taking it (see Alma 59:9), this example represents a recurrent theme in Nephite warfare. After Coriantumr amazes even himself in his sacking of Zarahemla (see Helaman 1:19–22), Moronihah uses the latent strength of the Nephite state to surround and crush Coriantumr’s forces (see 1:25–33). Earlier, Amalickiah sweeps through Nephite lands, but the Nephites commence retaking lands almost as soon as the pace of the war slows and forces become entrenched (see Alma 51).

The trend that emerges from this analysis is that short conflicts (such as those at Ammonihah or Coriantumr’s blitzkrieg-style campaign) favor the Lamanite autocracy, but extended conflicts are ultimately won by the Nephite democracy. We recall that the theoretical reason democracies are expected to succeed in conflicts is that they can direct greater resources over an extended period of time. While democracies may lose in the short term, “in every prolonged conflict in modern history, such states have prevailed over their illiberal rivals.”

The comparative wealth of the Nephite state as well as its potential for the quick acquisition of wealth (suggesting high productivity) are both noted in the Book of Mormon.48 It is during the democratic period that the productive capacity of the Nephite state is most conspicuously channeled to military endeavors. Moroni undertakes an extensive project of city construction and fortification, with impressive military results (see Alma 49, especially 49:8).
According to the theoretical logic, democracies should prevail because they have both greater resources to draw upon and greater political will to do so, for a long time if necessary. The above analysis considers the efficacy and capacity of Nephite democracy, but the Book of Mormon makes additional claims about the Nephites’ resilience. In contemporary theory the additional benefits granted by democracy create an incentive for democratic citizens to express a willingness to invest a great deal of blood and treasure into state preservation. Conversely, citizens of nondemocracies lack this incentive and may even prefer regime change since the possibility for improvement is greater in less desirable political states.

The wars of Captain Moroni ideally exhibit this phenomenon. Moroni knows that, in contrast to the Lamanite desire for conquest, the Nephites will fight to preserve their “lands, and their liberty, and their church” (Alma 43:30). It would be difficult to express the benefits of the archetypal procedural democracy more clearly than with the three ideals of democracy Moroni recognizes—individually owned property, political freedom, private rather than official religiosity. The reader need not doubt the pivotal role these benefits play in generating public support for the war, as they form the centerpiece of Moroni’s appeal to hold the line against the king-men (see Alma 46). Later, upon recognizing Pahoran’s government in exile to be on the brink of collapse, the people “flock” to his call to arms to defend the same set of rights (Alma 61:6). The Nephite people do seem to recognize, often at least, the worth of Mosiah’s gift (or rather, the Lord’s gift through Mosiah).
Tempering Optimism: Challenges in New Democracies

No political scientist has ever theorized Zion. Instead, all institutional choices entail trade-offs, and Mosiah is well aware of the possible sacrifices his shift to democracy carries. It is because righteous kings cannot be guaranteed indefinitely, and also perhaps because of the position in which he finds himself, that Mosiah opts for democracy (see Mosiah 29:13). He harbors no illusions about democracy being a panacea, nor should the Book of Mormon history be read to inspire any.

Philippe Schmitter examines possible predicaments that frequently plague nascent democracies. "All new democracies," according to Schmitter, "if they are to consolidate a viable set of political institutions, must make difficult choices." Among the problems confronting democracies are "free-riding" and "policy-cycling." In free riding, citizens achieve the benefits of collective goods without participating in producing them. Before institutional roles have solidified, new systems can be replete with opportunities for free gains. After all, it is not yet clear how wealth will be distributed, so critical choices can be made for profit. Korihor accuses Alma of free riding (see Alma 30:27). Nehor preaches the gospel of free riding (see Alma 1:3); what a great idea to be popular, to not have to labor with one's own hands! What more appealing political position could there be?

Such appeal is at the heart of the Nehor's program. It may be interesting that he appears as the first test of the new state, in the first year of the reign of the judges. On reflection, a powerful logic underscores Nehor's choice. Under the system of kings, the presentation of an opposing political platform would have little effect at all. If the king disagreed with a political manifesto, it would be ignored or suppressed. Candidacy means nothing in monarchy. All of this changes once the acquisition of power by others becomes a viable possibility. Nehor's purpose is to attain money and support (see Alma 1:5), the two critical elements of any successful political activity. When Alma accuses him of priestcraft and of its enforcement, he reveals that Nehor's dissidence has assumed a politicized tenor. According to Alma, it is when priestcraft rises to this political level that it becomes especially pernicious (see Alma 1:12).
The second dilemma, policy cycling, occurs when new democracies—not having developed stable political positions—encounter "unstable majorities formed by shifting coalitions . . . alienating everyone." Amlici’s story, four years after Nehor and still early in Nephite democracy, is the quintessential tale of alienation. In a dramatic election with widely differing alternatives, exactly how the political majority will coalesce is uncertain, as manifest by the “alarming” nature of Amlici’s challenge (Alma 2:3). When the majority does take Alma’s side, Amlici defects rather than accept the outcome, a tactic familiar to unconsolidated democracies. There is no prior tradition of peaceful change in power, nor in peaceful ceding of power. Without such a tradition, politically ambitious men cannot know for certain the costs of conceding power. This creates an incentive to cling to the chance for power, just as Amlici does.

These problems are more likely in a new democratic state than in an old (and especially a righteous) monarchy. Mosiah may have experienced these types of internal problems, but none are reported prior to democratization. Instead we know only that he “had established peace in the land” (Mosiah 29:40). Democracy would carry risks and responsibilities, as Mosiah understood and impressed on his people (see Mosiah 29:27, 30). Remarkably, the risks the young Nephite state encountered typify those generally experienced during the modern progression to democracy.

CONCLUSION: THEREFORE, WHAT?

Ultimately my perspective is devotional rather than evidentiary. Lacking a systematic way of determining a criterion for evidence, I do not suggest that the above arguments assist in compelling belief. They hopefully underscore the book’s significance and complexity. Believers in the Book of Mormon can better understand the claims the book makes about itself as we gain knowledge about why and how prophetic pronouncements are fulfilled. Mosiah departed from centuries of political tradition because he believed doing so would allow his people to achieve peace as long as they acted wisely. Although it might seem that the period following his rule was especially tumultuous, the historical record bears out the truth of Mosiah’s departing counsel. Sadly, the blessing of Mosiah’s system only becomes completely clear after it had been destroyed. It is then that the people “united in the hatred of those who had entered into a covenant to destroy the government” (3 Nephi 7:11).

I should also emphasize that this paper seeks to highlight an aspect of the Book of Mormon worthy of attention, not to obscure one of the book’s central themes. The most basic lesson in the Book of Mormon’s politics is simple: God makes all the difference. Our Father in Heaven is all-powerful—whether the adversary is Laban’s fifty or his hypothetical tens of thousands doesn’t matter (see 1 Nephi 4:1).

What, then, is the point? When God works miracles he works them according to his will. Often, we know, God works in unsensational ways. "I say unto you, that by small and simple things are great things brought to pass," Alma tells his son (Alma 37:6). Often this is understood to mean that great things are brought to pass by those who are neither powerful nor prominent by worldly standards. In this sense the “simple” are the humble followers of Christ. I presume something along these lines is correct, but another possible reading of the term
simple is natural, or organic. God uses natural processes—those explainable without use of an appeal to divine intercession—to accomplish his purposes. When God blesses his people with success, it is sometimes through this kind of “simple” means.

Mosiah changed the Nephites’ political institutions because he understood that the kind of state a people live in could make a relevant temporal and spiritual difference in their lives (see Mosiah 29, especially 29:17, 23). All too often, actors will do precisely what institutions allow them to do—a conclusion of scripture as much as of scholarship (see D&C 121:39). The more insulated political leaders are in exercising their invested authority, the greater the barriers to political entry by others will be. In turn, this permits leaders to exploit their peoples. When personal wealth trumps collective protection, leaders govern at the expense of their citizens, their state, and—finally—their own.

How plausible is it that Joseph Smith (or anyone close to him) could have observed the interplay of the institutions here considered and imagined such an authentic world as the one presented in the Book of Mormon? Until very recently, democracies have been viewed as government-light—softer and gentler than their nondemocratic peers, and concomitantly, weaker and less decisive. A major proponent of American democracy, Alexis de Tocqueville further believed democratic governments to be “decidedly inferior” in matters of international relations. In Joseph’s day, Jefferson and Madison worried about this point when trouble brewed with Britain. Fearing that Montesquieu was correct in arguing that democracies tended to be fragmentary, they feared western states might align against the federal government in the event of war. While the modern observer sees the emerging global dominance of democracy and easily acquiesces to the view that democracies could be strong rather than weak, this position has gained currency only as recently as the end of the Cold War. In presenting the Book of Mormon to the world, Joseph Smith turned political theory upside down for no apparent reason. Within the last couple of decades we have begun to find that his reversal actually puts the ideas right side up.

The blessings of democratic governance are easily concealed by more intuitive but misleading views about political strength. Indeed, as Mosiah noted, preparing society for peace is an act for which wisdom—political and spiritual—is a vital requirement.

3. Captain Moroni, for instance, acts with “the voice of the people,” but this suggests prior approval to use his personal discretion in executing his responsibilities (Alma 46:34).


6. In fact, a common misconception is that prime ministers face greater discretion in making political decisions than presidents for just this type of reason (they lack defined terms and are frequently unopposed). Prime ministers have a more expansive ability to set the legislative agenda. However, this is deceptive because it obscures institutional constraints that make prime ministers even more cautious than their presidential counterparts. See Kenneth Waltz, Theory of International Politics (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1979), 85–89.

7. Bushman, Beginnings, 132.


14. John Sorenson, “When Lehi’s Party Arrived in the Land, Did They Find Others There?” JRSM 1 (1992): 1–34. A reviewer helpfully points out that insofar as this held in periods of Nephitic kingship as well as during the democratic period, it does not support my claim that regime type made a difference.

15. I thank S. Kent Brown for this point.

16. In Helaman 4, fearful Lamanites must be coerced and deceived into going to war. A similar situation occurs in Alma 47, in which a Lamanite army refuses to go to war with the Nephites.


23. This is the dominant view, presented by Dan Reiter and Allan Stam, Democracies at War (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).


26. See, for instance, Helaman 6:8–9. In accordance with the principle of comparative advantage, it is during a period of free trade (“and thus the hand did battle alone”) that the Nephites gain “an exceeding plenty” of riches. This is noted also in Alma 1:29, suggesting the acquisition of riches is particularly pronounced in the era immediately following democratization.

27. A reviewer notes that it has been tried, such as in More’s Utopia. My point is just that state institutions built by humans do not get the best of everything.


31. I thank a reviewer for this point.


34. My focus has been on external peace, although as a reviewer points out, Mosiah was certainly concerned about peace within the society as well.

35. Alexis de Tocqueville, quoted in Schultz and Weingast, “Democratic Advantage,” 3. I thank a reviewer for pointing out to me that this is only a caricature of Tocqueville’s view. He also believed that in some circumstances, democracies fought better than
dictatorships, being more likely to win or lose decisively than other regimes. A thorough development of the perceived relationship between democracy and war in Joseph Smith’s day would require a much more expansive treatment than I provide. My concluding discussion is intended only to be suggestive. See Alexis de Tocqueville in Harvey Mansfield and Debra Winthrop, trans., Democracy in America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), especially chs. 22–26, pp. 617–35.

1. would like to thank S. Kent Brown for his valuable comments and three anonymous reviewers for their uncommonly thorough and insightful suggestions. Errors remain my own.

Three Days and Three Nights: Reassessing Jesus’ Entombment
David B. Cummings


4. Brown, Death of the Messiah, 1356–73.


7. A wadi near Bi`r Marshah is favored by Jeffrey R. Chadwick; see his “The Wrong Place for Lehi’s Trail and the Valley of Lemuel,” 71–75.


10. Chadwick, “Wrong Place for Lehi’s Trail and the Valley of Lemuel,” 71; Chadwick, “An Archaeologist’s View,” 72; Nibley points out that the expression “river of water” (1 Nephi 2:6) means that the streambed contained flowing water (Lehi in the Desert; The World of the Jاردidents: There Were Jاردidents (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 80.


