

King Benjamin's Statebuilding Project and the Limits of Statist Religion

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The first five chapters of the Book of Mosiah provide a stirring account of a humble king who recognizes his dependence on God, defines greatness as a life oriented toward service to God and one's fellow beings, and enjoins his people to signal their new covenantal life in Christ by caring for the most marginalized figures of society—not grudgingly, but out of a sincere disposition to emulate and embody God's grace. King Benjamin's sermon in Mosiah 2-5, punctuated by the people's ecstatic call for and receipt of Christ's atoning mercy, which in turn caused a "mighty change" in their hearts so that they were now disposed "to do good continually" (Mosiah 5:2), stands as one of the great discourses in all Mormon scripture. As a theologically informed guide to a believer's life in Christ, Benjamin's discourse arguably ranks second only to Jesus's own Sermon on the Mount (along with the parallel version delivered at the temple in Bountiful in 3 Nephi). The impact of Benjamin's words both on his audience in the text and on modern readers can hardly be underestimated.

Benjamin is part of a small coterie of scriptural figures, like the Hebrew Bible's King Josiah, who are simultaneously sovereign rulers of their people as well as major religious reformers. Mormon affirms that "king Benjamin was a holy man, and he did reign over the people in righteousness" (WoM 1:17). When he ascended his tower to speak to the people of his kingdom, Benjamin did so in his dual role as the people's monarch and God's spokesman. His address should therefore be read as operating simultaneously in two modes: first, as a prophetic discourse on how the people could receive and retain a remission of their sins and have their

creaturely natures transformed through faith in God, repentance, a godly life of good works and charity, and especially the saving grace of Christ's atonement; and second, as a political discourse in which he affirmed the divine right of the neo-Nephite dynasty in Zarahemla and asserted the king's status as a specially endowed vessel of God's word, grace, and power. The political dimension of the discourse is not simply window dressing or background context for the spiritual dimension. Rather, the king's politics substantially condition and in fact limit the prophetic possibilities of the king's words.

Benjamin was not the inheritor of a well-established kingdom whose borders, population, and line of succession were so well-understood and engrained as to seem the natural order of things. Instead, Benjamin inherited the statebuilding project begun by his father Mosiah I upon migrating with his followers from the land of Nephi into the already populated land of Zarahemla. As the minority population—and refugees at that—the Nephites' secure presence in Zarahemla, let alone anything like dominance, was hardly assured. It took strenuous effort by both Mosiah and Benjamin to form a new Nephite nation from the remains of the old one, but now mixed with a majority Mulekite population that shared with the Nephite arrivals none of the typical elements of a nation, such as a common history, language, and religion. We have only glimpses into the details of Benjamin's reign, but those peeks, placed alongside his last sermon, reveal a sovereign heavily engaged in a simultaneous project of statebuilding and religious reformation. I refer to a single Benjaminian "project" advisedly, as the two crucial aspects of Benjamin's rule—the statebuilding and religious reform—cannot be disentangled.

As an echo of the Israelite kings, the theo-monarchical state that Benjamin built and passed on to his son Mosiah II was one in which the polity was heavily informed by religion, and in which religious practice and belief were distinctly oriented toward the preservation and

prosperity of the state. I use the term “statist religion” to describe this particular arrangement, and argue that more than anything, his commitment to and operation within a statist religion is what limited Benjamin’s moral imagination and prevented him from leading his people to Zion.

Two definitions are in order, of “statist religion” and “Zion.” In statist religion, the preservation and extension of true religion is a priority of the state and its various coercive apparatuses. The state benefits from the promulgation of a particular religion because it uses that religion’s leadership, language, imagery, authority, and community to enhance its own legitimacy and otherwise advance its own ends. The religion conversely derives benefits from its privileged association with the state through financial assistance, symbolic status, political influence, and/or the suppression of rivals. This mutually beneficial relationship means that statist religion cannot be truly prophetic toward the state in which it is embedded. This does not necessarily mean that those who operate within a statist religion are religiously insincere or worse, crass manipulators of religion toward cynical political ends. Prophetic voices can be permitted and even encouraged within a statist religion, but only if they limit their message to a personalist theology of otherworldly salvation and good works, to the exclusion of any sustained structural critique of the powers that be. Statist religion therefore reduces the scope of the prophets’ teaching to a focus on individual morality and a conversionist ethic that is valuable for maintaining social harmony without disrupting the underlying assumptions and structures of the state project. A prophet who critiques the state necessarily stands outside of and will likely be disparaged, even persecuted, by those associated with the statist religion; good examples include Elijah, Abinadi, and Jesus.

My definition of Zion tracks with how Joseph Smith developed the concept in his scriptural productions and sermons. “Zion” is not a term native to Benjamin’s theology or

society, though its basic principles correspond to many aspects of his teaching. Zion, as I conceive it, is a society of gathered disciples who have experienced deep conversion to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Having been spiritually transformed, these disciples individually and collectively renounce all forms of violence, injustice, and inequity and in their stead cultivate the conditions for sustainable peace, justice, equality, and human flourishing. The radically committed Christian community that results provides a witness to the world of the advent and joy of the nonviolent kingdom of God. Zion is non-statist in its character and goals, and may even be *anti*-statist to the degree that, as Leon Trotsky is said to have observed, “Every state is founded on force.”¹ To the contrary, Zion, modeling heaven, is established and maintained by the power of non-coercive persuasion.

Looking back near the end of his life, Benjamin could rightly take pride that he had created a benevolent state for his subjects. He had not taxed them heavily, employed mass incarceration as a form of social control, nor appropriated their labor by resorting to enslavement. Instead, as their king he worked alongside and served the people, provided for their spiritual formation, and created a polity predicated on the principles of mutuality and care.² Nevertheless, by assessing how Benjamin’s statebuilding project affected his theology and ethics we better understand the outer limits of how religion can be envisioned and enacted within the context of state power. In articulating his primer on the Christian life, Benjamin was trapped by the constraints of his own mind, experience, position, and ambitions. He could not see that the instantiation of the kingdom of God as revealed in and through Jesus—predicated in its social arrangements on nonviolence, ethnoracial inclusiveness, and economic redistribution—would

¹ Quoted in Max Weber, *Politics as a Vocation*, trans. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965), 2.

² See Mosiah 2:11-14.

require the renunciation of the very things that his statebuilding project required. In short, Benjamin offers the best possible version of statist religion, and the remainder of the Book of Mormon is a testament to its insufficiency.

In the balance of this paper I will first lay out a brief account of Benjamin's statebuilding project. Second, I will show how the social ethic Benjamin offers in Mosiah 4 is constrained by that project, particularly in regard to its violence or coercion toward non-constituent "others" who are drawn outside the boundaries of moral obligation. Third, I will suggest that the Book of Mormon itself critiques and provides alternatives to the limitations of statist religion by demonstrating how subsequent generations of Benjamin's own family built upon but ultimately either dismantled or superseded his project.

I. Benjamin's Statebuilding Project

The initial settlement of Nephites in Zarahemla seems to have been a congenial process. The Zarahemlites, more commonly known in the text as Mulekites, seem to have immediately and unreservedly welcomed Mosiah I and his people, whom they outnumbered significantly. The two peoples quickly discovered a similar point of origin, their respective ancestors all having left Jerusalem at the time of Zedekiah, but they had little else in common. They spoke different languages, the Nephites had maintained a culture of literacy whereas the Mulekites had no written records, the Mulekites did not share the Nephites' belief in a Creator God (nor presumably any of the other elements of the Nephite religious system), and of course the two groups had different political leaders. Undaunted, Mosiah I took it upon himself to teach the Mulekites the Nephite language, which instruction seems to have been accompanied with a heavy dose of historical and religious content. All this was apparently done on friendly and

mutually agreeable terms, since the confederation of peoples soon thereafter chose Mosiah, the minority Nephites' leader, as their king.³ I call this union of the Nephites and Mulekites under the dynastic leadership of Mosiah I and his heirs the “neo-Nephite” state—though I will refer to the unified people, as the text does, simply as Nephites.

Whereas Mosiah seemingly ingratiated himself with the people and exerted influence through negotiation, persuasion, and education, his son Benjamin—whether compelled by temperament or circumstances—applied a heavier hand. Three major efforts mark King Benjamin's reign. First, he led his people in a “serious war” against the Lamanites in which the Nephites prevailed (Omni 1:24). At least some of the Lamanite forces were invaders from the land of Nephi, from which Mosiah and his people had fled in order to avoid such conflict. Yet others seem to have been inhabitants in the land of Zarahemla alongside the Mulekites, their ancestors having settled there as part of the “scattering” of peoples that had occurred in previous centuries (Jarom 1:6). The Nephites' defense against the Lamanite onslaught morphed into an offensive campaign in which all Lamanites were either killed or expelled from Zarahemla, which the Nephites now claimed as the “lands of their inheritance” (WoM 1:13-14). In sum, within the space of only about a generation, Nephites had entered the land of Zarahemla as a minority, asserted their linguistic, religious, and political dominance over the longtime inhabitants, and eradicated the remainder of the native population that either refused to accept their rule or which they deemed to be dangerously unassimilable. This pattern, with variations, will be familiar to scholars of settler colonialism, particularly as it played out in the modern history of the American West, Canada, South Africa, and Australia.⁴

³ See Omni 1:12-19.

⁴ See Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

When not waging war against the Lamanites, King Benjamin had to address problems on the domestic front. Mormon reports that the king “had somewhat of contentions among his people” (WoM 1:12). Whether these were lingering resentments from Mosiah’s time or new conflicts unique to Benjamin’s reign is uncertain. In either case, Benjamin felt threatened by a wave of “false Christs . . . false prophets, and false preachers and teachers” who came among the people (WoM 1:15-16). Perhaps these were Mulekite holdouts who refused to accept or abide by the strange Nephite teachings that they may have felt were imposed on them by foreign rulers. Since Benjamin felt his kingship was divinely ordained, any act of religious dissent within his realm could easily be understood—and perhaps was intended—as subversion of the neo-Nephite dynasty in Zarahemla. Fired with righteous zeal, Benjamin exhibited little tolerance for such deviance. The ensuing campaign of religious purification was not a gentle one. Benjamin and his “holy prophets” and “holy men” used “much sharpness” in their language stirring the people’s souls to repentance, then criminalized, silenced, suppressed, and punished recalcitrant dissenters “according to their crimes.” In the end, the king and his prophets prevailed, and the “contention” inspired by alternative voices disappeared. Those dissidents who had not been reformed or could not abide Benjamin’s religio-political regime voted with their feet and joined the Lamanites. Benjamin consolidated his rule and “did once more establish peace in the land,” according to Mormon, by eliminating the twin challenges to his reign—foreign Lamanites and domestic religio-political dissent (WoM 1:15-18).

A third key aspect of Benjamin’s statebuilding project was to introduce a doctrine of divine right of kings within the neo-Nephite dynasty. After the Nephites and Mulekites decided to confederate, Mosiah I “was appointed to be their king” (Omni 1:19). The text’s passive rendering leaves unclear the exact process by which this appointment came about, but it does

suggest that Mosiah's kingship was not a foregone conclusion let alone a providentially bestowed right. At the conclusion of his Mosiah's reign, Benjamin ascended to the throne by virtue of having been "chosen by [the] people," "consecrated by [his] father," then "suffered" by God to be "a ruler and a king" over the unified kingdom (Mosiah 2:11). No one doubted Benjamin's sovereign power, but the means by which he attained his position seem to have involved a significant affirmation from the people—whether actual or symbolic—in addition to the ritual bestowal of power and authority from his father Mosiah I. Whether consciously or not, Benjamin underscored the social construction of his kingship when he acknowledged to his people that his authority came in large part because they "have *called* me your king" (Mosiah 2:18, my emphasis).

In planning his succession, Benjamin further strengthened the neo-Nephite monarchy by solidifying the sovereign's authority to name his own successor and by adding a new layer of divine right. As he "waxed old" and faced his mortality (Mosiah 1:9, see also 2:26), Benjamin summoned his son Mosiah II and told him that on the following day he would "proclaim unto this my people out of mine own mouth that thou art a king and a ruler over this people" (Mosiah 1:10). The old king gave his heir "charge concerning all the affairs of the kingdom," and handed over the sacred Nephite relics of religio-political authority, namely the brass plates, plates of Nephi, sword of Laban, and Liahona (Mosiah 1:15-16). In short, Benjamin acted on his own prerogative in naming his son Mosiah king. He eliminated any role for the people in the succession process, which represented a departure from the means by which both he and his father had assumed the throne. When the people arrived the next day at what amounted to a command performance, Benjamin went even further by invoking sacred investiture for the succession. He testified to the assembly that he had been "commanded" by God to name his son

Mosiah as “a king and ruler over you” (Mosiah 2:30-31). Having previously lent their voice to the respective appointments of both Mosiah I and Benjamin, the people were now rendered mute and simply informed by their sovereign that they had been given a new king and that his power ultimately derived from heaven.

In addition to these procedural innovations, Benjamin introduced a small but perhaps significant change in the way that he framed the office that he and his heir occupied. In the original formulation of Nephite political authority, God ordained Nephi to be “a ruler and a teacher” over his brothers (1 Nephi 2:22). Nephi retained that language of “ruler and teacher” to describe his divinely ordained role even after his people prevailed upon him to be their king (see 2 Nephi 5:19). It therefore represented a slight departure when Mosiah consecrated Benjamin to be “a ruler and a king” over the neo-Nephite state (Mosiah 2:11). Whether this new formulation originated with the Mosiah-Benjamin handoff or had already become the language of Nephite kingship is unclear. In any case, whereas Benjamin was anointed to be “a ruler and a king,” he asserted that his son would be “a king and a ruler” over the people (Mosiah 2:30). In so doing, Benjamin placed the monarchical title ahead of the claim as the rightful inheritor of Nephi I’s rulership over his people. This subtle change in order of priority of “king” and “ruler” might be purely incidental. But it can also be read as a strategic attempt on Benjamin’s part to solidify the authority of the monarchy over a united domain in which the Mulekites had already come to accept the Nephite kings but as non-Lehites were under no hereditary obligation to accept a descendant of Nephi as their ruler. As leaders of a conglomerated kingdom that could no longer appeal to a shared history or tribal identity, it made sense for the sovereigns of the neo-Nephite state to emphasize and assert their newly established kingly authority over any claims of

rulership inherited from Nephi, whom the majority of the population did not recognize as their forefather.

In sum, over the course of his reign Benjamin had taken multiple steps to affirm and strengthen the religious and political authority of the neo-Nephite monarchy. In his sermon to the people Benjamin doubled down on that combination of kingly and prophetic authority by announcing that not only had an angel appeared to him, but that the angel was sent by God to deliver to the king words that he should in turn “declare unto thy people” (Mosiah 3:4). The king’s role as the appointed messenger of God built upon the charge that Benjamin had already given his subjects in presenting their new king to them. He promised that if the people would “keep the commandments of my son, or the commandments of God which shall be delivered unto you by him,” heaven would grant them prosperity and protection. Failure to obey the king’s—and by extension God’s—commands would lead to “contentions” and be tantamount to “obey[ing] the evil spirit” (Mosiah 2:31-32). The people apparently understood and internalized their king’s teachings. They declared that as a result of “the things *which our king* has spoken unto us” they were ready to make a covenant of obedience to God’s “commandments in all things that he shall command us” (Mosiah 5:4-5, my emphasis). What the people left unstated, but Benjamin had pointed out, was that in the absence of their heavenly king, the “Lord God Omnipotent” spoken of by the angel (Mosiah 3:5), it was their earthly sovereign, in the person of Benjamin’s heir, who would issue commands for and in behalf of God.

As the final piece of his religio-political statebuilding project, Benjamin therefore established the neo-Nephite king as the messenger and mediator of the covenant—titles otherwise associated with Jesus the Messiah.⁵ With the Lord God “on whom you are dependent

⁵ See Hebrews 12:24; 3 Nephi 24:1; D&C 76:69, 107:19.

for your lives and for all that ye have and are” (Mosiah 4:21) still in residence in the heavens, it was left to the Nephite king, ruler, and prophet—elevated even further by Mosiah II to be a king, ruler, and seer⁶—to govern and command all God’s dependents in his stead. At the time of his death, no doubt Benjamin believed that his statebuilding project was secure, with the king firmly at the head of both a unified kingdom and the statist religion that supported it.

II. The Limits of Benjamin’s Project

Benjamin’s speech is a rhetorical masterstroke in persuading the assembled crowd (and subsequent readers) of their perpetual indebtedness to God. Understanding and remembering the “goodness” and “greatness of God” would convict each person by contrast with “a sense of [their] nothingness, and [their] worthless and fallen state” (Mosiah 4:5, 11). Having been brought to the depths of humility, any hearer of the word would then throw themselves upon the mercy of Jesus Christ, whose “atoning blood” would allow them to “receive forgiveness of [their] sins” and have their “hearts . . . purified” (Mosiah 4:2). Every individual could then “retain a remission of [their] sins” through consistent, diligent action signaling an ongoing commitment to a godly life (Mosiah 4:12). Faith is only meaningful if translated into action—therefore, “if you believe all these things see that ye do them” (Mosiah 4:10).

Having successfully led his people toward individual sanctification in which they are “filled with the love of God” (Mosiah 4:12), Benjamin then makes the natural and necessary pivot toward the social implications of their covenantal relationship with God. This was not an innovation, finding clear precedent in both the Mosaic law and teachings of the Hebrew prophets that Benjamin would have had access to on the brass plates. Infused with both the love and

⁶ See Mosiah 8:14-16.

knowledge of God, the covenanted community would constitute itself according to the following principles:

- *nonviolence* – “ye will not have a mind to injure one another, but to live peaceably” (Mosiah 4:13);
- *social justice and human dignity* – “render to every man according to his due” (4:13);
- *care for the most vulnerable* – “ye will not suffer your children that they go hungry, or naked” (4:14);
- *economic consecration and redistribution* – “administer of your substance unto him that standeth in need” (4:16);
- *radical empathy with the vulnerable other in imitation of Christ’s atonement* – “succor those that stand in need of succor . . . [do] not suffer that the beggar putteth up his petition to you in vain” (4:16);
- *a multigenerational perspective rooted in family obligation and solidarity* – “neither will ye suffer that [your children] transgress the laws of God and fight and quarrel one with another . . . teach them to walk in the ways of truth and soberness . . . to love one another and to serve one another” (4:14-15).

These are my categories, not Benjamin’s. What sound like the building blocks of a Mormon-Christian social ethic are rattled off in a scant four verses, with some of these principles receiving no more than a phrase or two. Benjamin might have lingered on any one of these ethical principles, but he narrows his focus to only one action item, that of giving to the beggar, or at least being disposed to do so, as a natural extension of our beggarly dependence on God (Mosiah 4:16-25). He clearly ties any person’s desire to have an ongoing remission of their sins

to their serious commitment to “impart of [their] substance to the poor, every man according to that which he hath, such as feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and administering to their relief, both spiritually and temporally, according to their wants” (Mosiah 4:26). This is strong teaching that lines up almost exactly with Jesus’s sermon on how ministering to the wants and needs of “the least of these” is perhaps the most pertinent form of Christian discipleship and therefore the chief qualification, or at least characteristic, of those who would inherit the kingdom of God (Matthew 25:34-40). Were Benjamin’s teachings on the social implications of life in Christ to be widely heeded, it would undoubtedly have a drastic positive effect on mitigating human suffering. We might conjecture that any limitation of the principles stated by Benjamin lies only in the people’s failure to apply them sufficiently.

Yet Benjamin’s social teachings were the one aspect of his sermon that seem not to have taken root among his people. There is no textual evidence that Nephite society was substantially transformed along the lines of the principles elaborated above. The near-constant Nephite wars for the next several generations attest that any suggestion of nonviolence obviously landed with a thud. Furthermore, the entrenched class arrangement Benjamin addresses—the rich, the poor, and the beggar—seems not to have been disrupted in the aftermath of his sermon. It was not until the creation of Alma’s church in the wilderness, and then the church’s establishment in the land of Zarahemla a generation after Benjamin’s death, that we get an account of anything like a serious commitment to economic redistribution among the believers.⁷ It was not that Benjamin’s people were hard-hearted or spiritually slovenly; to the contrary, they had proven themselves willing to heed the king’s words immediately and with exactness. They did precisely what their king had admonished them to do elsewhere in his sermon, calling upon the name of Christ for

⁷ See Mosiah 18:27-29; Alma 1:27-30.

forgiveness of their sins and a transformed nature. If Benjamin's teachings in chapters 2-3 on human indebtedness to God and the atonement of Christ had such a powerful effect on the people's souls, why is there no evidence that his social teachings in chapter 4 resulted in a parallel and equally substantial transformation of the social structures of the neo-Nephite kingdom? If Benjamin could lead his people to mass conversion, why could he not lead them to a communal life in Christ predicated on nonviolence, social justice, care for the most vulnerable, economic redistribution, radical empathy, and multigenerational solidarity? With such a powerful conversion to Christ, why didn't Benjamin's people establish the type of Zion society created by Enoch or the disciples in the wake of Christ's visit to the Americas?⁸

I argue that Benjamin's people could not progress past the point where he could authentically lead them. The Christianizing project of Benjamin the prophet was constrained by the statebuilding project of Benjamin the king, and the more radical implications of the former were subsumed under the more confining requirements of the latter. We see this most clearly in Benjamin's incapacity to speak with authority of the nonviolence required for the establishment of Zion as well as his seeming failure to imagine the Lamanites as potential members of the redeemed community.

Benjamin had consolidated his rule by "fight[ing] with the strength of his own arm, with the sword of Laban," and thereby leading the Nephites to military victory over the Lamanites (WoM 1:13). His statebuilding project, and establishment of a neo-Nephite dynasty in Zarahemla, were secured and maintained by force of arms. The text does not say whether he employed violence in purging his realm of false Christs and teachers, but Mormon's account certainly suggests forceful and even coercive action in that regard (WoM 1:15-18). In short,

⁸ See Moses 7; 4 Nephi.

Benjamin was a man of war and a statebuilder. As sovereign of a newly amalgamated kingdom it was politically incumbent for Benjamin to urge his people to “live peaceably” one with another. But this was a plea for internal accord to prevent civil unrest within the nation, not a broadly principled appeal for Christian nonviolence. Benjamin reached the limits of his moral imagination—and moral authority—when it came to envisioning how a peaceable kingdom could be extended beyond the harmony prevailing among obedient and pliable subjects.

King Benjamin also seems not to have imagined how his prescribed social ethic would apply beyond the friendly confines of his own state and society. The king’s opening salutation in the second part of his sermon, in which he greets “my friends and my brethren, my kindred and my people” (Mosiah 4:4), reinforces the bonds that Benjamin’s subjects should feel for one another within the neo-Nephite state, and the affection he felt for them, but leaves out those who inhabited spaces beyond the overlapping categories of his own family, tribe, religion, and political community. Benjamin’s imagined community had sharply delineated borders that left Lamanites and religious dissenters beyond the pale of moral obligation. After spending much of his life fighting Lamanites, it is not surprising that Benjamin emerged with a rather dim view of his enemy. He described them as “know[ing] nothing” about God, and stubbornly resistant to correct teaching because of the false “traditions of their fathers,” rendering them temperamentally and perhaps even genetically impervious to saving religion (Mosiah 1:5). He taught his heir Mosiah II that Lamanites were “weak,” consumed with “hatred,” and not under the purview of God’s preserving power (Mosiah 1:13-14). Harboring these resentments, Benjamin never even mentions Lamanites in his long discourse. This is actually relatively rare for a major prophet in the Book of Mormon, most of whom affirm God’s promises to redeem the Lamanites in due time. But Lamanites were not Benjamin’s friends, brothers, kindred, or people,

and thus fell outside Benjamin's ethical schema. They would be the objects of neither salvation nor charity. Dissenters fared no better. Like the voiceless and effaced Lamanites, "their mouths had been shut" (WoM 1:15), and they enjoyed no status or recognition in the Nephite community of care.

Given that Benjamin's discourse offers so many other echoes and parallels to the Hebrew law and prophets regarding the poor and vulnerable, it is striking that Benjamin never speaks of an obligation to "the stranger" in the Nephites' midst. The "beggar" among them should be cared for, but the "stranger" or "alien"—the outsider either by lineage, belief, or politics—is literally a non-entity in Benjamin's construction of the moral community.

Benjamin had resolved the "problem" of the Lamanite or dissenter within the Nephites' midst by eliminating them. This was effective statecraft, but it translated into a moral vision that extended to only some of God's children. Rather than offering a universal ethic that extended generously even (or especially) to include one's enemies, as Jesus would in the Sermon on the Mount, Benjamin delivers a limited, tribal ethic to be applied only within the bounds of the state and toward other members of the ethnoreligious nation. The people of God are rendered to be merely those whom the king considers to be "my friends and my brethren, my kindred and my people" (Mosiah 4:4). Despite its manifest power, Benjamin's address thus fails to provide the theological and ethical escape velocity necessary to transcend the gravitational pull of human exclusivity and tribalism.

III. Beyond Benjamin

Despite Benjamin's many evident successes, within a generation virtually all that he built had crumbled or was superseded. The people proved unable to transfer their religious commitment

and experience to the next generation.⁹ The “name of Christ” (Mosiah 5:8) that the people so dramatically took upon themselves at the conclusion of Benjamin’s sermon seems not to have stuck; it was not for another half century, by Mormon’s reckoning, that Nephites started positively identifying as “Christians” (Alma 46:15). Benjamin’s prescribed ethic of Christian living seems not to have had any lasting effect in transforming the structure or operations of Nephite society. The Nephite state religion was replaced by the church formed by Alma in the wilderness.¹⁰ Even the dynastic neo-Nephite state that Benjamin worked so hard to build lasted only three decades after his death, until his son Mosiah II dismantled the monarchy in favor of a system of judges.¹¹ By the end of the Book of Mosiah, all that is left of Benjamin’s legacy is antagonism between geographically separated Nephites and Lamanites and intolerance toward dissenters.

But this is no doubt too dire a view. Benjamin’s greatest and most lasting accomplishment was to once again make revealed Christian religion a live option in Nephite society. His descendants would build on the foundation he laid in enacting what amounts to an ongoing restoration throughout the Books of Mosiah and Alma.¹² Benjamin’s son Mosiah II would authorize the spread of a new, non-statist church that would fruitfully shape Nephite religious life for generations. Benjamin’s grandsons would think the unthinkable: that their conversion to Christ dictated a new orientation not only to those within the Nephite nation but

⁹ See Mosiah 26:1-4.

¹⁰ See Mosiah 25:19-24.

¹¹ See Mosiah 29.

¹² The notion of an ongoing restoration draws from Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Are You Sleeping through the Restoration?,” April 2014 General Conference, available online at <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2014/04/are-you-sleeping-through-the-restoration?lang=eng>.

also (or especially) to their enemies the Lamanites.¹³ Consciously rejecting the trappings of state power and working outside it, the sons of Mosiah would point the way toward an inclusive kingdom of God that their grandfather could scarcely imagine. Among their fruits were the Anti-Nephi-Lehies, or people of Ammon, who approximated a Zion ideal as closely as anyone until Christ's coming.¹⁴

As a metatext, the Book of Mormon affirms that the full Christian gospel, with its attendant cultural critique and subversive social ethic, can only be fully preached and lived by those operating at some distance from the state. The most radical voices in the book—Jacob, Abinadi, Alma the Elder, and especially Jesus and the Zion community in 4 Nephi—are all distinctly non-statist in orientation and position. Proximity to state power becomes a common if not universal predictor for spiritual contamination or at least compromise. Joseph Smith taught that real “power or influence” can only be “maintained by virtue of . . . persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned” (D&C 121:41). If so, then one of the trenchant insights of the Book of Mormon is that the power of the state, predicated as it is on force, is ultimately illusory and ephemeral, and a religious system too closely tied to the state will inevitably lose much of its prophetic influence.

¹³ See Mosiah 28:1-4.

¹⁴ See Alma 23-25.