

THE VOICE OF RESPONSIBILITY

BRUCE H. PORTER

The Lord Almighty has prepared the way for the coming forth of the kingdom of God in this dispensation by establishing the republican government of the United States; a government affording the widest liberty and the greatest freedom to man that has ever been known to exist among men, outside of those governed by the direct communication of heaven. It was part of the design of the Almighty when He influenced our fathers to leave the old world and come to this continent; He had a hand in the establishment of this government; He inspired the framers of the Constitution and the fathers of this nation to contend for their liberties; and he did this upon natural principles, that the way might be prepared, and that it might be possible for Him to establish His kingdom upon the earth, no more to be thrown down.¹

—Joseph F. Smith

Political leadership and kingship is discussed at length throughout the Book of Mormon, from the beginning to end of the Jaredite record and throughout the abridgment of the large plates of Nephi. Because the prophets felt it was important enough to include this history within the text, there must be a vital message within these lessons of leadership that is necessary for the latter-day reader.

The Voice of the People

Leaders should be sought who are righteous and recognize the necessity of faith and religion to maintain these important and necessary freedoms that protect all from the yoke of bondage. Through the words of Mosiah, Mormon directed his message specifically to the Gentiles of the last days:

Therefore, choose you by the voice of this people, judges, that ye may be judged according to the laws which have been given you by our fathers, which are correct, and which were given them by the hand of the Lord.

Now it is not common that the voice of the people desireth anything contrary to that which is right; but it is common for the lesser part of the people to desire that which is not right; therefore this shall ye observe and make it your law—to do your business by the voice of the people.

And if the time comes that the voice of the people doth choose iniquity, then is the time that the judgments of God will come upon you; yea, then is the time he will visit you with great destruction even as he has hitherto visited this land. (Mosiah 29:25–27)

¹ *Journal of Discourses* 22:44–45.

Mormon explained the importance of “the voice of the people” to ensure the freedom and consequence of choice. It is clarified in these verses that the voice of the majority is *usually* righteous, which is only true if they actually have a voice. There is always a majority in an election; however, the majority that might feel the same on a given issue may not be the majority who voices that opinion. This ‘apathy’ walks the boundary of sin and can lead to the loss of God-given freedoms. The silent moral majority have no voice unless they use it.

Mormon again emphasized the voice of the majority, explaining in the aforementioned verses, “therefore this shall ye observe and make it your law—to do your business by the voice of the people.” This injunction should be a concern to the Latter-day Saint population in the United States. Nevertheless, in the 2010 general elections, Utah was ranked 48th out of the 50 states in voter turnout, meaning Utah was almost the lowest.² The LDS community has a scriptural injunction to be involved in the choosing of political leadership to maintain that which is right and free. When the time comes that the ‘voice of the people’ choose iniquity, it is time to worry, for the destruction prophesied is about to come upon the land of promise. Helaman explained that “as their laws and their governments were established by the voice of the people, and they who chose evil were more numerous than they who chose good, *therefore they were ripening for destruction, for the laws had become corrupted*” (Helaman 5:2). What messages of the Book of Mormon were treated lightly that brought the whole church under condemnation as warned in the Doctrine and Covenants?

And your minds in times past have been darkened because of unbelief, and because you have *treated lightly the things you have received*—

Which vanity and unbelief have brought the whole church under condemnation.

And *this condemnation resteth upon the children of Zion, even all.*

And they shall remain under this condemnation until they repent and remember the new covenant, even *the Book of Mormon* and the former commandments which I have given them, not only to say, *but to do according to that which I have written*— (D&C 84:54–57)

These four verses stress a solemn responsibility of members of the Church, as the Lord stated the saints have “treated lightly” the things they had received. The Lord explained this responsibility to know and understand the messages of “the Book of Mormon” by teaching that we as members should “do according to that which I have written.” In the past, most have just assumed that meant the Book of Mormon should just be read more often. Perhaps reading has improved or become more frequent, but are we *doing* according to which He has written in that book of scripture? Do we understand the messages that are presented in the Book of Mormon that apply to (1) the gospel of Jesus Christ, (2) to a record of a fallen people, and (3) the prophecies and promises of the land and the freedoms secured by our actions?

Apathy is a sin. Almost all sins of commission may be repented of and forgiven, but sins of omission are more difficult, as they reveal one’s character and true nature. Apathy is an omission of securing those things that are of primary importance for one’s faith, freedoms, and family.

As have all other prophets, President Ezra Taft Benson has counseled that members of the church should be actively involved in the political process as a responsibility inherent to their religion. Speaking to members and priesthood holders, President Benson listed a number of political responsibilities that rest upon all:

² http://elections.gmu.edu/Turnout_2010G.html

- Resist the erosion process which is taking place in our political and economic life.
- Use the political party of one's choice to express one's evaluation of important issues.
- See that one's party is working to preserve freedom, not destroy it.
- Join responsible local groups interested in promoting freedom and free competitive enterprise.
- Study political issues.
- Appraise the voting records and proposed programs.
- Write to members of Congress.
- Promote good men in public office.
- Scrutinize local, state, and federal agencies to see that the will of the people is being carried out.
- Do not wait for the Lord's servants to give instruction for every detail.
- Each member should exercise prayerful judgment and then act accordingly.³

Choosing Leaders

Mormon, familiar with the tragic end of the Nephite culture, made a point of including in the book of Mosiah, the issue about judges and the part they play. The prophet explained how the system of judges should work if all judges are chosen by the voice of the people:

And now if ye have judges, and they do not judge you according to the law which has been given, ye can cause that they may be judged of a higher judge.

If your higher judges do not judge righteous judgments, ye shall cause that a small number of your lower judges should be gathered together, and they shall judge your higher judges, *according to the voice of the people*. (Mosiah 29:28–29)

If all judges are chosen by the voice of the people rather than appointed, they must then answer to the people, of which the majority is usually righteous. This, then, would control judges in their positions to *judge* “according to the law” (v. 28) rather than *legislating* law. Judges appointed by leaders with special interests or agendas, often seek to accomplish their will upon the people through judicial legislation. Wicked leaders can avert the voice of the majority while protecting the complying judges. This is a form of secret combination spoken of often in the Book of Mormon.

Speaking of the system of judges, Mosiah and Mormon inform the reader that when the leaders are elected by the people, there is a responsibility placed upon the people for their own iniquities that does not exist in a kingship. The message of these few verses is based in the fact that freedom has a responsibility connected to it that cannot shift the ‘iniquities’ of a nation to its leadership when they are chosen by the voice of the people. Isaiah and Nephi too knew this, and wrote that ‘leaders can cause people to err, but those who are led by the leaders are the ones destroyed’ (2 Nephi 19:16).

³ Ezra Taft Benson, *God, Family, Country: Our Three Great Loyalties* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1974], 355.

And I command you to *do these things in the fear of the Lord; and I command you to do these things*, and that ye have no king; that *if these people commit sins and iniquities they shall be answered upon their own heads*.

For behold I say unto you, the sins of many people have been caused by the iniquities of their kings; therefore their iniquities are answered upon the heads of their kings.

And now I desire that this inequality should be no more in this land, especially among this my people; but I desire that this land be a land of liberty, and every man may enjoy his rights and privileges alike, so long as the Lord sees fit that we may live and inherit the land, yea, even as long as any of our posterity remains upon the face of the land. (Mosiah 29:30–32)

Righteous judges *as well as leaders* in the Book of Mormon were sought out and then put under an ‘oath and ordinance’ to fulfill their responsibility in maintaining the freedom of the people. In Alma we read:

Behold, it came to pass that the son of Nephiah was appointed to fill the judgment-seat, in the stead of his father; yea, he was appointed chief judge and governor over the people, *with an oath and sacred ordinance to judge righteously*, and *to keep the peace and the freedom of the people*, and to grant unto *them their sacred privileges to worship the Lord their God*, yea, *to support and maintain the cause of God all his days*, and *to bring the wicked to justice according to their crime*. (Alma 50:39)

This verse sets the standard for those who seek public office. Their ‘oath and ordinance’ should be to rule righteously, help to establish peace and freedom for the people, to make sure that “sacred privileges to worship” are not hindered, to support and maintain the causes of God throughout their life, and finally bring the wicked to justice “according to their crime.” The insights in this scripture—including by Mormon, the last prophet of the Nephite culture—were chosen, preserved, and presented to latter-day readers in the promised land for a wise purpose. Jarom included that the leaders were chosen because they were “mighty men *in the faith of the Lord; and they taught the people the ways of the Lord...*” It was because of the choice of leaders and the righteousness of both the leaders and people they were able to overcome their enemies. The ‘great promise and prophecy’ is found at least fourteen times in the Book of Mormon, and it is about the land of the Nephites. Lehi explained the great promise of the promised land best:

Wherefore, I, Lehi, have obtained a promise, that inasmuch as those whom the Lord God shall bring out of the land of Jerusalem *shall keep his commandments, they shall prosper upon the face of this land...* And if it so be that they shall keep his commandments they shall be blessed upon the face of this land, and there shall be none to molest them, nor to take away the land of their inheritance; and they shall dwell safely forever. (2 Nephi 1:9)

As citizens of the promised land, we feel the effects of economic downturns, bubbles, and recessions and seek to blame specific individuals, organizations, or institutions when the Lord in the Book of Mormon promises “prosperity” conditionally, or with a stipulation. The prosperity mentioned in the scriptures is not individual, but is a *collective* prosperity with a collective blessing given for obedience and faith, as discussed. Restrictions and limitations have been placed on the land by the Lord. The stipulation “inasmuch as you keep the commandments” that is found in scripture is also connected to a collective spiritual consequence: “and inasmuch as they rebel they shall be cut off...” (2 Nephi 4:4).

In 3 Nephi, Mormon described the wickedness which preceded the great physical, economical, and political destructions detailed in the text. Mormon first explained that it was the *people*—the

individuals—who played the largest part in these horrific events, in accordance to the promise of the land. Then Mormon explained a major concern of his: why the Nephite nation came to a close. With all the historical records in his possession, Mormon was able to have prophetic insights for the people connected to the land, who would be able to read his historical and spiritual abridgment. He explained about the spiritual Babylon in the hearts of the Nephites, just as President Kimball and President Benson have spoken to the church about the same concerns in our day. Mormon wrote:

And the people began to be distinguished by ranks, according to their riches and their chances for learning; yea, some were ignorant because of their poverty, and others did receive great learning because of their riches.

Some were lifted up in pride, and others were exceedingly humble; some did return railing for railing, while others would receive railing and persecution and all manner of afflictions, and would not turn and revile again, but were humble and penitent before God.

And thus there became a great inequality in all the land... (3 Nephi 6:12–14)

Mormon explained about the “inequality” in the land. Pride is the great sin of the Book of Mormon, and inequality is the manifestation of pride, which inequality fosters the pride that begins the cycle over again. The problems mentioned by Mormon in the verses above are not a problem exclusive to the non-member population today, as we know that Mormon was writing to us, and about us, as members of the church.

Mormon stated, in no uncertain terms, the very elements that caused the fall of the Nephites:

Now the cause of this iniquity of the people was this—Satan had great power, unto the stirring up of the people to do all manner of iniquity, and to the puffing them up with pride, tempting them to seek for power, and authority, and riches, and the vain things of the world. (3 Nephi 6:15)

In this verse, Mormon listed four sins that are common among all prosperous people. These four elements of iniquity are:

1. Being puffed up with pride
2. Seeking for power and authority
3. Seeking for riches
4. Seeking for the vain things of the world

Mormon then explained that because of the attitude of the Nephites, and these things that they were seeking, they were led to a wickedness that became a ‘great day of Satan’s power’ over them, facilitated by their own agency and choice.

And thus Satan did lead away the hearts of the people to do all manner of iniquity; therefore they had enjoyed peace but a few years.

And thus, in the commencement of the thirtieth year—the people having been delivered up for the space of a long time to be carried about by the temptations of the devil whithersoever he desired to carry them, and to do whatsoever iniquity he desired they should—and thus in the commencement of this, the thirtieth year, they were in a state of awful wickedness.

Now they did not sin ignorantly, for they knew the will of God concerning them, for it had been taught unto them; therefore they did willfully rebel against God. (3 Nephi 6:16–18)

The most disturbing element in Mormon's description is that these people were members of the Nephite church. They knew the gospel and the will of God because it had been taught to them. These people "did not sin ignorantly," so therefore they must be held accountable for their choices in this, the day of their probation. What would be the reason that Mormon chose these details of the Nephites who knew the gospel and lived on the chosen land, to preserve for the Latter-day Saints to read?

The wickedness and iniquity Mormon described resulted in the Nephites choosing leaders who were like unto them, seeking for money, power and authority, and the vain things of the world. These wicked leaders began to usurp power and destroy the freedoms that they once had. *Wicked leaders chosen by the 'voice of the people' are the consequence of individual wickedness.* The righteous seek righteous leaders for the preservation and protection of their faith and religion, their freedom and peace, and the protection of their families. Speaking of these wicked leaders, Mormon added his commentary about the unfairness and loss of freedom as a result of these leaders and judges who were no different in nature than those they represented. When the issues of righteousness, religion, and God were brought up before the judges, moral and religious values were no longer protected and freedoms were lost.

Now it came to pass that they were taken and brought up before the judge, to be judged of the crime which they had done, according to the law which had been given by the people.

Now it came to pass that those judges had many friends and kindreds; and the remainder, yea, even almost all the lawyers and the high priests, did gather themselves together, and unite with the kindreds of those judges who were to be tried according to the law.

And they did enter into a covenant one with another, yea, even into that covenant which was given by them of old, which covenant was given and administered by the devil, to combine against all righteousness.

Therefore they did combine against the people of the Lord, and enter into a covenant to destroy them, and to deliver those who were guilty of murder from the grasp of justice, which was about to be administered according to the law. (3 Nephi 6:26–29)

The ascendancy of wicked leaders resulted in protection of special interests and the voice of the people was overruled. This allowed those guilty of offenses toward law and man to go free by the conspiracy of the judges, leaders, and friends who profited from these jilted judgments. This is a direct consequence of iniquity, and once allowed to start, it is extremely difficult to stop. Mormon included the words of Amulek for us to learn from:

And now behold, I say unto you, that the foundation of the destruction of this people is beginning to be laid by the unrighteousness of your lawyers and your judges. (Alma 10:27)

There is a spiritual and temporal responsibility required by the student of the Book of Mormon to maintain the freedom of the chosen land. Likewise, there exists an individual and collective work that must be done in conjunction with this temporal and spiritual responsibility. The spiritual responsibility of the individual; is one of righteousness, coming unto Christ and loving God and your fellow man. There is a collective spiritual responsibility on the promised land to recognize

and worship “the God of the land, who is Jesus Christ” (Ether 2:12) for the preservation, prosperity, and freedoms for the collective Gentile nation. The individual temporal responsibility is to be an active voice in the choice of leadership, to help others understand the collective responsibility to choose the leaders ‘by the voice of the people’ who will best preserve the freedoms, morals, and values of “one nation under God.” The collective temporal responsibility rests on the voice of the people, like the individual. This voice by the majority will usually choose that which is right, *if* the majority will let their voice be heard by vote. Conforming to the ‘deed restrictions’ of the land and the responsibility to ensure that necessary freedoms are preserved, are individual and collective. The restrictions and responsibilities are required from member and non-member alike—from the individual and the community. These and other responsibilities are explained in the Book of Mormon, which is a spiritual and temporal Title of Liberty to the promised land.

Joseph Smith reportedly made a prophecy about the ‘Constitution hanging by a thread’ which ‘will be saved by the elders or priesthood.’ The source and content of this prophecy were questionable until an original source was found in the handwriting of Martha Jane Knowlton, who kept some of the best records of Joseph’s original words. Martha and Howard Coray’s notebooks have become major sources for many of the Prophet’s statements.⁴ They record Joseph’s words as:

We shall build the Zion of the Lord in peace until the servants of that Lord shall begin to lay the foundation of a great and high watch Tower and then shall they begin to say within themselves, what need hath my Lord of this tower seeing this is a time of peace &c. Then the Enemy shall come as a thief in the night and scatter the servants abroad. When the seed of these 12 Olive trees are scattered abroad they will wake up the Nations of the whole Earth. Even this Nation will be on the very verge of crumbling to pieces and tumbling to the ground and when the constitution is upon the brink of ruin this people will be the Staff up[on] which the Nation shall lean and they shall bear the constitution away from the very verge of destruction.⁵

This quote of Joseph Smith begins by explaining that the servants of the Lord will begin to say, in apathetic and indifferent words, “what need hath my Lord of this tower seeing this is a time of peace.” Subsequently, because of this apathy and the non-use of the tower, the enemy will come and, as Joseph said, “even this nation will be on the very verge of crumbling to pieces and tumbling to the ground.” The righteous members of the church will be awakened “to their awful situation” (Ether 8:24) and to their responsibilities. “*This people,*” instructed Joseph, “will be the staff upon which the nation shall lean and they shall bear the Constitution away from the very verge of destruction.” This statement, as recorded by Martha Knowlton, implies that the “Saints” will be a primary force that will save the Constitution.

President Benson declared in General Conference that this prophecy of Joseph Smith will include even more than just the Saints of the Church.

I have faith that the Constitution will be saved, as prophesied by Joseph Smith. It will be saved by the righteous citizens of this nation who love and cherish freedom. *It will be saved by the enlightened members of this Church*—among others—men and women who understand and abide the principles of the Constitution.⁶

⁴ The Historians Corner, *BYU Studies*, Vol. 19, Number 3, Spring 1979, 390.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 392.

⁶ Pres. Ezra Taft Benson, “Our Divine Constitution,” *Ensign*, November 1987, 6–7.

The awakening of the Saints and the saving of the Constitution may come about from Latter-day Saints who recognize and embrace the messages of the Book of Mormon that stress the importance of saving those freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution for the protection of ‘our faith, our freedom, and our families.’

The vehicle of salvation for the Constitution may take place by the Saints’ awareness of the responsibility to elect leaders and representatives who have the morals and values of faith that will preserve these freedoms. Perhaps the saving of the Constitution will come because of a non-denominational revival of faith in the God of this land, uniting the ‘voice of the people.’ It is only the Latter-day Saints who “know from whence their blessings come” who can have a voice loud enough to unite a faithful majority across the land to save, by ballot, this land and Constitution, as Joseph said. Only the Saints of the last days who have the ability and knowledge to make a difference in the fulfillment of the prophecies and promises of the Book of Mormon as they “shine forth fair as the moon, clear as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners” (D&C 109:73).

Responsibility and Freedom

The institution or philosophy founded upon the premise that God does not exist can only believe that men are animals in an existence of the survival of the fittest, prospering according to their own genius, declaring without morals they have no brother to keep. A man who assumes he was not created in the image of God can claim no intrinsic values or spiritual mores to make freedom necessary for a meaningful life. Faith and God are only compatible with freedom, which exists only because of faith in God. Whittaker Chamber wrote:

Freedom is a need of the soul, and nothing else. It is in striving toward God that the soul strives continually after a condition of freedom. God alone is the inciter and guarantor of freedom. He is the only guarantor. External freedom is only an aspect of interior freedom. Political freedom, as the Western world has known it, is only a political reading of the Bible. Religion and freedom are indivisible. Without freedom the soul dies. Without the soul there is no justification for freedom. Necessity is the only ultimate justification known to the mind.⁷

Real freedom allows the individual to work for his own welfare and that of his fellow man by his own choice. Freedom forces no one to be the villain, as men become their own judges, (Alma 41:7) by making their own choices of righteousness or iniquity (2 Nephi 2:27). If the freedom and agency that we cherish is allowed to exist, it must exist for all. This is especially true in the freedom to choose one’s values and morality. The way we value or judge other people almost always depends on the perceived differences between their values and ours. Believing in freedom means that we should not prevent others from making moral choices that may be contrary to our own. Nor should an individual stop another in the choice of what they consciously and freely seek. We should “judge not” (3 Nephi 14:1–2) their values—moral or otherwise—so long as they do not infringe upon the same freedoms guaranteed all. Almost all emotional pain one might suffer in life is due to someone else exercising his or her own agency, of which we have no control. The word *agency* is often coupled with the word *free*, which implies a freedom to chose without interference of others. Therefore, free agency—or better, the freedom to choose—can only exist if it encompasses the same right to do wrong, as it does to do right (another value judgment). This ‘liberty’ to do right or wrong must be available to all, without infringing upon

⁷ Edwin J. Feulner Jr., *The March of Freedom*, [Dallas:Spence Publishing Company, 1998], 235.

the same freedoms of other members of the society; in life, liberty and pursuit of their chosen happiness.

Spiritually speaking, there is no value or reward in a good moral choice if there is no other choice (2 Nephi 2:11, Moses 6:55–56). The exalting power of choice can only exist in the presence of evil. Since the law of opposition must exist, it therefore must proclaim that isolation from evil will render agency impotent, and thus the ability to make the character change necessary for exaltation null and void.

Freedom must exist for the improvement of character, and the quality of character is developed in the environment of tests with multiple choices. The ability to make the ‘best’ choice is founded on enough knowledge about the choices available—and their resulting consequences—to make the choice intellectually free. The individual then must have the freedom to actually make a right or wrong choice, knowing that they are accepting the responsibility to reap the consequences for the choices sowed without reservation. Once the choice is made and action initiated, the concept of freedom would require that one accept the consequence of his choice, without blame directed to God, man, or the community. Only in compulsion—without freedom of choice and action—may the consequence of that action become the fault of others. “The argument of liberty and freedom can only apply to those who are held responsible.”⁸

Having a knowledge and comprehension of good and evil holds within it power reserved for those who have the potential to become like God. However, it is not just the knowledge of good and evil that creates the power to become like God—or mandates a fall or separation from God—it is the act of “knowing, choosing, and doing” good or evil that will eventually damn or exalt. The power of knowledge lies in the ability and freedom to *act* upon that information. There is no benefit of knowing good and evil if there is no opportunity to “act,” otherwise we are “acted upon” and freedom does not exist. This doctrine is seen as Adam is introduced into the Garden of Eden.

And I, the Lord God, took the man, and put him into the Garden of Eden, to dress it, and to keep it.

And I, the Lord God, commanded the man, saying: Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat,

But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it, nevertheless, thou mayest choose for thyself, for it is given unto thee; but, remember that I forbid it, for in the day thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die. (Moses 3:15–17)

The choices Adam would have were explained by the Lord: “of every tree thou mayest freely eat...” He then added information that would make one choice better than another: “but of the tree of knowledge of good and evil thou shalt not eat” and “I forbid it.” Adam’s freedom from God is explained, *‘nevertheless thou mayest choose for thyself, for it is given unto thee.’* Freedom and knowledge mandate that when the choice is made, the consequences are chosen. These consequences are then explained as “in the day thou eatest thereof, thou shalt surely die.” In making a choice, Adam chose the consequence. He was not forced or compelled, but made an intellectual decision to suffer the penalty of death by acting upon a choice in order to remain with his wife, finally stating, “and I did eat” (Moses 4:18). Adam blamed no one, and accepted full responsibility for his agency and the freedom to choose, knowing what the consequences were.

⁸ *Ibid*, 71.

This is the Lord's way of teaching obedience to law: *knowledge* of the choice (right or wrong), understanding the consequences of the choice, *freedom* to make the choice, *power* to act upon that choice, and the acceptance of the consequences of the choice. These elements of agency and consequence are discussed throughout the Book of Mormon. As this record of a fallen people explains, the failures of the Nephite and Jaredite cultures were the result of agency. In spite of their knowledge of the prophecies and promises, they chose to follow a path to captivity and death and had to accept the consequences.