

Mosiah 23:7-15: Alma on Kingship

This is one of two expositions in the Book of Mormon regarding kingship, the other is by King Mosiah in Mosiah 29¹. The two sermons are contemporary, but focus on entirely different reasons for not having a king. Both use King Noah as a bad example, and cite the influence of God in liberating the people from his reign. However, Alma dwells on the issue of holding all men equal, and that kingship attempts to elevate one man above others, while Mosiah concentrates on the practical issues of authority and being answerable for one's actions.

Alma 23:7 starts in on Alma's central premise – considering a man to be above others by calling him a king is contrary to God's commands. I have found that some people misunderstand the meaning of the word “expedient,” assuming that it means “necessary.” In fact, the word as used in the Book of Mormon is best defined as “appropriate to a purpose.” So Alma tells the people that having a king is not appropriate to the purpose of obeying God.

Having said that, in the next verse he allows that if they could guarantee righteous kings “it would be well for you to have a king.” Having made a theological case against kings in verse 7 this may seem like a strange departure, but it is really just a rhetorical device to set up verse 9, where he reminds the people of the wickedness of King Noah. In fact, the introduction to the premise of verse 8 says “if it were possible” to guarantee righteous kings. The whole case is made in both verses 8 and 9 – the reason that kings cannot live up to the ideal is that they are fallible men, not unlike their followers.

Verses 9 and 10 together present a mini-sermon on repentance. We are never given any specific information about what sins Alma may have committed under King Noah's tutelage, but he characterizes them as “abominable.” Even so, by repentance and prayer Alma was able to become a servant of the Lord. Immediately after that thought he adds that the work he has done isn't of himself. This is a clear reference to the fact that the good works he did were empowered by grace.

Verses 12 and 13 deal with two kinds of bondage, and the corresponding two kinds of liberty. King Noah and his priests put the people under physical bondage. That led immediately to spiritual bondage through wickedness. The loss of temporal liberty is

1 Of course, we shouldn't forget the brother of Jared's succinct assessment of kingship found in Ether 6:23 - “Surely this thing leadeth into captivity.”

deplorable, but the loss of spiritual liberty is fatal. Alma cites the power of God in delivering the people from both kinds of bondage, and urges the people to appreciate their liberty.

In our day we see the strange effect that people living under liberty tend not to appreciate its importance, nor the fact that it takes effort to preserve liberty. The people of Alma had recently been freed, but he was concerned that they might quickly forget the value of liberty and the cost of reclaiming it. What a sermon for all time, especially with regard to spiritual liberty. Our spiritual liberty was bought at the price of a God, and taking it for granted is one of the worst – and most dangerous – forms of disrespect we can practice.

Verse 15 is something of a footnote to Alma's words, but very important to the overall message. The thrust of righteous living is to love one another and avoid contention. This unity echoes the unity enjoyed within the Godhead, and should be one of our central goals as disciples of Christ.

Alma was attempting to lead his people to a Christ-like life, and viewed a king as a direct threat to their spiritual progress. Although I am unlikely to come under the reign of a king in this time and place, the same warning holds true regarding any influence that I allow to dictate my actions. Unless I am sure that I am answering God's call in my actions, any other leader (popular influence, fashion, or trend) will inevitably lead me further from Christ and his glory.