

The Book of Mormon &

Modern Moral Relativism

Book of Mormon teachings warn us of the dangers of replacing God’s commandments with our own relative moral standards.

By Daniel L. Belnap

Associate Professor of Ancient Scripture, Brigham Young University

While describing our day, the Old Testament prophet Isaiah observed that people would “call evil good, and good evil” (Isaiah 5:20). One way we’ve seen this prophecy fulfilled is the growing acceptance of moral relativism—the idea that questions of right and wrong behavior are relative.

Elder D. Todd Christofferson of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles has said: “The societies in which many of us live have for more than a generation failed to foster moral discipline. They have taught that truth is relative and that everyone decides for himself or herself what is right. Concepts such as sin and wrong have been condemned as ‘value judgments.’ As the Lord describes it, ‘Every man walketh in his own way, and after the image of his own god’ (D&C 1:16).”¹

Similarly, President Thomas S. Monson has cited a study involving youth and their moral and ethical perceptions in given situations. The common answer was that moral and

ethical preferences were up to the individual, that there is no recognized standard.²

While society in general may believe that moral relativism is a sign of progress, the Book of Mormon contains examples and teachings that warn us of the dangers of replacing God’s commandments with our own relative moral standards.

Truth Defined and Evil Identified

The Book of Mormon lays out the basic principles that help us see the difference between God’s truth and Satan’s sophistry, including a working definition of truth and how to know it. The prophet Jacob taught: “The Spirit speaketh the truth and lieth not. Wherefore, it speaketh of things as they really are, and of things as they really will be; wherefore, these things are manifested unto us plainly” (Jacob 4:13; see also D&C 93:24). The emphasis on truth as the way things *really are* suggests that it contrasts with the way things *seem to be*, no matter how convincing that deception may be.



One such truth is the reality of evil. As Isaiah pointed out, at the heart of moral relativism is an inability or unwillingness to recognize evil. Nephi warns us that the adversary “flattereth [people] away, and telleth them there is no hell; and he saith unto them: I am no devil, for there is none” (2 Nephi 28:22). Just as important, the Book of Mormon makes it clear not only that the adversary is real but also that he has plans to deceive and destroy us collectively and individually (see 2 Nephi 9:28; Alma 12:3–6).

Rights versus Responsibilities

Another important lesson is found in the story of the anti-Christ Korihor, whose teachings established a moral relativism that challenged the Nephites for years to come (see Alma 30).

His assertions, many of which may be familiar to a modern audience, contain the following:

- a. There is no God (see Alma 30:28, 37–38).
- b. Belief in Christ is “a foolish and a vain hope” (Alma 30:13).
- c. Those who believe in a remission of sins are under the effects of a frenzied or deranged mind (see Alma 30:16).
- d. Their derangement is caused by following the traditions of their fathers and the whims of corrupt leaders (see Alma 30:14, 23–28, 31).
- e. Man is a creature (see Alma 30:17).
- f. One “[fares] in this life according to the management of the creature; . . . and whatsoever a man [does is] no crime” (Alma 30:17).
- g. There is no sin and no need for a Savior (see Alma 30:17–18).
- h. Those who encourage people to keep God’s commandments are stripping away an individual’s “rights and privileges” (Alma 30:27).

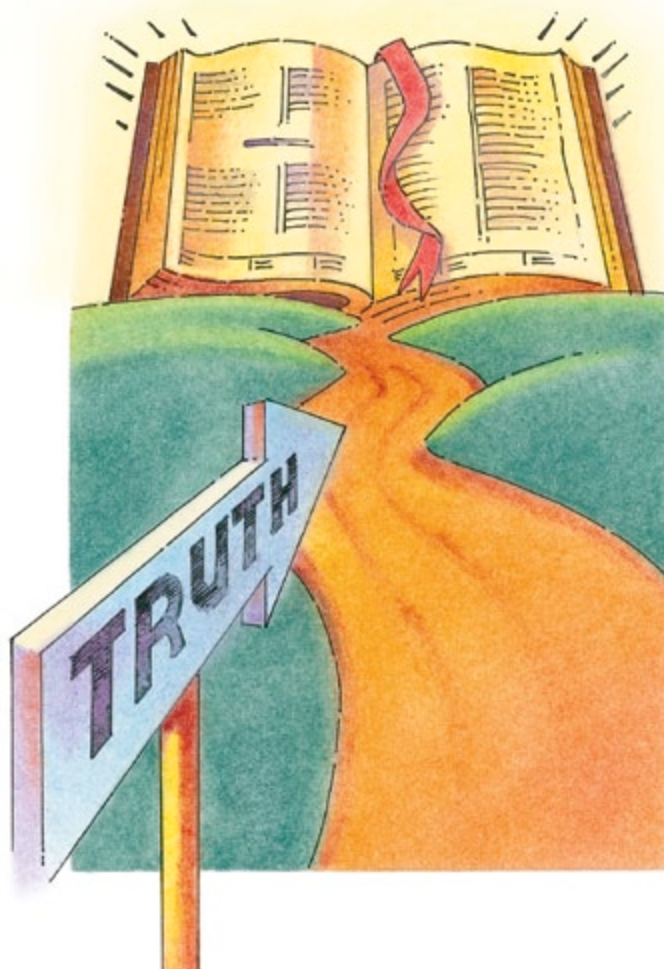
This last point is particularly dangerous, for it elevates one’s rights while avoiding any discussion of one’s responsibilities. In purporting to be in favor of individual liberty, moral relativism actually threatens one’s privilege to exercise agency by ignoring the negative consequences of not being cognizant of one’s responsibilities to others.

From Cain to the Gadianton robbers, there have always been those who believe that their rights are more important than the rights of others. In fact, Korihor’s emphasis on “rights” is nothing more than a revised version of Satan’s premortal gambit to strip us of agency. By focusing on a perceived loss of rights, we do not hold ourselves accountable, particularly in our relationship with one another, and therefore lose agency, exactly as the adversary wishes.

Elder Dallin H. Oaks of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles has noted: “One of the consequences of shifting from *moral absolutes* to *moral relativism* . . . is that this produces a corresponding shift of emphasis from *responsibilities* to *rights*. Responsibilities originate in moral absolutes. In contrast, rights find their origin in legal principles, which are easily manipulated by moral relativism.”³

It would be foolish to believe that this consequence was not intended by the adversary. Such a situation, coupled with the belief that man is merely a “creature,” produces an environment in which moral relativism can flourish.

In response to Korihor’s doctrine, Alma declared the overwhelming power of truth and the emptiness of moral relativism:



“And now what evidence have ye that there is no God, or that Christ cometh not? I say unto you that ye have none, save it be your word only.

“But, behold, I have all things as a testimony that these things are true; and ye also have all things as a testimony unto you that they are true” (Alma 30:40–41).

Alma’s response may be the result of his own earlier confrontation with moral relativism. As young men, he and the sons of Mosiah sought to destroy the Church and led many people to sin (see Mosiah 27:8–10). But when the angel confronted Alma, he told Alma that his father had been praying that he would “be brought to the knowledge of the truth” (Mosiah 27:14).

As Alma himself later explained, a knowledge of truth doesn’t necessarily come through angelic visits but through a pattern of behavior that will sound familiar to those who have gained a testimony of truth:

“Behold, I testify unto you that I do know that these things whereof I have spoken are true. And how do ye suppose that I know of their surety?

“Behold, I say unto you they are made known unto me by the Holy Spirit of God. Behold, I have fasted and prayed many days that I might know these things of myself” (Alma 5:45–46).

This pattern of fasting, praying, and pondering is that same pattern by which all may come to know the truth. Not surprisingly, this pattern also emphasizes that a knowledge of truth is acquired by taking personal responsibility for one’s actions, not merely as a right we are entitled to.

God’s Wisdom versus Man’s Wisdom

Finally, the Book of Mormon attests to the process by which moral relativism often leads to trusting in one’s own wisdom instead of the Lord’s. Following the battle with Zerahemnah, Helaman, the son of Alma, felt that it was necessary to declare the word of God again among the Church members and to appoint new priests and teachers (see Alma 45). But there was dissension among some of the Church members because of these changes, and many

were convinced by the words of Amalickiah, believing that a monarchy should be established.

Helaman, representing the Church as high priest, opposed Amalickiah’s arguments for kingship, yet “there were many in the church who believed in the flattering words of Amalickiah, therefore they dissented even from the church” (Alma 46:7).

But when Amalickiah’s true colors were revealed, many of his followers were then “doubtful concerning the justice of the cause in which they had undertaken” (Alma 46:29). In other words, not all followers of Amalickiah did so simply for

greed or power; some actually believed that there was merit to the pro-monarchy position. Yet it is also clear that this was not the position of the Church. Thus, some Church members believed that their wisdom concerning Amalickiah and his arguments was greater than the inspiration of their priesthood leaders. They later had a change of heart, but unfortunately it was a little too late—the resulting rebellion started the conflict that

defines the rest of the book of Alma. Untold lives could have been spared if these Church members had trusted in divine inspiration instead of relying on their own wisdom.

Today, prophets and apostles have declared that although the world’s moral relativism will get worse, for many, the desire for truth and the peace that comes from knowing the way things really are will increase as well. To those who seek earnestly for the truth, the Book of Mormon offers clarity. Though it was written many centuries ago, its warnings concerning moral relativism, as well as its promise that everyone can know the truth, are relevant to us today. Perhaps more than ever, Moroni’s challenge rises to confront the power of evil, assuring all who sincerely seek that “if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost. And by the power of the Holy Ghost ye may know the truth of all things” (Moroni 10:4–5). ■

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NOTES

1. D. Todd Christofferson, “Moral Discipline,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2009, 106.
2. See Thomas S. Monson, “Dare to Stand Alone,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2011, 60.
3. Dallin H. Oaks, “Religious Values and Public Policy,” *Ensign*, Oct. 1992, 60.