



THE BOOK OF MORMON AND THE Descent of Dissent

The Book of Mormon shows how dissension and contention start, as well as how to create unity in Christ's Church.

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The Restoration began when the Father and the Son appeared to Joseph Smith, dispelling the “darkness and confusion” that had engulfed him during a “division amongst the people,” a “war of words and tumult of opinions” (see Joseph Smith—History 1:5–20).

The revelation of the Book of Mormon followed.

The Book of Mormon testifies “that Jesus is the Christ” (title page). But it also offers case studies in how dissension arises and how it damages the Church and individuals. It was written “unto the confounding of false doctrines and laying down of contentions, and establishing peace” (2 Nephi 3:12).

It doesn't merely describe the foibles and foolishness of previous generations. It is for our day. We can, therefore, read it as a commentary on our time, a guide and a warning to us.

In many ways, the Book of Mormon is a guidebook on how to unify God's people in the faith, as well as how contention and dissension creep into the Church.

Dissenters: Their Motives and Methods

Nephite prophets repeatedly condemn contention, strife, and dissension.¹ Satan, says Mormon, created contention to “harden the hearts of the people against that which was good and against that which should come” (Helaman 16:22). Here are some examples of this principle from the Book of Mormon.

Laman and Lemuel

The division between the Nephites and the Lamanites began with Laman and Lemuel. They were bitter at abandoning their wealth and comfort in Jerusalem, unworthy of succeeding their prophet-father, and unqualified to lead. They were also resentful of their righteous younger brother Nephi.



Nehor

Nehor, too, flattered his audience, appealing to their self-interest. He said that priests and teachers should be supported financially by the people, “that all mankind should be saved at the last day, and that they need not fear nor tremble, but that they might lift up their heads and rejoice” (see Alma 1:3–4). Those who followed him “loved the vain things of the world” (Alma 1:16).

Korihor

Korihor was also eloquent (see Alma 30:31). And, like Sherem, he denied the hope of Christ’s coming (see Alma 30:6, 12). But he was an atheist, or at least an agnostic (see Alma 30:37–38). He insisted that God and the future could not be known (see Alma 30:15, 24, 26, 28, 48), dismissing the teachings of the prophets as “silly” and “foolish” (Alma 30:13–14, 23, 27, 31). Believers, he said (sounding very modern), suffered from “frenzied” minds and “derangement” (Alma 30:16).

But he directed his harshest criticisms at the prophets, priests, and teachers of the Church, saying they taught “foolish traditions” so they could “keep [the people] down” and “glut [themselves]” (Alma 30:27).

Korihor’s denial of God also led him to deny moral values and accountability, as well as life after death and the need for an Atonement. For him, life was simply a matter of the survival of the fittest. (See Alma 30:16–17.) It isn’t difficult to see why some were attracted to his teaching (see Alma 30:18).



Sherem

Shortly after the rift between Nephites and Lamanites, the Nephite anti-Christ Sherem seems to have been devoted to a conventional view of the law of Moses, denouncing belief in a coming Christ as “blasphemy” (Jacob 7:7). “And he was learned, that he had a perfect knowledge of the language of the people; wherefore, he could use much flattery, and much power of speech, according to the power of the devil” (Jacob 7:4).

Amalickiah

The Nephite traitor Amalickiah seems to have had no religious motivations at all. “Amalickiah was desirous to be a king,” the record bluntly remarks. And those who supported him “were seeking for power,” and he promised to “make them rulers over the people” (Alma 46:4–5).

He also used “many flattering words” (Alma 46:10), and, in fact, his ability to appeal to people’s desires was key to his success (see Alma 46:5, 7).

The King-Men

Later, political disagreements so angered some Nephites that they sought to remove Pahoran, the chief judge, from office and restore a monarchy. They “were those of high birth, and they sought to be kings” (Alma 51:8).

But these “king-men” failed to gain popular support and, in their frustration, refused to defend their country against Lamanite aggression (see Alma 51:2–21). So the Nephite military commander Moroni had to resort to force to “pull down their pride and their nobility” (Alma 51:18).

Gadianton Robbers

Following Pahoran’s death, his sons vied to succeed him. One who was not elected, Paanchi, attempted to flatter his supporters into an uprising (see Helaman 1:7). And when he was executed for treason, those supporters formed the core of the infamous Gadianton robbers.

Gadianton, their leader, was “exceedingly expert in many words” and “did flatter [his followers] . . . that if they would place him in the judgment-seat he would grant unto those who belonged to his band that they should be placed in power and authority among the people” (see Helaman 2:4–5).

Lessons for Today

Here are some of the things we can learn from the dissent and contention in the Book of Mormon:

- **Dissenters harm themselves.** This is the lesson, first and foremost, the Book of Mormon gives us about dissension (see 3 Nephi 3:11).
- **Dissension hinders the growth of the Church and fosters unbelief** (see Mosiah 26:5; 27:9; Alma 1:21–25; 4:6–9). Repeatedly, contention and dissension exposed the Nephites to jeopardy from external threats (see Alma 53:8–9; 60:14–16; 3 Nephi 2:18). Mormon specifically cites them as a cause of their destruction (see Alma 51:16; Helaman 2:13).
- **Contention reflects spiritual error.** It is often a sign of pride and denying the Holy Ghost (see 2 Nephi 28:4; 26:20–21). Significantly, there was no contention immediately after the coming of Christ to the Americas, when all were truly converted (see 4 Nephi 1:2, 13, 15–18).
- **Dissenters can often be articulate and persuasive.** Many accounts mention their power of flattery or expertness in using words.
- **Contention often reflects greed, self-interest, and political ambition.**² It’s linked with envy, strife, malice, and, especially, pride (see Alma 4:6–10; 16:18; Helaman 13:22; 3 Nephi 21:19; 30:2; Mormon 8:36–37).
- **Dissenters are often deceived or deceivers.** Even if dissenters feel justified, the Book of Mormon portrays them as either deceived or deceivers.³ Although Gadianton’s followers said (and may even have believed) that their principles were “good” and “of ancient date” (3 Nephi 3:9), Nephite writers call them “Gadianton’s robbers and murderers” (Helaman 6:18) and identify Satan as their founder (see Helaman 6:26–30; Ether 8:13–26; see also Moses 5:29–31).
- **Dissenters can become the fiercest enemies of the Church and the gospel.** Those who bear grudges or seek to gratify pride, greed, or ambition can become imbued with the spirit of contention and work aggressively against the Church and its teachings (see Alma 24:30).⁴



How to Be One

“Be one,” the Lord said early in our dispensation, “and if ye are not one ye are not mine” (Doctrine and Covenants 38:27).

The Book of Mormon demonstrates that we can still fall into factions if we ignore or rebel against the prophets. But one reason the gospel was restored was to end contention and lead us to unity in the faith (see Ephesians 4:11–15). So the Book of Mormon also gives us guidelines for achieving that unity. For instance, we should:

- Center our lives on Jesus Christ and His gospel.
- Follow God’s prophets.
- Humbly stand up for truth without engendering a spirit of contention.
- Be humble and esteem our neighbor as ourselves (see Mosiah 27:4).
- Strive to avoid contention (see 3 Nephi 11:29) and “look forward with one eye, having one faith and one baptism, having [our] hearts knit together in unity and in love one towards another” (Mosiah 18:21).

Following these and other Book of Mormon teachings will help members of the Lord’s Church to be one and to therefore be His. ■

NOTES

1. See 2 Nephi 26:32; Mosiah 2:14–15, 32; 18:21; Alma 16:18; 3 Nephi 11:22, 28–30; 18:34; Moroni 8:4–5.
2. Consider, for example, King Laman’s deliberate provoking of strife for self-serving ends (see Mosiah 9:13) or Amlici’s rebellion (see Alma 2–3). It’s striking that both *Korihor* and *Coriantumr* (the military leader who was “a descendant of Zarahemla” and “a dissenter from among the Nephites” [Helaman 1:15]) are Jaredite names, suggesting that their families may have been ethnic non-Nephites who had not been fully converted or reconciled to Nephite rule (see Ether 7:3–5; 8:4–6; Omni 1:21; Ether 12–15).
3. To some degree, at least, Sherem (see Jacob 7:18–19) and Korihor (see Alma 30:52–53) were deceived. Amalickiah was simply a cynical deceiver.
4. Compare Alma 47:36; 48:24. Of course, repentance and forgiveness are always possible (see Helaman 5:35–41 and the account of Zeezrom in Alma 10–15).

DISCOVER MORE

See the 2020 *Ensign* articles about Sherem (April), Nehor (April, digital only), and Korihor (July).