



*"You keep using that word.
I do not think it means what you think it means."
Inigo Montoya from the Princess Bride*

Prosperity and the just society (part 1)

The "prosperity promise" as found in the book of mormon
1 nephi 2.19-24

***j*ustification for this study**

The present study is rather lengthy, detailed, and, perhaps, somewhat pedantic. I would say a word, here, about why it takes the form that it does. Also, a word concerning why it is posted to the "Just Society" page of this site might be in order.

American Christianity—heavily influenced by the Calvinist doctrine of election and a Puritan ethic suggesting that personal election is evidenced by all types of individualistic worldly successes, particularly material/ economic—has succumbed to the temptations of an appealing but false "prosperity gospel." "The elect are blessed by God." "The elect 'prosper' materially." To those who espouse this false "gospel," this often comes to mean, "God blesses the faithful with material wealth."

In many ways, Mormonism has done one better than the rest of American Christianity in imbibing this false "prosperity gospel." I am not sure there is any population on the entire planet more dedicated to materialistic accumulation than that found along the stretch of desert called the Wasatch front. Many Latter-day Saints living in the diaspora outside this Mormon Homeland imitate their Wasatch brothers and sisters. Materialism is employed to evidence individual faithfulness and personal election. This justifies inordinate time and

energy being spent to worldly pursuits. Further, and more negatively, it is used to justify behavior that is unethical and immoral.

In the desire to justify the false “prosperity gospel” and the natural but rampant materialism engendered thereby, Latter day-saints have unknowingly adopted protestant doctrines of election and misuse of Biblical passages, and combined them with questionable interpretations of Latter-day Saint scripture, particularly key passages from the Book of Mormon—this, notwithstanding the elephant in the room: the Doctrine and Covenants with its strong anti-materialistic bent. There is, perhaps, no better example of this misinterpretation than that found in relation to Nephi’s “prosperity promise,” with which this study will begin.

By such perverted doctrine, both traditional Christians and untraditional—read LDS—Christians have dirtied themselves in filthy lucre. It has reached epidemic proportions. In addition to begetting idolatrous private attitudes and behaviors toward a deadly materialism, it has shamefully allowed Christians of all stripes to adopt and espouse societal, or public policies and practices that deny basic Biblical and Christian values, and run contrary to those of a just society as outlined in scripture.

I remain unconvinced by the arguments in favor of this false “prosperity gospel.” I am particularly unconvinced by arguments based upon scripture—both the Bible and Book of Mormon. It seems to me that scripture wants nothing to do with this false gospel or doctrine of prosperity. It views it as idolatrous—a doctrine of the Devil. “You can have anything in this word for money”—by some accounts, the first post-Eden temptation presented to Adam and Eve.

So, I am not trying to show off as the word “pedantic” suggests. In fact, I am not being pedantic at all. I am fighting fire with fire. Because the traditions concerning the “prosperity of the faithful”—what I call the “Prosperity Promise,” or “Prosperity Gospel”—are so extraordinary powerful and well ensconced among Christians of all stripes, it will not do to quote a passage of scripture here and there as we attempt to critique, challenge, and ultimately correct it. No, a pin-prick will not do. It will require nail and hammer. It will require spike and sledgehammer.

The strength of the tradition will require us to look at every single passage. Hopefully, the

reader will begin to see the end long before we get there. Nevertheless, we must endure to the bitter end.

I post this study on the “Just Society” page of my site because how we think of and utilize our financial and material resources is as spiritual and morally determinative, and reveals as much about our true character, as any “religious” endeavor in which we engage. This is true for individuals and it is true for societies and nations.

As readers of this site will already know, I am quite certain that America has too frequently failed this economic character test. We have a materialism run seriously amuck. This is true at the individual, family, and local, state, and federal government level. Worst of all, it is true at the religious institutional level.

***i*ntroduction**

In the winter of 1832, while working on the Joseph Smith translation of the Bible, Joseph Smith and his scribe, Sidney Rigdon, were engaged in a review of the Gospel of John. Having been given an alternative reading for John 5.²⁹, Joseph records that “this caused us to marvel, for it was given unto us of the Spirit.”¹ I have never been quite sure what the “it” was that was “given...of the Spirit.”

I am fairly sure that *it* was the new content of the verse itself. But I have wondered on occasion if perhaps *it* was the “*marvel*” that was the Spirit’s gift to them on this occasion. I have wondered if it was their sense of “marvel” that was given and that then led them to ask additional questions, and thus receive the revelation that followed—Doctrine and Covenants 76. Whatever one concludes, I have learned over the years to pay attention in those moments during scripture study when I suddenly experience a sense of marvel or wonder or inquiry. I have learned that it is often the Spirit prompting me to search something out with a little more care. On those instances that I have noted and followed up on the marvel, a merciful God has indeed provided greater insight and additional revelation.

The present study is the result of just such a moment of “marvel.” It came as I read the Book of Mormon. In his short book, Jarom reports that the Lamanites “came many times

¹ D&C 76.¹⁸

against...the Nephites, to battle.” Notwithstanding the fact that the Lamanites were “exceedingly more numerous than” the Nephites, the Nephites “swept them away out of [their] lands, and began to fortify [their] cities.”² Because of these military victories and the accompanying security, Nephite society blossomed. Jarom then draws out a lesson from their experiences. It was this that led me to marvel.

“And thus being prepared to meet the Lamanites, *they did not prosper against us*. But the word of the Lord was verified, which he spake unto our fathers, saying that: ‘Inasmuch as ye will keep my commandments ye shall *prosper* in the land.’”³

Three things grabbed my attention and caused me to “marvel.” First, I found the manner that Jarom used the word “prosper” to be unexpected. The Lamanite’s prosperity, or the lack thereof, had nothing to do with “economy” or “material benefits.” Rather, the emphasis was on their military success, or the lack thereof.

Second, I found this unexpected use intriguing in light of his reference to Nephi’s “prosperity promise,” which reads, “Inasmuch as ye will keep my commandments ye shall prosper in the land.”

Third, I noted a strong “corporate,” “public,” or “societal” emphasis as opposed to a “private” or “individualistic” emphasis.

I had always thought—uncomfortably, I will confess— of Nephi’s “prosperity promise” exclusively in terms of “economics:” “If you keep my commandments you will be materially blessed.” In addition, I had thought of it in individualistic terms. I am not alone, of course, in either of these inclinations.

But here in Jarom, the emphasis seemed to be military rather than economic. The Lamanites’ military aggression “did not *prosper* against us,” Jarom reports. In other words, the Lamanites did not experience military successes against the Nephites. In fact, the passage could very accurately read,

² Jarom 1.⁶⁻⁷

³ Jarom 1.⁹

“And thus being prepared to meet the Lamanites, they did not **prevail [or succeed]** against us.”

Here, then, “prosperity,” is not connected to material gains, but to military successes or political dominance. Jarom then applies this military or political reality to Nephi’s two centuries old “prosperity promise.” He does so by means of contrast. Jarom contrasts Lamanite *lack* of “prosperity” with Nephite *possession* of “prosperity.” The Lamanites did not prosper, or prevail,

“*But* the word of the Lord was verified, which he spake unto our fathers, saying that: ‘Inasmuch as ye will keep my commandments ye *shall prosper* in the land.’”

Lamanites did not militarily or politically prevail or succeed against the Nephites, but the Nephites did prevail or succeed militarily or politically against the Lamanites. There is, here, no discussion of the Lamanite “economic” condition. The text is silent about whether their society was experiencing an economic boom or bust. In this instance, Nephi’s prosperity promise is “verified.” It is applied to military or political success rather than economic or materialistic gains. It seems that we would be justified in reading the second part of the verse as follows:

But the word of the Lord was verified, which he spake unto our fathers, saying that: ‘Inasmuch as ye will keep my commandments ye shall **prevail [or succeed]** in the land.’”

Finally, it was clear that Jarom’s entire focus was on society at large, rather than upon any individual.

All of this suggested to my mind that perhaps I needed to have another, closer look at Nephi’s “Prosperity Promise” in particular, and what we might call the “Book of Mormon Prosperity Principle” more generally. Perhaps the initial promise and the principle that the Book of Mormon draws out of it are not as materialistic in their emphasis as I had been led to think.

This three part study begins with my closer reading of Nephi’s original “Prosperity Promise” as found in 1 Nephi 2.¹⁹⁻²⁴. We will then examine passages that directly quote or reference Nephi’s original prosperity promise. By my count, there are fourteen such passages.

In the second part, we will examine the concept of “prosperity” as found in the Hebrew Bible.

Finally, in the third part, we will return to the Book of Mormon, and examine passages that speak of “prosperity” in general without reference to Nephi’s prosperity promise.

***d*efinitions**

In my first drafts, I left the traditional introductory exploration of definitions for a later time. I did so believing that sometimes such definitions become overbearing and controlling in shaping and directing our investigations. It is often best to let scripture have the first word. In addition, word usage does not always follow the strict rules implied by dictionaries. Words must often be translated according to context and mood rather than dictionary definitions. Nevertheless, after further thought and work on this series of studies, I concluded that following the tradition made sense.

So, we begin with the traditional work of defining. In the first three parts of this study, we are going to focus on passages that utilize the English word group “prosper,” “prosperity,” “prospered,” etc. There are, of course, other words that we will need to examine. “Wealth,” “riches,” and “treasures” are three examples. However, this “prosperity” word group has played a crucial role in the development and perpetuation of the “prosperity gospel.” So, we will tackle it first.

In my own study of definitions, I first turned to a modern edition of the tried and true Webster’s Dictionary, and looked up “prosperity.” There, we read,

“the condition of being successful or thriving; *especially: economic well-being*,” for example.⁴

⁴ See Webster’s On-line Dictionary. Emphasis added.

In the same source and under the “English Language Learners” rubric, we read,
“the state of being successful usually by making a lot of money.”

The Cambridge On-line Dictionary’s entry for “prosperity” reads,

“the state of being successful and having a lot of money.”

All of this is precisely according to the normal modern usage. It shapes the LDS reader’s understanding of Nephi’s “prosperity promise,” which then shapes the interpretation and application of all passages related to “prosperity.” But, as we have seen, Jarom, in referring to prosperity did not use it to indicate economics. And, as we will see, it is not how the word is generally used in Scripture. The standard LDS reading of Nephi’s “prosperity promise” is highly suspect.

After thinking about this discrepancy long and hard, I decided to have a look at Webster’s 1820 dictionary.⁵ There, we read the following entries.

“PROSPERITY, N [L. *prosperitas*.] Advance or gain in any thing good or desirable; successful progress in any business or enterprise; success; attainment of the object desired; as the prosperity of arts; agricultural or commercial prosperity; national prosperity.”

“PROSPER, *verb transitive* [Latin *prospero*, from *prosperus*, from the Gr. To carry to or toward; to bear.] To favor; to render successful.”

“PROSPER, *verb intransitive* To be successful; to succeed.”

“PROSPEROUS, adjective [Latin *prosperus*.] Advancing in the pursuit of any thing desirable; making gain or increase; thriving; successful.”

⁵ This dictionary, of course, should accurately reflect word usage for that period when the Book of Mormon was translated. There are difficult “translation” questions that must be asked. For example, in translating the Book of Mormon, which, if either, would have the greatest sway: 19th century word usage, or original “Hebrew” word meanings? The difficulty is compounded by the fact that we do not have any original ancient text of the Book of Mormon. For obvious reasons, we will not address such difficult questions in this study.

As for etymology, the English word comes from “Latin *prosperare*, ‘cause to succeed, render happy,’ from *propserus* ‘favorable, fortunate, prosperous,’ perhaps literally ‘agreeable to one’s wishes,’ traditionally regarded as from Old Latin *pro spere* ‘according to expectations, according to one’s hope,’ from *pro* ‘for’ + ablative of *spes* ‘hope,’ from PIE root **spe-* ‘to flourish, succeed, thrive, prosper.’”⁶

It should be obvious that usage of this word group has evolved over time. The modern focus is clearly on material acquisition. It is on “economy.” It is equally obvious that 19th century usage is less focused on material acquisition. “Prosperity” applies to many endeavors, economy being only one of them. It is about “success” in general. Like our modern society, the modern usage is obsessed with wealth. But the 19th century usage is not.

With these observations and insights, we will now return to the Book of Mormon. While we will not completely ignore the “definitions,” we will allow the text to have the primary say concerning the nature of prosperity and the “promise of prosperity.”

Nephi’s original “prosperity promise”

1 NEPHI 2.¹⁹⁻²⁴

Before our close examination of Nephi’s original “Prosperity Promise,” we should set the stage. After a brief introduction (1 Ne. 1.¹⁻³), Nephi tells the story of his father, Lehi, and his life in Jerusalem. Nephi reports Lehi’s “conversion,” his subsequent ministry, his rejection by his people, and his revelation to leave Jerusalem. This takes us through 1 Ne. 2.³. In 1 Ne. 2.⁴⁻¹⁰, Lehi and his family leave Jerusalem and head off into the desert until they arrive in a valley, where the small group of refugees encamps. At this point (1 Ne. 2.¹¹⁻¹⁵), Nephi launches into a critique of his unfaithful brothers, Laman and Lemuel.

Finally, in 1 Ne. 2.¹⁶⁻²⁴, Nephi gets around to talking about himself, his life, and his own state of faith.⁷ Nephi offers his first prayer. God softens his heart so that Nephi, unlike his

⁶ See “Online Etymology Dictionary”

⁷ Interestingly, nearly all of this is presented in light of and by comparison to his brothers. One hardly knows who is more on Nephi’s mind—the Lord or his brothers. There is a deep and profound psychological something going on here. One can’t help but think of Jacob and Esau, and the confused and antagonistic relationship of “being” that exists between them. But that is for another time.

brothers, accepts his father's unorthodox views and drastic actions. Nephi witnesses to his brothers. Sam believes, but Laman and Lemuel harden their hearts. Nephi offers his second prayer, with his brothers being the main topic of conversation. Once more, the Lord answers Nephi's prayer. The passage is a little lengthy, but the Lord's pronouncement is important enough, basic enough to this entire study, that it is worth quoting in its entirety.

¹⁹Blessed art thou, Nephi, because of thy faith,
for thou hast sought me diligently,
with lowliness of heart.

²⁰And inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments,
ye shall prosper,
and shall be led to a land of promise;
yea, even a land which I have prepared for you;
yea, a land which is choice above all other lands.

²¹And inasmuch as thy brethren shall rebel against thee,
they shall be cut off from the presence of the Lord.

²²And inasmuch as thou shalt keep my commandments,
thou shalt be made a ruler and a teacher over thy brethren.

²³For behold, in that day that they shall rebel against me,
I will curse them even with a sore curse,
and they shall have no power over thy seed except they shall rebel against me also.

²⁴And if it so be that they rebel against me,
they shall be a scourge unto thy seed,
to stir them up in the ways of remembrance.”⁸

This revelation possesses an interesting structure. It begins with a “blessing formula” (verse 19). This is pronounced upon Nephi in consequence of his faithfulness. It is “private” or “individualistic” in its focus. It is a blessing pronounced upon the youth, Nephi, and Nephi alone.

⁸ 1 Ne. 2.¹⁹⁻²⁴

The revelation ends with a “cursing formula” (verses 23-23). This is pronounced upon Nephi’s brothers in consequence of their rebellion. It may possess an initial “personal” aspect, but, as the two references to “seed” suggests, it quickly and very clearly moves on to take a more “corporate” or “national” focus. It seems to be looking out over the years and generations to come. From this curse, Nephi learns that his brother’s descendants “shall have no power over your [Nephi’s] seed except they [Nephi’s seed] shall rebel against me also.” In other words, as long as they are obedient, the Nephites will prevail against the Lamanites.

Between this outer shell of blessing and curse are three conditional statements, all initiated with the formulaic, “And inasmuch as.” The two outer conditional statements (20 & 22) focus on Nephi. The middle one (23) focuses on Nephi’s brothers.⁹

The two outer conditional statements are parallel. In both, we find the conditional “And inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments...”

In the first conditional statement, the consequence of obedience is, “ye shall *prosper*, and shall be led to a land of promise...” We could legitimately translate, “ye shall *progress*, and shall be led to a land of promise.” Here, “prosperity” constitutes “success”—success in the journey and success in finally arriving in a land of promise. “Your journey will end in success.” It does not have an explicit or even implicit economic or materialistic bent.

In the third conditional statement, the consequence of Nephi’s obedience is, “thou shalt be made a ruler and a teacher over thy brethren.” Here, Nephi’s “prosperity” consists of his political, governmental, and ecclesiastical dominion over and freedom or independence from his brothers when he comes to possess the promised land.

The central conditional statement is directed at Nephi’s brothers. It warns of a removal of prosperity. This takes the form of their being “cut off from the presence of the Lord.” This seems spiritually focused, rather than economic or political.

Now, we ask, of what does Nephi’s promised “prosperity” consist? And again, of what does his brothers’ lack of prosperity consist?

⁹ It is interesting that the entire oracle revolves around the brothers and their looming removal from the presence of the Lord and their loss of political and governing power. Things radiate out from this center, both forward and backward. Once more, we sense the suggestion of something deeply psychological.

Inasmuch as Nephi keeps God's commandments,

1. He will personally experience a successful journey to the promised land.¹⁰
2. Once arriving in the promised land, he will personally rule over his brothers.

Looking forward, Nephi is given another prosperity promise. If his descendants keep God's commandments

1. They will never be subject to his brother's descendants (Lamanites).

As for Nephi's brothers, their lack of prosperity (the option of their being prosperous is not considered or explored) consists of

1. Their being cut off from the Lord.
2. Their being politically and ecclesiastically (really the same thing in the ancient world) subject to Nephi's rule.
3. Their descendants being no more than a "scourge" to Nephites and Nephite power.

If we come to this first prosperity promise fresh and free of pre-conceived ideas, it is difficult to see how we could draw a promise of "economic" or "material" well-being from it. The focus seems to be utterly political. This original prosperity promised is about politics, control, and governance. While it seems "private" in its beginning, it takes a decidedly "corporate" or "societal" turn. This turn takes place early in the blessing, and is permanent in its future application to groups and nations.

Having examined the context, meaning, and emphasis of the original "prosperity promise," we now turn our attention to other passages that repeat our formula, "inasmuch as [or 'if'] ye shall keep my commandments, ye shall prosper."¹¹ In each, we will want to look at the

¹⁰ We shall have more to say about the nature of the "Promised Land," but for now, we suggest that the land is "a land of promise" in that it is politically free and independent from oppressive and subjugating influences.

¹¹ I identify 15 passages that contain our "prosperity promise" formula. The first is the one we have already examined—1 Nephi 1.²⁰. The others are found at 1 Nephi 4.¹⁴; 2 Nephi 1.^{9, 20, 32}; Jarom 1.⁹ (this is the one that inspired our present study); Omni 1.⁶; Mosiah 2.²²; Alma 9.¹³; Alma 36.^{1, 30}; Alma 37.¹³; Alma 38.¹; Alma 48.¹⁵; Alma 48.²⁵; and Alma 50.²⁰.

passage itself along with its immediate narrative and historical context in order to identify the nature of the promised “prosperity.” We will want to see if these passages are related to questions of “sovereign governance” and “military independence and success” or if they are related to “economic” or “materialistic” benefits. We will also want to note whether they are “private” and “individualistic” or “corporate” and “societal.”

***P*assages that reference Nephi’s original “prosperity promise”**

1 NEPHI 4.¹⁴

This is our first Book of Mormon passage that references Nephi’s original “prosperity promise.”

“And now, when I, Nephi, had heard these words, I remembered the words of the Lord which he spake unto me in the wilderness, saying that: *Inasmuch as thy seed shall keep my commandments, they shall prosper in the land of promise.*”¹²

This passage represents Nephi’s musings as he considers whether to follow the prompting to kill Laban. In his hesitation to commit the act, the Spirit seems to make the argument that for his people to have and keep the Lord’s commandments, and thus prosper, they must be in possession of the Law, which is to be found on the plates that are in Laban’s possession. It seems that the “prosperity” that the Spirit has in mind, and the prosperity about which Nephi contemplates in regard to his people is spiritual in nature. There is nothing in the passage that leads the reader to prefer either an economic or political interpretation.

It is also important to note that in the original bestowal of the prosperity promise, the Lord states, that “ye shall prosper.” This felt personal, a promise offered to the youth, Nephi. But just as it was quickly made applicable to his descendants, so here, with its “*they shall prosper,*” it has been directly extended to all his descendants. When Nephi calls the original promise to mind, it takes on a decidedly corporate or societal rather than private emphasis.

2 NEPHI 1.⁹

The next passage is part of a lengthy discourse Lehi delivered to his family. It represents his last recorded “testament.” We will first examine his reference to the “prosperity promise,”

¹² Emphasis added.

and any possible implications concerning the nature of the prosperity as it existed in his mind. We will then explore the narrative context to see if it adds anything to our understanding. So, here is the passage.

“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 *they shall be kept from all other nations, that they may possess this land unto themselves*. 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.*”¹³

First, we should note that Lehi here claims to have received his own “prosperity promise.” The language of that promise is remarkably similar to that of Nephi’s.

Second, we point out that in this passage, and throughout the surrounding discourse, the promise of prosperity is entirely corporate or societal. The promise is extended to Lehi’s descendants for many generations to come.

It is abundantly clear that the concept of “prosperity” in this passage focuses on political independence and freedom. As long as Lehi’s descendants are faithful to God, prosperity entails

1. Possession of the land without fear of other’s discovery or domination.
2. The absence of other nations to “molest” them or threaten them with disinheritance.
3. Their living in safety.

So far, unless one is simply intent on making prosperity about economic and materialistic blessings due to some preconceived notion, there is no reason to read the promise of prosperity in any way other than “political.” Lehi’s descendants will be politically independent, maintaining sovereignty so long as they are faithful to God.

¹³ Emphasis added

As we examine the material before and after this passage, we find this same political focus repeated over and over.

“Wherefore, this land is consecrated unto him whom he shall bring. And *if it so be that they shall serve him according to the commandments* which he hath given, *it shall be a land of liberty unto them*; wherefore, *they shall never be brought down into captivity...*”¹⁴

“And behold, it is wisdom that this land should be kept as yet from the knowledge of other nations; for behold, *many nations would overrun the land, that there would be no place for an inheritance.*”¹⁵

Such blessings as these, articulated before his recitation of the prosperity promise (verse 9) are balanced by an enunciation of curses that will accompany disobedience. Note the nature of the curses. Put differently, note the nature of the “non-prosperity.” In fact, these statements of blessing before and statements of cursing after loosely reflect the “blessing” and “cursing” pattern that we witnessed in the initial statement of the prosperity promise found in 1 Nephi 1.¹⁹⁻²⁴.

“...Behold, I say, if the day shall come that they will reject the Holy One of Israel, the true Messiah, their Redeemer and their God, behold, the judgments of him that is just shall rest upon them.

Yea, he will bring other nations unto them, and he will give unto them power, and he will take away from them the lands of their possessions, and he will cause them to be scattered and smitten.

Yea, as one generation passeth to another *there shall be bloodsheds, and great visitations among them....*”¹⁶

“... a cursing should come upon you for the space of many generations; and ye are *visited*

¹⁴ 1.7. Emphasis added.

¹⁵ 1.8. Emphasis added.

¹⁶ 1.10-12. Emphasis added.

*by sword, and by famine,¹⁷ and are hated...*¹⁸

“... arise from the dust, my sons, and be men, and be determined in one mind and in one heart, united in all things, *that ye may not come down into captivity.*”¹⁹

Turning his attention from his sons to Zoram, Lehi declares,

“... thy seed shall be blessed with his seed, that they dwell in prosperity long upon the face of this land.... The Lord hath consecrated this land for *the security of thy seed* with the seed of my son.”²⁰

Clearly, the focus of prosperity is political, entirely. It is on freedom from national threats, incursions, and defeats. There is no explicit or implicit economic or materialistic blessing to be found here.

We should also point out the “national” and “corporate” nature of the statement and its surroundings. This passage is not a personal or “individualistic” one. It is difficult to see how someone could conclude from this passage that if they are personally righteous they might become personally rich. But, let us wait to begin to draw conclusions and make applications.

2 NEPHI 1.²⁰

“And he hath said that: **Inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments ye shall prosper in the land;** but inasmuch as ye will not keep my commandments ye shall be cut off from my presence.”

This “prosperity promise” formula is found within the same discourse as the previous passage. Its focus is conditioned by the passages we have just examined. We should note,

¹⁷ We will point out here that “famine” is as often as not the result of military defeat and societal breakdown. That seems to be the focus here. The threat is not that of a bad economy, but of societal defeat and collapse.

¹⁸ 1.18. Emphasis added.

¹⁹ 1.22. Emphasis added.

²⁰ 1.31-32. Emphasis added.

however, that the warning about being “cut off from my presence” is dependent on the warning originally given to Nephi’s brothers, and is connected to political/ecclesiastical weakness.

JAROM 1.⁹

“And thus being prepared to meet the Lamanites, *they did not prosper against us*. But the word of the Lord was verified, which he spake unto our fathers, saying that: **Inasmuch as ye will keep my commandments ye shall prosper in the land.**”²¹

This is the passage that caused me personal marvel and began my deeper investigation of the prosperity promise found in the Book of Mormon. We discussed it above. We found that the absence of prosperity among the Lamanites was evidenced by their inability to militarily and politically dominate the Nephites. Nephi’s original “prosperity promise” is “verified” in that the Nephites remain independent from and victorious over their Lamanite enemy due to their faithfulness. In this passage, the thrust of prosperity is, as it has been everywhere else so far, political, governmental, and military. In addition it is societal and corporate rather than individual and private.

Perhaps we should say a word here about our frequent reference to the prosperity promise as being “corporate,” “societal,” or “public” rather than individual and private. What we mean to say is that the promise of prosperity can be legitimately applied by society as a whole. Because individuals are part of society they will certainly reap the benefits that accrue to that society. However, any individual within that society may, in a number of ways, experience a “reversal of fortune” while remaining faithful (for example the individual who is taken hostage and even murdered by a kidnapper). Such reversal does not imply the breach of covenant on the part of either the worshipper or God, because the promise was never intended to be understood privately.

By promise, or covenant, the “reversal of fortune” at the societal level is unlikely as long as that society is faithful as a whole. Because the promise is corporate, God will always grant societal “prosperity” as we are beginning to understand it. Because the promise is not private,

²¹ Emphasis added.

God is under no obligation to grant individual “prosperity” based upon the “prosperity promise.” God may allow such “prosperity” to depart from the individual for any one of a whole host of reasons that have nothing to do with one’s faithfulness or the lack thereof.

Though it does not seem to be the main thrust of the passage, we should note that there is some talk of economic or material well-being in the surrounding narrative context.

“And we multiplied exceedingly, and spread upon the face of the land, and *became exceedingly rich in gold, and in silver, and in precious things, and in fine workmanship of wood, in buildings, and in machinery, and also in iron and copper, and brass and steel, making all manner of tools of every kind to till the ground, and weapons of war—yea, the sharp pointed arrow, and the quiver, and the dart, and the javelin, and all preparations for war.*”²²

Now, we will not put too fine a point to it, but we observe that the nation “became exceedingly *rich* in gold and in silver and in...” The text does not say that the nation “became exceedingly *prosperous* in gold, and in silver, and in...” This is important and a matter of “usage” as we will increasingly see. In addition, we note that the passage is decidedly corporate or societal rather than private or individualistic.

The mention of “weapons of war... and all preparations for war” seems to place the “economic” well-being into the realm of political security. The point, it seems, is not so much that they were comfortably wealthy, but that they had the national wherewithal to arm, fortify, and defend themselves. The material advantages are not prosperity itself, but a consequence of political prosperity or success.

OMNI 1.⁶

“For the Lord would not suffer, after he had led them out of the land of Jerusalem and kept and *preserved them from falling into the hands of their enemies*, yea, he would not suffer that the words should not be verified, which he spake unto our fathers, saying that:

²² Jarom 1.⁸

Inasmuch as ye will not keep my commandments ye shall not prosper in the land.”²³

These words are part of the five verse record of Amaron (Omni 1.⁴⁻⁸), so we have a limited context in which to read it. Our formula passage above follows the notice in verse 5 that “the more wicked part of the Nephites were destroyed.” The military and political defeats that brought destruction to the wicked were in fact verification of the Lord’s “prosperity promise” that “inasmuch as ye will not keep my commandments ye shall not prosper in the land.” Amaron also notes that the Lord “did spare the righteous that they should not perish, but did *deliver them out of the hands of their enemies.*”²⁴

As with the other passages that we have examined so far, prosperity is viewed from a political or military perspective, with no discussion or allusion to economic or materialistic affairs. We can also say that the focus of this passage is national rather than private. “The “righteous” were spared. But this is surely a general statement, as there were likely individual “righteous” who did not survive the trials, were killed in battles, etc.

MOSIAH 2.²²

“And behold, all that he requires of you is to keep his commandments; and he has promised you that **if ye would keep his commandments ye should prosper in the land;** and he never doth vary from that which he hath said; therefore, if ye do keep his commandments he doth bless you and *prosper* you.”²⁵

The context for this passage is one of the best know and well-loved narratives found in the Book of Mormon. The righteous King Benjamin has called for a national assembly in order to pass the scepter of kingship to his son, Mosiah II. During this assembly, King Benjamin addresses, teaches, admonishes, and encourages his people. Our formulaic passage above comes during this national assembly and King Benjamin’s national address.

The passage itself seems to be clearly corporate. However, it offers no help in determining whether the emphasis is economic or political sovereignty. Based solely upon the citation of

²³ Emphasis added.

²⁴ Omni 1.⁷

²⁵ Emphasis added.

the prosperity promise, it would be unwise to be dogmatic one way or the other. So, if we are to establish a focus, we will need to look to the broader narrative context.

Immediately before our passage, King Benjamin encourages his people to thank and praise God because he has “created you, and has kept and preserved you, and caused that ye should rejoice, and has granted that ye should live in peace one with another.”²⁶ Continuing, he again speaks of God as having “created you from the beginning, and... preserving you from day to day, by lending you breath, that ye may live and move and do according to your own will, and even supporting you from one moment to another.”²⁷ Immediately after the formula, he reminds his people that “in the first place, [God] hath created you, and granted unto you your lives. And secondly... he doth bless you.”²⁸

To this point we can say little about the focus of the cited “prosperity promise.” There is nothing that would sway us to think of it in either political/militaristic terms or economic/materialistic terms. It is probably going to be read according to the preconceptions that the reader brings to the text. Is it significant and determinative to note that the statement is made at a national/political gathering? Given that all governments, ancient and modern, like to claim responsibility and control over economic matters, perhaps not.

However, the tide may turn in favor of the political/militaristic perspective as we continue to read. Benjamin seems to allude to the “prosperity promise” when he admonishes,

“And now, my brethren, I would that ye should do as ye have hitherto done. As ye have *kept my commandments*, and also the commandments of my father, and *have prospered*, and have been kept from falling into the hands of your enemies, even so if ye shall keep the commandments of my son, or the commandments of God which shall be delivered unto you by him, *ye shall prosper in the land, and your enemies shall have no power over you.*”²⁹

This is blatantly political or militaristic in its outlook. It is surely no stretch to connect

²⁶ Mos. 2.²⁰

²⁷ Mos. 2.²¹

²⁸ Mos. 2.²³⁻²⁴

²⁹ Mosiah 2.³¹. Emphasis added.

Benjamin's "As ye have kept my commandments" with the conditional statements of Nephi's original prosperity promise. Here, "prosperity" is to be found in being "kept from falling into the hands of your enemies" and living such that "your enemies shall have no power over you." This is precisely the emphasis that we found in the original prosperity promise and in the passage that inspired our investigation: Jarom 1.⁹

We can also say that this statement and its narrative/historical context is decidedly corporate or societal.

Within King Benjamin's address, one looks in vain for a statement concerning economic or materialistic benefits that might flow from his people's obedience to the king and/or God. All things considered, it seems best to read King Benjamin's reference to the "prosperity promise" in political terms to be applied at the national level.³⁰ Independent national sovereignty will be maintained through the observance of God's counsels.

ALMA 9.¹³

"Behold, do ye not remember the words which he spake unto Lehi,³¹ saying that:

Inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments, ye shall prosper in the land? And

again it is said that: Inasmuch as ye will not keep my commandments ye shall be cut off from the presence of the Lord."

Once more the focus of this passage, whether economic or political, is indeterminate. We will have to look into the narrative and historical context of the statement. So, a review of the context is in order.

In Alma 9, Alma is preaching to the people of Ammonihah. The people of Ammonihah are, we are told over and over and over again, "wicked." What is the nature of their wickedness? Of what sins are they guilty? Are they a nation of hedonists? Adulterers? Idolaters? Liars?

³⁰ The strongest emphasis is on the spiritual blessings that flow from obedience. But that is a topic for another time and place.

³¹ It is not pertinent to our discussion, but it is worth noting that this statement is said here to have been spoken to Lehi. Is this an ancient typo? Did Alma misspeak? Did the Lord say this to Lehi before saying it to Nephi, and the text simply not inform us? When Nephi informed us that the Lord spoke these words to him, did he actually mean that the Lord said them to him through his father, Lehi, who had heard them from the Lord?

Thieves? Extortionists? The text does not go into detail. The Lord does reveal this one particularity to Alma:

“They do study at this time that they may destroy the liberty of thy people, (for thus saith the Lord) which is contrary to the statutes, and judgments, and commandments which he has given unto his people.”³²

This notice is not enough to unquestionably thrust us into a purely political reading of the entire narrative, including our formula passage, but it seems to point us in that direction.

If we reverse course and read Alma’s discourse backward from our formulaic passage, we hear him ask the people of Ammonihah,

“Have ye forgotten so soon *how many times he delivered our fathers out of the hands of their enemies, and preserved them from being destroyed*, even by the hands of their own brethren?

Yea, and if it had not been for his matchless power, and his mercy, and his long-suffering towards us, *we should unavoidably have been cut off from the face of the earth long before this period of time*, and perhaps been consigned to a state of endless misery and woe.”³³

Such words are, at least in part, in direct response to the people’s disbelief of Alma’s warning that “this great city should be destroyed in one day.”³⁴

Reading forward in Alma’s discourse, we hear,

“Yea, and after having been delivered of God out of the land of Jerusalem, by the hand of the Lord; having been saved from famine, and from sickness, and all manner of diseases of every kind; and they *having waxed strong in battle, that they might not be destroyed; having been brought out of bondage time after time, and having been kept and preserved*

³² Al. 8.¹⁷

³³ Al. 9.¹⁰⁻¹¹. Emphasis added.

³⁴ Al. 9.⁴

*until now; and they have been prospered until they are rich in all manner of things—*³⁵

Obviously, there is a very, very strong political bent to Alma's discourse.³⁶ Let us note the final line, "and they have been prospered until they are rich in all manner of things." It would stand to reason that at least a portion of the Nephite's richness "in all manner of things" would be material or economic. That said, it seems best to read this notice, "and they have succeeded until they are rich in all manner of things." Again, the riches are a result of their having been prospered in the political sense.

Now, again, we should perhaps not press things too far. The text, as we shall see, is not opposed to prosperity periodically taking the form of materialistic benefits. But we would still maintain that the focus of prosperity here is social and political. If the Nephites have acquired material well-being, it is in consequence of their political prosperity, their political and military successes and victories. They were prospered, given military strength and political stability such that their economy was unencumbered with disruption and expenses. Their prosperity and their richness seem to be two different things, the latter the result of the former.

So, we do not deny a weak economic component to the "prosperity promise." We do, however, argue that it is not dominant or primary. It is certainly nowhere near as powerful, pervasive, and motivating as it is often made out to be in our LDS culture. This passage, like all the others we have studied so far, is not strongly and adamantly economic or materialistic in its emphasis. Any material wealth is the consequence of political and military prosperity.

I know that we are repeating ourselves... over, and over, and over again. But, as we indicated in the opening justification, the traditional reading is so pervasive, ingrained, and so very appealing to natural human desires and appetites that any suggestion to the contrary has the burden of proof. Therefore, if it is to be called into question, it will likely require overwhelming and repeated arguments against the accepted wisdom.

³⁵ Al. 9.²²

³⁶ There is, of course, a strong "spiritual" component to this and all the other occurrences of the formula. We do not mean to deny or downplay this aspect of the "prosperity promise." But we can only do so much at a time, and need to remain fixed on the topic at hand.

“My son, give ear to my words; for I swear unto you, that **inasmuch as ye shall keep the commandments of God ye shall prosper in the land.**”

“But behold, my son, this is not all; for ye ought to know as I do know, that **inasmuch as ye shall keep the commandments of God ye shall prosper in the land;** and ye ought to know also, that inasmuch as ye will not keep the commandments of God ye shall be cut off from his presence. Now this is according to his word.”

While I have counted these passages as two separate occurrences of the formula, it is convenient to examine them together. Not only are they both contained within the same discourse, but are closely associated with each other by virtue of their placement within the “chiastic” structure of Alma 36. They will both make the same point. The formula, as found at the beginning of the chapter is followed immediately by,

“I would that ye should do as I have done, in *remembering the captivity of our fathers; for they were in bondage, and none could deliver them except it was the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob; and he surely did deliver them in their afflictions.*”³⁷

Similarly, the formula as found at the end of the chapter is preceded by,

“I will praise [God] forever, for he has brought our fathers out of Egypt, and he has swallowed up the Egyptians in the Red Sea; and he led them by his power into the promised land; yea, and he has *delivered them out of bondage and captivity* from time to time.

Yea, and he has also brought our fathers out of the land of Jerusalem; and he has also, by his everlasting power, *delivered them out of bondage and captivity*, from time to time even down to the present day; and I have always retained in remembrance their captivity; yea, and ye also ought to retain in remembrance, as I have done, their captivity.”³⁸

³⁷ Al. 36.². Emphasis added.

³⁸ Alma 36.²⁸⁻²⁹. Emphasis added.

Here, Alma focuses on God’s deliverance of his people from political enemies. As has been the case with most of our formula passages, these two make no mention of economics or material welfare. In addition to the strong “spiritualization” of the formula (which, again, we simply do not have time to examine here), it is strongly political/military in its emphasis.

ALMA 37.¹³

“O remember, remember, my son Helaman, how strict are the commandments of God. And he said: **If ye will keep my commandments ye shall prosper in the land**—but if ye keep not his commandments ye shall be cut off from his presence.”

Like the last two occurrences of the formula, this one comes from Alma’s instructions to his son, Helaman. We treat it separate from the previous two because it is different from them. It has a unique focus. In fact, it is quite unique among all of our formula occurrences. As has been the case with most of our passages, the idea of “preservation” is dominant. While the idea of preservation is very much to the fore, it is not the preservation of a nation or even of an individual that is at stake here. It is the preservation of the sacred text that Alma is handing over to Helaman.

“If ye keep the commandments of God, and do with these things which are sacred according to that which the Lord doth command you, (for you must appeal unto the Lord for all things whatsoever ye must do with them) behold, *no power of earth or hell can take them from you*, for God is powerful to the fulfilling of all his words.”³⁹

While it is different from the “political” focus, it is very instructive for the passages that are politically focused. Here, what “no power of earth or hell can take” from Helaman is a sacred text. In most of our formula passages, what “no power of earth or hell can take” from the Nephites is their land, autonomy, freedom.

³⁹ Alma 37.¹⁶

ALMA 38.¹

“My son, give ear to my words, for I say unto you, even as I said unto Helaman, that **inasmuch as ye shall keep the commandments of God ye shall prosper in the land;** and inasmuch as ye will not keep the commandments of God ye shall be cut off from his presence.”

This occurrence of the formula comes from Alma’s instructions to his middle son, Shiblon. What we found with the two in Alma 36, seems to apply to this one. Alma follows this statement up with promises of “deliverance” from “trials,” “troubles,” and “afflictions.” Again, the idea of “prosperity” here is that of “preservation,” without a dominant focus on either economic or political.

ALMA 48.^{15-16 & 25}

“And this was their faith, that by so doing God would prosper them in the land, or in other words, **if they were faithful in keeping the commandments of God that he would prosper them in the land;** yea, *warn them to flee, or to prepare for war,* according to their danger; and also, that God would make it known unto them *whither they should go to defend themselves against their enemies,* and by so doing, *the Lord would deliver them;* and this was the faith of Moroni, and his heart did glory in it; not in the shedding of blood but in doing good, in *preserving his people,* yea, in keeping the commandments of God, yea, and resisting iniquity.”⁴⁰

“Yea, they could not bear that their brethren should *rejoice over the blood of the Nephites,* so long as there were any who should keep the commandments of God, for the promise of the Lord was, **if they should keep his commandments they should prosper in the land.**”⁴¹

It might be argued that these two should be removed from the list. It is true that they do not strictly adhere to the formula. The language is slightly different. Our traditional “Inasmuch as ye shall keep the commandments of God” is altered to read “if they were faithful in keeping

⁴⁰ Emphasis added.

⁴¹ Emphasis added.

the commandments of God,” and “if they should keep his commandments” respectively. But the language is so similar, that it seems clear that the language of this passage is completely dependent upon the original prosperity promise. So, it doesn’t seem like an outrage to include these verses in our consideration of the formulaic prosperity promise.

Clearly, the sole focus of these two passages is military. It is about the defense of freedom/independence and political preservation of the government. All the verses around them are equally single minded. Leading up to the first passage, we read that Moroni’s “soul did joy I the liberty and the freedom of his country.”⁴² Moroni “was a man who... had sworn with an oath to defend his people, his rights, and his country, and his religion.”⁴³

The language of Alma 28.²⁵ seems particularly determinative and definitive for the interpretation and meaning behind this formulaic “prosperity promise.” Connecting words are important. They help us understand relationships. In this verse “they could not bear that their brethren should rejoice over the blood of the Nephites, so long as there were any who should keep the commandments of God, **FOR** the promise of the Lord was, if they should keep his commandments they should prosper in the land.” This “for” could be read as “because.”

For the writers of the Book of Mormon, Lamanite victory over a Nephite nation, which is striving to be obedient, feels like a complete breach of covenant and a breaking of God’s promises. This defines, as well as any of our passages, just how “political” the prosperity promise was felt to be.

As has so often been the case, there is, here, no discussion concerning economic or materialistic wealth. When it comes to the prosperity promise, economic matters simply do not come foremost to the mind of those who wrote the Book of Mormon. It may be weakly present; however, as we have seen, it is, even then, rare. It is anything but dominant. It is certain that the promise is not used to justify or explain material and economic successes.

⁴² Al. 48.¹¹

⁴³ Al. 48.¹³

Blessed art thou and thy children; and they shall be blessed, **inasmuch as they shall keep my commandments they shall prosper in the land**. But remember, inasmuch as they will not keep my commandments they shall be cut off from the presence of the Lord.

This final restatement of the prosperity promise, along with its historical and narrative context, is as comprehensive as any that have come before. To begin our discussion of this passage, I would like to go back to verse 17. It reads,

“And in these *prosperous* circumstances were the people of Nephi in the commencement of the twenty and first year of the reign of the judges over the people of Nephi.”⁴⁴

What are “these prosperous circumstances” in which the Nephites find themselves? The language here suggests to me that we should be able to go backward and discover what the writer thinks of as “prosperous.” Verses 13-15 catalogues a large number of cities whose construction was started. Now, the building of new cities could indicate a number of things. It could indicate an increase in population. It could indicate an economic boom. The text mentions neither of these. The reason for the building boom was increased national security due to Moroni’s wise and strategic military preparations. Verses 1-10 list his impressive military accomplishments and victories. Verses 11-12 summarize the results.

“And thus he cut off all the strongholds of the Lamanites in the east wilderness, yea, and also on the west, fortifying the line between the Nephites and the Lamanites, between the land of Zarahemla and the land of Nephi, from the west sea, running by the head of the river Sidon—the Nephites possessing all the land northward, yea, even all the land which was northward of the land Bountiful, according to their pleasure.

“Thus Moroni, with his armies, which did increase daily because of the assurance of protection which his works did bring forth unto them, did seek to cut off the strength and the power of the Lamanites from off the lands of their possessions, that they should have no power upon the lands of their possession.”

⁴⁴ Emphasis added.

So, everything from verse 1 to verse 17 indicates that “the prosperous circumstances” revolved around increased national security. The next verse is worth reviewing as well.

“And they did *prosper* exceedingly, and they became exceedingly rich; yea, and they did multiply and wax strong in the land.”⁴⁵

I will not press the issue too much, but it *feels* to me (I make no claims to being an objective scientist) like “prosperity” and becoming “exceedingly rich” are not the same thing. They are two separate issues. “They did prosper” AND “they became exceedingly rich.” The material wealth is the result of the political and military successes listed previously. Those military successes are the result of having kept the commandments. Now, I am O.K. with material plenty being thought of as “prosperity,” but, again, even in this passage where we have riches mentioned, there is simply no special emphasis on the material wellbeing. If there is a heavy or special emphasis in this chapter, it is on the Nephite’s military and political advances against and victories over the Lamanites which then created a good economy.

There is nothing in the verses that follow the verse with our formula that would alter our previous conclusion.

“And we see that *these promises have been verified to the people of Nephi; for it has been their quarrelings and their contentions, yea, their murderings, and their plunderings, their idolatry, their whoredoms, and their abominations, which were among themselves, which brought upon them their wars and their destructions.*

“And those who were faithful in keeping the commandments of the Lord were *delivered at all times, whilst thousands of their wicked brethren have been consigned to bondage, or to perish by the sword, or to dwindle in unbelief, and mingle with the Lamanites.*”⁴⁶

Again, we read of “verification” of the prosperity promise. It is not the absence of riches or the abundance of poverty, but the presence of “wars,” and “destructions,” and “bondage” that act as verification of the promise. Deliverance from bondage and the sword are verification

⁴⁵ Emphasis added.

⁴⁶ Al. 50.²¹⁻²²

of the promise.

Conclusion

Having finished our survey, we can offer the following observations:

1. Neither Nephi's original "prosperity promise," nor any of the fourteen passages that reference the formula of the original promise, possess even the slightest economic or materialistic focus.
2. Among these same fifteen formulaic passages, only three are found in a larger narrative context in which there is mention of economic or materialistic attainment and security. These references to economic attainment seem oblique, almost detached from the promise. Rather than being described as prosperity itself, the economic attainment seems to exist in consequence of political prosperity.
3. Within the fifteen formulaic passages themselves, the political/militaristic emphasis is explicit and dominant in a third of them. Additionally, in three of the passages which are indeterminate in and of themselves, we find a clear and dominate political/militaristic emphasis in the surrounding narrative and historical context.
4. Among the fifteen passages, not one can be understood to have an individual or private focus. They seem to always be societal and corporate.

What, then, do we take from this examination and its summary?

Based upon these fifteen formulaic statements, it seems that the Lord's promise of prosperity, emanating from a willing conformity to godly principles, is to be understood in terms of domestic political security and stability, as well as success in foreign affairs and victory in military conflicts. In addition, the prosperity promise is to be applied at the group, societal, and national rather than at the individual or private level.

Based upon the prosperity promise, economic achievement at the societal level may or may not accompany political stability. But there is no justification—let me repeat, *no justification*—for reading the Book of Mormon's prosperity promise as a promise that a conforming individual should expect economic or materialistic wealth as a reward for that conformity.

It might be argued that I am seeing what I was looking for; confirming a preconceived position. As disconcerting as it is to acknowledge, this is always a danger. But, as I indicated at the beginning, this is not how I had read Nephi's original statement of the "prosperity promise," or the formulaic passages that harken back to the original. I had always assumed quite the opposite—that the prosperity promise was economic in nature. The dominant political focus was as much a surprise for me as it may be for the reader.

Now, there is no doubt that these observations and conclusions run contrary to the traditional and accepted reading of the prosperity promise as found in the Book of Mormon. Our conclusion that the promise of prosperity extended by the Book of Mormon to the obedient does not mean economic "well-being" may seem nonsensical and to fly in the face of "common sense."⁴⁷ However, it does not fly in the face of 19th century usage of the word group. Nor does it fly in the face of usage of the word in the Book of Mormon.

Nevertheless, the traditional reading is so powerful, that the burden of proof would seem to be on us to demonstrate that these conclusions are not the result of bias confirmation, or nonsensical interpretation. While the "formulaic" passages, it seems to me, must take precedence in our understating of the meaning of prosperity in the Book of Mormon, we will want to examine passages that address "prosperity" without direct reference the formula. There are many.

However, before doing so, we will turn our attention to the Hebrew Bible. If, as the text claims, the Book of Mormon peoples came out of ancient Jerusalem, we might expect that their way of looking at prosperity would have been influenced by and similar to that found in the Old Testament.

⁴⁷ This is not the only instance of the Book of Mormon using a vocabulary item differently than we are accustomed. One of my favorite examples involves the meaning of "transgress" and "transgression." The Book of Mormon has a unique take on this word as well. The word does not mean in the Book of Mormon what we think it means.