

## Seeing Religious Freedom in the Scriptures

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### Book of Mormon: Samuel the Lamanite and Ammon with King Lamoni

These have always been two of my favorite Book of Mormon stories. As a girl, I looked up to Samuel the Lamanite as a bold defender of truth. He stood on a wall, arrows flying, declaring repentance to a hardened people, and “they could not hit him” because “the Spirit of the Lord was with him” (Helaman 16:2). Samuel warned, “If a prophet come among you and declareth... the destruction of this people, ye are angry with him, and cast him out” (Helaman 13:26). The Nephites didn’t just reject his words; they tried to erase his presence, even calling him “a devil” (Helaman 16:6). Religious freedom, in that moment, was dying in their hearts more than in their laws, and within a generation the destruction he foretold came to pass.

In contrast, the story of Ammon in Alma 17–21 shows what can happen when leaders protect the right to believe and teach. Ammon served as a shepherd, waited for trust to build, then taught Lamoni about the “Great Spirit” and Christ’s coming (Alma 17:25–29; 18:40). Lamoni chose faith and “sent a proclamation” to protect his people’s right to worship (Alma 21:23). Later, his father, the high king, declared that missionaries should not be harmed and that all could “have free access to their houses, and also their temples” (Alma 23:2). Thousands were converted, cities were transformed, and a peaceful group of Lamanites permanently laid down their weapons (Alma 23:5).

These stories make me ask: Who do I want to be like? Samuel, bold in speaking truth when it’s unpopular? Ammon, patient and courageous in lifting others? Will we build faith and defend freedom as King Lamoni did?

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### Bible: Esther and the Jews vs. Cyrus’s Decree

The story of Esther has always stayed with me. She wasn’t just beautiful; she was brave, faithful, and wise, standing between her people and annihilation. Haman convinced King Ahasuerus to destroy the Jews, arguing that “their laws are diverse from all people ... it is not for the king’s profit to suffer them” (Esther 3:8). With the king’s ring, he issued a law of genocide, and Jews across Persia mourned in “sackcloth and ashes” (Esther 4:3).

Mordecai’s words to Esther were piercing: “Who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?” (Esther 4:14). She risked death to reveal her Jewish identity, and through courage, fasting, and faith, the first decree was countered by a second that empowered the Jews to defend themselves (Esther 8:11). Religious oppression nearly destroyed her people—but one faithful woman changed history.

Ezra 1 offers a quieter story of freedom. Cyrus, the king of Persia, proclaimed that the Lord had commanded him “to build him a house at Jerusalem” and invited God’s people to “go up to Jerusalem” (Ezra 1:2–3). He not only allowed them to return but also provided support so they could worship freely. Isaiah records the Lord calling Cyrus “his anointed” (Isaiah 45:1) because he made room for faith, restored worship, and protected God’s people.

One ruler tried to destroy God’s covenant people for their beliefs; the other empowered them to rebuild and reconnect with Him. In our day of polarization and pressure to keep quiet about eternal truths, Esther teaches courage, and Cyrus reminds us that even secular leaders can be instruments in God’s hands. We are the stewards of our time—will we be passive, or will we use our voice and influence to protect faith, defend families, and build for the future?