



Why was Giddianhi So Polite?

KnoWhy # 190
September 19, 2016



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“Lachoneus, most noble and chief governor of the land, behold, I write this epistle unto you, and do give unto you exceedingly great praise.”

3 Nephi 3:2

The Know

In the 16th year since the sign of Christ’s birth, “Lachoneus, the governor of the land, received an epistle from the leader and the governor of [a] band of robbers,” who was called Giddianhi (3 Nephi 3:1). Giddianhi began his letter graciously. “Lachoneus, most noble and chief governor of the land, behold, I write this epistle unto you, and do give unto you exceedingly great praise because of your firmness ... yea, ye do stand well, as if ye were supported by the hand of a god” (v. 2).

Such a cordial tone coming from the leader of the Gadanton robbers is quite startling—and even more so when considering that his letter followed several uniquely ancient conventions of politeness. For example, in his introduction, he deferentially mentioned Lachoneus first, as was customary in the “ancient Hittite-Syrian, Neo-Assyrian, Amarna, and Hebrew format,” as well as in the Book of Mormon itself.¹

His letter also mirrors forms of politeness found in ancient Egyptian letters.² According to Kim Ridealgh, “when a subordinate individual writes to his superior, a

longer formal introduction is necessary alongside more fawning language.”³ Such is clearly the case in Giddianhi’s letter, where excessive praise and flattery saturate his opening remarks (see 3 Nephi 3:2–3).

Moreover, when making imperative requests, writers of ancient Egyptian letters would often introduce the request with the phrase “when my letter reaches you” as in the following example: “When my letter reaches you, you shall release this man.”⁴ According to Ridealgh, “These phrases seem to hold a deeper cultural significance and perhaps even reflect a form of ‘politeness.’”⁵

Before issuing a formal request to Lachoneus, Giddianhi placed a similar self-referential emphasis on the written words of his letter: “Therefore I have *written this epistle, sealing it with mine own hand*. ... Therefore I write *unto you*, desiring that ye would yield up unto this my people, your cities, your lands, and your possessions” (3 Nephi 3:5–6, emphasis added).⁶

Giddianhi's rhetoric also conforms more broadly to strategies recognized in politeness theory. For instance, throughout his letter he expressed praise for Lachoneus and his men,⁷ reluctance for their impending conflict,⁸ sympathy for their welfare,⁹ in-group language (words and phrases familiar to a group),¹⁰ offers for mutual cooperation,¹¹ and even acted as if he were a mediator between these groups, placing himself as a protector who could save the Nephites from his own robbers.¹²

When analyzed in light of the ground-breaking politeness theory developed by Penelope Brown and Stephen C. Levinson, Giddianhi's persuasive strategies and motivations are easier to identify and understand. Brown and Levinson have summarized:

Central to our model is a highly abstract notion of "face" which consists of two specific kinds of desires ("face-wants") attributed by interactants to one another: the desire to be unimpeded in one's actions (negative face), and the desire (in some respects) to be approved of (positive face). This is the bare bones of a notion of face which (we argue) is universal.¹³

When this model is applied to Giddianhi's letter, his praise, sympathy, use of in-group language, and attempts at cooperation can be seen as efforts to retain respect or gain approval from the Nephites (positive face).¹⁴ And his expression of reluctance to send his men against the Nephites can be seen as a token desire not to impinge on the Nephites' need for freedom and independence (negative face).¹⁵ Thus, in several ways, his letter provides textbook examples of persuasive strategies.

Moreover, because Giddianhi's epistle was liable to be read by multiple individuals, and perhaps even be made known to the general public, it can be reasonably categorized as "on the record" (or in public view).¹⁶ According to Brown and Levinson, a speaker who goes "on the record" may strategically seek to "enlist public pressure against the addressee or in support of himself; he can get credit for honesty, for indicating that he trusts the addressee; he can get credit for outspokenness, avoiding the danger of being seen to be a manipulator; [and] he can avoid the danger of being misunderstood."¹⁷

Several of Giddianhi's strategies, such as boldness and upfront honesty about his intentions, seem to comply generally with this list. It is even possible that Giddianhi

gave a countdown to impending destruction as a form of public pressure, a motivation for as many Nephites as possible to dissent from their own government and join his cause.¹⁸

The Why

Although efforts at persuasion aren't inherently evil, Giddianhi's use of rhetoric was clearly aimed to manipulate and gain control over the Nephite nation. In ways that are both uniquely ancient and also culturally universal, his letter demonstrates what is meant by "flattery, and much power of speech ... according to the power of the devil" (Jacob 7:4).

Despite Giddianhi's attempts to ingratiate himself with the Nephites, he couldn't hide from them his ulterior motives, nor could he completely veil the actual import and consequences of what he was proposing—the end to their religious and political freedom.¹⁹

Ironically, Giddianhi's open and unabashed attempts at flattery and persuasion significantly backfired. Instead of being charmed or impressed, Lachoneus "was exceedingly astonished, because of the boldness of Giddianhi demanding the possession of the land of the Nephites, and also of threatening the people" (3 Nephi 3:11). And instead of cowering in fear, succumbing to Giddianhi's demands, or changing their minds about the justness of the robbers' cause, Lachoneus saw through these duplicitous formalisms, and the Nephites ultimately placed their faith in the Lord and followed Lachoneus until they achieved victory over Giddianhi and his robbers (see 3 Nephi 4:8–14).

To help readers similarly avoid flattery and deception in their own time, the Lord has made available the gift of discernment.²⁰ Elder David A. Bednar taught that the gift of discernment helps its recipients to "read under the surface" and "detect hidden error and evil in others."²¹

President Stephen L. Richards explained,

Every member in the restored Church of Christ could have this gift if he willed to do so. He could not be deceived with the sophistries of the world. He could not be led astray by pseudo-prophets and subversive cults. Even the inexperienced would recognize false teachings, in a measure at

least. ... We ought to be grateful every day of our lives for this sense which keeps alive a conscience which constantly alerts us to the dangers inherent in wrongdoers and sin.²²

Further Reading

Robert F. Smith, “Epistolary Form in the Book of Mormon,” *FARMS Review* 22, no. 2 (2010): 125–135.

Sidney B. Sperry, “Types of Literature in the Book of Mormon: Epistles, Psalms, Lamentations,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 4, no. 1 (1995): 69–80.

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NOTES

1. Robert F. Smith, “Epistolary Form in the Book of Mormon,” *FARMS Review* 22, no. 2 (2010): 127. See also, Book of Mormon Central, “Why was Moroni’s Correspondence with Pahoran Significant? (Alma 59:3),” *KnoWhy* 168 (August 18, 2016).

2. See Smith, “Epistolary Form,” 132: “Since both the Book of Mormon and the brass (bronze) plates of Laban were written in Egyptian, it might be worthwhile for future researchers to also compare ancient Egyptian epistolography to Book of Mormon letters.”

3. Kim Ridealgh, “Polite like an Egyptian? Case Studies of Politeness in the Late Ramesside Letters,” *Journal of Politeness Research* 12, no. 2 (2016): 248.

4. Ridealgh, “Polite like an Egyptian,” 261.

5. Ridealgh, “Polite like an Egyptian,” 260. Ridealgh added that this introductory phrase seemed intended to “mitigate any possible [Face Threatening Acts] due to the request act” (p. 260).

6. Several variants of this self-referential form accompanied by an imperative request can be found in the Book of Mormon, including some that mirror the Egyptian model more precisely. To modern readers of the text, Moroni wrote: “Behold, I would exhort you that *when ye shall read these things*, ... that ye would remember how merciful the Lord hath been unto the children of men” (Moroni 10:3); “And *when ye shall*

receive these things, I would exhort you that ye would ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true” (v. 4). To Joseph Smith, Moroni wrote, “And now *I, Moroni, have written the words* which were commanded me ... therefore touch them not in order that ye may translate” (Ether 5:1). To the Gentiles and the house of Israel in the latter days, the Lord declared, “*Therefore, when ye shall receive this record* ... repent all ye ends of the earth, and come unto me” (Ether 4:17–18). Moroni wrote to his son, Moroni: “And now, my son, I desire that ye should labor diligently, that this gross error should be removed from among you; for, *for this intent I have written this epistle*” (Moroni 8:6). Captain Moroni’s imperative request to Chief Judge Pahoran is interesting because, as one of inferior authority, Moroni appealed to the words of God rather than the words of his own letter: “therefore I would that ye should *adhere to the word of God*, and send speedily unto me of your provisions and of your men, and also to Helaman” (Alma 60:34). To Ammoran, Captain Moroni seemed to open up a request formula by making a self-reference to his own letter, but he delayed the request because he doubted the possibility of Ammoran hearkening unto him: “Behold, Ammoran, *I have written unto you* somewhat concerning this war ... Behold, *I would tell you* somewhat concerning the justice of God ... Yea, *I would tell you* these things if ye were capable of hearkening unto them ... But as ye have once rejected these things ... even so I may expect you will do it again” (Alma 54:5–8). When Captain Moroni finally did get around stipulating a request for prisoner exchange, he once again self-referenced his own epistle: “*I will close my epistle* by telling you that I will not exchange prisoners, save it be on conditions that ye will deliver up a man and his wife and his children, for one prisoner; if this be the case that ye will do it, I will exchange” (v. 11, emphasis added for all examples). A special case can be found in one of Moroni’s letters to Pahoran. Moroni “sent a petition, with the voice of the people, unto the governor of the land, *desiring that he should read it*, and give him [Moroni] power to compel those dissenters to defend their country” (Alma 51:15, cf. Alma 60:34). Royal Skousen has proposed that word “read” should actually be “heed.” This is due to Oliver Cowdrey’s misspelling “heed” as “head,” which led the 1830 typesetter to conjecturally insert “read” instead of “heed.” Skousen’s conjectural emendation actually seems to align quite nicely with the Egyptian formality of expecting the recipient to fulfill a request in response to the letter itself. For Skousen’s textual analysis,

see Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon: Part Four, Alma 21–55*, The Book of Mormon Critical Text, Volume 4 (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2007), 2643.

7. For example, “most noble and chief governor,” (3 Nephi 3:2), “exceedingly great praise” (v. 2) “firmness of your people” (v. 2), “noble Lachoneus” (v. 3), “your firmness in that which ye believe to be right” (v. 5), and “your noble spirit in the field of battle” (v. 5).

8. See 3 Nephi 3:3: “it seemeth a pity unto me.”

9. See 3 Nephi 3:5: “feeling for your welfare.”

10. For example, Giddianhi used the phrases “that which ye suppose to be your right and liberty” and “supported by the hand of a god,” and “defence of your liberty, and your property, and your country” (3 Nephi 3:2). These words and phrases would certainly have been familiar and perhaps even peculiar to the Nephites’ political and religious language. Compare with Alma 43:9, 26; 56:11.

11. See 3 Nephi 3:7: “Or in other words, yield yourselves up unto us, and unite with us and become acquainted with our secret works, and become our brethren that ye may be like unto us—not our slaves, but our brethren and partners of all our substance.”

12. For example, Giddianhi preferred to use the pronoun “they” in reference to his own men, thereby excluding himself from the threatening acts of his robbers (emphasis added): “they should come down against you” (3 Nephi 3:4), “they should visit you with the sword” (v. 6), and “they shall not stay their hand” (v. 8). On the other hand, when seeking cooperation with the Nephites, Giddianhi used the pronouns “us” and “our” which included him back into his own party: “yield yourselves up unto us, and unite with us and become acquainted with our secret works” (v. 7).

13. Penelope Brown and Stephen C. Levinson, *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*, (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 13.

14. For positive politeness, see Brown and Levinson, *Politeness*, 101. For praise, see pp. 103–105; sympathy, p. 106; in-group language, pp. 107–111; and cooperation, pp. 125–127.

15. For negative politeness, see Brown and Levinson, *Politeness*, 129; for expression of reluctance, see pp. 187–188. It should be noted that in Brown and Levinson’s model “negative face” is not undesirable or bad. It is simply their term for the desire of both speakers and hearers to be unimpeded in their actions. A speaker can actually show politeness for a hearer by appealing to his or her “negative face.” This is called “negative politeness.”

16. 3 Nephi 3:11–12, for example, suggests that Lachoneus, to some degree or another, informed his people concerning Giddianhi’s intentions for war.

17. Brown and Levinson, *Politeness*, 71.

18. See Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 5:255: “Giddianhi can confidently assume that Zarahemla still holds many sympathizers and that victory will be assured in an all-out battle.

19. See Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness*, 5:254: “From the Nephite perspective ... it would not only mean political and economic submission, but the probable destruction of their religion—the very reasons they feared the order of the Nehors.”

20. See 1 Corinthians 12:10; Alma 18:18; D&C 46:23.

21. David A. Bednar, “Quick to Observe,” a devotional delivered at Brigham Young University, December 2006, online at lds.org.

22. As cited in David A. Bednar, “Quick to Observe,” online at lds.org.