The Trials of Abinadi and Socrates

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Historical, Social, and Political Background

The trials of both Socrates and Abinadi took place against the backdrop of larger societies, both of which were in the midst of political, military, and social turmoil with their attendant measures of anxiety and defensiveness. Since the milieu in which the two trials took place not only helps to frame the responses of both Abinadi and Socrates, but also goes a long way in explaining why they were prosecuted in the first place, we would do well to examine those backgrounds before we proceed to the trials themselves. What is presented here, however, in no way attempts to complete sketch of Athens in the time of Socrates or Lehi-Nephi in the time of Abinadi.

Socrates was tried and executed by the Athenians in 399 BC. At the time of his trial, Athens had just suffered its final defeat in a great war, and its political and social life was in turmoil. To understand the importance of that defeat, however, one must venture even farther back into Greek history. In the eighth century BC Greece emerged from a "dark age" caused by what is known as the Dorian invasions, which were a wave of Aryan conquests that obliterated the earlier civilization that is described in Homer's epic poems. As the classical centers of power in Attica, Ionia, and the Peloponnese began to coalesced into the city-states of later fame, the Greek world confronted a massive invasion from the East. The Persians under a succession of leaders began a steady march of conquest through most of the ancient Near East and eventually invaded the Greece proper in 490 BC. A loose coalition of Greek city-states emerged that was

ultimately able to check the Persians through a series of decisive battles[1]. In 465 BC Xerses, the king of the Persians, was murdered in his palace and the Persian attacks on Greece ceased.

Athens emerged as the pre-eminent Greek power in the wake of the Persian Wars. Using the naval force she had built up during the invasion, Athens created a maritime empire of colonies and tributary city-states that made her the most powerful city in Greece. However, jealously of Athenian domination soon sparked a backlash. About fifty years after the end of the Persian Wars, Athens found herself embroiled in a series of brush wars that soon escalated into a general conflict. The scope of this war in the Greek imagination was captured by the Athenian historian Thucydides who wrote, "this was the greatest disturbance in the history of the Hellenes, affecting also a large part of the non-Hellenic world, and indeed, I might almost say, the whole of mankind."[2] The chief opponent of the Athenian hegemony was the city of Sparta in the Peloponnese. The war raged on and off for thirty years during which time the advantage shifted from first one city and then to another. After a series of disastrous battles and campaigns, the power of Athens was decisively broken.

In the wake of military defeat, a group of aristocratic dissidents toppled the Athenian democracy, which had governed the city since before the Persian Wars. This group was sympathetic to Sparta, and blamed the ineptitude of the democracy for the nation's recent humiliation. In the place of the democracy, the plotters set up a ruling

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[1] The two most noted of these are Marathon and Thermopylae. At Marathon a group of outnumbered, but well disciplined Athenians charged the Persian amphibious force north of Athens and threw them back to their ships. At Thermopylae a force of Greek infantry fought the Persian army along a narrow front between high cliffs and the sea for three days. When the Greeks were flanked, a tiny contingent of Spartans held off the entire Persian army long enough for the Greeks to retreat to their next line of defense.

[2] Thucydides, *The History of the Pelopennesian War*, translated by Rex Warner, (London: Penguin Books 1972), 35.

committee to govern the city. For nine months this regime, known as the Thirty Tyrants, ruled Athens and executed scores of political opponents. When a democratic counter-revolution toppled the Thirty, executions were repaid with counter-execution as the pro-democracy party exacted its revenge.

In addition to this mix of political and military instability, Athens suffered from social and religious decay. The traditional gods of the city were under attack by two new groups. The first group was what later thinkers would label natural philosophers. Beginning with Thales in the eighth century BC, Greek thinkers had begun to offer naturalistic explanations of phenomena. Thus the philosopher Anaxagoras taught that the sun was not the chariot of the god Pheobus, but rather was a giant burning stone. Such thinking undermined the authority of the traditional pantheon of gods described in the sacred texts of Homer and Hesiod[3]. The second group was known as the sophists. These were itinerant teachers who offered to teach men the key to earthly success for a fee. The key they offered was rhetoric, the skill of presenting persuasive arguments on any topic. The central interest of the sophists was not truth but power. They were openly cynical of traditional values and gods, and offered to the ambitious an easy road to political and legal success. In one of his dialogues, Plato described the cynical seriousness of a sophist in argument thus: "He coiled himself up like a wild beast about to spring, and he hurled himself at us as if to tear us to pieces."[4] This spirit of no-holds barred argument disturbed many and had tragic consequences for Socrates.

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[3] See generally Robert C. Solomon and Kathleen M. Higgins, *A Short History of Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) 29-36.

[4] Plato, *Republic*, translated by G.M.A. Grube and revised by C.D.C. Reeve, (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc. 1992), 336b. All reference to Platonic passages in this paper are to the Stephanus pagination.

The Nephites of Nephi-Lehi presented a similar picture of decay. Abinadi's ministry occurred among a somewhat marginal group of Nephite colonists between about 150 BC and 148 BC. When Lehi's party arrived in the New World, Nephi's record indicates that they spread out from their point of landfall for some time before the final split between Nephites and Lamanites (1 Ne 18:23-25). After Lehi's death the simmering tension between Nephi and his older brothers burst into open conflict, and Nephi and his followers were forced to flee into the wilderness "for many days" (2 Ne 5:7). They eventually established themselves in land they named Nephi, and, significantly, built a temple (2 Ne 5:16). The new settlement prospered, expanded, and had sufficient strength to fend off the first wave of Lamanite invasions (2 Ne 5:13-14). Nephi captured the success of these early years very simply. "And came to pass that we did live after the manner of happiness" (2 Ne 5:27).

The Nephite kingdom founded in the land of Nephi lasted for a very long time[5]. However pressure from the Lamanites continued, and about 400 years after the founding by Nephi, the Nephites abandoned their original capital. The Lord commanded King Mosiah[6] to flee into the wilderness. A group of Nephites followed Mosiah, leaving their compatriots in the land of Nephi, and migrating through the wilderness. They eventually found another group of hitherto unknown people. The people of Mulek, as they were called, lived in the land of Zarahemla and seemed to have quickly accepted Nephite leadership (Omni 12-19). The final fate of the Nephites who remained in the land of Nephi is not recorded. However two facts indicate that they were most likely

[5] Readers sometimes forget that the *Book of Mormon* does not cover the thousand years from Lehi to Moroni very evenly. We are told very little about the roughly four centuries between the death of Jacob and the end of King Benjamin's reign. The entire period is covered in less than 26 pages of printed text.

overwhelmed by the continuing Lamanite onslaught. First, by the reign of King Mosiah's son Benjamin the Lamanites have advanced to the previously remote land of Zarahemla and the Nephites are fighting battles on their own borders (Omni 24). Second, when a party of Nephites returned to the land of Nephi in the reign of King Benjamin there was no sign of any remaining Nephite settlement (Mosiah 9:3-7).

Some years later, a Nephite scouting party to the Lamanites included a man named Zeniff. Deeply struck by the original capital of the Nephites, Zeniff resolved to lead a group of his countryman back to their original homeland. After a good deal of political maneuvering, he accomplished his goal, reestablishing a Nephite colony in the original land of Nephi. The colony depended, however, upon the good will of the Lamanite king who controlled the territory. Originally, Zeniff was able to negotiate an agreement whereby his people could occupy the land in peace (Mosiah 9:6-7). However, after twelve years, the Lamanites began to fear the growing power of the Nephite colony and attacked (Mosiah 9:11-13). The result was a bloody war from which the Nephites ultimately emerged victorious. After the Nephite victory a twenty-two year period of peace followed (Mosiah 10:3).

When Zeniff died, his son Noah succeeded him as king of the Nephite colony. While Zeniff had been an essentially righteous leader, Noah did not share his father's religious commitment. The Book of Mosiah records that he was a sensuous man who "delighted in whoredoms" and had "many wives and concubines" (Mosiah 11:2). The people seemed to have followed the example of his sexual promiscuity. In addition to this moral decline, Noah embarked on several policies that were to prove disastrous.

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[6] This Mosiah was the father of King Benjamin, whose great sermon is recorded in the opening chapters of the Book of Mosiah and should not be confused with King Benjamin's son Mosiah for whom the book is

First, he seems to have committed the Nephites whole heatedly to a military solution to their confrontation with the Lamanites. We have no way of determining the extent to which other alternatives were open to him, but the scriptures do provide a few hints. First, there is no record that he tried to re-negotiate the kind of peaceful agreement his father had originally pursued. Second, the record states that he and his people "did delight in blood" (Mosiah 11:19). The wars that ensued ultimately exhausted and destroyed his kingdom (Mosiah 19:2). Second, he embarked on a extravagant spending program that weakened the colony and led to political unrest. Heavy taxes were levied to support his lavish court and personal appetites (Mosiah 11:3). In addition, he had an ambitious building program of palaces, towers, and fortifications (Mosiah 11:8,12-13). These projects were expensive and the absence of any record of their later military usefulness indicates that they may have been of little or no practical value. Finally, Noah elevated a new group of men to the priesthood (Mosiah 11:5). Although we have no record of religious innovations, they shared Noah's decadent lifestyle and sexual appetites (Mosiah 11:6). In addition to their religious activities, they acted as advisors to Noah, ultimately persuading him to execute Abinadi (Mosiah 17:6).

With these two portraits in mind, we can see the basic similarities of the societies that tried Socrates and Abinadi. Both societies were precarious and corrupt. The Athenians were recovering from defeat and revolution, while the Nephites were in the teetering in a precarious decadence while locked in a life or death struggle with a larger foe. Into this milieu of social anxiety both Socrates and Abinadi brought critical messages. Both challenged offered challenges to their countrymen, tracing their nations' decline back to moral failings.

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Two Protagonists

We know very little about Abinadi's personal background. Prior to his ministry to the Nephites, he does not appear in the *Book of Mormon* record at all. "And it came to pass that there was a man among them whose name was Abinadi" (Mosiah 11:20). The text offers no other introduction. We can glean some extra information from his name. It is of Hebrew origin. *Ab*, the Hebrew word for father, has several variations including *aba* and *abi* that carry a more personal meaning similar to "my father" or "my dad." *Nadi* means "present with you" in Hebrew and thus the name *Abinadi* probably meant something like "my father is present with you."[7] Other than this entamology we are left with nothing but the spare facts provided in the Book of Mosiah. We know he preached among the Nephites twice, with a two year interval between appearances, and that he was tried and put to death in about 150 BC. Of his earlier life, age, family, and so on we know nothing. Some students, noting the close similarities between the teachings of Abinadi and King Benjamin, have suggested a possible post-mortal history for him. In the opening passage of his great sermon, King Benjamin notes that an angel gave the message he will deliver to his people (Mosiah 3:1-3). It has been speculated that the martyred Abinadi may have been the angel sent to King Benjamin[8]. However, the text itself, while not ruling out this possibility, is silent.

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[7] Todd Parker, *Abinadi: The Man and the Message (Part 1) and The Message and the Martyr (Part 2)* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1996).

[8] Parker 4-5. Cite D&C on the nature of angels. The precise chronology of Abinadi's ministry and that of King Benjamin is difficult to determine. The dates at the bottom of the current edition of the *Book of Mormon* were calculated using the *Book of Mormon*'s three internal dating systems—years after the destruction of Jerusalem, the reign of the judges, and years after the appearance of Christ. These provide reasonably precise dates for much of the *Book of Mormon*, however it leaves a shadowy chronological period immediately prior to the institution of the reign of the judges where determining exact dates is impossible.

We do know a great deal about the breadth of Abinadi's later impact. His lone convert was Alma the Elder, to whom we are indebted for the detailed record of Abinadi's trial. Alma was on of Noah's priests, and sat on the court at Abinadi's trial. Convinced of his innocence, Alma unsuccessfully pled with King Noah for Abinadi's life, and was cast out and hunted by the king as a result (Mosiah 16:2-3). Alma began a church in the wilderness that was eventually reunited with the main body of the Nephites in Zarahemla. Once in Zarahemla it was Alma, rather than Benjamin's successor Mosiah, who became the priestly head of the church (Mosiah 25:18-19). Thus the church tracing its roots to Abinadi enveloped the religion already existing among the Nephites at Zarahemla[9]. Finally, when Mosiah's sons refuse the crown and the reign of the judges is adopted, it was Alma who became the chief judge, reuniting political and religious authority. This regime lasted for about a century until the coming of Christ. Interestingly, this critical period occupies the bulk of the *Book of Mormon*'s text. An indicator of Abinadi's later influence is the fact that the later religious and political system of the Nephites traces directly back not to King Benjamin and the other successors of Nephi, but to the nearly anonymous prophet martyred by King Noah. In later Nephite thinking Abinadi seems to have taken on an archetypal character. After Ammon beheld the slaughter of over a thousand Lamanite converts, Abinadi was the identified as the archetype of their martyrdom, being "the first that suffered death by fire because of his belief in God" (Alma 25:11). Strictly speaking this is not correct. Abinadi was executed on the charge of falsely prophesying and speaking against the king. His

[9] It is interesting to note in this regard that after Alma's sermon to the Nephites at Zarahemla he baptized into the church those roused by his message (Mosiah 25:18). In contrast, at the end of his sermon King Benjamin "[took] the names of all those who had entered into a covenant with God to keep his commandments" (Mosiah 6:1). This difference of procedure, coupled with the fact that prior to Alma's

accusers never cited Abinadi's belief in God at trial. But the legal complexities of his execution were lost on later generations that remembered Abinadi instead as the archetypal witness of God who was slain for his testimony.

In some ways, Socrates is also a shadowy figure, although we have much more biographical data on him than on Abinadi. Most of what we know of his teachings comes to us from later writers, most notably his student Plato who makes Socrates the leading character of most of his dialogues. The last two millennia have seen a protracted debate over the credibility of Plato's depiction of Socrates, but a basic consensus has emerged. Plato's dialogues are divided into three categories: early, middle, and late. The early dialogues (including those giving an account of Socrates' trial) are thought to be more Socratic than Platonic, more or less presenting the historical Socrates. The middle and late dialogues in contrast present a Socrates who speaks Plato's ideas[10]. But even given this rubric, the Socrates presented in the dialogues is seen through the lens of Plato's perceptions and priorities.

There are a few agreed upon historical facts. Socrates is generally thought to have earned his living as a stone mason. He was married and had several young sons at the time of his death. Tradition has it, that as a young man he fought in the Athenian army, earning a reputation for prodigious physical endurance and unfaltering courage in the face of the enemy. He is not noted for any political involvement, except for two incidents that illustrate his moral courage. Following a naval victory, the Athenian admirals had failed to pick up survivors from the water, a capital offense under Athenian law. Feelings against the admirals ran high, and the Athenian citizens wished to try them

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arrival there is no record of a church at Zarahemla, suggests the founding a new religious order of some kind.

as a group rather than individually, a violation of the law. Socrates was the lone voice of protest against this illegal procedure. The second incident involved the reign of the anti-democratic Thirty Tyrants, who had sought to implicate as many people as possible in their new regime by ordering them to participate in political executions. When Socrates was called upon to arrest a fellow citizen, he refused to carry out the illegal order, returning, instead, quietly to his house.

It is difficult to gauge Socrates' full impact on later thinkers. To the extent that he influenced Plato he must be acknowledged as one of the seminal thinkers of western civilization. The oft-quoted line attributed to Alfred North Whitehead asserts that "all of western philosophy is nothing more than footnotes to Plato." Despite the difficulty of determining exactly what Socrates taught, as a figure he has come to occupy a place as an archetype of intellectual and moral courage. To later generations, he has been the thinker who was completely true to his own ideals and understanding of the truth. One of Socrates' recent biographers summed it up his influence by saying:

> We have the enduring influence of the figure of Socrates as an exemplar of the philosophic life, of a total moral and intellectual integrity permeating every detail of everyday life and carried to the heroic extreme of steadfastness in the face of rejection and ignominious death.[11]

Two Trials

Plato's *Apology* contains the text of a speech Socrates purportedly gave in his defense at his trial. The precise reliability of this text is difficult to trace. It is almost certainly not a verbatim transcript of what Socrates said. During the years following his death, Socrates spawned a peculiar genre of literature. Many writers wrote books that purported to give the text of Socrates defense before the Athenian jury. Only two of

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[10] See C.C.W. Taylor, *Socrates* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) 36-43.

these works, the one by Plato and another work by Xenophon, have survived; however, in antiquity there were numerous versions of Socrates' supposed defense. An ancient tradition holds that at his trial Socrates was simply silent, offering no defense at all. This could explain the numerous Socratic apologies. They represent the speech their author's thought Socrates *should* have given. On the other hand, Plato goes to the trouble of indicating in the text of the *Apology* that he was actually present at the trial. This sets the *Apology* off from his other Socratic dialogues where Plato generally makes no attempt to indicate his status as an eye witness to the conversation described. Perhaps Plato was making a special claim to authority and authenticity for the contents of the *Apology*. Regardless of how one views the *Apology*, there is general agreement that it reflects genuinely Socratic thinking, and there can be no doubt that it has had a tremendous influence on later thought. Thus for the purposes of this paper, I will refer to the *Apology* as my source for Socrates' words and thinking.

The Athenians had a fairly sophisticated system of written laws. Their great law giver was the semi-mythic figure of Solon, who supposedly gave Athens her legal code and then left the city to insure that laws rather than the law giver would rule. Yet two factors kept this written law from providing a stable and predictable rule of law. First, Athens had no class of trained lawyers. All men argued their own cases and there were no rules of evidence of procedure to ensure that they confined their advocacy to neat questions of law and fact. A prosecutor could introduce virtually any evidence, no matter how irrelevant or prejudicial. Under Athenian law, even what we would think of as criminal suits were brought by private individuals. There were no public prosecutors or district attorneys. The law did regard homicide, adultery, and other acts as public crimes,

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[11] Taylor, 6.

and the state received a portion of any the damages recovered by private plaintiffs. Second, Athenian trials were tried by very large juries. In the case of Socrates, there were 501 jurors. Not surprisingly, these tribunals often reflected public opinion rather than measured deliberation on facts and law. One legal historian summed up the problem of Greek jurisprudence by saying, "So far as general rules are concerned Greek law would in its main lines be found to differ little from our own. The difficulty with it as a system was its failure to develop a competent tribunal to apply the law."[12] Given this system, a capital charge against an unpopular defendant was dangerous, regardless of how legally spurious it might be.

Socrates went about Athens asking people difficult questions. In the *Apology* he describes his practice by saying, "I proceeded systematically. . . . [I went] to all those who had any reputation for knowledge to examine its meaning."[13]

[12] John Maxcy Zane, *The Story of Law*, second edition (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1998) 118.
[13] Plato, *Five Dialogues: Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Meno, Phaedo*, translated by G.M.A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1981) 20e.