



7-31-2007

A Tale of Three Communities: Jerusalem, Elephantine, and Lehi-Nephi

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Ludlow, Jared W. (2007) "A Tale of Three Communities: Jerusalem, Elephantine, and Lehi-Nephi," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*: Vol. 16 : No. 2 , Article 5.

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Title A Tale of Three Communities: Jerusalem, Elephantine, and Lehi-Nephi

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Reference *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 16/2 (2007): 28-41, 95.

ISSN 1065-9366 (print), 2168-3158 (online)

Abstract Prior to the Babylonian invasion of Jerusalem in 586 BC, Lehi took his family into the wilderness. Around the same time, another group of Jews fled to Elephantine in Egypt. Ludlow evaluates the Nephite group, the Elephantine colony, and the Jews in postexilic Jerusalem to show how the Nephites compared religiously with other Jewish groups. Social relationships, the Sabbath and festivals, priesthood officials, and temples played important roles in all three communities, with the importance and function of each varying among the three. On the other hand, scriptural texts strongly aided the reformation of Jerusalem and played an important role among the Nephites, beginning with the retrieval of brass plates from Laban, but the Elephantine community lacked texts related to the Hebrew Bible. After comparing the three, Ludlow shows that the Nephites created their own religious community, separate and independent from the religious community they left behind.



Jerusalem about 600 bc. Illustration by Joseph Brickey.



A TALE OF THREE COMMUNITIES:

*Jerusalem,
Elephantine, &
Lehi-Nephi*

BY JARED W. LUDLOW

BEFORE THE DESTRUCTION OF JERUSALEM AND ITS TEMPLE BY THE BABYLONIANS IN 586 BC, INHABITANTS OF JUDAH, OR THE JEWS, AS THEY CAME TO BE KNOWN, CENTERED THEIR RELIGIOUS LIFE AROUND THE PRIESTLY ACTIVITIES OF THE JERUSALEM TEMPLE.

Their temple-centered religion changed, however, with the invasion and takeover by the Babylonian Empire. In advance of the looming crisis, many prophets exhorted the citizens of Judah to repent and be preserved from possible destruction. Jeremiah (see Jeremiah 7:1–15; 11:1–17) and Lehi (see 1 Nephi 1:4, 13) were among them. Both Lehi and Jeremiah risked their lives to deliver their prophecies but with little success (see 1 Nephi 1:18–20; Jeremiah 20:1–2; 26:8–9). Finally the Lord commanded the threatened Lehi to take his family into the wilderness prior to Jerusalem’s destruction eventually to inhabit a new promised land (see 1 Nephi 1:20; 2:2; 18:23); still other Jews fled to Egypt, taking Jeremiah with them, and settled there (see Jeremiah 43:4–7). Those who remained in Jerusalem faced the Babylonian onslaught, which included the deportation of captives to Babylon as well as the destruction of the city and its temple. Many of the former inhabitants of Judah now found themselves in spiritual crisis: how were they to live their religion away from the covenant land and the site of the temple? As Lehi’s family entered a new promised land as described in the Book of Mormon, they also faced the task of reconstituting their religious community far away from Jerusalem and the region of their earlier covenant history.

In order to better understand how the Nephites compare religiously with various other Jewish groups during this pivotal period of religious and social recovery (during the fifth and sixth centuries BC) as these groups adapted to changes that occurred to the previous Jerusalem temple worship, I would like to compare three “Jewish” communities that tried to reconstitute their societies in new circumstances: the Jewish community at Elephantine Island in Upper Egypt, postexilic Jerusalem, and the Nephite colony in the Americas.¹ These are the crucial questions: What were key components in these respective religious communities? How did these communities interact with their political overlords and neighbors? What types of festivals were significant for the respective communities? What were the roles of the temple and sacred texts in community life? By examining the categories of temple, social relations, festivals, texts, and priesthood, we can see that the core factors determining a similar religious identity for all these communities were temple ritual practice and festival worship. But in the case of texts and priesthood, unlike the

Jews in postexilic Jerusalem and the early Nephites, Jews at Elephantine did not seem to seek a firm connection with or continuation of previous covenant communities and instead chose a different way of developing social relations with their neighbors.

BACKGROUND

A major factor in the founding of the three communities—postexilic Jerusalem, Elephantine, and the colony of (Lehi-)Nephi—was the rise and domination of Near Eastern empires in the region. Beginning in the eighth century BC, Israel came under siege from growing empires in the East. The first of these empires, Assyria, conquered the northern kingdom of Israel and dispersed many of its inhabitants. A little over a century later, the Babylonians conquered the Assyrians and attacked the southern kingdom of Judah, eventually deporting many inhabitants and destroying the Jerusalem temple. Sometime during the period of Assyrian and Babylonian expansion, and probably as a result of these invasions, a Jewish group of mercenaries made their way to Egypt and settled near the Nile’s



In 586 BC, the Babylonians sacked Jerusalem and destroyed the temple. *The Destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem*, by Francesco Hayez. Cameraphoto Arte, Venice/Art Resource, NY.



Lehi's family fled Jerusalem before it was destroyed, and they were guided by the Lord to a new home. *Family of Lehi Camped in Promised Land*, by Gary Kapp. © IRI.

first cataract on an island known as Elephantine.² Although the precise date of the founding of this community is unknown, it seems to have had strong ties to the former northern Israelite kingdom because of its unique worship practices and reliance on Aramaic as its mother tongue. As a result of either the Assyrian invasion or later clashes between the Egyptians and the Assyrians, or the Babylonian attack, these Jews settled in a fort on the island and eventually built their own temple. By the time the Persians conquered Egypt in 525 BC, this Jewish community was well-established, maintaining many aspects of Jewish worship.

The postexilic community of Jerusalem was founded when the Persians allowed exiled Jews to return to their homeland after 538 BC. Many Jews came with such leaders as Ezra, Zerubbabel, and Nehemiah and reestablished their community, rebuilt the city, and restored the temple. Although the exact chronology of some of the key figures is

debated, the community began practicing sacrificial worship shortly after returning, and Ezra and Nehemiah reasserted obedience to the law and covenant a few decades later.³

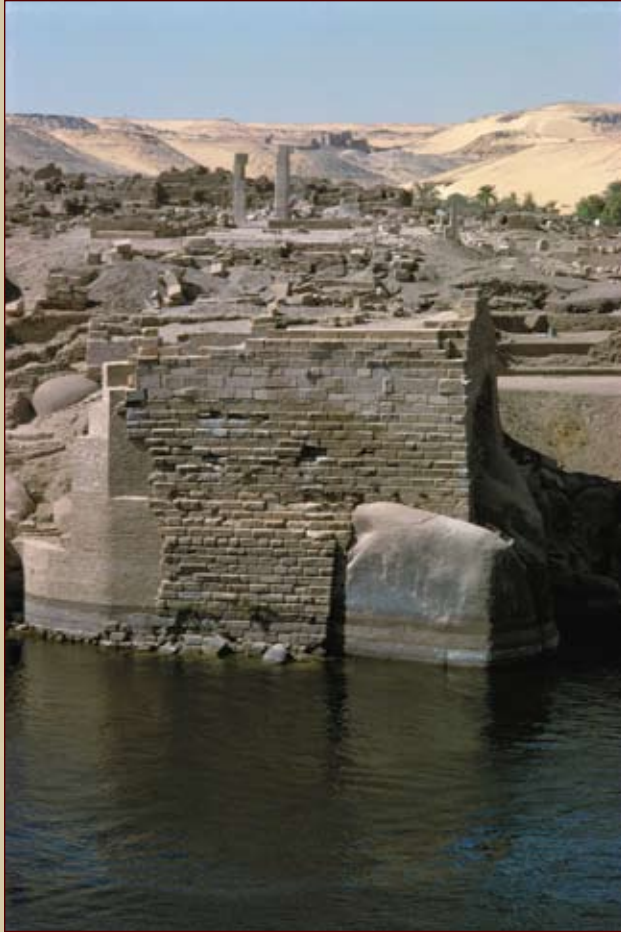
Shortly before the Babylonian invasion, around 600 BC, Lehi and his family were warned to flee Jerusalem prior to its destruction. They spent some time wandering in the wilderness near the Red Sea but eventually sailed to a promised land in the Americas. Thus, by the middle of the sixth century BC, these three groups faced new challenges and issues in their religious lives, all within differing environments.

TEMPLE

One of the strongest institutions for all three communities was a temple, but the Elephantine community's temple exhibits some puzzling aspects when compared with the others. Although we don't know the exact date of the construction of the temple in Elephantine, it seems to have

been built before the conquest of Egypt by Cambyses in 525 BC, a number of years before the Jerusalem temple was rebuilt. Elephantine was noteworthy because it was a Jewish community outside of Israel that constructed its own temple, a development that runs counter to the belief "that foreign soil was ritually unclean precluding erection thereon of a temple."⁴

Why was the Elephantine community so willing to build a temple when the Jews exiled from Judah to Babylon were not? Many have attempted to trace the origin of the Elephantine community to northern Israel, possibly with strong connections to the Arameans of that region (a Semitic, nomadic group related to the Hebrews). This group had apparently experienced minimal contact with the Jerusalem establishment before arriving in Elephantine. Thus, as one scholar put it, the "Jewish character of the Elephantine colony is secondary."⁵ The problem with this view, however, is explaining



Elephantine Island in the Nile, opposite Assuan, Egypt. This photograph shows the ancient quay walls. Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY.

the evident, strong Jewish aspects of this group or especially why Judeans, who were a part of this community, did not seem to have a problem with the worship practices established there. From a different viewpoint, Talmon believes that “Egyptian Jewry had adjusted to their Diaspora conditions. They had accepted life ‘away from the land’ as final and did not entertain any hope of a restoration, or at least did not believe in the possible realization of such hope in historical times.”⁶ Although the construction of the temple by Egyptian Jews does seem to indicate a new and vibrant outlook as part of their adjustment to Diaspora conditions, as Talmon suggests, it may not connote a sentiment of finality since they seemed to continue to revere Jerusalem and its religious leadership. The construction of the temple may have been an adjustment they were willing to make to maintain their worship in their current situation—unlike the Babylonian Jewish

community—but both could have held out the same hopes for the future restoration of Jerusalem and her temple.

In the Aramaic Elephantine documents, this “altar house”⁷—the temple—was a place where meal offerings, incense, and, at least initially, burnt offerings were offered. Somewhat like the Jerusalem temple, the Elephantine temple suffered its own episode of annihilation when the Egyptian Khnum priests requested its destruction from the Persian general in Elephantine-Syene. This destruction prompted correspondence from Elephantine to Jerusalem seeking approval and assistance to rebuild the temple. The fact that the Elephantine Jews sought a recommendation from Jerusalem shows “that they did not regard themselves as schismatic, nor even opposed to the claims of the Temple at Jerusalem.”⁸ However, the first letter to the high priest of



The Elephantine papyri, such as the one shown here, describe the functions of the temple in the Elephantine community.



Nephi and his people built a temple shortly after they separated from the Lamanites. Illustration by Joseph Brickey.

Jerusalem, the governor of Judah, and the nobles of the Jews remained unanswered, despite the description in the letter of mourning within the Egyptian community over the loss of their temple.

A second attempt was made to contact the authorities of Jerusalem *and* Samaria, this time ignoring the High Priest from Jerusalem. This effort may show that, even though the Elephantine Jews were not opposed to the Jerusalem temple, perhaps the Jerusalem High Priest had some reservations about their temple, and only when the Samaritan authorities were invoked did Jerusalem respond to prevent increased influence from Samaria. In the relevant Elephantine letter, a promise was made that, if the temple were rebuilt, “the Jews of Elephantine would pray for the governor of Judah and offer meal offerings, incense and burnt offerings in his name on the altar of YHW⁹ at Elephantine.”¹⁰

Another temple built outside of the land of Israel was constructed in the New World by the Nephites shortly after their separation from the

Lamanites, following Lehi’s death. As Nephi’s people began to construct buildings, they built a temple “after the manner of the temple of Solomon save it were not built of so many precious things” (2 Nephi 5:16). According to Nephi’s own record, the workmanship was exceedingly fine. Not much detail is given about the specifics of the Nephites’ temple worship, but since they were following the law of Moses (see 2 Nephi 5:10), they presumably performed customary offerings and sacrifices, perhaps from the flocks and crops they had produced (see 2 Nephi 5:11; see also Mosiah 2:3). The only other specific mention of religious activity related to the initial temple occurred as Jacob used the temple as a teaching site (see Jacob 1:17; 2:2, 11).¹¹

The third Jewish community to focus on temple construction was the postexilic Jerusalem community. As members of the Babylonian Jewish community began to make their way back to Jerusalem, the former exiles began to rebuild the temple. Yet while the initial project repaired the altar for sacrificial

worship, the temple sanctuary remained in need of repair for quite some time. The prophet Haggai became concerned with the problem of worshipping in a ruined sanctuary, especially when the people were living in comfortable homes while the Lord's house lay in waste (see Haggai 1:4, 8, 14). "Therefore," notes one prominent study,

the prophet promised the Jerusalemites and their leaders, Zerubbabel and the high priest Joshua, the blessings of Yahweh's presence in the new temple. This would be the temple's glory and the community's hope. National, religious, and cultic identity depended on the reestablishment of the cultic center.¹²

The temple altar was already being used for sacrifice as soon as the Jews returned, perhaps even before (see Jeremiah 41:5).¹³ But the temple's importance went beyond sacrifice—it was tied to the Jews' national identity, which is probably part of the reason why the returning exiles, in rebuilding the temple, refused the assistance of the Samaritans and other inhabitants who had been left behind. The community they were establishing was going to be more narrowly defined, and only those from the narrow group could rebuild and worship in the restored temple. Besides being a religious shrine, the temple was a powerful political and economic institution—primarily as the collection and distribution site of the people's tithes and offerings—and the returning Jews sought to control these key temple functions.

This exclusion of the Samaritans created antagonism, so the returning Jews had to overcome the local opposition of the Samaritans and others when they tried to rebuild the temple, even though they had the Persian emperor's blessing and financial support. Historical documents show that only after lengthy correspondences back and forth between Jerusalem and the Persian overlords was this matter resolved to the Jews' satisfaction, but certainly not to the satisfaction of the Samaritans and others (see Ezra 4:1–6:15).

In both Elephantine and Jerusalem, the religious desires of the community to rebuild their temples had to be balanced with the new political realities. In both cases, the Persians and the Samaritans played key roles. In the case of Elephantine, however, the Samaritans were used more as a tool for arousing jealousy to force the Jewish governor

of Judah to support their rebuilding project because he did not want to give the Samaritans that opportunity. In the case of the Nephites, the new political situation brought about by separating from the Lamanites and forming their own community led them to build a temple like the one they had left in Jerusalem.

SOCIAL RELATIONS

The political maneuverings among Jerusalem, Elephantine, Samaria, and Persia, and between the Nephites and Lamanites demonstrate that the relationships between these communities and their neighbors were also a high priority because each community sought favor from their overlords. The former exiles in Jerusalem immediately separated themselves from the people of the land, especially the Samaritans. Although they shared similar customs, religious beliefs, and backgrounds, the returning Jews, perhaps in a bid to establish complete political control, refused to interact with the Samaritans, especially prohibiting intermarriage. In fact, this prohibition became a type of litmus test to determine if one was a faithful member of the community: had they separated themselves from the peoples of the land (see Nehemiah 9:2; 10:28)? The last chapter of Ezra describes a mandatory meeting—unless one was willing to lose his property and be cut off from the community (see Ezra 10:8)—wherein citizens of Jerusalem confessed their sins and promised to obey the prohibition against intermarriage. However, it apparently took some time to sort everything out, and the giving up of one's foreign wives started at the top among the leaders and then moved down. Nehemiah was quite indignant toward those who had intermarried. He contended with them, cursed them, struck some of them, pulled out their hair, and made them covenant that neither they nor their children would intermarry (see Nehemiah 13:25).

The Nephites also experienced a radical separation from even closer kinsmen. Because of Nephi's older brothers' anger and desire to kill him and their desire that he not rule over them (see 2 Nephi 5:2–4), Nephi was warned by the Lord to depart into the wilderness with all those who would go with him (see 2 Nephi 5:5). Those who followed Nephi began to call themselves the people of Nephi, or Nephites, and were not only spiritually separated from the others by their desire to follow God's com-



Nephi was commanded by the Lord to lead his people away from the people of Laman and Lemuel after the death of Lehi. *Into the Wilderness*, by Jorge Cocco Santangelo. May not be copied. For information see www.jorgecocco.com.

mands but were now physically separated as well (see 2 Nephi 5:9–10). Spiritual and physical consequences followed those who chose not to follow Nephi (see 2 Nephi 5:20–21). Like the Jews under Ezra and Nehemiah’s jurisdiction, the Nephites were prohibited from intermarrying with their neighbors or else the same cursing would come upon them (see 2 Nephi 5:22–23).¹⁴ Thus began a long and often tumultuous relationship between these two groups that was often the means of stirring up Nephi’s people to remember the Lord (see 2 Nephi 5:25).

The Elephantine Jews, on the other hand, had no problem intermarrying with Egyptians and other neighbors. In fact, the temple records list offerings made to many different gods, not just Jehovah (Yahu). Similarly, some oaths in marriage and other contracts were made in the name of Yahu as well as other gods, particularly if it was a mixed religious family (for example, see *Aramaic Papyri* 7, 14, 22).

Some have labeled the Jewish worship at the Elephantine temple as syncretistic, but it is unclear whether all the Jews were worshipping foreign gods or merely allowing offerings to be made to other deities in a type of ecumenical arrangement. One scholar, Sami Ahmed, wonders if “the recognition of comparable deities may only have been practical for social acceptance.”¹⁵ Another scholar, Thomas Bolin, concludes that the use of uncustomary titles for God, especially *elohe shamaia*, was merely a policy of political expediency, equating “their god with the Persian *Ahura Mazda* in an effort to have their request more favorably received,” rather than a result of theological reflection.¹⁶ In fact, he cautions that the repetition of these terms could be a very formulaic or meaningless protocol, and “to ask questions of theological signification of texts that are clearly not dealing with issues of theological speculation disregards the genre of the texts under study and the limits that genre sets on the type of data a text can and cannot yield.”¹⁷ In agreement

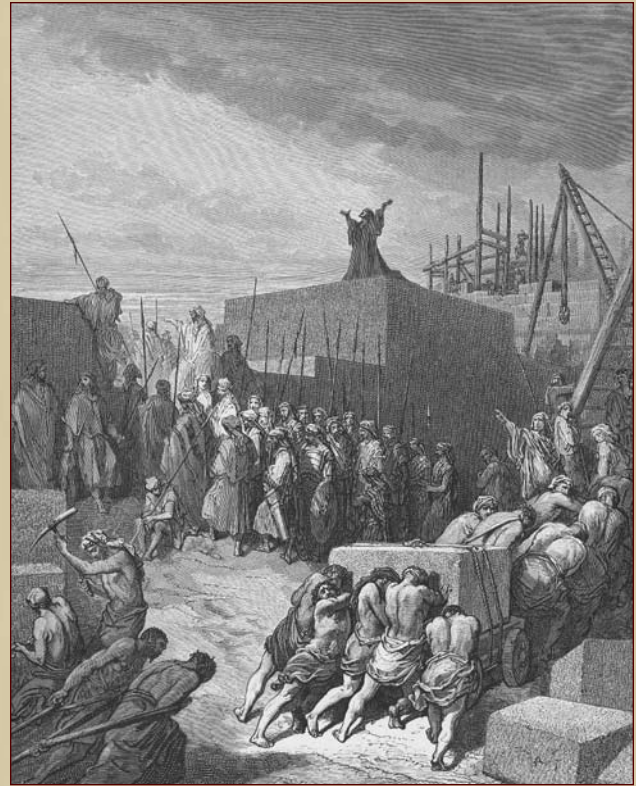
with this concept, Michael Silverman argues that we must “consider those documents in which the Elephantine Jews consciously try to state the main points of their faith. Such a text is AP 30–31, the petition to Bagoas the Governor of Judea for help in rebuilding the temple. Here the god worshipped is Yahu the God of Heaven, the God of Israel, and there is no hint of syncretism at all.”¹⁸

The community situation in Elephantine certainly indicates that the Jews were not isolated in a separate ghetto but had economic, political, and even marital relations with non-Jews. They seemed to have enjoyed good relations with their gentile neighbors except in the case of the angry, neighboring Egyptian priests who objected to some of their worship practices. For the Nephites and for the Jews in Jerusalem, however, there was a distinct separation between them and their neighbors, primarily based on perceived worthiness within the covenant.

FESTIVALS

Festivals and the Sabbath played an important role in all three communities, although admittedly there is less direct discussion of Nephite and Elephantine observance of the Mosaic holy days. Although the Nephite and Elephantine texts are not completely clear on the exact nature of these observances, they are discussed, and we can assume they were part of the worship custom. Again, the Book of Mormon at the time of the formation of the Nephite community makes only a general statement regarding the Nephite observance of the law of Moses: “We did observe to keep the judgments, and the statutes, and the commandments of the Lord in all things, according to the law of Moses” (2 Nephi 5:10). Almost two centuries later, the people of Nephi had multiplied in the land and “observed to keep the law of Moses and the sabbath day holy unto the Lord” (Jarom 1:5). We know from later passages that they continued to keep the law of Moses until after Christ’s death and his appearance in the Americas (see 3 Nephi 15:2–10; see also an earlier controversy over whether the law of Moses had already been fulfilled in 3 Nephi 1:24–25).

In the Elephantine texts, the festivals were more frequently mentioned than the Sabbath. From this fact, Silverman concluded that “the festivals are more important than the Sabbath. This certainly



When the Jews returned to Jerusalem, Ezra directed the reconstruction of the temple. *The Rebuilding of the Temple*, by Gustave Doré.

differs from Judean practice, but is in consonance with later Egyptian Hellenistic custom.”¹⁹ Passover seems to have been especially noteworthy for Jews at Elephantine. In fact, the observance of Passover, and especially the mission and letter of the Jerusalemite Hananiah to Elephantine, was probably the cause of the temple’s destruction because it “aroused the animosity of the Elephantine Khnum priests against the Jews. Any emphasis of a festival commemorating Egyptian defeat at the hands of the Jews’ ancestors was likely to antagonize, and the Khnum priests may have prevented the Jews from celebrating their festival until Hananiah received renewed royal permission.”²⁰

According to Ezra 3:4–6, the first festival celebrated by the Babylonian returnees to Jerusalem was Sukkot (Feast of Tabernacles/Booths). The Jews celebrated this festival soon after reerecting the altar, even though they were living in some fear of the local inhabitants. Afterward, they offered all the necessary offerings for the New Moons and appointed feasts, thus apparently reestablishing the normal religious calendar (see Ezra

3:5). Similarly, after rebuilding and dedicating the temple, the Jews celebrated Pesach (Passover), with the report particularly noting that this was possible because the priests and the Levites had purified themselves and were ritually clean (see Ezra 6:20).²¹ Nehemiah 13 relates the story of that prophet's indignation at the lack of Sabbath observance among his people. He scolded them not only for working on the Sabbath but also for engaging in business transactions with the men of Tyre (see Nehemiah 13:15–16). Nehemiah's immediate solution was to castigate the people, but then in a more pragmatic vein he closed the city gates on the Sabbath and installed guards to ensure that no burdens would be brought in on the Sabbath day (see Nehemiah 13:17–19). It took a few weeks and one more threat before the merchants got the message that they were no longer welcome on the Sabbath (see Nehemiah 13:20–21); the Levites then became the standing guards to ensure that everyone sanctified the Sabbath day (see Nehemiah 13:22).

TEXTS

Texts usually play an important role in the formation of a community's identity and the maintenance of its ideals. In the case of Elephantine, the lack of texts related to the Hebrew Bible raises questions about whether the Jews had not brought any "scriptural" texts with them or whether no texts related to the later canon have been discovered at the site because of circumstance, destruction, or decay. (The *Words of Ahiqar*, originally a non-Jewish piece of Wisdom literature later popular among Jews, is the main literary text that has been discovered there.) Some texts deal with civil law and in these cases Elephantine usually differs from later Jewish practice, but the silence of the documents on religious law prevents any firm conclusions.

The re-formation of Jerusalem, on the other hand, was strongly aided by texts that were apparently a key tool in reform efforts. Evidently the rebuilt temple was not enough to "reestablish Yahweh to the central place in the life of the



Jeremiah and the Fall of Jerusalem, by Eduard Bendemann. Foto Marburg/Art Resource, NY.



Scriptural texts provided the foundation for the early Nephite society. In this illustration, Lehi studies the brass plates. Illustration by Joseph Brickey.

people.”²² The exact chronology of the story of Ezra is debatable. Still, it seems that the promulgation of a law code and the establishment of judges based on the laws of the king as well as the laws of God lay at the heart of reform efforts (see Ezra 7:25–26). Nehemiah 8 describes a great public reading of the law with priests and Levites assisting the listeners to understand the text. Later, a rich rehearsal of God’s doings with his covenant people was recounted, culminating in a covenant renewal sealed by the priests, Levites, and leaders (see Ezra 9). All of this certainly forged a strong connection and identification between these postexilic Jews and earlier Israelites. The new community recognized the past errors of their people, and they were making appropriate amends.

Scriptural texts played a very important role among the early Nephites, beginning when Nephi and his brothers risked their lives to retrieve the brass plates from Laban (see 1 Nephi 3–4). As Lehi said, one of the major purposes of obtaining the plates, which were “desirable; yea, even of great worth,” was to “preserve the commandments of the Lord unto our children” (1 Nephi 5:21). Nephi took “the records which were engraven upon the plates of brass” when he and his followers separated from the Lamanites (2 Nephi 5:12). The words of Isaiah found on those brass plates were sources of significant teaching material for Jacob and Nephi as they taught their new community. The brass plates also included sizable portions of earlier scriptures (see especially 2 Nephi 6–25).

Besides the brass plates, Nephi also kept other records, which included a shorter, more spiritual record and a longer, more historical record:

And I, Nephi, had kept the records upon my plates, which I had made, of my people thus far. And it came to pass that the Lord God said unto me: Make other plates; and thou shalt engraven many things upon them which are good in my sight, for the profit of thy people. Wherefore, I, Nephi, to be obedient to the commandments of the Lord, went and made these plates upon which I have engraven these things. And I engraved that which is pleasing unto God. And if my people are pleased with the things of God they will be pleased with mine engravings which are upon these plates. And if my people desire to know the more particular part of the history of my people they must search mine other plates. (2 Nephi 5:29–33)

As part of Nephi’s closing words to his people and those who would read his record, he shared his testimony of the importance and truthfulness of both the scriptural texts he had helped preserve and those that would come forth in the future (see 2 Nephi 33). Jacob continued the same pattern of following the command to write on the small plates “a few of the things which I considered to be most precious” touching only lightly “concerning the history of this people which are called the people of Nephi” (Jacob 1:2). The small plates were reserved for “preaching which was sacred, or revelation which was great, or prophesying” for the purpose of touching “upon them [these topics] as much as it were possible, for Christ’s sake, and for the sake of our people” (Jacob 1:4).²³

Thus, as in postexilic Jerusalem, the early Nephites used scriptural texts to continue their link, or “continuation identity,” with the previous covenant followers, as well as to bring forth new scripture and create their own covenant community. Oddly, all these connections with earlier communities of believers in Jehovah through text, law, and written traditions are apparently missing in the Elephantine community.

PRIESTHOOD

Priesthood officials helped lead each of these communities. The exact hierarchy of priesthood is difficult to ascertain at Elephantine. Some of

the letters are addressed to “Yedoniah and his colleagues the priests,” but they are not called the sons of Aaron. Yedoniah was probably the head priest and had some responsibility with the temple funds, and, as mentioned earlier, administrators must have overseen lists of offerings to the temple. In one of the few clues pointing to an Elephantine priesthood, the Elephantine texts contain the Aramaic term *lhn*, which refers to a common temple functionary. However, there is some debate as to the term’s exact meaning and function, especially since in its feminine form it was also attached to women (see *Brooklyn Papyri* 12:2). Several scholars interpret this term as “singer,” others as “servant.”²⁴

In postexilic Jerusalem, priesthood officials took a significant role in rebuilding the religious community, both in terms of physical construction as well as spiritual leadership. The priestly families, Levites, singers, *nethinim* (temple officials), and others were listed as part of the returnees.²⁵ Apparently the priests and Levites helped rebuild the sanctuary (see Ezra 3:8–13) as well as the gates and walls of Jerusalem (see Nehemiah 3:1, 17, 22, 28). Eventually the priesthood functionaries were organized in their divisions and courses, and they were purified to serve in the rebuilt temple (see Ezra 6:18, 20). They were also assigned to manage the tithes (see Nehemiah 10:37–39) and to watch over and weigh all the silver, gold, and other items offered to support the temple (Ezra 8:24–34). When the city walls of Jerusalem were dedicated, the Levites and singers formed large choirs and played a major role in the celebration (see Nehemiah 12:27–28, 31, 38).²⁶

Another noticeable difference between the Jerusalem and Elephantine priesthoods was the

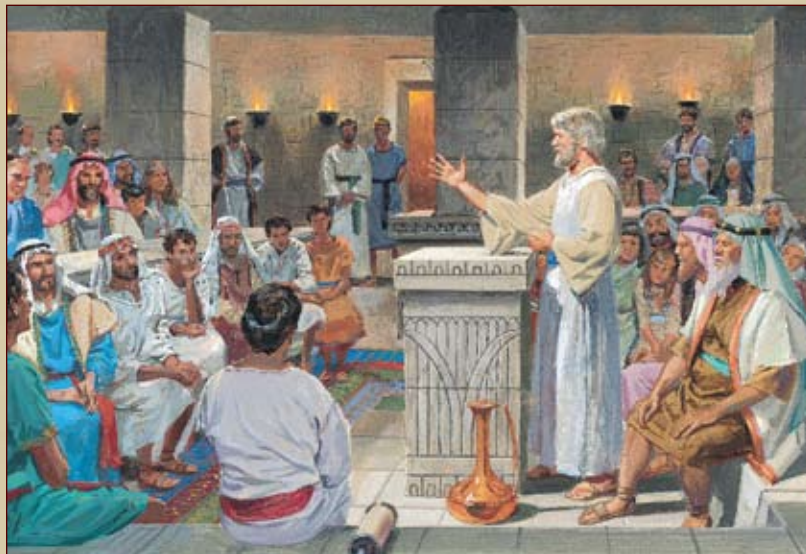


Horned Altar of Beersheba. Copyright D. Kelly Ogden.

presence of prophets in the Jerusalem community (see Ezra 5:1–2). The Old Testament states specifically that the “elders of the Jews builded, and they prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah” (Ezra 6:14). No prophets were found among the Elephantine community, but there were prophets among the Nephites, just as in Jerusalem.

In recounting their history shortly after breaking off from the Lamanites, some early Nephite writers mentioned the presence of prophets in their midst (see Enos 1:22). One of the prophets’ major tasks was calling people to repentance and warning them they would be destroyed if they did not keep the commandments (see Jarom 1:10). We are also told that besides prophets there were priests and teachers among the Nephites:

Wherefore, the prophets, and the priests, and the teachers, did labor diligently, exhorting with all long-suffering the people to diligence; teaching the law of Moses, and the intent for which it was given; persuading them to look forward unto the Messiah, and believe in him to come as though he already was. And after this manner did they teach them. And it came to pass that by so doing they kept them from being destroyed upon the face of the land; for they did prick their hearts with the word, continually stirring them up unto repentance. (Jarom 1:11–12)



Jacob taught the people of Nephi in the temple. Illustration by Jerry Thompson. © IRI.

Jacob and Joseph, Nephi’s brothers, were specifically mentioned as being consecrated to these assignments,²⁷ and their primary function seems to have been teaching the people and bringing them to repentance (see 2 Nephi 6:2–3 and Jacob 1:7, 17–19; 2:1–3).

Thus, priesthood officials were important in all three communities, but the exact function and range of responsibility differed. Particularly among the Jerusalem and Nephite communities, the prophets and priests encouraged and led the people to greater devotion to their covenants.

CONCLUSION

This tale of three cities has examined five different aspects of religious community building for postexilic Jerusalem, Elephantine, and the early Nephites after the shattering loss of Jerusalem and its temple. We have looked specifically at the temple, social relations, festivals, texts, and priesthood. Each of these groups saw the temple and its accompanying sacrifices and offerings as absolutely vital to their communities. Another important aspect was observance of the festivals and the Sabbath. In these ways, even the Jews at Elephantine maintained their Jewish identity among gentile neighbors.

The relationship between the Jews of Elephantine and their neighbors was evidently one of accommodation, but both Jerusalem and the Nephite colony adopted a policy of separation. Did the Elephantine community go too far? Perhaps too often we see the situation as either/or for Jews in the Diaspora: either turn inward and ignore the gentile world or completely assimilate to that world. Perhaps the Elephantine community was like other later diasporic communities, choosing to adopt and adapt some aspects of the gentile world while still remaining true to their covenants. I agree with Michael Silverman that Elephantine’s “many foreign elements did not alter its fundamental character,”²⁸ but Elephantine did seem to lose some of the covenant aspects retained in other Israelite communities.

In the case of textual traditions, the Jerusalem community and the Nephites appear to go beyond the

Elephantine community in an effort to preserve the records of God's covenant relationship with His people, as well as to record new scriptures for the future. In terms of an elaborate hierarchy of priests and temple functionaries, the Jerusalem community went far beyond the Elephantine community and seems to have gone even further than the Nephites, although for both Jerusalem and the Nephites, prophets and priests became important teachers to their respective communities. Perhaps these characteristics, minimal in the Elephantine setting, represent early efforts by the Nephite and Jerusalem communities to reconnect with the pre-exilic traditions and practices as part of their "continuation identity." This may have been an effort to maintain the covenant while also acknowledging and attempting to correct the sins and mistakes of their predecessor Jerusalem/Israelite community. Elephantine Jews, on the other hand, focused on ways to maintain their Jewish identity and worship in their new circumstance, but they did not seem to have the same focus on connecting their community with earlier covenant communities through a rich scriptural tradition or strong priesthood line. The nature of their community may go a long way to explaining this difference since it was primarily made up of military personnel and merchants

and their families. For practical reasons they built a temple to worship, but they probably did not have much opportunity, nor perhaps inclination, for theological instruction and development. For the early Nephites and Jews in postexilic Jerusalem, however, having been led or visited by prophets contributed to their spiritual focus and theological development.

We begin to see some origins of Jewish sectarian development in Elephantine's seeming adaptation of gentile ideas, but there was still a subservience of one religious community, Elephantine, to the other, Jerusalem. The postexilic Jerusalem community began to create sectarianism by refusing the Samaritans' aid, thereby pushing the Samaritans to establish their own cultic practices and temple. The Nephite leaders, while acknowledging Jerusalem's importance and God's efforts to redeem his people there, warned their people of Jerusalem's wickedness and of the necessity of leaving it and its ways behind.²⁹ Thus, the Nephites struck out on their own and created their own religious community, separate and independent from Jerusalem, a phenomenon that would occur only later among other Jewish groups in the Second Temple Jewish period, when we see stronger lines drawn and intentional separation from the main cult in Jerusalem. ■

Olsen, "Prophecy and History: Structuring the Abridgment of the Nephite Records," *JBMS* 15/1 (2006): 18–29.

20. Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield, England: Almond Press, 1983), 15.
21. Although I have used the phrases "people of Alma" or "Alma's people" for convenience, these terms never appear in the Book of Mormon. Mormon does refer to "Alma and his people" or even "his people," but at key transitions in the narrative, Mormon uses a slightly different—and significant—variation: "Alma and the people of the Lord" (Mosiah 18:34, 19:1, heading before chapter 23; cf. 23:21, 24:13–14). By contrast, "people of King Noah" and "people of King Limhi" each appear three times, and there are twenty-one occurrences of "people of Limhi." S. Kent Brown has suggested that possessive forms connecting leaders and their peoples in these chapters are reminiscent of the exodus. See *From Jerusalem to Zarahemla*, 111, n. 34.
22. Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 46–47.
23. Bednar, "In the Strength of the Lord," 123.

A Tale of Three Communities: Jerusalem, Elephantine, and (Lehi-)Nephi

Jared W. Ludlow

1. Special thanks to S. Kent Brown who envisioned the juxtaposition of these three communities, gave a lot of pointers to information related to these communities, and then invited me to write about them.
2. Bezalel Porten, probably the leading expert on Elephantine, proposes a date of settlement around 650 BC as a result of disaffected priests fleeing Jerusalem during wicked King Manasseh's reign. See "Settlement of the Jews at Elephantine and the Arameans at Syene," in *Judah and the Judeans in the Neo-Babylonian Period*, ed. Oded Lipschits and Joseph Blenkinsopp (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 451–61.
3. S. Kent Brown and Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, *The Lost 500 Years: What Happened*

between the Old and New Testaments (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2006), 7–27.

4. Bezalel Porten, "The Jews in Egypt," in *The Cambridge History of Judaism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 1:386.
5. Karel van der Toorn, "Anat-Yahu, Some Other Deities, and the Jews of Elephantine," *Numen* 39/1 (1992): 80.
6. Shemaryahu Talmon, "The Emergence of Jewish Sectarianism in the Early Second Temple Period," in *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross*, ed. Patrick D. Miller Jr., Paul D. Hanson, and S. Dean McBride (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 595.
7. The temple was usually designated 'egora in the Elephantine texts, paralleling the Akkadian term *ekurru*.
8. Jena Jörg Frey, "Temple and Rival Temple—The Cases of Elephantine, Mt. Gerizim, and Leontopolis," in *Gemeinde ohne Tempel*, ed. Beate Ego and others (Tübingen: Mohr, 1999), 178–79.
9. The tetragrammaton YHWH is not found in any Elephantine documents. Instead, these documents use the trigrammaton like many initial or final elements in theophoric personal names. See Bezalel Porten, *Archives from Elephantine: The Life of an Ancient Jewish Military Colony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 105–6.
10. Frey, "Temple and Rival Temple," 177.
11. There are of course later references to the temple in the Book of Mormon, especially with King Benjamin's discourse at the temple at the beginning of the Book of Mosiah, but I have focused only on the initial temple up until the time of Mosiah to keep it in a similar time frame with the other communities discussed and also to look primarily at the formations of these communities, not at their continuations.
12. Henry J. Flanders Jr., Robert W. Crapps, and David A. Smith, *People of the Covenant: An Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 438–39.
13. See Brown and Holzapfel, *The Lost 500 Years*, 12–15.
14. Of course, repentance from iniquity would remove any cursing from the Lord—see 2 Nephi 5:22.
15. Sami S. Ahmed, "The Jewish Colony at Elephantine," *Ilfiff Review* 22 (Spring 1965): 15.
16. Thomas M. Bolin, "The Temple of Yahu at Elephantine and Persian Religious Policy," in *The Triumph of Elohim: From Yahwisms to Judaisms*, ed. Diana V. Edelman (Kampen, Netherlands: Kok Pharos, 1995), 128.
17. Bolin, "The Temple of Yahu at Elephantine," 142.
18. Michael H. Silverman, "The Religion of the Elephantine Jews—A New Approach," in *Proceedings of the Sixth World Congress of Jewish Studies*, ed. Avigdor Shinan (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1977), 1:378.
19. Silverman, "The Religion of the Elephantine Jews," 385.
20. Porten, "The Jews in Egypt," 389.
21. Although there is little question that these festivals would have been celebrated, it does seem quite formulaic how they are described in Ezra, connected first with the rebuilding of the altar and later with the temple.
22. Flanders, Crapps, and Smith, *People of the Covenant*, 443.
23. For other passages related to the two sets of plates, see Jarom 1:14 and Omni 1:11. Note also Jacob's difficulty engraving on the plates but also his realization of their importance for future readers (Jacob 4:1–4).
24. See, for example, Hans Joachim Stoebe, "Überlegungen zum Synkretismus der jüdischen Tempelgemeinde in Elephantine," in *Beiträge zur Kulturgeschichte Vorderasiens: Festschrift für Rainer Michael Böhmer*, ed. U. Finkbeiner, R. Dittmann, and H. Hauptmann (Mainz: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 1995), 619.
25. Ezra 2:61–62 and Nehemiah 7:63–65 list some sons of the priests whose names were not registered in the genealogy and who were consequently excluded from the priesthood by reason of being defiled.
26. Briefly, Bernhard Anderson raises an important point with regard to the priesthood at Jerusalem following Zerubbabel. After the temple was rebuilt

and Zerubbabel left under somewhat mysterious circumstances, the high priest became the successor and henceforth Israel became a temple-centered community. See Bernard W. Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966), 440.

27. President Joseph Fielding Smith wrote concerning the early priesthood among the Nephites: "There were no Levites who accompanied Lehi to the Western Hemisphere. Under these conditions the Nephites officiated by virtue of the Melchizedek Priesthood from the days of Lehi to the days of the appearance of our Savior among them. It is true that Nephi 'consecrated Jacob and Joseph' that they should be priests and teachers over the land of the Nephites, but the fact that plural terms *priests and teachers* were used indicates that this was not a reference to the definite office in the priesthood in either case, but it was a general assignment to teach, direct, and admonish the people." *Answers to Gospel Questions* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957), 1:124–26.
28. Silverman, "The Religion of the Elephantine Jews," 378.
29. An interesting piece on the importance of Jerusalem in the consciousness and teachings of the Book of Mormon peoples was recently published. See Joshua Michael Sears, "'We Came Out of Jerusalem': The Holy City's Influence on Book of Mormon Peoples," in *The 2007 Brigham Young University Religious Education Student Symposium* (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2007), 130–46.

Service and Temple in King Benjamin's Speech

Donald W. Parry

1. Previously published examinations of King Benjamin's speech include Hugh W. Nibley, "Old World Ritual in the New World," in *An Approach to the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957), 243–56, a comparison of the speech with ancient year-rite festivals; Stephen D. Ricks, "Treaty/Covenant Patterns in King Benjamin's Address," *BYU Studies*