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Title Authority in the Book of Mosiah

Author(s) Daniel C. Peterson

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Abstract This article examines the book of Mosiah in the Book of Mormon in order to study the doctrine and presence of the priesthood in Book of Mormon times.

AUTHORITY IN THE BOOK OF MOSIAH

Daniel C. Peterson

It has been correctly observed that the Book of Mormon is probably the earliest published Mormon scriptural text to mention the structure and the nature of priesthood.¹ An understanding of just what the book has to say about priesthood is, therefore, of some importance. My intention is to examine a portion of the Book of Mormon, the book of Mosiah, as an initial step in determining the overall doctrine of priesthood in the text as a whole. I will attempt to account for every verse in the book of Mosiah that deals, either directly or indirectly, with questions of priesthood and authority.

The book of Mosiah is a valuable starting place because there is good reason to believe that it was the first portion of the Book of Mormon as we now have it to have been translated into English.² Thus, if the Book of Mormon is the earliest Latter-day Saint text to

A shorter and somewhat different version of this essay was published as Daniel C. Peterson, "Priesthood in Mosiah," in *The Book of Mormon: Mosiah, Salvation Only through Christ*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1991), 187–210. My thanks are due to Professors Kent P. Jackson, Monte S. Nyman, Charles D. Tate Jr., and John W. Welch for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper. I, of course, assume sole responsibility for my conclusions, which I merely suggest as hypotheses to be tested against the evidence of the Book of Mormon.

1. Paul James Toscano, "Priesthood Concepts in the Book of Mormon," *Sunstone*, December 1989, 8. I shall criticize Toscano's arguments below.

2. See John W. Welch, "The Miraculous Translation of the Book of Mormon," in *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–1844*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and BYU Press, 2005), 90, 93–94.

deal with the question of priesthood, the book of Mosiah may be the earliest part of the (English) Book of Mormon to do so. It is therefore an important piece of evidence for what the very earliest Latter-day Saints might have known or at least encountered about priesthood. Furthermore—and this is an issue to which I shall return below—the book of Mosiah has been adduced as support for positions on priesthood that, I think, are profoundly wrong. Thus, it certainly deserves close examination on this matter.

Background: Priesthood in the Small Plates

One of the most striking things about the question of priesthood in the Book of Mormon is how little the small plates of Nephi (i.e., 1 Nephi through Omni) have to say on the subject but how abruptly this apparent lack of interest disappears when, with the book of Mosiah, we enter Mormon's abridgment of the large plates of Nephi. The term *priest*, for example, occurs 125 times in the Book of Mormon, either by itself or in compound terms such as *priesthood* and *priestcraft*.³ Yet only eight of those occurrences are to be found in the portions of the book preceding the book of Mosiah. That is to say that only 6.4 percent of the references to “priests” or “priesthood” occur in a portion of the book that constitutes approximately 27 percent of the entire Book of Mormon—less than a quarter of the occurrences that might have been expected. This situation is even more striking when one realizes that one of those eight references occurs in Nephi's quotation from Isaiah in 2 Nephi 18:2. (If this passage is ignored, our percentage drops to 5.6 percent.)⁴

How are “priests” and “priesthood” viewed in the small plates of Nephi? Our sample is perhaps too small to allow definitive judgments, but it appears that the attitude of the authors of the small plates toward priests and priesthood may not have been entirely positive. (In this regard, Nephite prophets would share the feelings of Lehi's

3. *Eldin Ricks's Thorough Concordance of the LDS Standard Works* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1995), 597–99.

4. Three of these very early usages are prophetic denunciations of *priestcraft*. If they are deleted, the percentage drops to 3.2 percent.

contemporary, Jeremiah (see Jeremiah 1:18; 2:8, 26; 4:9; 5:30–31; 6:13; 13:13; 23:11, 33–34; 32:32; Lamentations 2:6; 4:13). Other prophets, as at Isaiah 24:1–6; 28:7; and Nehemiah 9:33–34, to choose just a few examples from many, made similarly disparaging comments. One need think only of Hophni and Phineas in 1 Samuel 2–4 or of the parable of the good Samaritan related at Luke 10 to realize how widespread in the scriptures is the notion of the evil priest. At 2 Nephi 10:5, for example, Jacob predicts that “priestcrafts and iniquities . . . at Jerusalem” will lead to the crucifixion of the Savior. At 2 Nephi 26:29, Nephi defines *priestcraft* and represents the Lord as condemning it. At 2 Nephi 28:4, Nephi says that the latter days will be characterized by contentions between “priests,” who will “teach with their learning, and deny the Holy Ghost, which giveth utterance.”

This apparently negative attitude may perhaps reflect the unpleasant experience that Lehi and his family seem to have had with the political and ecclesiastical authorities in Jerusalem. Certainly those experiences would have been a frequent topic of conversation among Lehi’s believing children. More likely, since Jacob had seen Jerusalem only in vision (1 Nephi 18:7; 2 Nephi 6:8–10) and since Nephi was prophesying (2 Nephi 25:7; 26:14; 28:1, 3), the negative attitude was actually the Lord’s, reflecting his evaluation of the corruption wrought among his people in the Old World. Nevertheless, whatever may have been the attitude of the early Nephites toward the potential abuses of priesthood authority, it is clear that their earliest records contain very little positive material—indeed, very little material of any kind—on priests and priesthood.

It is equally clear, however, that they did not reject the idea of priesthood as such. Nephi himself, for example, ordained his brothers Jacob and Joseph “after the manner of [God’s] holy order” (2 Nephi 6:2; cf. 2 Nephi 5:26; Jacob 1:18; also Alma 13:1, 2, 6, 8; and D&C 107:2–4). By the time two centuries had passed—if not, indeed, well before—an entire system of “the prophets, and the priests, and the teachers” existed among the Nephites (Jarom 1:11).⁵

5. Alma 6:1 and Moroni 3 make it clear that, at least in Nephite history following the close of the book of Mosiah, “priests” and “teachers” were both clearly “ordained” in

In ordaining priests, Nephi was functioning as a kind of king among his people—which was, of course, precisely how they viewed him (see 2 Nephi 5:18–19; 6:2).⁶ Ordination is primarily a royal prerogative in the book of Mosiah as well, although, as we shall see, a dramatic shift on that very issue is documented toward the end of the book. This point must be clearly understood. I do not mean to say that Nephite kings somehow had the right to ordain simply because they held political rule. Instead, I wish to suggest that kingship, among the Nephites, was a priesthood calling.⁷ A survey of the evidence from the book of Mosiah and elsewhere in the Book of Mormon should serve to make this plausible. Indeed, at least several of the Nephite kings—Nephi (a quasi-king; see 2 Nephi 6:2), Mosiah₁ (see Omni 1:12–22), Benjamin, and Mosiah₂—were actually major prophets. King Benjamin appointed priests at Zarahemla (Mosiah 6:3). In the secondary Nephite kingdom that endured briefly in the land of Nephi, Zeniff exercised his right as ruler and ordained priests. It will be recalled, of course, that they were then dismissed by his son and successor, Noah. In their place, Noah ordained his own priests, who would presum-

a manner not unlike that practiced by Latter-day Saints today. There is no reason to suppose that things were different in the earlier periods. Indeed, it can be argued on the basis of Moroni 2:1 that Moroni 3 represents the instructions given by the resurrected Lord during his visit to the Nephites in 3 Nephi. If this is true, it is very clear that the practice of ordaining by the laying on of hands was carried across dispensations, both before and after the advent of Christ. Considering all the changes otherwise effected by the Lord's advent, the continuity in this ordinance is rather impressive.

6. Indeed, while it lasted, legitimate Nephite kingship remained within the line of Nephi. It is clear, for example, from Mosiah 22:13, that Mosiah's was the primary kingship and that the kingship of the Zeniffite line was derivative and subordinate. It is interesting to note that Mosiah₂ ruled a people who were mostly those of Zarahemla, a descendant of Mulek; Mulek's royal prerogatives (see Helaman 6:10; 8:21) had been swallowed up in those of the line of Nephi (Mosiah 25:2, 13). We do not know why or how this occurred, but then we know very little about the Mulekites at all. I suspect that the explanation for this lack of information is to be found in John Sorenson's notion of the Book of Mormon as "lineage history." See John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1985), 50–56.

7. Rodney Turner asserts, correctly in my view, that the Melchizedek Priesthood was held by Lehi and Nephi and "by those righteous prophet-kings who succeeded Nephi." See Turner, "Three Nephite Churches of Christ," in *The Book of Mormon: The Keystone Scripture*, edited by Paul R. Cheesman (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1988), 100–126, at 101.

ably be more pliable in his hands (Mosiah 11:5). Later, when Noah's priests were on the run, it is noteworthy that the king of the Lamanites also appointed them as "teachers" among his people (Mosiah 24:4–5). We must, of course, keep in mind that Amulon and his associates do not appear to have exercised priestly functions under the Lamanites. They had never really had much interest in such things, it would seem, and so their teaching among the Lamanites—Nephite language, record keeping, and a literacy program—was entirely secular. But the Amulonites' characteristically secularizing view of their own office should not blind us to its sacerdotal origins, any more than Noah's abuse of his rank should blind us to its manifestly priestly nature.

This notion of a priestly kingship is perhaps a bit jarring to modern readers, living in a society where what we think of as "church" and "state" are kept separate as a matter of principle.⁸ However, the Nephites were not modern, and we should not be surprised to see them untouched by more modern fashions. Kingship in the Book of Mormon is very much a religious affair, much as it had been (or had been intended to be) among the Israelites of the Old World.⁹ Following his famous speech, for example, Benjamin "consecrates" his son Mosiah as his successor (Mosiah 6:3), just as he had been "consecrated" by his own father (Mosiah 2:11).¹⁰ The very same verb, of course, is used for the ordination of priests in the Book of Mormon (at 2 Nephi 5:26; 6:2; Jacob 1:18; Mosiah 11:5; 23:17; Alma 4:4, 7; 5:3; 15:13; 23:4). In Noah Webster's 1828 *American Dictionary of the English Language*, a marvelous resource in helping us understand the language Joseph Smith used to translate the Nephite record, *consecration* is "the act or

8. It should not be so disturbing to Latter-day Saints, whose aspirations for the life to come include becoming both "priests and kings" (D&C 76:56). This eschatological ideal may partially explain why the "priest-king" has so frequently been an earthly ideal as well. Furthermore, it would seem that Christ, the true king of Israel, holds his kingship as a priesthood office.

9. For some of the possible Hebraic biblical links between priesthood and kingship, see John A. Tvedtnes, "King Benjamin and the Feast of Tabernacles," in *By Study and Also by Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley*, ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 2:197–237; see specifically 233–34 n. 57.

10. Amlici's followers "consecrate" him "king" in Alma 2:9.

ceremony of separating from a common to a sacred use, or of devoting and dedicating a person or thing to the service and worship of God, by certain rites or solemnities.”¹¹ As examples, Webster cites “the consecration of the priests among the Israelites” and “the consecration of a bishop.”¹² And, indeed, Mosiah, son of Benjamin, was not merely a secular ruler but also a “seer,” which the Book of Mormon informs us is a more exalted title, even, than that of “prophet” (Mosiah 8:13–18; 21:28; 28:16). Seership was connected with possession of certain objects, known as “interpreters” (Mosiah 8:13). So, too, Nephite kingship seems to have been connected with and even symbolized or legitimized by possession of certain material objects.¹³ Thus, Nephi took the brass plates with him when he abandoned the land of Nephi, perhaps in part as a token of his legitimacy. That the Lamanites shared his perception of the importance of the plates is shown in their oft-repeated claim that, by taking them, he had “robbed them,” just as “they said that he had taken the ruling of the people out of their hands” (Mosiah 10:15–16; cf. 2 Nephi 5:3; Alma 20:10, 13). When Benjamin transferred the kingdom to his son Mosiah, he also gave to Mosiah the brass plates, along with the plates of Nephi, the sword of Laban, and the Liahona (Mosiah 1:15–16).¹⁴ There is, of course, undoubtedly more

11. King Benjamin, of course, thought of kingly service to his people as precisely equivalent to service to God; see Mosiah 2:16–17.

12. Any concordance of the King James Bible will illustrate the first example.

13. In the medieval Near East, the Shi'ite imams likewise preserved certain objects as emblems of their legitimacy. Ja far al- ad q (d. AD 767), for example, who was the sixth imam, received not only the explicit designation, or *na*, of his father, Mu ammad al- B qir, but, according to common report, the weapons, the books, and the scrolls of the Prophet Mu ammad. These were not only valuable in their own right, but apparently were thought to contain the esoteric knowledge given by Gabriel to the Prophet and then passed down the line of imams as their special birthright. Al-Muqtadir, one of the last Abb sid caliphs to hold real political power, used the Prophet's staff and cloak as both symbols and proofs of his authority. See, for the two cases, respectively S. H. M Jafri, *Origins and Early Development of Shi a Islam* (London: Longman Group, 1979), 293; and Roy P. Mottahedeh, *Loyalty and Leadership in an Early Islamic Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980): 186.

14. On the sword of Laban as a kind of royal heirloom, see 2 Nephi 5:14; Jacob 1:10; Words of Mormon 1:13; Mosiah 1:16. In the Hebrew Bible, the sword of Goliath was preserved as a trophy (see 1 Samuel 21:9; 22:10). Gordon C. Thomasson, “Mosiah: The Complex Symbolism and Symbolic Complex of Kingship in the Book of Mormon,”

to the royal possession of the brass plates than simply a claim to legitimate sovereignty. Deuteronomy 17:18–20 stipulates that the Israelite king should keep with him at all times a copy of the law that he might always keep in mind the commandments of God. But it should be clear that the Nephite monarch was more than merely the supreme secular official in a secular government.

The priestly nature of Nephite kingship is, I think, evident in certain other ways as well. God, says Benjamin, is the appointer of kings (Mosiah 2:4).¹⁵ Zeniffite ideology held that Nephi was chosen by God to lead his people (Mosiah 10:13).¹⁶ Thus, the king represents God on the earth, and his actions, when he is righteous and inspired, are God's actions. Joseph F. Smith's definition of "priesthood" will be recalled here: "The Priesthood in general is the authority given to man to act for God."¹⁷ It is not, therefore, inconsistent for the book of Mosiah, which repeatedly speaks of kings ordaining priests and teachers, to speak also of God as the appointer of teachers (see Mosiah 2:4). Likewise, an inspired king can be said to speak for and on behalf of God, and the distinction between them means very little in this respect (see Mosiah 2:31).¹⁸ God and the king are correlatives, mirroring each other in their respective spheres (Mosiah 2:19)—God rules the

Journal of Book of Mormon Studies 2/1 (1993): 21–38, offers a number of intriguing insights on the royal trophies associated with Mosiah.

15. Admittedly, it was the people who "conferred" the kingdom upon Limhi, the son of Noah, in the absence of Noah (Mosiah 19:26), as they also seem to have done in the case of Benjamin, who was "chosen" by the people, although he was "consecrated" by his father (Mosiah 2:11). And it was Zeniff who "conferred" the throne upon one of his sons, Noah (Mosiah 10:22; 11:1)—a very unfortunate choice, as it turned out (although we know nothing of the alternatives). In Nephite kingship ideology during this period, lineage seems to be important, but there is no clear evidence that the Nephites followed a rule of primogeniture (see, together, Mosiah 27:34; 28:10; 29:2–3, 6).

16. On the other hand, Lamanite ideology saw Nephi as a usurper (Mosiah 10:15). Second Nephi 5:18–19 and 6:2, taken together, may perhaps help us understand how it could be simultaneously the choice of God and the people that made someone king. The Book of Mormon may also be argued to illustrate the law of common consent, where the Lord reveals his choice of a king and then asks the people, through his appointed servant, to sustain that revelation (see D&C 20:63–67; 26:2).

17. See Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine*, 5th ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1939), 136; cf. 139.

18. Cf. Doctrine and Covenants 1:38; 68:4.

universe at large, macrocosmically, while the king rules subordinately and microcosmically over a limited portion of God's universe.¹⁹

The Roles of Priests

The society in which the Nephite kings ruled was certainly a temple-centered one. Soon after their arrival in the New World, members of the Lehite colony built “a temple . . . after the manner of the temple of Solomon” (2 Nephi 5:16). Important announcements were made at the temple (Mosiah 1:18; 2:5–6).²⁰ This was true not only at Zarahemla, but also in the derivative society of the Zeniffite colony in the land of Nephi (Mosiah 7:17). Even the none-too-spiritual King Noah lavished money upon his temple, which was served by his chosen priests (Mosiah 11:4–5, 7, 10–11).²¹ The role of Nephite priests, we are repeatedly told, was to “teach.” Specifically, they taught, or at least claimed to teach, the law of Moses (see Mosiah 12:25, 28; 18:18; 23:17; 25:21). Abinadi, of course, attacks the hypocritical priests of Noah for not having taught the law of Moses well (Mosiah 13:25–26), but there is no hint that they should not have taught it at all. They had claimed that salvation came through the law of Moses—a proposition that Abinadi condemns as a misinterpretation (contrast Mosiah 12:32 with 13:28, 32). Instead, both King Benjamin and the prophet Abinadi insist that the law of Moses had been given because the Israelites had been “stiff-necked” and resistant to a higher law and that its chief purpose is to

19. This idea is very common in hierarchical systems. It may be observed, for example, in the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius (ca. AD 500) among Christian thinkers, and in those of *Ism ʿl Sh ʿism* among the Muslims. Similarly, it is hardly coincidence that the various three-member presidencies and bishoprics of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints seem to reflect the Godhead itself.

20. When Jesus Christ appears to the Nephites, he comes to them where they have gathered at the temple in the land of Bountiful (3 Nephi 11:1).

21. Turner's suggestion, at “The Three Nephite Churches of Christ,” 122 n. 19, is attractive: “It is very likely that Zeniff restored the temple originally built by Nephi in the sixth century BC (2 Nephi 5:16). King Noah seems to have remodeled this same temple on a grand scale, making it far more elaborate and costly than it had previously been (Mosiah 11:10). Like Herod the Great, who remodeled the second temple (that of Zerubbabel; Ezra 3), Noah's project was doubtless more a matter of personal vanity than genuine piety.”

point forward to the coming of Christ (Mosiah 3:14–15; 13:29–31; cf. 2 Nephi 11:4; 25:24–30; Jacob 4:5; Alma 25:15; 34:14).

At first glance, it seems striking that “priests” in Mosiah (and elsewhere in the Book of Mormon) appear only to teach.²² Repeated mention is made of “priests and teachers.” Could this be related to Joseph Smith’s use of the word *priest* for the preachers of his own day? In his 1828 dictionary, Noah Webster writes that “In the United States, the word [*priest*] denotes any licensed minister of the gospel.” And this is, in fact, much the way that Joseph Smith used the term. The draft of his 1839 “History,” for example, speaks of “several learned Priests” who visited him in order to dispute his theological claims, where the context almost certainly involves Protestant preachers rather than actual Catholic or Orthodox priests.²³ The same usage is apparent in his account of the religious disputes that preceded his first vision (see Joseph Smith—History 1:6).

In other words, are the “priests” of Mosiah real priests, in the same sense as those of Levitical lineage in the Hebrew Bible? Surely, if they are really teachers of the law of Moses, we should see some evidence not merely that its moral precepts were discussed but that its sacrificial system was conveyed and put into practice. In fact, we do have the temple as the spiritual (and perhaps literal) center of Nephite society, and we have some (admittedly slight) evidence for Mosaic sacrifice in the book of Mosiah (Mosiah 2:3–4; cf. 1 Nephi 5:9; Alma 34:13–14). Furthermore, a careful reading of Mosiah 1–6 offers plausible evidence that the Nephites, on at least this occasion, celebrated a full-fledged Mosaic Feast of Tabernacles.²⁴ This offers an interesting interpretive possibility: If it is, in fact, the case that King Benjamin’s address coincided with a Nephite Feast of Tabernacles, the solemn

22. Actually, at least when Alma’s party arrives at Zarahemla and the church is established there, “teachers” seem also to have filled a *presiding* role (see Mosiah 25:20).

23. Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Papers of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 1:238; cf. 298 for the final version of that “History.”

24. I am convinced by Tvedtnes’s fascinating article, “King Benjamin and the Feast of Tabernacles,” 197–237. See, too, Terrence L. Szink and John W. Welch, “King Benjamin’s Speech in the Context of Ancient Israelite Festivals,” in *King Benjamin’s Speech: “That Ye May Learn Wisdom,”* ed. John W. Welch and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998), 147–223.

and moving celebration of the Day of Atonement would have taken place within only the previous few days. Thus, when, at Mosiah 4:2, the people cried out for application of “the atoning blood of Christ,” it is not difficult to imagine that cry as an echo of the deeply religious season through which they were passing, as well as of the sacrifices characteristic of the feast in which they were at that very time engaged. The Nephites were, after all, a people who understood the gospel of Jesus Christ but continued to live according to the performances and ordinances of the law of Moses, a possibility allowed by Galatians 3:8 and Moses 6:54, 59–62. They had just received from their king an angelically delivered message about the atoning blood of Christ (see Mosiah 3:11). They understood the real significance of the ordinances and rituals laid down in the Mosaic law, which were intended to point forward to Christ (2 Nephi 11:4; 25:23–26; Jacob 4:5; 7:7; Jarom 1:11; Mosiah 3:14–15; Alma 25:15–16). Their minds would thus have been directed to the coming of the Savior in a singularly powerful way by the rites of the Day of Atonement and the Feast of Tabernacles. “It is significant to note,” John Tvedtnes observes, “that there are more sacrifices prescribed for Sukkot [Tabernacles] than for any of the other festivals.”²⁵ Clearly, as is abundantly attested throughout the Book of Mormon before the coming of Christ, the Mosaic law was practiced among the Nephites (2 Nephi 5:10; 25:24), and equally clearly, therefore, the “priests” of the Book of Mormon were really priests and not merely a nineteenth-century farm boy’s retrojection of the circuit-riding revivalist preachers of his own day into his pseudobiblical historical yarn.²⁶

25. Tvedtnes, “King Benjamin and the Feast of Tabernacles,” 222.

26. Why, then, is the law of Moses so much less prominent in the Book of Mormon than it is in the Hebrew Bible? First of all, as my colleague Kent P. Jackson has reminded me, the law is really not so prominent in the Old Testament (outside of a few “priestly” writings) as one might tend to think. The apostle Paul clearly talks more about it than do Lehi’s contemporaries in Jerusalem, at least as they are represented in the prophetic books of the Bible. A further explanation is probably to be found in the fact that much of the book was edited by Mormon, who wrote several centuries after the coming of the Messiah had put an end to the sacrificial law and who had more on his mind while preparing it for its future readers than merely antiquarian curiosity. In the small plates, not edited by Mormon, there is the intriguing reluctance to talk about “priests” and “priest-

The “priests and teachers” referred to throughout the Book of Mormon are often—although not always—two distinct groups, even though, undeniably, the book often attributes teaching functions to its priests. “Priests” and “teachers” are mentioned in close proximity to one another twenty-two times in the Book of Mormon, and in every instance except one “teachers” are mentioned after “priests,” suggesting that they might represent a subordinate priesthood office among the Nephites as they do in the church today.²⁷ (It is clear from Moroni 3 that the offices were distinct, at least in later Nephite practice.) This seems to be confirmed by the incident depicted in Mosiah 26:7, where the “teachers” are subordinate to the “priests” in a hierarchy consisting of teachers, priests, and Alma the Elder as “high priest.”²⁸ (As we shall see below, Alma was here taking the place of the king, who seems to have presided over the priests in earlier Nephite usage.)²⁹

hood” to which I have already alluded, and to which I shall return below. Perhaps too, and perhaps most importantly, the Book of Mormon is the record of a people who understood the subordinate and provisional role of the law of Moses and who had among them the higher or Melchizedek priesthood. For the latter point, see Joseph Fielding Smith, *Answers to Gospel Questions* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957), 1:124–26; John A. Widtsoe, *Evidences and Reconciliations: Aids to Faith in a Modern Day* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1943), 1:188–90.

27. See 2 Nephi 5:26; Jacob 1:18; Jarom 1:11; Mosiah 23:17; 25:19, 21; 26:7; 27:5; Alma 1:3; 14:27; 15:13; 23:4; 30:31; 35:5; 45:22–23; Helaman 3:25 (“high priests” and “teachers”); Moroni 3:1, 3–4; 6:1. Only in Alma 4:7 do we find “teachers, and priests, and elders” (cf. Alma 6:1 for “priests and elders”), where it is clear that the offices are simply being mentioned in reverse order. See Moroni 6:1 for a listing in the conventional order.

28. Jarom 1:11 knows a hierarchy of “the prophets, and the priests, and the teachers.”

29. According to Mosiah 11:11, King Noah had “high priests” (emphasis added). It may be that we are here referring to an office analogous to that of high priest (i.e., a priest of the higher priesthood, as opposed to a priest of the Aaronic order) in the contemporary church, which many are able to hold simultaneously. In many other occurrences of the term *high priest* in the Book of Mormon, on the other hand, it seems likely that what is intended is rather more like—although not identical to—the high priest in ancient Israel, of whom there was normally only one at a time. (Alma₁, for instance, was the single high priest over the church, both when he and his people were in exile [Mosiah 23:16] and after their arrival in Zarahemla and the subsequent expansion of the church [Mosiah 26:7].) In later periods, possibly owing to the sheer size of the church and to difficulties of communication and centralization, there seem to have been regional high priests in Jershon and in Gideon (Alma 30:20–21), and very likely elsewhere—perhaps subordinated to the overall high priest, in this case Alma₂, resident in the capital city of Zarahemla (Alma 30:29; cf. Alma 46:6, 38; Helaman 3:25; 3 Nephi 6:21–22, 27). Multiple “high priests” in

Nephite priests seem to have served as a kind of council to whom the king could go for counsel and advice. Mosiah₂ consulted with his priests (Mosiah 27:1), as did King Noah at his own (obviously imitative) court in the land of Nephi (Mosiah 12:17; 17:6).³⁰ It is in fact the priests of Noah who advise the king, in Mosiah 17:11–12, to put Abinadi to death for “revil[ing] the king.”

Were Early Nephite Priests Ordained?

The case of Alma the Elder brings up an interesting question: Were these priests of Noah legitimate holders of legitimate priesthood? We have no record of any ordination for Alma other than his presumed inclusion among the priests ordained by Noah at the latter’s accession to the throne (Mosiah 11:5). Where, then, did Alma get his priesthood authority? Is it possible that he functioned as a prophet without ordination? This possibility has been raised. “On occasion,” one writer has argued, “certain individuals with unmediated callings are presented as not waiting for ordination before embarking upon their ministries. Ordination, therefore, is not presented as being essential either to create a church or priesthood structure where none before existed, or to preach repentance or teach the gospel, or to castigate an existing ecclesiastical or even political structure that has become rigid or corrupt.”³¹

Among those in the Book of Mormon as a whole who are claimed to have received “unmediated callings” to priesthood or prophetic authority from God are Lehi, Nephi, Samuel the Lamanite, Abinadi, Alma

the same location may simply have been another of King Noah’s apostate and grandiloquent innovations, which tended everywhere to exchange Nephite simplicity for the lavish and the overdone.

30. At Alma 23:16, the king of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies too consults with his priests. Whether he was carrying on Lamanite practice or simply adopting Nephite habits as he had adopted Nephite religion is unclear. The Book of Mormon tells us little about the Lamanites. See again Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 50–56.

31. Toscano, “Priesthood Concepts in the Book of Mormon,” 13. The question must be considered because the position represented in the quotation immediately preceding is not only erroneous, but, I am firmly convinced, is fraught with immense danger for the order of the church. Any number of ark-steadiers have come forward in the history of the restoration of the church, who have seen it as their right and duty to guide the church, to wrest its leadership away from those called of the Lord to preside over it.

the Younger, and Alma the Elder. I shall examine each of these cases individually, if briefly. But first the theoretical basis for a claim of “unmediated” priesthood callings must be investigated. Alma 13:1 is invoked as evidence that “the Lord God [has] ordained priests, after his holy order” without human mediation. But it proves nothing of the sort since the Lord acts through his designated agents and since it makes no difference whether the voice is his or that of one of his servants (D&C 1:38). We have already seen that faithful Nephites could speak of God’s appointing a king or a priest while being fully aware of the human agency through which that appointment was effected. Alma 13:4 is cited as proof that “it is the ‘Spirit of God,’ not any human being,” that calls to priesthood office.³² But this is at best an unconvincing inference from a rather ambiguous verse. Moreover, Alma 13:8, 10, and 16 make it clear that “ordinances” were involved and that the priests were “ordained” in a manner that looked forward to the Son of God. And Mosiah 21:33–35 strongly implies that Limhi, at least, did not accept the idea of “unmediated” callings to priesthood authority.

Lehi

Regarding Lehi’s ordination, one simple observation is in order: Arguments from silence are, logically speaking, notoriously weak. The verses cited to prove that Lehi was ordained by no man (1 Nephi 1:18–20) nowhere state that Lehi was not ordained; they simply do not record that he was. However, the fact that Lehi’s ordination goes unmentioned by the Book of Mormon may be no more significant than Luke’s failure to mention the wedding of Elizabeth and Zacharias. It would be irresponsible to conclude, from that omission, that John the Baptist was born out of wedlock.

32. See Toscano, “Priesthood Concepts in the Book of Mormon,” 12–13, for the presentation of the theory of “unmediated callings” and the individual cases purporting to illustrate such callings upon which I draw. It is worth mentioning here that, whatever may have been the case in early Nephite times, the manner of ordination to the priesthood was prescribed and standardized by Jesus when he appeared at Bountiful (see 3 Nephi 11:18–25; 18:36–38; Moroni 2–3).

Nephi

Lehi's son Nephi unquestionably held some kind of priesthood since, as noted above, we have record of his having ordained Joseph and Jacob, his brothers. Yet we have no record of his own ordination. First Nephi 17:48–54 says nothing about it. What are we to conclude from these gaps in the Nephite chronicle? Nothing, I submit. Again, such things speak only of the vagaries of historical record keeping; they do not by any stretch of the imagination demonstrate that Nephi was not ordained to the priesthood.

Samuel the Lamanite

In the case of Samuel the Lamanite, again, we have only an argument from silence. We know little about his career except for that brief portion of it recorded in Helaman 13–16. Certainly there is no statement in the Book of Mormon that says that Samuel did *not* hold the priesthood. The sentiments recorded at Helaman 13:5, 7 do not even remotely hint that he had not been ordained. And, given the general silence of the Book of Mormon about the affairs of the Lamanites when they did not impinge directly upon the Nephites, we would hardly expect to hear anything about Samuel's ordination.³³ (For that matter, we also lack any record of the coronation or accession to the throne of the Lamanite king Lamoni.) It is significant, for our purposes, that the risen Savior later acknowledged Samuel as "my servant" (3 Nephi 23:9), confirming that Samuel was God's authorized agent at the time he prophesied in the name of the Lord from the walls of Zarahemla.

Abinadi

At the risk of wearisome repetitiveness, essentially the same observation must be made in the case of Abinadi. Admittedly, Mosiah 11:20 and 12:1–2 do not mention his ordination. But what do we know about Abinadi's biography beyond his brief encounter with King Noah and

33. Again, see Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 50–56.

the court priests? Nothing. Does our ignorance justify a declaration that he had never been ordained?

The case of Abinadi also illustrates how, when the king fails to exercise his responsibility, someone else may be called to fill his role. Abinadi speaks for the Lord, at the Lord's command, as the king was supposed to do (Mosiah 11:20; 12:1–2; 13:6). It is because both king and priests have failed to discharge their responsibilities that Abinadi has to be sent by the Lord: "Have ye taught this people that they should observe to do all these things for to keep these commandments? I say unto you, Nay; for if ye had, the Lord would not have caused me to come forth and to prophesy evil concerning this people" (Mosiah 13:25–26; cf. 12:29).

It is not surprising, thus, that King Noah, who does not acknowledge his own neglect of his divinely ordained stewardship, demands to know "Who is Abinadi?" Who is this unauthorized person who trespasses upon my royal prerogatives and has the effrontery to declare "that I and my people should be judged of *him*"? But when Noah follows that question with the arrogant outburst "Who is the Lord?" it becomes painfully and obviously clear why Abinadi had to be sent (see Mosiah 11:27).³⁴ Noah has broken the covenant between himself and God that is the ultimate source of his own authority. Rather than recognizing himself as the earthly analogue of the heavenly king, he seeks to deny the authority of that heavenly king.³⁵ Thus, when God sends Abinadi to Noah, he tells that prophet of the king's impending death by fire, "for he shall know that *I* am the Lord" (Mosiah 12:3).³⁶

Alma the Younger

A rather different argument can be made in the instance of Alma the Younger. After his spectacular angelic conversion, it has been claimed,

34. Precisely the same question had been asked of Moses and Aaron by Pharaoh (Exodus 5:2; cf. Qur an 26:23–29), and, rhetorically, by Cain (Moses 5:16). Compare too the Rabshakeh's speech at 2 Kings 18:35.

35. Compare the Pharaoh of Qur an 26:29: Having arrogantly asked Moses and Aaron just who the Lord is, he says (as I translate the Arabic), "If you take a god other than me, I will have you imprisoned!"

36. Noah's death in the flames is an entirely appropriate symbol, incidentally, viewed in the light of Benjamin's remarks at Mosiah 2:36–38.

“Alma does not wait for an ordination by any human authority.”³⁷ Even here, it is possible that Alma the Younger, son of a priest, had already been ordained to some office in the priesthood by the time of his conversion. But it requires no ordination to report a spiritual experience, and this is all that Mosiah 27:32 tells us that he was doing. It is utterly incorrect, however, to cite Alma 5:44, 49, 51 as evidence for the notion that Alma₂ claimed no authority other than a powerful conversion even at a point later in his career, for that very discourse begins with a powerful statement of his own priesthood authority, received through ordination: “I, Alma, having been consecrated by my father, Alma, to be a high priest over the church of God, he having power and authority from God to do these things” (Alma 5:3; cf. Mosiah 29:42).³⁸

Alma the Elder

Indeed, if the cases of Lehi, Nephi, Abinadi, and Samuel are relatively ambiguous, that of Alma the Elder is not ambiguous at all. He was ordained validly by Noah, who was ordained validly by his father, as discussed above. One writer on this question maintains that Mosiah 11:5 rules out any valid ordination under the hand of Noah, but it is difficult to see how that passage says anything of the sort.³⁹ The fact that Noah was not righteous and that Alma himself seems to have violated the laws of God during his early ministry has nothing to do with Alma’s priesthood authority. Unless and until superior priesthood authority withdraws permission to exercise priestly functions, a legitimately ordained holder of the priesthood may continue to perform valid priesthood ordinances—however unrighteous he may personally be, however

37. Toscano, “Priesthood Concepts in the Book of Mormon,” 12.

38. It is puzzling that Alma 5:3 and 5:44 are quoted, almost fully, on the same page, by Toscano, “Priesthood Concepts in the Book of Mormon,” 12, to illustrate Alma’s “unmediated calling.” They demonstrate precisely the opposite. Jacob 1:17 and 2:11 are likewise used to illustrate that Jacob’s calling came directly from God, but 2 Nephi 5:26, 6:2, and Jacob 1:18 record Jacob’s ordination by his brother, Nephi. Sometimes, Toscano seems merely to claim that divine guidance is needed to make priesthood holders fully effective instruments in the hands of God. This is an incontestable claim, but, unfortunately, he wants to go beyond it.

39. See Toscano, “Priesthood Concepts in the Book of Mormon,” 13.

dead to spiritual promptings, and however unlikely it may be that he will ever actually exercise his priesthood.⁴⁰ (As our advocate of “unmediated callings” himself correctly—if somewhat inconsistently—writes elsewhere in his discussion of the subject, “worthiness is not essential for priesthood to function. If, for example, one were baptized by an unworthy priesthood bearer, the baptism would still be effectual.”)⁴¹

Alma, in fact, claimed to have authority from God (Mosiah 18:13), a claim that the later editor implicitly acknowledges as valid (Mosiah 18:18; Alma 5:3).⁴² Furthermore, in the power vacuum left by the absence of King Noah, the people implored Alma to assume the royal title and prerogatives (Mosiah 23:6). He turned down the title but, of necessity, did carry out some kingly duties. It was Alma who ordained priests and teachers for his outcast people, among whom he was in fact the sole human source of authority (Mosiah 18:18; 23:17). Indeed, Mosiah 18:18 informs us that Alma ordained “one priest to every fifty” of his followers.⁴³

40. The ancient Christian church faced this problem in the form of the Donatist schism, which was finally declared heretical in AD 405. The Donatists held that unrighteousness in a bishop or priest invalidated any and all ordinances that he might have performed. However, the Synod of Arles determined in AD 314 that the validity of baptisms and ordinations and the like did not depend upon the worthiness or merit of the officiator. (On the Donatists and the related Novatianist and Meletian movements, see David Christie-Murray, *A History of Heresy* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989], 96–97.) Granted, the Christian church at this period was essentially apostate, but Latter-day Saints take basically the same position, and for good reason. If serious sin, as such, invalidated priesthood ordinances, we could never know whose marriage was legal, or who was really a member of the church. Did the man who ordained you to the priesthood have a secret, unrepented sin? Then your ordination is invalid. Your mission was illegitimate, any converts you baptized are actually nonmembers, and you are living in adultery since you should never have been admitted to the temple. Any of your converts who served missions and baptized are similarly fraudulent, and the consequences ripple onward and outward in utterly unforeseeable ways. How could we ever be sure of anything?

41. Toscano, “Priesthood Concepts in the Book of Mormon,” 16.

42. Alma was a descendant of Nephi (Mosiah 17:2), a fact that may or may not be significant in discussing his priesthood authority since we do not know precisely how priesthood functioned or was apportioned among the Nephites. Certainly most, if not in fact all, of the priests and kings of whom we know anything in the Book of Mormon up to this point were of the lineage of Nephi.

43. This seems quite mechanical, incidentally, when contrasted with the claim that, in the Book of Mormon, “one’s calling in the priestly structure was determined not so

The baptisms that Alma performed required power and authority from God (Mosiah 18:17). One writer on Mormon subjects, mistakenly assuming that Alma had no valid ordination, uses the book of Mosiah as evidence that early Mormonism “placed greater emphasis on the charismatic, or spiritual, nature of restored authority than on its lineal or legal aspects. The exercise of authority in the [early LDS] church derived from the operation of the Holy Spirit rather than exclusively from ordination or as a function of church office. Only gradually did Mormonism’s description of . . . authority become clearly lineal-legal.”⁴⁴ He sees a reflection of this in the alleged fact that Alma’s authority to baptize, and even “the legal claim of authority of the priests and teachers [ordained by him] ultimately rested on Alma’s charismatic reception of authority.”⁴⁵ However, in so interpreting the account of Alma and his people, this author has not only ignored the very real priesthood clearly possessed by Alma before the coming of

much by the needs of the Church as by the personal gifts of those ordained.” Toscano, “Priesthood Concepts in the Book of Mormon,” 10. Toscano has particular reference to the period following the visitation of Christ to the Americas, but it appears that he would argue similarly for the entirety of the Nephite record. His claim, which I think incorrect, seems to be an oblique criticism of today’s church.

44. Dan Vogel, *Religious Seekers and the Advent of Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1988), 101. Vogel is trying to assimilate formative Mormonism to an alleged early American religious movement that he terms “Seekerism.” See, however, the critical reviews of his book by Grant Underwood in *BYU Studies* 30/1 (1990): 120–26, and Daniel C. Peterson in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 30/1 (March 1991): 127–28, 130.

45. Vogel, *Religious Seekers and the Advent of Mormonism*, 102–3. Compare p. 104: “Authority in the early Mormon church was originally patterned on a similar model of charismatic or spiritual power, not on priesthood ordination.” By using the episode of Alma and the waters of Mormon in this way, Vogel wishes to support his contention that the angelic ordination of Oliver Cowdery and Joseph Smith to the Aaronic Priesthood came later, as an afterthought. However, if my reading of the book of Mosiah is correct, Alma and his followers (and all the complexities of lineage and priesthood that surround their story) are in fact indirect evidence that the later claims by Oliver and Joseph (echoed by Orson Pratt) that it was a concern for authority that led them to the Susquehanna river in May of 1829 are not spurious retrojections. Welch, “Miraculous Translation of the Book of Mormon,” 90, puts the translation of Mosiah in April 1829, only about a month before the reception of the Aaronic Priesthood. See Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 100–101, and Milton V. Backman Jr., *Eyewitness Accounts of the Restoration* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1986), 107–12, for those claims.

Abinadi, but he has seriously misread the report of Alma's baptismal service at the waters of Mormon.⁴⁶ He reads Mosiah 18:12 and finds there Alma's impassioned prayer: "O Lord, pour out thy Spirit upon thy servant, that he may do this work with holiness of heart." Then he notices that the verse immediately following records that "the Spirit of the Lord was upon" Alma, who claimed "authority from Almighty God." Having seen this, and having confused temporal sequence with causation, our author thereupon alleges that Alma's authority actually came entirely through a direct answer to his prayer for "holiness of heart," instead of through formal ordination.⁴⁷ However, the passage in question does not require such an inference and cannot truly be said even to suggest it. Surely priesthood holders who have never thought to question their authority, and who well remember the laying on of hands that they believe gave them that authority, can understand a prayer for the Spirit before performing an ordinance.⁴⁸ In subsequent

46. For his interpretation of the material, see Vogel, *Religious Seekers and the Advent of Mormonism*, 102–3.

47. This elementary logical error is most commonly known as *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* (i.e., roughly, "after something, therefore because of it"). It is often illustrated with the image of a rooster who thinks that his crowing causes the sun to rise each morning. Vogel might have done better to have cited Mosiah 18:26, where strength in the Spirit really does appear to enable men to "teach with power and authority from God" (cf. Matthew 7:28–29). However, the problem with this verse, for his purposes, is that the men in question are already ordained priests. And besides, to *teach* "with authority" on a subject is potentially quite a different matter than simply having priesthood authority to perform an ordinance. It can be a function of knowledge, insight, experience, or spiritual sensitivity. Beyond an absolute minimum, none of those attributes (however desirable) is really necessary for the validity of a priesthood ordinance.

48. Alma was both a prophet and a priest and so was especially concerned, although he had unquestionable priesthood ordination, with the spirit (or Spirit) in which he acted. The opposition of legalism and charisma, of priest and prophet, is an old cliché, and, like many old clichés, carries some truth. (In more-or-less Latter-day Saint circles, E. E. Ericksen was particularly fond of it. See Scott G. Kenney, ed., *Memories and Reflections: The Autobiography of E. E. Ericksen* [Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987], xii, 208–9.) But it is only accidentally true, and not essentially so. (Was the Hebrew Samuel a prophet or a priest? What of John the Baptist?) Even King Noah's priests claimed to *understand* prophecy (Mosiah 12:25). For reflections on this issue, with particular reference to **Mu ammad**, see Daniel C. Peterson, "Muhammad," in *The Rivers of Paradise: Moses, Buddha, Confucius, Jesus, and Muhammad as Religious Founders*, ed. David Noel Freedman and Michael J. McClymond (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 457–612;

Nephite history, the reception by ordination of authority to baptize is made absolutely clear (3 Nephi 7:25).⁴⁹

The Church in the Days of Mosiah,

Noah's breach of the normal order of things in Nephite kingship was to have long-lasting consequences in Nephite history. First, it helped to transform his one-time priest, Alma, into an ardent anti-monarchist. "Behold," says Alma, who draws upon divine revelation⁵⁰ as well as upon his own experiences with Noah,

it is not expedient that we should have a king; for thus saith the Lord: Ye shall not esteem one flesh above another, or one man shall not think himself above another; therefore I say unto you it is not expedient that ye should have a king. Nevertheless, if it were possible that ye could always have just men to be your kings it would be well for you to have a king. But remember the iniquity of king Noah and his priests. . . . Trust no man to be a king over you. (Mosiah 23:7–9, 13)

Alma begins his denunciation of kingship by referring to the equality of all flesh but soon alludes to his basic reason for opposing monarchy, which is that the king might well prove to be unrighteous—like his old boss, Noah.⁵¹ (Of course, a truly righteous king would not esteem

and Peterson, "Final Thoughts: Responses to McClymond's 'Prophet or Loss?'" in *Rivers of Paradise*, 675–81.

49. As it is also in the matter of the administration of the sacrament (see 3 Nephi 18:5). The passage that features ordination for authority to baptize was probably translated within, at the most, five weeks of the report of Alma and the waters of Mormon. See Welch, "Miraculous Translation of the Book of Mormon," 93. If one assumes, as Vogel does, that Joseph Smith was *authoring* the Book of Mormon during that period, there seems hardly enough time for a major theological (or ecclesiological) evolution from one portion of the book to the other.

50. Perhaps he recalls here the revelation he himself had received, and which is alluded to at Mosiah 18:21–29. However, the doctrine that "the Lord esteemeth all flesh in one" is attested from the earliest period of the Lehite colony (1 Nephi 17:35).

51. That Alma was quite serious about equality is shown in his insistence that his priests, both in the wilderness (Mosiah 18:24, 26) and in Zarahemla (Mosiah 27:4–5), labor to support themselves. This was in clear contrast to the practice of King Noah's priests, among whom Alma had once been numbered (Mosiah 11:6, 14).

himself to be better than others and would not allow others to think so of him; see Mosiah 2:10–19, 26.) Later, in Zarahemla, Alma emphasized equality within the church, insisting that priests and teachers should labor for their own support rather than relying upon the surplus of others (Mosiah 27:4–5).

Another consequence of Noah's iniquity was, in fact, the eventual establishment of a Nephite church, which is described in Mosiah. It is striking that not a single reference to any "church" actually existing in the New World is to be found in the small plates of Nephi—that is, in the portion of the Book of Mormon prior to Mosiah—while such references are quite common from Mosiah onwards.⁵² Only one actually existent "church" is referred to in the small plates at all, and that is the "church" at Jerusalem with which Laban was thought to be affiliated (1 Nephi 4:26). Laban's link with that "church" is perhaps almost enough in itself to account for the neglect of the term throughout the small plates—a neglect broken only by occasional references, the majority of which are negative. (Similar considerations may have led to the apparent reluctance in the small plates, already discussed, to talk about priests and priesthood. When they are mentioned, as often as not it is in the context of a warning against the evils of priestcraft—a sin that can certainly afflict, precisely, churches.) With the exception of the single reference to a Jerusalem church in Lehi's day and another to the Jerusalem church in the time of Jesus and the apostles (2 Nephi 25:14), the only occurrences of the term *church* in the small plates refer either to the eschatological-apocalyptic "great and abominable church" (1 Nephi 13:4–6, 8, 26, 28, 32, 34; 14:3, 9–10, 15, 17; 22:13–14, 23; 2 Nephi 6:12; 26:20–21; 28:3, 12, 18) or, rather less commonly, to the eschatological-apocalyptic church of God (1 Nephi 14:10, 12, 14; 2 Nephi 9:2). Again, it is striking that there occurs here no mention whatever of an actually existent New World church, despite the fact

52. One could argue from 3 Nephi 5:12, with its reference to "the first church which was established among [the people of Alma the Elder] after their transgression," that there must have been churches before Alma's time. But the passage seems to me too ambiguous to allow for any very strong inferences. It could just as well mean that Alma's was, simply, "the first church," and that it was established after the people's transgression (under Noah?).

that the small plates cover nearly the first five centuries of Nephite history.

Rodney Turner observes that “the Book of Mormon does not indicate the exact nature and extent of the Church, as such, among the early Nephites.”⁵³ If I am correct, this is simply because, among the early Nephites, there *was* no church.⁵⁴ Turner is right to argue that, in a certain sense, “the Church has been found on the earth in every gospel dispensation since the days of Adam. Although it is always founded upon the keys and powers associated with the Melchizedek Priesthood and always embodies certain basic doctrines and ordinances, its organizational structure reflects the times and circumstances in which it is established. Thus the Church of each dispensation has had a personality all its own.”⁵⁵ But he can present no evidence that anything even remotely resembling what we today would recognize as a church organization existed among the Nephites before Alma the Elder. Only with Alma do we encounter a separate “church” in the true sense of the Greek word *ekklesia*. (That term, it will be recalled, originally referred, in classical Greece, to an assembly of the citizens called out by a kind of crier. It is related to the verb *ekkaléo*, “to call forth.” The notion of “separation” is inherent, unavoidable, in it.)

I realize that I am working here on the basis of an argument from silence, broadly analogous to the kind of argument I have criticized in those who contend for the presence of “unmediated” priesthood callings in the Book of Mormon. Readers are therefore free to take it for what they think it worth. One way of testing it will be by the plausibility, or lack thereof, of my overall position, in which this particular argument has a specific place. But I must say that the lack of references to an early Nephite church—consistent over many pages and the space

53. Turner, “Three Nephite Churches of Christ,” 102.

54. Turner asserts that, “while it is clear that Nephi and his successors taught the people of Christ, there is no textual evidence that the early Nephites had an ecclesiastical organization independent of that associated with the law of Moses.” Turner, “Three Nephite Churches of Christ,” 120 n. 5. However, many important features of the “ecclesiastical organization . . . associated with the law of Moses” themselves appear to be lacking in the Book of Mormon. There seem, for instance, to have been no Levites in the New World. (This fact is noted by Smith, *Answers to Gospel Questions*, 1:124.)

55. Turner, “Three Nephite Churches of Christ,” 100.

of many years, but only in a particular portion of the record—seems to me more likely to be indicative of something significant than is the occasional failure, in a book nowhere prone to give biographical details, to mention personal ordinations to the priesthood.

It is Alma who founded the church among the Nephites (Mosiah 23:16), in the sense of a separately existing organization within the larger society. It is easy to see why this was so. The king, Noah, had abdicated his traditional responsibilities in the hierarchical social system of the Nephites, and Alma had taken his place as the spiritual leader and fount of priesthood authority for those who dissented from Noah's leadership. Alma's colony thus became a secessionist group much like the almost precisely contemporary community of Qumran on the shore of the Dead Sea.⁵⁶ Birth as a Nephite was no longer enough to make a man or woman one of God's people, as it was emphatically no longer sufficient for the Qumran sectaries. Instead, a conscious and personal decision, a covenant, was required of anyone who wished to be numbered among the people of God.

For Alma and his followers, this decision was expressed in baptism.⁵⁷ "Now," Alma cried out to his people, "I say unto you, if this be the desire of your hearts, what have you against being baptized in the name of the Lord, as a witness before him that ye have entered into a covenant with him, that ye will serve him and keep his commandments, that he may pour out his Spirit more abundantly upon you? . . . And they were called the church of God, or the church of Christ, from that time forward. And it came to pass that whosoever was baptized by the power and authority of God was added to his church" (Mosiah

56. See Hugh Nibley's discussion of "Qumran and the Waters of Mormon," in *An Approach to the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 183–93. For the dating of the Qumran Essenes, see Helmut Koester, *History, Culture, and Religion of the Hellenistic Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 1:234–39.

57. The Qumran sectaries also emphasized ritual washings, which may be related to Christian baptism. On this, see William S. LaSor, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), 40, 70–71, 134, 149–51; LaSor, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Christian Faith* (Chicago: Moody, 1962), 78–80, 203–6, 208, 214, 236–39; F. F. Bruce, *Second Thoughts on the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), 50–51, 118, 128, 133–34, 136, 140, 142, 149, 151.

18:10, 17; cf. 18:13–16; 25:17–18). Even Alma received immersion as a sign of his commitment to the Lord (Mosiah 18:14–15).⁵⁸

At a slightly later time, King Limhi and his people also desired baptism as an expression of their commitment to do the will of God. But “they did not at that time form themselves into a church” because “there was none in the land that had authority from God” (Mosiah 21:34, 33).⁵⁹ After all, Alma had already fled, as had the wicked but validly ordained priests of Noah. Noah himself was dead, and under such circumstances that he had not managed to “consecrate” Limhi his successor according to Nephite practice. (Ammon, the warrior from Zarahemla who had led the expedition to find them, evidently had priesthood authority but felt himself unworthy to exercise it and declined to perform the ordinance of baptism for them.) Later, when the groups led by Alma and Limhi were reunited in Zarahemla, Limhi’s people were baptized by Alma. “Yea, and as many as he did baptize did belong to the church of God” (Mosiah 25:18).

It would be foolish, of course, to argue that baptism was unknown among the Nephites before the time of Alma. References to baptism are not uncommon in the small plates. (Indeed, Moses 6:52–53, 64 informs us that the ordinance was known to Adam.) But it is noteworthy that, while baptism is said to “fulfil all righteousness” (Matthew 3:15), to open the gate for salvation, and to enable us to obtain a remission of sins, no text in the small plates describes baptism as an initiatory rite for entrance into a church, any more than in the case of Adam. It is also important to bear in mind the fact that church and priesthood are not inseparably linked. It is possible for priesthood to exist without a church (although it is impossible for the true church to exist without

58. It should be noted here that there is no apparent explanation of what baptism is. Perhaps Alma’s people had already been baptized. Perhaps this represented a rebaptism expressive of recommitment, somewhat along the lines of the rebaptisms performed during the so-called “Mormon reformation” in early Utah. Alma’s immersion of himself may strike us as a bit strange, but it is not incomprehensible. John the Baptist ordained both Oliver Cowdery and Joseph Smith, who then baptized each other with the authority they each had received. Among Alma’s people, only he had such authority.

59. Again, this point is *very* telling. Obviously, Limhi did not give credence to the notion of “unmediated” callings.

priesthood).⁶⁰ The church today, as has often been noted, is simply the essential but temporary scaffolding that surrounds an eternal family-priesthood structure in the process of construction; until that construction is complete at some point in the postmortal future, priesthood is mediated through and associated with the church. Second Nephi 31:9, 18 makes it clear that baptism was known and practiced by the early Nephites, in accordance with eternal law, as the first step on the path toward eternal life. What kind of religious society or church community, if any, one joined by those early baptisms is not clear. It is not self-evident, in fact, that baptism has always signified entrance into a church, or that entrance to a church has always been a part of that path.⁶¹

As a working hypothesis, to be tested by readers and students of the Book of Mormon, I would suggest the possibility that early Nephite priesthood was mediated and given structure through family and clan organization, rather than through a church structure. Furthermore, I propose that the early Nephites found their primary social and religious identification in the very fact that they were Nephites. In the earliest days of the Nephites in the New World, to follow Nephi required a deliberate commitment that might demand sacrifice of those who made it. Baptism was preached, and, indeed, stressed to these early Nephites as something pleasing to God and necessary for salvation in his kingdom—but it would be as easy for an unbaptized Nephite to still think of himself as a member of God’s people (albeit one who had

60. Widtsoe, *Evidences and Reconciliations*, 1:177, allows for the possibility that priesthood can exist independently of a church; after all, priesthood authority is necessarily prior to any divinely approved ecclesiastical organization.

61. What church did Adam join by receiving the baptism recorded in Moses 7? Having made my point, it is vital that I not be misunderstood: I do not mean to imply that eternal life is available without the ordinances of the priesthood, and I do not mean to suggest for a moment that those ordinances are available or valid in this dispensation apart from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. John A. Widtsoe, having observed that the priesthood can exist apart from an ecclesiastical organization, and that it has on occasion done so, declared nonetheless that, “whenever the Church exists, any and every person who holds the Priesthood must exercise his power under the laws and authority of the Church. Then, no Priesthood power is recognized on earth outside of the Church.” Widtsoe, *Evidences and Reconciliations*, 1:177–78. I fully agree. I have no intention of offering aid or comfort to schismatics and religious freelancers.

not yet gotten around to an important ordinance) as it is easy for some careless Latter-day Saints today to feel themselves members of the church, and believing members, even if they neglect sacrament services, drink coffee, smoke, and marry outside the temple. Eventually, however, it was apparent that being a Nephite could become, and for many perhaps had become, merely a matter of lineage, and therefore that it need involve no deliberate personal commitment to serve the Lord. It was obvious that the Nephites, as such, were not “the Lord’s people.” A more precise definition of that term, and a marker for who was to be counted among the Lord’s people and who was not, became something desirable.

In any event, the “church,” that innovation indirectly brought about by King Noah in the land of Nephi, maintained its separate existence in the land of Zarahemla. King Mosiah granted to Alma the right to “establish churches throughout all the land of Zarahemla” and authorized him “to ordain priests and teachers over every church” (Mosiah 25:19)⁶²—a prerogative heretofore pertaining to the kingship.⁶³ Indeed, Mosiah gave Alma authority over the church (Mosiah 26:8), thus effectively delegating to another man a major portion of the sacral authority that had traditionally been attached to the Nephite throne. (In what follows, we shall see that Mosiah had felt himself overburdened by the responsibilities he bore as king. He was presumably quite happy to divest himself of some of them.) Priests in the church at Zarahemla taught the people what they received from Alma to teach (Mosiah 25:21), he having received it in his turn from God, whom he represented. Thus, the pyramidal hierarchy of heavenly king, earthly king, priests, teachers, and people, so characteristic of earlier

62. The overall organization was called the “church,” but it was made up of subordinate local units also called “churches.” (There were seven of these local units in Zarahemla itself; see Mosiah 25:20–23.)

63. Or to those lineage, family, or clan leaders, in the earliest days, who effectively functioned as kings—as is clearly the case with Nephi (see 2 Nephi 5:18, 26; 6:2). Nevertheless, Turner’s point is well taken: “Although Mosiah granted Alma the legal right” to organize churches in Zarahemla, “it is evident . . . that Alma had not received his original authority from that prophet-king.” Turner, “Three Nephite Churches of Christ,” 106.

Nephite thought and practice, survived under the new order, albeit in somewhat different form.

It is true that King Mosiah seems to have retained to himself a council of priest-advisers even after the establishment of the church at Zarahemla (Mosiah 27:1). While it is possible that these men continued as a body of priests independent of the new church—the transition from a nonecclesiastical to an ecclesiastical priesthood structure does not need to have occurred all at once, or with absolute neatness—there is no compelling reason to assume that they did.⁶⁴ If the virtually universal pattern of advanced cultures in the ancient world held for the Nephites as well, their priesthood would represent many of the best educated and most astute men in the society and would be a natural reservoir of talented advisers for the monarch. There would be no reason, even after the establishment of the church, for King Mosiah to dismiss his council of advisers, regardless of their priestly status. And, indeed, it is noteworthy that the issue upon which they advise him, according to Mosiah 26:38–27:2, is a political matter transcending the church and extending, in fact, to all subjects of the king whether member or not. The king retained authority and responsibility for dealing with such issues.

Questions of ecclesiastical discipline, however, were now to be handled within the organization itself, without the direct involvement of the monarchy. But the establishment of a church within Nephite society, membership in which was both theoretically and practically distinguishable from simple Nephite nationality, led to unprecedented problems.⁶⁵ For one thing, some of the younger generation—those

64. Toscano, “Priesthood Concepts in the Book of Mormon,” 9, regards them as a continuing and independent sacerdotal body.

65. In addition to the problem discussed in the text, it might be noted that the only references to a historically existent “priestcraft” in the entire Book of Mormon occur in Alma 1 (at 1:12, 16), immediately following organization of a separately existing “church.” As Alma₂ put it to Nehor, “Behold, this is the first time that priestcraft has been introduced among this people” (Alma 1:12). Second Nephi 26:29 had defined the offence, saying that “priestcrafts are that men preach and set themselves up for a light unto the world, that they may get gain and praise of the world.” Perhaps the reason that it occurred now was that, in contrast to the earlier Nephite system, where kings (who, by virtue of their very rank, had no lack of glory or, presumably, of such wealth as was available to Nephites)

who had not experienced the great spiritual outpouring that occurred at the abdication sermon of King Benjamin, now perhaps more than two decades in the past—refused to be baptized or to join the church (Mosiah 26:1–5).⁶⁶ Their worldly influence, in turn, began to take its toll on those who had already enrolled themselves as members of the church, which was itself well into its second generation. These members of the church began to commit “many sins,” which obviously raised the issue of whether and how they were to be disciplined (see Mosiah 26:6–8).⁶⁷

Now there had not any such thing happened before in the church; therefore Alma was troubled in his spirit, and he caused that they should be brought before the king.

And he said unto the king: Behold, here are many whom we have brought before thee, who are accused of their brethren; yea, and they have been taken in divers iniquities. And they do not repent of their iniquities; therefore we have brought them before thee, that thou mayest judge them according to their crimes. (Mosiah 26:10–11)

Old habits die hard. Here, Alma—he of the pronounced anti-monarchical views—turns to the monarch for assistance in solving a grievous ecclesiastical problem. But he had miscalculated his man,

presided over the priesthood, separation of priesthood from lineage-based leadership now opened up the “ecclesiastical” route to power, glory, and success for people who would otherwise not have had access to it. Events in televangelism have shown how well religion can serve as a route to advancement, even for those with no great endowment of wealth or education to begin with.

66. This fact shows, implicitly, that the “church” at Zarahemla was meant for all of the inhabitants of that place and not merely for the refugees from the land of Nephi. Organization of the church by Mosiah and Alma represented a major restructuring of Zarahemlan society.

67. In a community of intention, as the church was, one had to ask just how seriously one could sin before it became obvious that his intention to serve God had ceased to exist. And if that intention was gone, could he any longer be validly considered a member of that community? (This was very much a question in early Islam. Did serious sins in and of themselves cause someone to cease to be a Muslim? Was faith alone enough? What of works?) Such questions would not arise where simple Nephite citizenship constituted membership of the people of God, without making a personal decision to join.

for King Mosiah₂ himself was probably Alma's greatest convert to the antimonarchical position. And, at least in this instance, Mosiah was a more consistent partisan of that stance than was the high priest. He refused to become involved in the kind of religious-ecclesiastical issue that he had put onto Alma's shoulders. "Behold," he said, "I judge them not; therefore I deliver them into *thy* hands to be judged" (Mosiah 26:12).

This was extremely troubling to Alma, who saw now no recourse but to approach the Lord in prayer for a solution to the pressing problem facing him (see Mosiah 26:13). The earthly king, who, in earlier Nephite tradition, had been the fount of religious authority and the last resort for religious questions, had definitively given up such a role. Only the heavenly king was left. In answer to Alma's earnest entreaties, the Lord revealed the idea of excommunication, whereby "whosoever will not repent of his sins the same shall not be numbered among my people" (Mosiah 26:32).⁶⁸ Put into practice, this idea resulted in the "blotting out" of the names of a number of erstwhile adherents of the gospel. "And it came to pass that Alma did regulate all the affairs of the church" (Mosiah 26:37). This idea of excommunication was obviously wholly new to Alma, who had grown up under the old ideology where one's birth "numbered" one among the people of the Lord—the Nephites—in such a way that one could not be "blotted out," and where one's primary social identity was national or genealogical rather than, as we might express it, "intentional" or "voluntary."⁶⁹

68. It has been suggested to me that Mosiah 5:8–12 contains the notion of excommunication. But this passage seems rather to refer to events of the postmortal judgment—that is, not to excommunication from an earthly church but to the even more serious, indeed spiritually fatal, "excommunication" from the Lord's presence.

69. Many Nephites apparently continued to see themselves as the Lord's chosen people purely on the basis of their genealogy—and the Lord clearly continued to reject such a self-congratulatory attitude. Note, for example, the drumbeat of warning sounded against "this people," the Nephites (repeated over and over again, clearly with deliberate intent), by Samuel the Lamanite at Helaman 13:5–6. Hope is held out only for "*his* people" (meaning Christ's; emphasis added)—who are not necessarily the same group.

Of Kings and Priests

When it became clear that none of his sons would accept the kingship, Mosiah proposed the abolition of Nephite monarchy⁷⁰—in language strongly reminiscent of Alma’s own position:

If it were possible that you could have just men to be your kings, who would establish the laws of God, and judge this people according to his commandments, yea, if ye could have men for your kings who would do even as my father Benjamin did for this people—I say unto you, if this could always be the case then it would be expedient that ye should always have kings to rule over you. . . .

Now I say unto you, that because all men are not just it is not expedient that ye should have a king or kings to rule over you.

For behold, how much iniquity doth one wicked king cause to be committed, yea, and what great destruction!

Yea, remember king Noah, his wickedness and his abominations, and also the wickedness and abominations of his people. Behold what great destruction did come upon them. (Mosiah 29:13, 16–18; cf. 29:30–31)

The example of King Noah is surely a clue that Alma’s experiences and Alma’s analysis of the events at the land of Nephi had been deeply influential, if not decisive, for Mosiah’s new position.

Like Alma, Mosiah talks about monarchy from the perspective of human equality. But, although the two men may superficially seem to be saying much the same thing, there is a fundamental difference between their two positions. “I command you,” Mosiah says,

70. It might be thought that Mosiah’s decision to abolish the monarchy came simply because there was no one in his family who would accept it and because he had no choice. In fact, however, his sons’ decision to forego their hereditary rights gave him opportunity for a choice that he on his own did not entirely have the right to make. When the decision was his alone, he could act on his principles without fear of defrauding his princely sons.

that ye have no king; that if these people commit sins and iniquities they shall be answered upon their own heads. For behold I say unto you, the sins of many people have been caused by the iniquities of their kings; therefore their iniquities are answered upon the heads of their kings. And now I desire that this inequality should be no more in this land, especially among this my people. . . . And many more things did king Mosiah write unto them, unfolding unto them all the trials and troubles of a righteous king, yea, all the travails of soul for their people, and also all the murmurings of the people to their king; and he explained it all unto them. And he told them that these things ought not to be; but that the burden should come upon all the people, that every man might bear his part. (Mosiah 29:30–34)

Where the nonroyal Alma had expressed his antimonarchical sentiments in much the same terms that we today would employ, with our insistence on human rights and the equality of all humanity before God and the law, Mosiah comes to the question from the *king's* perspective.⁷¹ (His approach is very unlike the nineteenth-century American thinking that some critics of the Book of Mormon claim to see in it.) Mosiah worries about the undue burden that kingship imposes even on those who conscientiously strive to carry out their responsibilities. Having attempted for more than three decades to discharge his royal duties well, Mosiah feels that it is the *king* who is victimized by the inequality inherent in the Nephite monarchical system. The ruler carries not only his own mistakes, but risks responsibility for those of his subjects if he has in any way, even inadvertently, misled them (see Mosiah 29:31).⁷²

Mosiah's concerns are true to life. "The reflection upon my situation and that of this army," said General George Washington (very

71. See Richard L. Bushman, "The Book of Mormon and the American Revolution," *BYU Studies* 17/1 (1976): 3–20.

72. What volumes this speaks for the character of Mosiah₂ (especially in contrast to King Noah). The king was clearly worried, too, about the potential threat that the continued existence of the monarchy might pose to his heir (see Mosiah 29:6–9).

nearly America's first king) at the beginning of the fateful year 1776, "produces many an uneasy hour when all around me are wrapped in sleep. Few people know the predicament we are in."⁷³ Similar views are expressed by both king and commoners in Shakespeare's historical play *The Life of King Henry V*. On the eve of the momentous battle of Agincourt (1415), Henry, unable to sleep, is depicted as wandering among his heavily outnumbered troops, disguised as a common soldier. He engages some of his men in conversation but is not entirely prepared for what he hears:

BATES

If his cause be wrong, our obedience to the king wipes the crime of it out of us.

WILLIAMS

But if the cause be not good, the king himself hath a heavy reckoning to make, when all those legs and arms and heads, chopped off in a battle, shall join together at the latter day and cry all "We died at such a place;" some swearing, some crying for a surgeon, some upon their wives left poor behind them, some upon the debts they owe, some upon their children rawly left. . . . Now, if these men do not die well, it will be a black matter for the king that led them to it.⁷⁴

Understandably, Henry is deeply troubled by this kind of talk and attempts without great success (while still concealing his identity) to argue against it. He does not manage, it seems, even to convince himself, and after his men have gone off to sleep we see him among the slumbering soldiers and speaking somewhat bitterly to himself of his envy for their simple lives, so free of responsibility:

Upon the king! let us our lives, our souls,
Our debts, our careful wives,
Our children and our sins lay on the king!
We must bear all. O hard condition,

73. Cited in David McCullough, *1776* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005), 1.

74. *The Life of Henry V*, 4.1.138–52.

Twin-born with greatness, subject to the breath
 Of every fool, whose sense no more can feel
 But his own wringing! What infinite heart's-ease
 Must kings neglect, that private men enjoy!
 And what have kings, that privates have not too,
 Save ceremony, save general ceremony?
 And what art thou, thou idol ceremony?
 What kind of god art thou, that suffer'st more
 Of mortal griefs than do thy worshippers?

...

Wherein thou art less happy being fear'd
 Than they in fearing.

...

No, thou proud dream,
 That play'st so subtly with a king's repose;
 I am a king that find thee, and I know
 'Tis not the balm, the sceptre and the ball,
 The sword, the mace, the crown imperial,
 The intertissued robe of gold and pearl,
 The farced title running 'fore the king,
 The throne he sits on, nor the tide of pomp
 That beats upon the high shore of this world,
 No, not all these, thrice-gorgeous ceremony,
 Not all these, laid in bed majestical,
 Can sleep so soundly as the wretched slave,
 Who with a body fill'd and vacant mind
 Gets him to rest. . . .
 The slave, a member of the country's peace,
 Enjoys it; but in gross brain little wots
 What watch the king keeps to maintain the peace,
 Whose hours the peasant best advantages.⁷⁵

75. *Life of Henry V*, 4.1.247–301.

These are, whether regarded as Henry's or as Shakespeare's, utterly pre-democratic sentiments.⁷⁶ So, too, are those of King Mosiah, although we can certainly understand how a reigning monarch might be inclined toward monarchical thoughts! Shakespeare's Henry is acutely aware that the king, although burdened with more than ordinary responsibility, is merely a man. Thus, his ironic words (he is still disguised as a commoner) convey a serious point:

I think the king is but a man, as I am: the violet smells to him as it doth to me; the element shows to him as it doth to me; all his senses have but human conditions: his ceremonies laid by, in his nakedness he appears but a man; and though his affections are higher mounted than ours, yet, when they stoop, they stoop with the like wing. Therefore when he sees reason of fears, as we do, his fears, out of doubt, be of the same relish as ours are.⁷⁷

Compare the sentiments expressed by King Benjamin, the father of Mosiah₂:

I have not commanded you to come up hither that ye should fear me, or that ye should think that I of myself am more than a mortal man.

But I am like as yourselves, subject to all manner of infirmities in body and mind; yet I have been chosen by this people, and consecrated by my father, and was suffered by the hand of the Lord that I should be a ruler and a king over this people. (Mosiah 2:10–11)

Neither Henry's view nor Benjamin's should be thought of as democratic, but merely realistic.

Perhaps Mosiah recalled the fate of Noah, who paid for his crimes with a very painful death while his people seem to have been spared.

76. The distinguished British historian A. L. Rowse, commenting upon this very passage, remarks, "I fear that this betrays, as usual, Shakespeare's opinion of the average man—not very democratic, no humbug." See A. L. Rowse, *The Annotated Shakespeare* (New York: Potter, 1978), 2:537.

77. *Life of Henry V*, 4.1.105–14.

(Although an evil man, Noah was nonetheless a king, member of a small and quite select fraternity. In this limited but not unimportant respect, Mosiah could probably feel some kinship with him.) Perhaps Mosiah remembered the words of his father Benjamin, spoken at the end of a long, conscientious, and laborious reign devoted to the service of his fellow men and thus to the service of God: “I say unto you that if ye should serve him who has created you. . . . I say, if ye should serve him with all your whole souls yet ye would be unprofitable servants” (Mosiah 2:21; cf. 2:17).

Moved by Mosiah’s obviously deep feelings, the people agreed to his plan to abolish the monarchy. “Therefore they relinquished their desires for a king, and became exceedingly anxious that every man [even those of royal blood] should have an equal chance throughout all the land; yea, and every man expressed a willingness to answer for his own sins” (Mosiah 29:38).

So the relatively secular institution of the “judgeship” was introduced among and accepted by the Nephites (Mosiah 29:11, 41–42) to complement the religious office of “high priest” that had already been introduced. (In a certain sense, this merely formalized the division of functions that Mosiah and Alma had already worked out some time before.) However, the people chose as their first chief judge Alma₂, who had previously received the office of high priest from his father, the first Alma (Mosiah 29:42). Mosiah₂ having had no willing heirs, this Alma had already received the plates of brass, the records, and the interpreters, the sacred relics that, as we have seen, once formed so important a part of the symbolism of Nephite kingship (Mosiah 28:10, 20). The bestowal of the chief judgeship upon Alma may therefore be plausibly read as an attempt on the part of the people to recombine the secular and sacred functions of the kingship in one man, who might, it is true, not bear the title of “king” but who would nonetheless serve essentially the same role. Kingship had, after all, been a rather popular institution. Nephi’s brothers had thought that he coveted the title (1 Nephi 16:38), and he had later been obliged to refuse it from his people (2 Nephi 5:18; 6:2). Zeniff was made king by the voice of the people in the land of Nephi (Mosiah 7:9). Alma’s

people sought to persuade him to accept kingly honors, but he refused (Mosiah 23:6–7). And it was only after Mosiah’s passionate appeal to his people that “they relinquished their desires for a king” (Mosiah 29:38). Furthermore, the monarchy continued to fascinate and attract factions, at least within the Nephite society, long after its abolition, as is shown by repeated efforts through the years to effect its restoration. Alma 51, 60, 62, for instance, records the struggles Moroni had with the so-called “king-men,” who sought to alter the laws in order to reestablish kingship. Third Nephi 6:30 alludes to yet another attempt to put a king on a Nephite throne, and 3 Nephi 7:9–10 describes an effort that was partially and temporarily successful in doing just that. Obviously, kingship had its appeal—and not only to the one who would, if successful, gain the throne.

The apparent attempt of the Nephite people to circumvent their king’s rejection of kingship did not succeed, however. After only about five years, Alma₂ gave up his position as chief judge (presumably the least effective of his two offices) in order to concentrate his attention upon the high priesthood as the solution for the urgent problems that faced the Nephites (Alma 4:15–20). Never again would a Nephite king serve as both religious and temporal leader of his people. The relatively secular office of the chief judgeship would continue almost to the end of Nephite civilization, but we have no record of any chief judge ever ordaining priests; such ordinations were the prerogative of the high priests before the coming of Christ (as at Alma 6:1; 3 Nephi 7:25),⁷⁸ and then, after the coming of Christ and the apparent disappearance of that office, of the “disciples, who were called the elders of the church” (Moroni 3:1).⁷⁹ Priesthood functions were essentially severed from governmental functions, and the two would never be fully recombined in the sacral kingship with which Nephite history had

78. Ammon, Aaron, Omner, and Himni—the four sons of Mosiah₂—consecrated priests among the Lamanites (Alma 23:4), but there is no reason, despite their absence of fourteen years (Alma 17:4), to suppose that they did so independent of the priesthood authority resident in the Nephite church. Later, Ammon at least appears as an ecclesiastical subordinate to Alma₂ (Alma 30:20, 30).

79. The office of high priest is not mentioned later than 3 Nephi 6:21–22, 27, by which time it has clearly become corrupt.

begun in the New World. The material objects that had once pertained to the Nephite monarchy continued to be passed down but now along a nonroyal line of high priests and prophets (Alma 37:1–47; 63:1–2, 10–13; 3 Nephi 1:2–3; 4 Nephi 1:47–49; Mormon 1:2–5; 4:23; 8:3–5; Moroni 10:2; Joseph Smith—History 1:34–35, 42, 50–53, 59–60).

This brief glance at the question of priesthood and authority in the book of Mosiah has revealed an intricately complex and remarkably consistent system underlying the many incidental details of its already highly involved narrative. I do not see how anyone can fail to be impressed with what the book of Mosiah discloses about the nuanced richness of the Book of Mormon. I certainly have been.

