“Wicked Traditions” and “Cunning Arts”: Wise Men, Sorcery, and Metalwork in Nephite Society

Dan Belnap
dan_belnap@byu.edu

Daniel L. Belnap
Daniel Belnap
Dan Belnap

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub

Part of the Mormon Studies Commons

Original Publication Citation
Seek Ye Words of Wisdom: Studies of the Book of Mormon, Bible, and Temple in honor of Stephen D. Ricks

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation
Belnap, Dan; Belnap, Daniel L.; Belnap, Daniel; and Belnap, Dan, "‘Wicked Traditions’ and ‘Cunning Arts’: Wise Men, Sorcery, and Metalwork in Nephite Society" (2020). Faculty Publications. 4478. https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub/4478

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
Seek Ye Words of Wisdom
SEEK YE WORDS OF WISDOM

STUDIES OF THE BOOK OF MORMON, BIBLE, AND TEMPLE IN HONOR OF STEPHEN D. RICKS

EDITED BY DONALD W. PARRY, GAYE STRATHEARN, AND SHON D. HOPKIN
In the ninetieth year of the reign of the judges, four years after the ministry of Samuel the Lamanite, the “great signs and wonders” that he had prophesied of concerning the coming of Christ began to appear. Yet even as they convinced some, others expressed doubt as to what the signs meant, believing instead that the coming of Christ was a “wicked tradition, which has been handed down unto us by our fathers, to cause us that we should believe in some great and marvelous thing which should come to pass . . . therefore they can keep us in ignorance” (Hel. 16:20). As the reference suggests, the belief in the coming of Christ, a prophecy that had defined the Nephite people since their arrival in the New World, was now viewed by some as propaganda that was deliberately espoused and perpetuated by others to keep the general population compliant under the current leadership.

This ideological perspective was not new, having been advocated by Korihor approximately seventy years earlier. Recorded in Alma 30, he declared the religious beliefs and practices associated with belief in Christ as

1. Helaman 16:10, 12 suggest that the majority of the Nephites no longer followed the will of God and, as time went on, that majority grew in number.
vain and foolish traditions that led to “a frenzied” and “deranged” mind (vv. 13–14, 16). These traditions, their support by the church leadership, and their perpetuation in church praxis, Korihor continued, “are laid down by ancient priests, to usurp power and authority over [the people], to keep [the people] in ignorance” (v. 23). He sums up in verse 27:

   And thus ye lead away this people after the foolish traditions of your fathers, and according to your own desires; and ye keep them down, even as it were in bondage, that ye may glut yourselves with the labors of their hands, that they durst not look up with boldness, and that they durst not enjoy their rights and privileges.

But the passage in Helaman was more than a repetition of Korihor’s doctrine and political philosophy. In Helaman 16:21, the tradition of Christ’s coming was considered not just because it was an ideology taught by the politico-religious elite to maintain power, but also because it was reinforced by the selfsame individuals, who “will, by the cunning and mysterious arts of the evil one, work some great mystery which we cannot understand, which will keep us down to be servants to their words, and also servants unto them . . . thus will they keep us in ignorance.”

What these “cunning and mysterious arts” supposedly possessed by the unnamed leadership were is not explained in the text, but the context suggests that the physical signs observed by the people were understood by some to be the result of these arts and used by the leadership perpetuating these beliefs to maintain their own authority. The assumption that the signs were the results of human manipulation is reinforced in 3 Nephi 2:1–2 as the reader is told that following the emergence of further signs, “the people began to forget those signs and wonders which they heard, and began to be less and less astonished at a sign or a wonder from heaven . . . imagining up some vain thing in their hearts, that it was wrought by men and by the power of the devil, to lead away and deceive the hearts of the people.” As the text suggests, the physical signs, both heard and seen, associated with the prophecies concerning Christ’s birth were understood by many to have been “wrought” by men working with the power of the devil or “evil one,” presumably the “cunning and mysterious arts” men-
tioned earlier, with the purpose of maintaining their politico-cultural status.

While the association of the mysterious arts with the religious ideology would appear to be a late innovation (only happening when the specific signs associated with the birth of Christ were manifested) intriguingly it may reflect a much older tradition, one that can be found before the original community even left the Old World. Following Nephi’s *de facto* assumption of leadership described in 1 Nephi 16, verse 38 records the case made by Nephi’s brothers as to why they ought to kill him:

Now, he says that the Lord has talked with him, and also that angels have ministered unto him. But behold, we know that he lies unto us; and he tells us these things, and he worketh many things by his cunning arts, that he may deceive our eyes . . . and after he has led us away, he has thought to make himself a king and ruler over us, that he may do with us according to his will and pleasure.

Like the later unnamed leadership in Helaman 16, Nephi, was accused of possessing “cunning arts,” which he employed to deceive the other members of the group visually in order to establish his own political authority. The performance of these arts explained the supernatural phenomena the group had experienced, including both Nephi’s own visionary experiences as well as the manifestations that the brothers themselves had witnessed (see 1 Ne. 3:29–30). Significantly, in both cases, while those who witness the manifestations do not believe that the events are evidence of divine activity, there is the acknowledgment that they in fact witnessed something; the manifestation, whatever it was, was the result of the “cunning arts” of the practitioner.

Unfortunately, there is no explicit description as to what “cunning arts” entailed beyond the passages provided above, yet the context of each suggests that “cunning arts” should be understood as a skill that could produce auditory and visual manifestations observable by others. The qualification of it as an art suggests it was something that could be taught and acquired, rather than bestowed, and its later association with the devil, or “evil one,” highlights its less-than-divine origin. With these qualifications in mind, it appears that “cunning arts” and their performance
may be best understood as “magic.” Indeed, this is one of the primary definitions of “cunning arts” at the time that Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon.\(^2\) Thus, the Book of Mormon appears to contain a tradition spanning almost six hundred years in which Nephite elites, including the Nephite founder, were understood by some to possess sorcerous “arts” through which they deceived the populace in order to receive or maintain political power.

This assertion, as striking as it may be, leads to perhaps an even bigger question: how did Nephi, and those that followed after him, became associated with “cunning arts” in the first place? Again, the text is silent, but another similarity between Nephi, and the religious leadership supposedly working the cunning and mysterious arts in Helaman 16 suggests a tantalizing possibility, namely, the association of Nephite elite with metalworking. If this is the case, then the Helaman 16 accusation may reflect the ambiguous and ambivalent role of the smith, the challenge of Nephite identity with others within the Nephite community, and even the heart of the Lamanite-Nephite contention that defined each society until the coming of Christ.

**THE CUNNING, CURIOUS METALSMITH**

While studies have largely concentrated on the presence of metallurgy in the Book of Mormon, the social and cultural significance of smiting has

---

\(^2\) While this study will look at the role of *cunning men* and *cunning work* from a biblical perspective, the term *cunning men* was used throughout premodern England to refer to specialists in so-called “folk” magic. Such individuals were often described as performing divinatory practices and engaging with supernatural entities, abilities that were named by some as “cunning arts.” See Owen Davies, *Cunning-Folk: Popular Magic in English History* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2003). This has led some scholars to designate Joseph Smith as a *cunning man*; see Catherine L. Albanese, “The Metaphysical Joseph Smith,” in *Joseph Smith Jr: Reappraisals after Two Centuries*, ed. Reid L. Neilson and Terry L. Givens (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, 65–72). For more on the *cunning man* and the church, see Jonathan A. Stapley, *The Power of Godliness: Mormon Liturgy and Cosmology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 105–24.
gone largely unnoticed. Yet if Nephite civilization was similar to other traditional cultures, including that of ancient Israel, metalsmithing would have bestowed upon its practitioners authority, both social and religious. However, their authority would have been viewed somewhat ambivalently; the metalsmiths were admired and desired because of the benefit they provided to the greater community yet at the same time were distrusted, perhaps even feared, because of the transforming power they possessed.


4. Paula M. McNutt notes these contrasts in her study *The Forging of Israel: Iron Technology, Symbolism and Tradition in Ancient Society*, The Social World of Biblical Antiquity Series 8 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1990), 4: “In many societies the ironsmith holds a position of prestige. Although there are societies in which he is despised rather than honored, he seems always to be held in awe. According to the general interpretation, the pattern seems to be that among pastoral peoples he is perceived as a dangerous sorcerer, but among agriculturalists is honored, often holding the position of counselor, and sometimes chief or priest. Among the latter, he is often looked upon as a wise and clever man who is an important go-between and trader, a man whose curse is taken seriously, a prophet, or a person with healing powers. In many societies he also serves as an important person in initiation rites, secret societies, and the religious life of the community in general.” See Paula M. McNutt, “The Kenites, the Midianites, and the Rechabites as Marginal Mediators in Ancient Israelite Tradition,” *Semeia* 67 (1994): 111: “Artisans and metalsmiths in traditional African and Middle Eastern societies tend to form marginal groups that are regarded with ambivalence by the dominant social groups. There is, in fact, a clear incongruence between notions and actions with regard to such marginal groups—between the ambivalent attitudes directed toward them and a reliance on them for the production of economic and cultural necessities.”
Augmenting this ambivalence was the often-secretive nature of the work. Smiths tended to work in enclosed spaces, encircled by smoke, heat, and darkness. Moreover, they rarely shared the processes by which they forged metal, keeping such knowledge within the immediate family or in secretive “guilds.”

Reasons the trade was associated with secrecy range from protection of the trade itself to concerns of magical sabotage by other smiths. Regardless, what holds true across all smithing traditions is the association of the smith with some type of magical expertise, including, apparently, biblical tradition.

5. McNutt, Forging of Israel, 45: “Smiths tend to form groups apart that are in some way isolated from the rest of the community. This separation may be radical, especially in societies in which the smith is held in low esteem, or it may take the form of endogamous families, as seems to be typical of societies in which he is honored. The smith’s trade is one that is generally passed on through heredity.” Concern must be noted by the use of the term guild, which is often used to describe the trade organizations of medieval Europe. With that said, there is some biblical evidence that suggests participants of a given trade resided near one another. First Chronicles 4:14 describes the valley of the ḥarašim, or craftsmen. See Dan Levene and Beno Rothenberg, A Metallurgical Gemara: Metals in the Jewish Sources (London: Institute for Archaeo-Metallurgical Studies, 2007), 12–22.

6. This latter concern appears among some African traditional societies. See Philip De Barros, “Iron Metallurgy: Sociocultural Context,” in Ancient African Metallurgy: The Socio-Cultural Context, ed. Joseph O. Vogel (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira, 2000), 166: “In central Malawi . . . sorcery was usually given as the explanation for the failed smelt when successful technical procedures had been faithfully followed and there were no known prohibitions or taboos that had been violated . . . . This fear of sorcery led to considerable variation in furnace design, [and] smelting procedure . . . because smelters rarely communicated these to other smelters.” See also Walter E. A. van Beek, The Forge and the Funeral: The Smith in Kapsiki/Higi Culture (Madison: Michigan State University Press, 2015); and Mircea Eliade, The Forge and the Crucible, trans. Stephen Corrin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956).

7. For more on the relationship between the “artisan” and magic, see Mary W. Helms, “Joseph the Smith and the Salvational Transformation of Matter in Early Medieval Europe,” in Anthropos 101 (2006): 451–71: “Through their skillful activities artisans are both earthly correlates of creative divinities and vital intermediaries linking earthly society with the wider spiritual world. The heart of the matter is the widespread belief that skilled craftsmen are privy
The challenge is that there is no recognized Hebrew term for “magic” as we may think of it today. In fact, defining “magic” is extremely difficult. In the ancient view, the world was numinous, interacting directly with the divine and supernatural. Thus distinguishing what was “magic” and what wasn’t isn’t always clear for scholarship. Most recently, Dolansky has provided the following definition of magic: “an act performed by a person (as opposed to a theophany or a direct act of God) that has no physical, causal connection to the expected or actual results.” With this definition in mind, the primary form of magic in the Old Testament had to do with divination, which consisted of different types of actions that were not performed in the official cult but engaged with the numinous world through non-causal means. As noted above, the cultures around ancient Israel believed that the natural world itself revealed divine intents, thus practices that accessed these unspoken communications could be utilized. Even within cultic practice, ancient Israel sought God’s intent through means that might strike the modern reader as magical, such as the use of the Urim and Thummim (Num. 27:21; 1 Sam. 28:6) and the priestly ephod (1 Sam. 23:9–11; 30:7–8), while others, such as Joseph and Daniel, were skilled oneiromantics, or dream interpreters.

10. For more on divination in ancient Israel, see Ann Jeffers, *Magic and Divination in Ancient Palestine and Syria* (Leiden: Brill, 1996); and Frederick H.
Yet, as Deuteronomy 18:9–11 makes clear, there were other divinatory practices that were clearly not acceptable. The distinction between these acts and those that were acceptable appears to be correct personnel in terms of performance and whether or not one was seeking Yahweh’s will. The narrative of Saul and the “witch” of Endor provides a visible example of the distinction. Because of Saul’s unrighteousness, “when Saul inquired of the Lord, the Lord answered him not, neither by dreams, nor by urim, nor by prophets. Then said Saul unto his servants, seek me a woman that hath a familiar spirit that I may go to her and inquire of her . . . then said the woman, whom shall I bring up unto thee? . . . And the woman said unto Saul, I saw gods ascending out of the earth. And he said unto her, What form is he of? And she said, An old man cometh up; and he is covered with a mantle. And Saul perceived that it was Samuel” (1 Sam. 28:6–7, 11, 13–14). As is demonstrated in the above text, the “correct” forms were not working for Saul, so instead he went through an improper channel. Importantly, while the practice went against the law given to Israel, its performance appears to have been efficacious. In other words, while Saul did not receive the divine will of God, he did encounter a supernatural force that outlined what was going to happen. In this sense, the divination was successful even as it demonstrated why Saul should not be king.

There are indications that suggest that metalworkers were thought of, at least in some cases, as individuals who could interact and intercede with the numinous, both within the acceptable limitations of ancient Israel’s faith and without. Two terms in particular are used that indicate

---


12. The text does not actually refer to the woman as a witch but designates her as an ‘ēṣet ba‘alat ‘ôb, or woman who is “master over a spirit/ghost.”
a relationship between smith and magic worker: ḥakam and ḥaraš. The first of these, ḥakam, has the general meaning of “wise, knowledgeable, understanding” and is translated at times as “cunning.” It is also used to refer to those skilled in craftsmanship. Thus, in 1 Chronicles 22:15–16, those gathered by David for the construction of the temple are described as “hewers and workers of stone and timber, and all manner of cunning men for every manner of work. Of the gold, the silver and the brass and the iron.” Similarly, when the temple was actually built during the reign of Solomon, Solomon requested of his Phoenician counterpart: “Send me now therefore a man cunning to work in gold, and in silver, and in brass, and in iron . . . that can skill to grave with the cunning men that are with me in Judah and in Jerusalem, whom David my father did provide” (2 Chron. 2:7). Hiram, the Phoenician king, responded, “I have sent a cunning man (ʾiš ḥakam) . . . skillful to work in gold, and in silver, in brass, in iron” (vv. 13–14). Isaiah 40:20 mentions a “cunning workman” who can make the “graven image,” while Jeremiah 10:9 notes that the “silver spread into plates from Tarshish and gold from Uphaz” are “the work of cunning men.”

One “cunning man” in particular holds a prominent place in Israel’s history. According to Exodus 31, Bezaleel was selected as the primary supervisor over the construction of the tabernacle because he was filled “with the spirit of God, in wisdom (ḥōkmāh), and in understanding and in knowledge and in all manner of workmanship, to devise cunning works, to work in gold, and in silver, and in brass” (vv. 3–4). Later, both Bezaleel and his assistant, Aholiab, are described as individuals “filled with wisdom of heart, to work all manner of work, of the engraver, and of the cunning workman . . . that devise cunning work” (Exod. 35:35).

While ḥakam can be used to describe one who engages in craftwork, it appears to refer more specifically to the particular knowledge the individual possesses to perform the skill. It is the association of the ḥakam

---


14. The designation “cunning workman” stems from another Hebrew term, ḥašav, translated in a number of places as “cunning” or “curious.” It differs from ḥakam in that it appears to specifically reference the hands-on skill in tradecraft, as opposed to the cognitive knowledge that the individual could have had concerning the skill. Thus, a ḥākām may also be a ḥōšev, but a ḥōšev isn’t necessarily a ḥākām.
with knowledge not possessed generally, but held by a small subset of skilled individuals, that leads to the term’s usage to describe those who can work magic. In Genesis 41:8, the Pharaoh asks for an interpretation of his dreams from his magicians and “wise men” (ḥakamîm). Similarly, in Exodus 7:11, ḥakamîm are associated with the other magicians of Egypt and the “wise men” of Ahasuerus who “knew the times” (i.e., astrology; Esther 1:13). While it is tempting to assume the term only refers to foreign magic workers, following Joseph’s interpretation of Pharaoh’s dreams, the king states that Joseph is more “wise” (ḥakam) than any other. Daniel, too, is recognized as “ten times better than all the magicians and astrologers” in the Babylonian kingdom (Dan. 1:20). Elsewhere he is associated with the other “wise men,” which included the magicians, astrologers, and sorcerers (Dan. 2:2, 13; 4:7–8; 5:7), and at least in one reference he is actually referred to by the king as “master of the magicians, astrologers, Chaldeans, and soothsayers” (Dan. 5:11). The similarity between “wise men” and “cunning men” is their possession of knowledge that allows them access to divine knowledge that others do not possess. As we’ve seen, smiths could also be designated as “wise men” (ʾiš ḥakam and ḥakamîm are both used to describe those who work metal), but an explicit understanding that smiths were also magic workers requires a review of the Hebrew term ḥaraš.

While ḥaraš has a general meaning of “to cut, scratch, inscribe,” it is often used to describe the fabrication or making of something. It is in this context that we find the term used with metalwork. For instance, the skilled workman sent to help Solomon was not only a ḥākām but in 1 Kings 7:13 a ḥōreš of brass, thus specifying his specific skill at metalwork, while Isaiah 44:12 references the ḥōreš of iron. Not surprisingly, both Bezaleel and Aholiab, who are also recognized as ḥākām, are each also designated as a ḥōreš. This term is also found especially in the context of

17. The spellings here reflect the participial or nominative forms of Hebrew pronunciation rather than the root word, which is spelled without vowel inflection.
idol-making. In Hosea 13:2 it reads, “And now they sin more and more, and have made them molten images of their silver, and idols according to their own understanding, all of it the work of the craftsmen (ḥarašîm).” In Deuteronomy 27:15, “cursed is the man that maketh any graven or molten image . . . the work of the hands of the craftsman (ḥārāš) and putteth it in a secret place.” The Deuteronomic injunction suggests that smiths may not have just been involved in the making of idols but may have been understood as religious specialists by virtue of their making the idol, a supposition that is further suggested in Isaiah 40:19 and 44:9–12, which also place the metalworkers in the role of religious authority because of their unique skill in making the idol.


19. It is possible these passages are polemics against the role of craftsmen in the “waking up” of cultic statuary, a role found in Mesopotamian texts. One such text, Esarhaddon’s Renewal of the Gods, describes the restoration of cultic statuary of Marduk. The text includes the following prayer from the king to Marduk: “Endow the skilled craftsman whom you ordered to complete this task with as high an understanding as Ea, their creator. Teach them skills by your exalted word; make all their handiwork succeed through the craft of Ninshiku.” Later, he states: “I brought carpenters, goldsmiths, metalworkers, stoncutters—skilled artisans knowledgeable in the mysteries—into the temple . . . I installed the craftsmen there.” After making the statue of “red gold,” the king then performed the mis pî pît pî ritual, the opening of the mouth, which “enlivened” the statuary. As part of the ritual process, the craftsmen take the finished statuary out of the temple room to the river where representatives of divine craftsmen “touch” the images, presumably finishing them. The human craftsmen then offer their tools to the deity Ea. On the second day, again the divine craftsmen note the portions of the statuary that they created, the mortal craftsmen verbally declaring that the deities made the statuary, not themselves. For more on this ritual, see Catherine L. McDowell, The Image of God in the Garden of Eden: The Creation of Humankind in Genesis 2:5–3:24 in Light of mis pî pît pî and wpt-r Rituals of Mesopotamia and Ancient Israel, Siphrut 15 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2015), 43–85; see also Christopher Walker and Michael B. Dick, “The Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia: The Mesopotamian mis pî Ritual,” in Born in Heaven, Made on Earth: The Creation of the Cult Image in Ancient Near East, ed. Michael B. Dick (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1998), 55–120. Signifi-
The term ḫrš is also associated with the working of magic. The craftsman god of Ugarit, Kothar wa-Hasis, is referred to at least four times as ḫrš yd, which Mark Smith translates as “the Handy Artisan.”20 In two other texts, Kothar is understood as a diviner (ḫbr), while in another, the weapons that he makes for Baal are magically imbued by the incantations that he places on his finished work.21 Thus, the Ugaritic deity associated with smithing was also recognized as a magic practitioner. Another Ugaritic deity, El, also possessed this skill, evidenced by the use of the term’s verb form in the creation of a figurine.22 Outside of the mythical texts, the root is also found in a verbal form describing the making of an incantation.

---

20. Mark Stratton Smith, “Kothar wa-Hasis, the Ugaritic Craftsman God” (PhD diss., Yale University, 1985), 91–93.

21. UDB 1.2, 10–15: “Kothar fashioned two maces, and pronounced their names. ‘You, Your name is Expeller. Expeller, expel Yam, expel Yam from his throne, Nahar from the siege of his dominion! You must leap from the hand of Baal, like a falcon from his fingers. Strike the shoulders of Prince Yam, the chest of Ruler Nahar!’”; also lines 18–23: “Kothar fashioned two maces, and he pronounced their names: You, your name is ‘All-Driver.’” All-Driver, drive Yam away, drive Yam from his throne, Nahar from the siege of his dominion! You must leap from the hand of Baal, like a falcon from his fingers. Strike the skull of Prince Yam, the brow of Ruler Nahar! Let Yam collapse in a heap, and let him fall to the ground!” See also Mark Smith, The Ugaritic Baal Cycle, vol. 1: Introduction with text, translation, and commentary of KTU 1.1–1.2, Supplements to Vetus Testamentum 55 (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 336–79, who discusses this passage in length, particularly the incantatory aspect of the naming of the weapons.

22. In the Kirta epic, Kirta becomes deathly ill, and El heals him by “crafting” a personage out of clay and then investing it with power to move on its own, mourn, and heal. For more, see Theodore J. Lewis, “The Shaʿtiqatu Narrative from the Ugaritic Story about the Healing of Kirta,” Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions 13 (2013): 188–211.
while in the Deir Alla inscription a nominative form is found meaning “spell.”

Though many of the Old Testament usages are too brief in context, at least one reference is understood by some biblical scholars as evidence of smith-as-magic worker. Isaiah 3:2–3 lists professions and offices of those who would be taken from Jerusalem because of its wickedness. Among the list is the ḥakam harāsim, translated in the KJV as the “skilled artisan.” Yet other, more contemporary translations translate the phrase as “magician” (NEB), “skillful magician” (NAB), even “diviner” (Watts, Isaiah 1–33). Further hints concerning the relationship between the words smith and magic may be in the Ketef Hinnom amulets. Discovered in 1979 in the Hinnom valley, these amulets (the larger measuring 1 by 3.75 inches, the smaller measuring .5 by 1.5 inches) were inscribed silver sheets that are now understood to have been apotropaic amulets protecting the wearer from demonic forces.

In summary, the terms ḫkm and ḥrš, which were both associated with metalworkers in the Old Testament and the related ancient Near East, reflect the unique skillset required to work metal. They suggest that metalworkers were understood to possess distinctive knowledge, reflected in their attendant roles either in religious contexts or as magic workers. As we shall see, the social ambiguities associated with smiths also appear in those ascribed to metalworking skills in the Old Testament.


THE AMBIGUOUS STATUS OF THE SMITH IN ANCIENT ISRAEL

As has been demonstrated above, the texts depicted the smith-as-religious-specialists/magic workers both positively and negatively. While the smith may have been filled “with the spirit of God, in wisdom, and in understanding, and in knowledge” (Exod. 31:3), such as the builders of the tabernacle, they could also have been the makers of idols, even involved in the worship of such. Yet, even the metalworkers who were clearly devoted to Jehovah could make items that would be construed as magical items and used inappropriately by others. Perhaps the best example of this ambiguity is the creation and use of the brass serpent made by Moses.

Both the original narrative in Numbers and the narrative given by Alma in the Book of Mormon note the positive uses of the brass serpent, namely, that it healed those who looked at it and represented Christ on the cross (John 3:14; 2 Ne. 25:20; Hel. 8:14–15). Second Kings 18:4 notes that among the religious reforms initiated by Hezekiah was the destruction of the “brazen serpent that Moses had made: for unto those days the children of Israel did burn incense to it.” Its appellation nehushtan may give some insight as to why deference was given to the metal object. The term nāḥūš, from which the nehushtan is derived, is the common designation for copper and bronze (the biblical usage making no distinction), thus the designation of the item appears to reflect its composition. Yet the root of nāḥūš, which is nāḥāš, is the term for “serpent,” thus the brass serpent is a n'haš har'hošet. Even the qal verbal form, while used to denote snakes in its simple nominative form, appears to mean “to whisper, to hiss” (hence its presumed association with serpents) and in the piel form is understood to mean “to divine, do omens,” thus the verbal form is associated with performing magic, specifically divination. How the brass object made by Moses became an item of veneration in ancient Israel is not provided, but the multiple meanings and usages of the root nāḥāš may explain the later confusion as to the function of the object.

26. Dolansky, Now You See It, 42 explains the difficulty with this particular term. Many believe the overlapping definitions reflect the onomatopoeic similarity between hissing of snakes and whispering of incantations.
But the ambiguity extended beyond the metal objects to the smiths themselves. The first smith mentioned in the Bible is Tubal-Cain, found in the lineage of Cain’s descendants: “And Zillah, she also bare Tubal-Cain, an instructor of every artificer in brass and iron” (Gen. 4:22). Though fronted and ended by the descriptions of Cain and Lamech, the mention of Tubal-Cain is surprisingly neutral. According to the description, Tubal-Cain was an “instructor” of all horēš in brass and iron. Though we have explored the term hrēš as a description of those with smithing skills, the term is also used to describe the act of plowing. Some have suggested that this description designates Tubal-Cain as a farmer, who, perhaps, innovated farming by introducing plowing with metal. Yet, the description also hints at the potential violence that the smith could embody. Translated as “instructor,” the Hebrew term laṭaš is found elsewhere to mean “sharp,” or, in its verbal form, “to sharpen.” In fact, outside of the Genesis reference, this is the sole usage of the term. If this is the definition for Genesis 4 as well, the overall translation becomes “Tubal-Cain, a sharpener of all the horēš of iron and bronze.” Tubal-Cain-as-sharpener thus highlights the manner by which smiths would incorporate ambivalence into the objects they made. While sharpening a plow or tool made it more effective, it could also render it as a weapon.27

The ambivalence of the smith is also manifested in the unique relationship of many of the smiths with Israel. We’ve already noted the place of Tubal-Cain, but even individuals such as Moses, who is ascribed smithing skills via the brass serpent narrative, held an indeterminate position within the community of Israel. While recognized as Israel’s spiritual leader, Moses, according to the biblical tradition, was not raised in an Israelite household. Moreover, during the Exodus Moses uniquely straddled the divine and mortal realms, acting as God in a way that separated him from

27. John F. A. Sawyer suggests in his study, “Cain and Hephaestus: possible relics of metalworking traditions in Genesis 4,” Abr-Nahrain 24 (1986): 155–66, that the description hints at the introduction of warfare: “The emphasis may rather be on the type of artefact mainly associated with the verb [laṭaš], that is to say, sharp weapons of war, and on the new frightening and belligerent power brought into the world by Tubal Cain” (161).
other mortal-divine interlocutors. Moses, for instance, though certainly Israelite by blood, straddled the divine and mortal world and was often treated as separate from the community as a whole, culminating in his inability to enter into the Promised Land.

Similarly, Aholiab, the divinely chosen smith called to build the tabernacle, and Hiram’s servant who was sent to Solomon to assist in building the temple, are both associated with the tribe of Dan, a marginalized tribe on the northern border of Israel’s territory known specifically for its idol worship and interaction with foreigners. The association of Dan with idolatry is established in Judges 18, as the Danites encounter the priest of Micah and offer him, along with his ephod, teraphim, graven image, and molten image, the role of tribal priest and then possess the city of Laish, renaming it Dan. Archaeological evidence suggests that the city itself had already been established as a metallurgical center. This is the only such narrative associated with a given tribe. As for the city, it was situated at

28. See Wayne A. Meeks, “Moses as God and King,” in Religions in Antiquity: Essays in Memory of Erwin Ramsdell Goodenough, ed. Jacob Neusner (Leiden: Brill, 1968), 354–71; see also Stephen L. Herring, “Moses as Divine Substitute in Exodus,” in Criswell Theological Review 92 (2012): 53–68. Interestingly, Moses’s extended family also seem to be smiths. Aaron, his brother, knew how to make the golden calf, and Aaron’s brother-in-law was named “Nahshon,” the root of which is ṃḥš; see Richard A. Henshaw, Female and Male: The Cultic Personnel, the Bible and the Rest of the Ancient Near East, Princeton Theological Monograph Series 31 (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick, 1994), 3.32.4. See also Frank S. Frick, “Rechab,” in The Anchor Bible Dictionary—Vol. 5, O–Sh, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 630–32: “In a preindustrial society, the smith had to be familiar with many technical procedures, the knowledge of which was handed down and guarded jealously from one generation to the next . . . metallurgists in antiquity, as a rule, formed proud endogamous lines of families with lengthy genealogies.”

the northernmost border of Israel’s territory and, under the reign of Jehroboam, was notable as one of the two centers of golden calf worship.\textsuperscript{30} The ambivalence concerning the tribe of Dan and its eponymous center, the city of Dan, may explain its absence in the list of Israelite tribes in Revelation 7 and the Christian tradition that the anti-Christ will come from the tribe of Dan.\textsuperscript{31}

In all three cases, Tubal-Cain, Moses, and the Danite smiths, the smith is situated in ambiguous contexts, a part of and yet not part of their respective communities. This liminal status, coupled with the powers associated with the smith described in the earlier section, suggests that ancient Israel understood the smith in a manner similar to other traditional societies, namely, a figure who, by virtue of the possession of unique skills, stood apart from the rest of society and who, by virtue of that power, possessed knowledge that placed them in a category similar to priests and magic workers.\textsuperscript{32} On the positive side, the smiths could be divinely inspired leaders, such as Moses, Bezaleel, and Aholiab; on the negative side they were makers of idols and associated with divination and incantations.

\textsuperscript{30} Some suggest that the final form of the Dan narrative in Judges 18 has been influenced by the Jeroboam narrative; see Bartusch, \textit{Understanding Dan}, 170–202.


\textsuperscript{32} Though this study has concentrated on the individual smith, the Old Testament notes the exclusive sociality of smiths. In Isaiah 44:11 the smith is mentioned with his “fellows.” While this may refer to fellow worshippers, it may also reflect the members of an association or guild. See Roland de Vaux, \textit{Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions}, trans. John McHugh (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 77: “A more general term, \textit{Harash}, denotes a worker in wood or stone, i.e., a smith, founder, or carver. They worked on the system of the family workshop, where the father handed on the craft to his son. . . . The crafts were, as a general rule, hereditary. . . . These craftsmen who worked side to side gradually organized themselves into guilds. . . . The head of a guild is called a ‘father,’ e.g., Yoab, ‘father’ of the Valley of the Smiths, I Ch 4:14, and the journeymen are called ‘sons.’”
Nephi’s record is replete with instances noting Nephi’s smithing prowess. His interest in metalwork appears as early as 1 Nephi 4 in his description of Laban’s sword, noting the quality of its workmanship and its steel blade. His possession of a steel bow also indicates his appreciation of metal. But it isn’t until 1 Nephi 17:9–11 that Nephi reveals his smithing abilities. According to the text, upon receiving divine instruction concerning the building of a ship, Nephi then asks for revelation: “Whither shall I go that I may find ore to molten, that I may make tools to construct the ship after the manner which thou hast shown me?” After finding the ore deposit, Nephi then states that he “did make a bellows wherewith to blow the fire,” suggesting that Nephi had built a forge. Upon arrival in the New World, he notes the ores that were present, while his first recorded revelation indicates that he was to make “plates of ore.” Finally, in 2 Nephi 5:15, he records, “I did teach my people to build buildings, and to work in all manner of copper, and of brass, and of steel, and of gold, and of silver, and of precious ores, which were in great abundance.”

Though brief, these passages highlight Nephi-as-smith similar to his Old Testament counterparts. Like Aholiab and Hiram’s servant, Nephi is an inspired craftsman directly charged in the building of the sacred precinct. Like Moses, Nephi is the spiritual leader of the entire community. Yet as productive as Nephi’s skills may be in the community, they also appear to be at the heart of the conflict between himself and his older brothers. In 1 Nephi 16:37–8, we find the following accusation by Laman:

Behold let us slay . . . our brother Nephi, who has taken it upon him to be our ruler and our teacher . . . how he says that the Lord has talked with him, and also that angels have ministered unto him. But behold, we know that he lies unto us; and tells us these things, and he worketh many things by his cunning arts, that he may deceive our eyes, thinking, perhaps, that he may lead us away into some strange wilderness; and after he has led us away, he has thought to make himself a king and a ruler over us.
Though the accusation follows on the heels of Ishmael’s death, it appears to allude to events preceding the death, namely, the manner in which Nephi₁ had become the *de facto* leader of the group.

The specific crisis is described in 1 Nephi 16:18–21; the inability of food procurement occurred because all of the bows were inoperable, including Nephi₁’s steel bow. According to his account, Nephi₁ compensated by making a new bow and arrow whereupon he then requested divine instruction to tell him where to find food. Following those instructions he returned “bearing the beasts which I had slain.” Thus, via his own craftsmanship and the divine instruction, Nephi₁ had become the food provider for the entire group. As for the manner in which the divine instruction was received, the narrative reveals that it came about from a metallic device that had appeared in the entrance of his father’s tent earlier in the journey.

According to Nephi₁, a “ball of curious workmanship,” made of “fine brass,” was found outside Lehi’s tent entrance one morning. It contained two spindles, one of which pointed in the direction that the party should go. In this it was similar to a compass, but whereas anyone could work a compass, the pointers only worked “according to the faith and diligence and heed which [were given] unto them” (1 Ne. 16:28). Moreover, at times, writing appeared on the ball that gave “understanding concerning the ways of the Lord.” This writing also changed according to the “faith and diligence we gave unto it” (v. 29). Thus, the party was in possession of a divinatory-like device that appeared miraculously and only worked for those who had faith (i.e., Lehi, Nephi₁). As noted earlier, it was also made of brass.

While brass is not designated as different from copper or bronze in the Old Testament, the Book of Mormon does distinguish between the natural ore and the alloy that can be made from it. As already noted in 1 Nephi 18:25 and 2 Nephi 5:15, Nephi₁ notes the presence of a number of ores including gold, silver, copper, and iron, marking as well the two primary alloys brass and steel. Similar distinctions are made in Jarom, which mentions the Nephite proficiency in “precious things, and in fine workmanship of wood, in buildings, and in machinery, and also in iron and copper, and brass and steel” (v. 8).
The distinction made between ore and alloy is significant in Nephi’s narrative because of the explicit identification of the instrument as brass, which suggests that the metal itself was made, being a blend of two ores. While it is possible that other members of the family knew how to work metal, the text only identifies Nephi as metalworker and as the one who teaches others how to make brass. Nephi, as noted earlier, would therefore have been the only one who could make a brass object. Thus, we are left with Nephi, a metalsmith, who engages with a “magical” brass object that only he could have made and that responds to him, becoming leader of the group through his use of that “divinatory” object.

It is in this setting that we can contextualize Laman’s accusation. Though Laman does not explicitly connect Nephi’s smithing skills with his possession of the “cunning arts,” the possession of them would make Nephi, a “cunning man,” similar to the “cunning men” of the Old Testament, who are characterized by their skills in making “curious workmanship.” The proximity of this accusation with the introduction of the revelatory device, its physical makeup, and the attendant narrative as to how the device functions (the only such narrative in the Book of Mormon) implies Nephi was the smith.

What Laman is alluding to with his accusation concerning Nephi’s usage of the device may be understood from the rest of his accusation. According to Laman, Nephi worked “his cunning arts” in order “that he may deceive our eyes,” leading them “away into some strange wilderness.” As mentioned earlier, writing appeared on the device while it contained an element that pointed in the direction the party was to travel. It also appears that it did not work for Laman himself but only for his brother. While Nephi makes it clear that it only worked according to the faith of the individual, to Laman, who lacked faith apparently, it would have appeared to only work for Nephi (and Lehi initially), thus rendering the group dependent upon Nephi’s leadership.

The accusation itself arises from the perceived usurpation of leadership by Nephi. Though he was the fourth son, Nephi had wrested leadership from his older brother, doing so by utilizing the device, which, Laman concluded, only Nephi could have made. By supposedly revealing the divine will, the device reinforced Nephi’s claims of divine appointment. Accepting Nephi’s version of events would have meant that L-
man legitimately recognized Nephi’s placement; instead, Laman accused Nephi of working cunning arts that deliberately deceived the vision of the party. The implication of magic usage may explain Laman’s extreme solution, the death of Nephi, for divination was repeatedly forbidden in the Israelite law, the penalty of engaging in magical activity being death (see Deut. 18:10–14).

Though the specific crisis passes, the same issue concerning usurpation of leadership by Nephi again arises following the death of Lehi. Once more, Nephi is accused of seizing Laman’s rightful leadership. This time, Nephi leaves, taking with him the plates, the device, and the sword of Laban. In both narratives, the reader is shown the events through the perspective of Nephi, who does not see himself as a magic worker but as a man chosen by God to lead only when his older brothers fail in their responsibilities. However, this is not the perspective of the brothers themselves. Instead, centuries later, we find the tradition that had developed concerning these events. According to later Lamanite tradition, Nephi had wronged them three times, each time presumably taking the “ruling of the people out of their hands” (Mosiah 10:12, 15–16).

The same perspective is present later in the confrontation between Ammon and Lamoni’s father, the king of the Lamanites. Upon their meeting, the king commanded Lamoni in the following manner: “Lamoni, thou art going to deliver these Nephites, who are sons of a liar. Behold, he

33. This is the argument that Noel Reynolds makes in his study “Nephi’s Political Testament,” in Rediscovering the Book of Mormon, ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1991), 220–29, at 221: “Nephi undertook late in his life to write an account of his people on the small plates. Though we don’t know what the large plates—the political history—contained, we can guess from his version of how his people originated that a major issue was who had the right to govern. His small plates defend the Nephite tradition and refute the account advanced by the Lamanites and dissenters. Nephi carefully constructed what he wrote to convince his own and later generations that the Lord had selected him over his older brothers to be Lehi’s successor. Thus, one interesting way to read the account is as a political tract produced to show that his rule was authoritative.”

robbed our fathers; and now his children are also come amongst us that they may, by their cunning and their lyings, deceive us” (Alma 20:13). Reflecting the Lamanite tradition, Lamoni’s father repeats the accusation of robbery but includes the concern that the Nephites, specifically the Nephite elite, continued to deceive via their “cunning.” Intriguingly, the Nephite encountered was Ammon who engages in miraculous behavior visually witnessed by a number of Lamanites, including the divining of other’s thoughts (see Alma 17–18).

Thus, the reader is presented with an ambivalent perspective to Nephi, represented in two contrasting views: (1) Nephi as a chosen agent of God, and (2) Nephi as the man who, while repeatedly seeking to usurp the legitimate power of his older brothers through his cunning arts, had crafted an object that worked magically, only for Nephi, and divined messages that were only beneficial to himself.35

THE NEPHITE ELITE AND THE CUNNING ARTS OF THE EVIL ONE

Approximately six hundred years later, a similar concern was levied against Nephite leadership, specifically the spiritual leadership. In Helaman 16, after stating that “the people” believed Christ’s arrival in the New World was a “wicked tradition” taught by the leadership, the record goes on to

35. It appears that belief that Nephi constructed the Liahona is still accepted by some, hundreds of years later. Another version of this tradition is given by Alma at the time he delivered the plates and the Liahona to his son Helaman. When doing so, Alma declared, “And behold, there cannot any man work after the manner of so curious a workmanship” (Alma 37:39). His statement suggests that some had in fact believed that it was manmade, thus necessitating his overt denial of such. As for the tradition of Nephi as “bad guy,” a Zoramite version of this appears approximately 550 years after Nephi in the letter of Ammoron to Captain Moroni. He concludes the letter with the following historical tradition: “I am Ammoron, and a descendant of Zoram, whom your fathers pressed and brought out of Jerusalem. And behold now I am a bold Lamanite; behold, this war hath been waged to avenge their wrongs, and to maintain and to obtain their rights to the government” (Alma 54:24).
say that the people believed the leadership would continue to deceive:

They will, by the cunning and mysterious arts of the evil one,
work some great mystery which we cannot understand . . .
for we depend upon them . . . thus they keep us in ignorance
if we will yield ourselves unto them. (vv. 15–21)

While the presence of “cunning and mysterious arts” that will be
worked, or performed, is again raised, missing is any sense as to how they
would do so. Perhaps even more importantly is that the accusation does
not implicate just one person but now an entire group: “they will,” “they
keep,” “them.” It appears that at some point the cunning arts went from
one to many.

That the metalworking had expanded from Nephi to include a num-
ber of individuals six hundred years later should be expected. But what is
intriguing is that it appears the skill is associated with the Nephite elite,
even descendants of Nephi himself as traced by those who worked with
the metal plates. Alma1 we are told is a “descendant of Nephi,” thus Alma2,
Helaman1, Helaman2, Nephi1 and Nephi2 were all descended from Nephi
as well. Mormon, the maker of the gold plates, explicitly notes that he is a
“descendant of Nephi,” while his son, Moroni, who would also have been a
descendant, lamented at one point that he had no ore to make new plates
 presumably finding some later that he used to make plates for the Jaredite
record and a few final words from himself). All of these individuals are
overtly recognized as descendants of Nephi, Nephite elite themselves, and
were acquainted with metalwork, at least in the form of making metal
plates. As noted above, traditional smithing was often a familial occupa-
tion, with the secrets of the trade handed down within the specific lineage
of father to son. This appears to be the case in the Book of Mormon.

Yet, it also appears that Nephi attempted to teach all of his people
this particular trade, perhaps to counter the accusation of secretive magic
work posited by his brother. In 2 Nephi 5:15, Nephi records, “I did teach
my people . . . to work in all manner of wood, and of iron and of copper,
and of brass, and of steel, and of gold and of silver, and of precious ores.”
Thus, at least from one perspective, one could look at the original colony
of Nephites as a metalsmithing “clan.”

Association of the original Nephites with metalwork may have somewhat defined the relationship between the Nephites and the Mulekites. In the book of Mosiah, we are told that the Nephites were about less than half the number of the Mulekites in Zarahemla, but they held the majority of elite positions in that society, including king, chief captain, and prophet of the church. One of the reasons for this leadership disparity appears to have been the Nephite’s possession of the metal plates.

It is also possible that the predominance of Nephite elite in leadership positions may have reflected their military superiority, a result of their greater metalworking skills. In Alma 44:9, when Zerahemnah, the Lamanite king, confronts Captain Moroni he suggests that it is the smithing abilities of the Nephites that had saved them:

Behold, we are not of your faith: we do not believe that it is God that has delivered us into your hands; but we believe that it is your cunning that has preserved you. Behold, it is your breastplates and your shields that have preserved you.

36. An interesting early Mexican tradition, recorded by Sahagun, reflects a possible smith clan; see Pedro Carrasco, “The Peoples of Central Mexico and their Historical Traditions,” in *Handbook of Middle American Indians* 11 (1971): 459–73: “In the distant past the people who first arrived in this land came over the water in boats; they landed in Panotla or Pantla (the Huasteca) and moved along the coast as far as Quauhtemallen (Guatemala). They were led by their priests who counseled with their god. Then they came to Tamoachan and there they stayed. Their wise men (tlamatinime) were called book men (amoxuaque); they soon left and took with them the old books and the art of casting metals.” (Thank you to Kerry Hull, who pointed out this source.)

37. John L. Sorenson, “The Mulekites,” *BYU Studies* 30, no. 3 (1990): 6–22, at 16: “From the point of view of some of the resident people, however, the transition may not have seemed so pleasant. The key reason why they ‘rejoiced’ is said to be that Mosiah brought sacred records when they had none. The impressive fact of literacy itself could indeed have combined with possession of the mysterious sacred relics in Mosiah’s possession—the plates of Nephi, the brass plates, Laban’s sword, the Liahona—to confer an almost magical aura on Mosiah that validated his deserving the kingship.”
Here the concept of “cunning” is explicitly tied to Nephite metalworking, further strengthening the understanding that “cunning” has reference to Nephite metalworking skills and perhaps hinting at Nephite magical expertise. In any case, what emerges from these texts is an understanding that a segment of the Nephite population, the family of Nephite elite, both political and religious, was recognized as proficient in metalworking.  

Though the accused in Helaman 16 are never fully defined, the context suggests that they are Nephite religious elite. According to the text, “great signs were given unto the people, and wonders,” which included the appearance of angels to “wise men”; and though it is not explicit, the text suggests that the religious leadership had emphasized that these signs and wonders demonstrated the fulfillment of prophecy and scripture:


Nevertheless, the people began to harden their hearts, all save it were the most believing of them . . . saying: Some things they may have guessed right, among so many . . . and they began to reason and to contend among themselves, saying: That it is not reasonable that such a being as a Christ should come . . . but behold, we know this is a wicked tradition which has been handed down by our fathers, to cause us to believe in some great and marvelous thing which should come to pass . . . therefore they can keep us in ignorance. (vv. 15–21)

---

38. The relationship between metalworking and the elite in the Americas, both political and religious, is well attested. Eugenia Ibarra discusses the role of tribal chiefs in the working of the ore and the production of the final product in gold. See Eugenia Ibarra, “Gold in the Daily Lives of Indigenous People of Sixteenth-Century Southern Central America,” in Gold and Power in Ancient Costa Rica, Panama, and Columbia: A Symposium at Dumbarton Oaks, 9 and 10 October 1999, ed. Jeffrey Quilter and John W. Hoopes (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2003), 383–420. The entire volume explores the role of metal, specifically gold, in the social, political, and religious understanding of native cultures in southern Central America. For a study on North American Amerindian and “the copper society,” in which the elite, both religious and political, were in authority because of their familiarity with metals, copper in particular, see Amelia M. Trevelyan, Miswabik, Metal of Ritual: Metallurgy in Precontact Eastern North America (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2004).
The designation of the prophecy concerning Christ’s coming as a “wicked tradition” handed down by “our fathers” reflects a possible demographic shift. Throughout the books of Mosiah and Alma, the reader is presented with different perspectives concerning Nephite and Lamanite “traditions.” While we’ve already referenced the Lamanite traditions and their connection to Nephi following the Mulekite integration and subsequent political reformation in which the system of judges was established, Nephite splinter groups, now having political legitimacy, expressed their own interpretations or criticisms of the original Nephite traditions.

Throughout the book of Alma these different, disparate groups had separated, interacted, and reintegrated multiple times, so that by the time of Helaman 16, Nephite culture would have contained a number of heterodox ideas concerning the “traditions of the fathers.” Moreover, this period of time is characterized by greater interaction with the Lamanites (Anti-Nephi-Lehies, Lamanite ministries of Nephi/Lehi, outreach of Gadianton robbers, etc.), which would have meant encounters with the Lamanite tradition. While the Book of Mormon often notes the manner in which teaching the “correct” Nephite tradition overcame the Lamanite traditions, the accusation against “our fathers” in Helaman 16, suggests that the reverse may have been true as well.

In any case, the voice of the accusers then declare that the accused “will, by the cunning and the mysterious arts of the evil one, work some great mystery which we cannot understand, which will keep us down to be servants to their words, and also servants unto them, for we depend upon them to teach us the word.” The nature of the “mystery” is not given, but it is clear that the mystery will be “worked” via “cunning and mysterious arts,” the same language used by Laman in his accusation against Nephi. Moreover, the presumed purpose behind the performance of those arts is similar, namely to reinforce political control over the group. As for that performance, like Laman’s accusation, this too suggests that it was visible, that is, something that was witnessed by others, as noted in a passage a couple of chapters later:

The people began to forget those signs and wonders which they had heard, and began to be less and less astonished at a sign or a wonder from heaven, insomuch that they began to be hard in their hearts, and blind in their minds, and began
to disbelieve all which they had heard and seen—imagining up some vain thing in their hearts, that it was wrought by men and by the power of the devil, to lead away and deceive the hearts of the people. (3 Ne. 2:1–2)

As the text suggests, the signs and wonders that characterized the period immediately preceding the birth of Christ were not recognized as divine manifestations but instead were thought to have been “wrought” for the express purpose of deceiving the observers via their possession of the “cunning and wicked arts of the evil one.”

Thus, it appears that while the accusation in Helaman is specifically levied at their current Nephite spiritual leadership, it has roots in early Nephite tradition, likely arising from Nephi’s facility for metalworking. Like other traditional societies, metalwork was viewed ambivalently in the Old Testament, blurring the distinction between actual skill and magic. This ambivalence appears to have followed with the original colony and become associated with a particular, specialized group of Nephite religious elite, notably reflected in the ongoing tension between Nephite/Lamanite interactions and the struggle over authority. This ambivalence, coupled with general animosity toward spiritual leadership and what appears to be greater diversity among the so-called Nephite population, bloomed in the years preceding Christ’s appearance, a prophesied event that reinforced the authority of this elite, when “signs and wonders” portending its fulfillment were numerous.

**Conclusion**

Throughout the Book of Mormon, the reader is confronted with the presence of smithing and the smiths themselves, and while the role of both the trade and its practitioners is not a primary theme of the Book of Mormon, the significance of these concepts may play vital roles in

---

reconstructing the Nephite experience. The accusation of Nephi as a magic worker, apparently alluding to his actual skillset and his interaction with the Liahona, who sought to seize the authority from Laman, reflected the ambivalent perception of the smith within the larger Israelite worldview. This accusation became the foundation of Lamanite tradition that partially defined Nephite/Lamanite interactions for the next six hundred years. Nephi’s own descendants, who possessed the same metallurgical skill, were challenged in terms of their own authority through the selfsame accusations.

Of course, to the modern reader this study may seem an exercise in academic aloofness; to the extent that it doesn’t give insight into the powerful doctrines and teachings of the Book of Mormon, there may be truth to that. But what this study does do is give complexity to the Nephite experience. Mormon, by providing these cultural markers, “fleshed out” the Nephites, demonstrating that the individuals described were not simply cartoon figures but were influenced by the cultural concepts that surrounded them. Though smithing may not have any significance to us today, it did back then. Recognizing its place in the Nephite history gives us a better sense of what exactly that experience was.