

Book of Mormon Tribal Affiliation and Military Castes

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This article demonstrates that military and political leadership among the Nephites and related peoples was often a responsibility inherited from one's father. The acceptance of this thesis makes it possible to understand certain aspects of Book of Mormon social structure, the conduct of war, and the martial viewpoint of the book's abridger, Mormon. We begin with an examination of what appears to be a tribal structure among Book of Mormon peoples. For this purpose, we define the tribe as it is known today among the Arabs, whose social structure is akin to that of the ancient Israelites.

The Arab tribe is a quasi-political unit of considerable size whose members are, for the most part, genetically related. To be sure, Middle Eastern tribes such as those found among the Arabs often include "retainers," whose loyalty is to a larger kinship group to which they (or their ancestors) have attached themselves. But most tribal members claim a common ancestor. The primary kinship unit is the *hamula* or extended family, which also demands primary loyalty. The tribe is secondary except when specific privileges or positions of honor are based on descent from a remote ancestor.

In ancient Israel, tribal affiliation generally determined one's political loyalties to one or another of the two kingdoms that dominated the land of Israel during much of its biblical history. Thus, for example, the tribes of Judah, Benjamin, Simeon, and, to a large extent, Levi, comprised the kingdom of Judah. The other tribes comprised the kingdom of Israel. In the Book of Mormon, we have a similar situation with two nations (Nephites and Lamanites), each of which was really a confederation of tribes.

Book of Mormon Tribes

As early as the second generation in the New World, descendants of Lehi's colony were calling themselves Nephites, Jacobites, Josephites, Zoramites, Lamanites, Lemuelites, and Ishmaelites, after the founders of their lineage groups. Jacob, however, preferred to call them by the collective terms Nephites and Lamanites, according to their political allegiance (see Jacob 1:13-14). We should note the wording of Jacob 1:14: "Those who are friendly to Nephi I shall call Nephites, or the people of Nephi, *according to the reigns of the kings*" (italics added). It has been noted that descendants of Lehi's party are consistently divided into the same seven tribes, always listed in the Book of Mormon in the same order. Dividing the polity into seven groups may correspond to the seven churches Alma set up in the land of Zarahemla (see Mosiah 25:23), which groups are perhaps the "large bodies" into which the people assembled at the time these ecclesiastical units were organized (Mosiah 25:15).¹

Despite the paucity of genealogical details in the Book of Mormon, clearly the people were very concerned about their tribal affiliation. For example, Book of Mormon personal names containing such Semitic patronymic elements as *Abi-* ("father") and *Ami-* ("paternal kinsman/clan") fit the biblical pattern and are evidence for a strong patrilineal kinship system. Note the names Abinadi, Abinadom, Aminadab, and Aminadi.

Another evidence for the concern with tribal affiliation is that the ancestry of certain individuals is specified, indicating that they either kept genealogical records or that they had family traditions. For example, we learn that Ammon was a descendant of the Mulekite leader Zarahemla (see Mosiah 7:3), that Alma was a descendant of Nephi (see Mosiah 17:2), and that Amulek of the "Nephite" city of Ammonihah had to take pains to specify that "I am a Nephite" (Alma 8:20). He subsequently spoke of his descent from Nephi and even from Joseph who was sold

into Egypt (see Alma 10:2-3). Lamoni, king of the land of Ishmael (see Alma 17:19), was said to be a descendant of Ishmael (see Alma 17:21) though his father lived in the land of Nephi (see Alma 22) and was king over all the Lamanite lands (see Alma 20:8). Even Mormon, who lived centuries after the coming of Christ, made a point of his descent from Nephi (see Mormon 1:5) and specified that he was a “pure descendant of Lehi” (3 Nephi 5:20) — an idea his son Moroni repeated (see Mormon 8:13).² As late as ca. 20 B.C., the second Nephi spoke of “the seed of Zedekiah [who] are with us” (Helaman 8:21).

Mulekites and Nephites

A good example of the importance of tribal affiliation is the relationship between the Nephites and the Mulekites. The two peoples united under the first Mosiah soon after they met, in the middle of the second century B.C. (see Omni 1:19). But when Mosiah’s namesake and grandson assembled his people in Zarahemla together with the followers of Limhi and Alma (groups recently arrived from the city of Nephi), he divided them into two bodies. The text, which states that the Mulekites were more numerous than the Nephites (see Mosiah 25:1-4), implies that these two bodies, the Nephites and the Mulekites, were separated.

The merger of the Nephites and Mulekites is recounted with very little explanation in the Book of Mormon and presents some anomalies. Since Zarahemla, leader of the Mulekites, was descended from Zedekiah, king of Judah (see Omni 1:14-15; Mosiah 25:2; Helaman 6:10; 8:21), we are perplexed by the fact that he acknowledged Mosiah as king over the new confederation. It may be that we are dealing with the age-old leadership conflict between the biblical tribes of Judah (represented by Zarahemla) and Joseph (represented by Mosiah).³ If the Book of Mormon story is truly analogous to the biblical, we should expect that some of the Mulekites objected to Nephite rule and occasionally rebelled against those in power. There is, in fact, evidence that the rebellious king-men and Nehors may have been Mulekites.

The King-Men

The name Mulek comes from the Hebrew root **mlk* for “king,” and it may be that the “king-men” of the Book of Mormon were, in fact, Mulekites (see Alma 51:5). The text informs us that these were people of “high birth” (Alma 51:8), “who professed the blood of nobility” (Alma 51:21), and who felt that they should rule — perhaps because of descent from King Zarahemla or King Zedekiah of Judah. The passage in question dates from the twentieth year of the reign of the judges; hence, twenty-five years after Mosiah announced his retirement and therefore four generations after the agreement made between the earlier Mosiah and Zarahemla, uniting the two peoples.

Moroni was able to crush the rebellion, slaying some four thousand of the king-men and imprisoning their leaders (see Alma 51:17-19). The king-men who survived the war “were compelled to hoist the title of liberty upon their towers, and *in their cities*” (Alma 51:20; italics added). If this means that they were settled in specific cities, then they are more likely a tribal group than a political faction with representation throughout the Nephite lands.

The Order of Nehor

Another group that may have been composed of Mulekites — and that may, in fact, have been the forerunners of the king-men — was named from a certain Nehor, the man who introduced priestcraft into the Nephite nation and who slew one of their heroes, Gideon (see Alma 1). One of the leaders of the order of Nehor was Amlici, who sought to become king (see Alma 2). His name may contain the **mlk* root for “king.” Even if the name Amlici does not derive from this root, phonological similarity to the word for “king” makes it possible to establish the tie by

means of folk etymology. The phenomenon is well known from the Bible. Another man whose name may relate to the same root was Amalickiah, a Zoramite whose followers wanted to make him king. (Unsuccessful in his efforts among the Nephites, he later treacherously slew the Lamanite king and took his throne.) Those who supported Amalickiah in his bid for a Nephite throne were lesser judges who wanted higher positions (see Alma 46:4-5). As we shall see later, it was likely that the judgeship was generally inherited, which suggests that all or many of these men may have been Mulekites.

The contrast between Amlicites and Nephites in Alma 2:11 implies that the Amlicites were, in fact, not Nephites. Also of the order of Nehor were the Amulonites and Amalekites, Nephite defectors who dwelt among the Lamanites (see Alma 21:4; 24:28-29). (Though there are better explanations for some of these names, the name Amalekite, like Amlicite, may derive from the Hebrew root for “king.”) The judges, lawyers, priests, and teachers (those of the upper classes) of the city of Ammonihah were of the order of Nehor (see Alma 14:16-18; 15:15; 16:11). If they were Mulekites, this would explain why Amulek, who lived in that city, took pains to specify that he was a Nephite (see Alma 8:20; 10:2-3).

Alma's First Mission

The mission of the younger Alma may provide evidence for tribal divisions among the Nephites. Alma resigned as chief judge “that he himself might go forth among his people or among the people of Nephi, that he might preach” (Alma 4:19). The cities he visited may have belonged to specific tribal groups.

Alma taught the Nephites “in their cities and villages throughout the land ... first in the land of Zarahemla and from thence throughout all the land” (Alma 5:1 and preface to that chapter). After speaking in Zarahemla (see Alma 5:2), he went to the city of Gideon (see Alma 6:7). Because the town was named after the general who served King Limhi, we may not be amiss in suggesting that immigrants from the land of Nephi settled it. Following a period of rest in Zarahemla (see Alma 8:1), Alma went to Melek (see Alma 8:3-5). The name means “king,” suggesting that it may have been a Mulekite settlement.

Alma's next stop was Ammonihah, where the people would not hear his message (see Alma 8:6, 9). This was because they were not members of Alma's church, as were the people in Zarahemla, Gideon, and Melek (see Alma 8:11). As we have noted above, they were of the order of Nehor, and may have been Mulekites.

Lamanite Divisions

In Alma 43:13, we read that the Lamanites were “a compound” of descendants of Laman and Lemuel, the sons of Ishmael, and Nephite dissenters such as the Amalekites, Zoramites, and descendants of the priests of Noah. Despite this, there are indications of a clear separation between some of these elements. For example, we read of the Lamanites, Amalekites, and Amulonites who built the city of Jerusalem, with the notation that many of the Amalekites and Amulonites were after the order of Nehors (see Alma 21:1-4). This group seems to have remained separate from the main Lamanite body, at least in their tribal identification. Despite their political unity, these groups appear to have comprised separate tribal groups within the Lamanite kingdom.

Over these tribal groups, there was a sort of “high king” in the land of Nephi, to whom other kings were subservient. Lamoni, a descendant of Ishmael, was king of the land of Ishmael (see Alma 17:21). His father was “king over all the land, and lived in the land of Nephi (Alma 18:9; see 20:1, 8). Antiomno, king of Middoni, was a friend to Lamoni (see Alma 20:4). But he, like Lamoni, was evidently subservient to the king at Nephi, who promised Ammon that he would release his brethren from prison in Middoni (see Alma 20:27; 22:2). After

Ammon's intervention, Lamoni's father granted his son autonomy in his kingdom (see Alma 20:26; 21:21) and remained king "over all the land save it were the land of Ishmael" (Alma 22:1).

Aaron and his fellow missionaries are said to have converted seven cities/lands of the Lamanites during their stay in the land of Nephi (see Alma 23:8-13, 15). These did not include the cities of the Amalekites and Amulonites and the Lamanites living in the same region (see Alma 23:14), which comprised the lands of Amulon, Helam, Jerusalem, and nearby areas (see Alma 24:1-2). The converted Lamanites took the name Anti-Nephi-Lehies (see Alma 23:16-18) and were attacked by these others. Of the attackers, some were impressed with the sincerity of their brethren and laid down their arms to unite with them. Interestingly, the text informs us that those who joined with them were all descendants of Laman and Lemuel and that none of the Amalekites, Amulonites, or those of the order of Nehor laid down their arms (see Alma 24:29). The separate status of the Amulonites is further indicated by the fact that the Lamanites, angry at their losses, burned the Amulonites who had provoked them to war (see Alma 25:8-12).

The Ammonites

From the Nephite sphere, too, we find that there were clear-cut tribal distinctions. For example, though the Anti-Nephi-Lehies (people of Ammon) were converted to the Nephite religion and came to live with the Nephites, yet they were not left to intermingle with the rest of the people. Rather, they were given a special territory named Jershon (see Alma 27). That they remained separate from the main Nephite body is indicated by the statement that they continued to be called by the name of their mentor, Ammon, "ever after" (Alma 27:26-27).

Though the sons of the Ammonites, who fought under Helaman in the great war, called themselves by the more general term of Nephites (see Alma 53:16), they nevertheless appear to have been segregated from the main Nephite army. Helaman noted that his two thousand Ammonite warriors "were descendants of Laman, who was the eldest son of our father Lehi" (Alma 56:3). This implies that none of them was descended from Lemuel or the sons of Ishmael, who also formed the Lamanite league. It is true that Helaman notes that his two thousand were joined "to the army of Antipus" (Alma 56:10), but they were kept as a separate subunit. Later, six thousand replacement troops were sent from the land of Zarahemla "besides sixty of the sons of the Ammonites who had come to join their brethren, my little band of two thousand" (Alma 57:6). Clearly the Ammonites were united to Helaman's army and did not mingle with the other Nephites. This is further demonstrated by the fact that he then wrote of "my little band of two thousand and sixty" (Alma 57:19-20).

There is a similar incident recorded in Mosiah. The priests of Noah, led by their chief, Amulon, had fled from the city of Nephi into the wilderness, leaving behind their wives and children. They stole Lamanite girls as wives, founded a new city called Amulon, and were thereafter termed "Amulonites." When the rest of the inhabitants of Nephi escaped to Zarahemla and joined with the people of Mosiah, the sons of these priests (by their first wives) "would no longer be called by the names of their fathers, therefore they took upon themselves the name of Nephi, that they might be called the children of Nephi and be numbered among those who were called Nephites" (Mosiah 25:12). This passage implies that the Amulonites' fathers (despite the fact that they lived in the city of Nephi) were, in fact, *not* Nephites, but we cannot be certain of their real origin. The fact that the Amulonite priests, like the Amalekites, were of the order of Nehor (see Alma 24:28-29), and the further fact that they ruled in Nephi under King Noah, may imply that they were Mulekites. That Mulekites accompanied Nephites in their return to the land of Nephi seems more likely when we consider the fact that Ammon, who led the group sent out by King Mosiah to locate them, was himself a Mulekite (see Mosiah 7:3, 13).

Segregation of converted Lamanites from the main body of the Nephites seems to have been standard operating procedure. For example, during the course of the great war of the first century B.C., more than four thousand Lamanite prisoners were allowed to settle with the people of Ammon in the land of Jershon, after making an oath of peace with the Nephites (see Alma 62:15-17, 27-30). At the outset of that great conflict, the servants of the Lamanite king, falsely accused of slaying their monarch, fled to the land of Zarahemla and were sent to join the people of Ammon (see Alma 47:29).

At one point, Moroni had to search among his troops to find “a descendant of Laman” to send on a spying mission (Alma 55:4-5). The implication of the story is that the Nephites either didn’t look enough like Lamanites or didn’t speak like them and could therefore not have deceived them. This undoubtedly resulted from the geographical separation of the tribes. Since there had been “Nephite” dissenters to the Lamanites, one wonders why Moroni could not have sent someone else. The answer may be that these dissenters were, in fact, always Mulekites or Zoramites, whose physical characteristics or language distinguished them from the Nephites.

The Zoramites

The story of the Zoramites may also indicate the tribal structure of Nephite society. The sect known as the Zoramites was, indeed, led by a man named Zoram (see Alma 30:59). This does not, however, preclude the possibility that they were really descendants of the Zoram of Nephi’s time, the original Zoram who went with Nephi when he separated himself from Laman and Lemuel and the sons of Ishmael (see 2 Nephi 5:6). The name of the sect’s leader may have been passed down in the family. The fact that the Zoramites all lived in the same geographical area (where Alma and his sons went to preach to them) indicates that they may have been a tribe with religious customs that differed from those of the Nephites. While it is true that they “were dissenters from the Nephites” and “had had the word of God preached unto them” but had fallen away (Alma 31:8-9), one wonders at their sudden reversion to idolatry (see Alma 31:1). It seems more reasonable that an undercurrent of idolatry already existed in the tribe and that Zoram emphasized it to widen the rift between the Zoramites and the Nephites. Indeed, the group may have been practicing idolatry in secret, much as the Marranos or “secret Jews” of Spain practiced Judaism in secret while publicly professing to be Catholics — a situation that continued over several centuries.

That they were not merely a distinct religious group is indicated by the fact that the Zoramites lived on the border with the Lamanites (see Alma 31:3) and separated themselves politically and religiously from the Nephites (see Alma 31:2, 10). This made the Nephites fear that they would ally themselves with the Lamanites, and was, in fact, the reason Alma decided to organize a mission among them (see Alma 31:4-5). The Zoramites are termed dissenters from the Nephites (see Alma 31:8). Ultimately, they did as feared, joining the Lamanites in battle against the Nephites (see Alma 35:101-11; 43:4). Zerahemnah, one of the Lamanite leaders, is the first to have appointed Amalekites and Zoramites as chief captains over the Lamanite armies (see Alma 43:4-6). Jacob, the commander of the Lamanite forces that later occupied the city of Mulek, was a Zoramite (Alma 52:20, 33).

Amalickiah, a Nephite dissenter who, by treachery, took over leadership of the Lamanites (see Alma 48:5), also followed the practice of appointing Amalekites and Zoramites as chief captains. In Alma 49:25, Amalickiah is said to have been “a Nephite by birth,” though later, in Alma 54:24, he says, “I am a bold Lamanite,” after joining that group politically. Yet his brother and successor, Ammoron, is said to be a descendant of Zoram, Laban’s servant (see Alma 54:23). It appears reasonable to assume that the Zoramites appointed as leaders in the Lamanite army were not merely members of a religious sect, but were, in fact, actual descendants of the original Zoram of Nephi’s

day. The fact that converted Zoramites went to live with the Ammonites in the land of Jershon rather than mingle with the general Nephite population (see Alma 35:6, 14) indicates that they were a distinct ethnic group.

The Gadianton Robbers

The Gadianton robbers were a secret society that came to the fore in the latter part of the century before Christ and played a role in the destruction of the Nephite nation four centuries later (see Helaman 2). The group seems to have had some dependence on the Jaredites (Helaman 2:13), among whom there were also secret combinations (cf. Ether 8). Such a tie would most logically have come through the Mulekites, who are known to have encountered at least one Jaredite survivor (see Omni 1:20-22). Despite the fact that the Mulekites have left us virtually no records, there are hints of cultural contacts between them and the Jaredites. Hugh Nibley once pointed out that the troublemakers among the Nephites appear to be Mulekites, sometimes bearing Jaredite names.⁴ For example, one Coriantumr (a distinctly Jaredite name), a descendant of Zarahemla, dissented from the Nephites and became leader of a Lamanite army (see Helaman 15). John Welch has noted that the name of the “Lamanite” leader Zerahemnah is so similar to the Mulekite name Zarahemla that he was likely a Mulekite.⁵

Earlier we indicated that the order of Nehor may have been a Mulekite organization. This may explain why the name Nehor also appears as that of a Jaredite city (see Ether 7:4, 9). The man Nehor became notorious as the one who killed Gideon (see Alma 1:9), and violence was one of the more noted features of the Gadianton band (see Helaman 2:8; 6:15, 18-19). The order of Nehor shared with the Gadianton band the fact that they sought control of the judgeship in order to get gain (see Alma 11:3, 20; Helaman 7:4-5; 3 Nephi 6:27-30). We are reminded that the king-men were comprised of nobles who sought to establish a king in the land (see Alma 51), while the Gadianton judges and lawyers sought to set a king over the people (see 3 Nephi 6:30). We remember, too, that the lesser judges had backed Amalickiah's bid for kingship (see Alma 46:4-5). The fact that judges were involved in all of these movements reinforces the supposition that the Mulekites were behind each of the attempts to establish a monarch.

If the Mulekites carried on elements of Jaredite culture, the “secret combinations” of Jaredite times may have been preserved in the Gadianton band of the first century B.C. Indeed, the name Gadianton, as well as the name Kishkumen (the first-named member of the band) are Jaredite in form.⁶ Another Jaredite-like name is that of Giddianhi, a leader of the Gadianton band ca. A.D. 16. He wrote that he was ready to command his troops to “go down upon the Nephites and destroy them” (3 Nephi 3:3). His words may indicate that the band was not comprised of Nephites. In his epistle to the Nephite governor Lachoneus, Giddianhi demanded the surrender of the government “that this my people may recover their rights and government” (3 Nephi 3:10). These words reflect the same claim made by the king-men several decades earlier. We are tempted to suggest that the king-men and the Gadianton robbers were, in whole or in part, the same group and that they were Mulekites seeking to recover a lost kingship.

About A.D. 30, the central government was dissolved. The fact that all people knew the tribe to which they easily reverted is strong evidence of the basic tribal nature of these people: “The people were divided one against each other; and they did separate one from another into tribes, every man according to his family and his kindred and friends.... And every tribe did appoint a chief or a leader over them; and thus they became tribes and leaders of tribes. Now behold, there was no man among them save he had much family and many kindreds and friends; therefore their tribes became exceedingly great” (3 Nephi 7:24). At the same time, the secret combination “did gather themselves together” and appointed a man named Jacob as their king (3 Nephi 7:9-10). But “they were not

so strong in number as the tribes of the people," who banded against them (3 Nephi 7:11-12). The wording of this statement leads us to believe that the band may also have been a tribe.

Tribalism in the Christian Era

We read in 4 Nephi 1:17 that there were no more "-ites" after the coming of Christ, but that all of the people were united in the kingdom of God. However, this evidently has reference to political factionalism, rather than the abandonment of lineage ties. As noted above, not long before the coming of Christ, the people had dissolved their political ties and retained tribal allegiances (see 3 Nephi 7:2-4). There is reason to believe that these tribal units continued to exist after the time of Christ.

Evidence from Names

Before two hundred years had passed (see 4 Nephi 1:22), in the second generation after Christ, those who rebelled against the church called themselves Lamanites (see 4 Nephi 1:20). Of the 231st year of the Christian era, we read that there were people among the Nephites whom the Lamanites termed Jacobites, Josephites, and Zoramites (see 4 Nephi 1:35-37). Those who rejected the gospel, we are told, were called Lamanites and Lemuelites and Ishmaelites (see 4 Nephi 1:38). "They were taught to hate the children of God, even as the Lamanites were taught to hate the children of Nephi from the beginning" (4 Nephi 1:39). The old enmities followed the reemphasis of tribal affiliation.

In Mormon's day, the Nephites are also said to have consisted of Nephites, Jacobites, Josephites, and Zoramites, while the Lamanites consisted of Lamanites, Lemuelites, and Ishmaelites (see Mormon 1:8-9). That the tribal structure had never changed is evidenced by the fact that these groups are named in this same order in 4 Nephi 1:38 (referring to events dating two centuries prior to Mormon's time) and Jacob 1:13-14 (dating to the sixth century B.C.).

I believe that the reversion to the ancient tribal names is more than coincidence. Merely separating into two groups would have been simpler for the people, according to whether they followed or rejected the established religion. Believing that people actually took upon themselves the names of the tribes from which they descended is much more reasonable. This is not to say that there was no intermarriage nor intermingling of tribes. But, following the patrilineal system of their ancestors, it is logical to assume that these Israelites considered themselves to be members of the paternal clan and tribe. One might argue that, since the converted Lamanites left their homeland with Ammon and settled among the Nephites, they no longer had Lamanite ties. But the fact that they were segregated in the land of Jershon from the general Nephite population would have helped retain their tribal identity. The Lamanite king of Mormon's time was named Aaron (see Mormon 2:9). This may have been a family name originally adapted from Aaron, brother of Ammon, who had converted the Lamanite king (see Alma 22). If so, then the Lamanites of Mormon's time can be tied to those of the time of Ammon.

Geographical Considerations

When war broke out between the two main groups of Mormon's time, it was, significantly, "in the borders of Zarahemla, by the waters of Sidon" (Mormon 1:10), which was the old border between Nephites and Lamanites, where wars had begun in earlier days (see Alma 22:27). Apparently, people tended to live where their ancestors had dwelt.

The subsequent history of war between Nephites and Lamanites further demonstrates that the people still lived within their ancient borders. Because the Lamanites chased the Nephites northward (see Mormon 2), obviously the Lamanites still dwelt south of the Nephite homeland, as in the days prior to the coming of Christ (e.g., see Alma 22:27-34). The fact that, during Mormon's time, both the Nephites and the Lamanites had become apostate (see 4 Nephi 1:43, 45) indicates that the distinction was tribal and not religious (that is, "believer" vs. "nonbeliever"). That the Lamanites of Mormon's day were more numerous than the Nephites (see Mormon 4:13, 17; 2:3, 25; 5:6) is further evidence of continuing tribal identity. This had been true in earlier generations also (see Jarom 1:6; Alma 43:51; 58:2; Helaman 4:25).

Political Entities of Mormon's Day

Readers of the Book of Mormon tend to oversimplify matters when it comes to the wars in the days of Mormon. They see two great opposing forces, Lamanites and Nephites. They forget, for example, that the inhabitants of some of the "Nephite" cities did not join the retreating Nephites and were wiped out (see Mormon 5:5). If they were of different tribes, they may have thought they were not part of the war. Another point is that there are three main groups, not two. The third comprised the Gadianton robbers who, Mormon informs us, lived among the Lamanites (see Mormon 1:18). Indeed, at one point the Nephites made a treaty with the Lamanites and the Gadianton robbers (see Mormon 2:27-28).

The Gadianton robbers were a secret society who had, at an earlier stage, infiltrated both Nephite and Lamanite society, but who were ultimately driven into the hills. They sought wealth and power and we have suggested that they may have been the Mulekites or king-men, who had laid claim to the government in the time of the first Moroni.

Destruction of the Nephites

That the Nephites who were destroyed by the Lamanites in the fourth century A.D. were literal descendants of the group led by Nephi—and not just a religious group taking his name—is evidenced by prophecies made centuries before the event. The Lord had told Nephi that the Lamanites would "be a scourge unto thy seed ... and inasmuch as they will not remember me, and hearken unto my words, they shall scourge them even unto destruction" (2 Nephi 5:25). Nephi also saw the history of his people in vision. He noted that, following the fourth generation after Christ's appearance, he "saw the multitudes of the earth gathered together. And the angel said unto me: Behold *thy seed*, and also the seed of thy brethren. And it came to pass that I looked and I beheld the people of *my seed gathered together in multitudes* against the seed of my brethren; and they were gathered together to battle" (1 Nephi 12:11-15; italics added). "I beheld and saw that the seed of my brethren did contend against my seed; ... the seed of my brethren did overpower *the people of my seed*; ... the people of the seed of my brethren ... had overcome *my seed*" (1 Nephi 12:19-20; italics added). Later, Nephi wrote that after the fourth generation from Christ, "a speedy destruction cometh unto *my people*" (2 Nephi 26:10; italics added).

Samuel the Lamanite, during his address to the Nephites, said that unless they repented, "*this people*" would be destroyed some four hundred years hence (Helaman 13:5-6; italics added). He specifically named the Nephites as those who would suffer this fate (see Helaman 13:8-10). Shortly before the end of his ministry, about seventy years before Christ's coming, Alma prophesied to his son Helaman: "I perceive that *this very people, the Nephites* ... in four hundred years from the time that Jesus Christ shall manifest himself unto them, shall dwindle in unbelief. Yea, and then shall they see wars and pestilences, yea, famines and bloodshed, even until *the people of Nephi shall become extinct*" (Alma 45:10-11; italics added).

Alma further noted (see Alma 45:12-14) that the only Nephites who would survive would be those who would go over to the Lamanites. Mormon, editorializing on the Nephite-Lamanite wars of the mid-first century B.C., noted this as well. He further pointed out that the records kept by the Nephites had been handed down among them to the time they were destroyed as a people (see Helaman 3:13-16). This implies that the Nephites retained their tribal identity as late as Mormon's time. Moroni later wrote that the Lamanites "put to death every Nephite that will not deny the Christ" (Moroni 1:1-2). This is reflected in Doctrine and Covenants 10:45-48, where we read that the Lord had promised to the ancient Nephite scribes that the gospel would be preached to "the Lamanites, and also all that had become Lamanites because of their dissensions." Enos was one of those who had received this promise (see Enos 1:13), and modern revelation confirms that the record he and others kept will come to the "Nephites, and the Jacobites, and the Josephites, and the Zoramites, ... the Lamanites, and the Lemuelites, and the Ishmaelites" (D&C 3:16-20).

These passages make it clear that the Lamanites and Nephites who fought the great battles leading to the dissolution of the Nephite nation (but not the annihilation of every single Nephite) were, in fact, the ancient tribal confederacies known by those names in the days before Christ.

Hereditary Offices

Other evidence for the importance of tribal/family descent in the Book of Mormon is found in the fact that some of the offices seem to be hereditary. We refer particularly to the offices of king, high priest, judge, and chief captain. Originally, all of these offices seem to have been centered in a single individual — the king. He was civil ruler, military leader, and prophet/priest⁷ to his people. As such, he kept the sacred implements of religion (the Liahona and the scriptures) and of war (the sword of Laban), turning them over to the next king when he abdicated. For example, when Limhi, king of the land of Lehi-Nephi, turned over the twenty-four Jaredite plates found by his people to the second Mosiah, this may have been a sign of political submission or abdication of royal rights (see Mosiah 28:11). It may have been an act similar to Zerahemnah turning over his weapons as a sign of military submission (see Alma 44:8). Then, when Mosiah retired, he turned his position as civil ruler over to Alma, who had been chosen as the first chief judge. Alma had also inherited the position of high priest from his father, whom Mosiah had earlier appointed to this post (see Mosiah 25:14-24).

Alma was also a Nephite military commander and led an army against the Amlicites (see Alma 12:16), personally fighting with Amlici (see Alma 2:29), who was seeking to be king and hence probably saw the chief judge as his personal rival for political power. As time went by, Alma relinquished some of his responsibilities to others. Around 83 B.C., he appointed Nephihah, an elder of the church, as chief judge, but retained the high priesthood (see Alma 4:16-20). Two years later, we find a man named Zoram leading the Nephite army as its chief captain (see Alma 16:5). Still, there was some overlapping. For example, Helaman, who succeeded his father Alma as high priest, served for a time as captain of a military force of two thousand young men (see Alma 53:18-22).

Gideon, one of the "strong men" of King Noah (see Mosiah 19:4), had evidently been in charge of the Nephite army in the land of Nephi (see Mosiah 19:18, 22), where he later served as advisor to Noah's son, Limhi (see Mosiah 20:17-22; 22:3-10). He became a teacher in the church in Zarahemla and was killed by the apostate Nehor (see Alma 1:7-9; 2:1, 20).

The King

The first Mosiah appears to have been the Nephite king when his group encountered the people of Zarahemla, who accepted him as their ruler. This is evidenced by the fact that his son, King Benjamin, possessed the records handed down by the earlier Nephite kings (see Words of Mormon 1:10-11; Jarom 1:14; Omni 1:11). Benjamin's son Mosiah succeeded him on the throne when Benjamin gave him "charge concerning all the affairs of the kingdom" and turned over to him the records, the sword, and the Liahona, or ball or director (Mosiah 1:15-16). The throne was later offered to Mosiah's sons, each of whom declined the honor (see Mosiah 28:10; 29:1-6). Mormon noted that although the people of Zarahemla were part of the Nephite nation, kingship was reserved to the descendants of Nephi (see Mosiah 25:13).

The High Priest

The elder Alma had been offered the kingship by his original followers, but he declined. Instead, he served as high priest in the land of Helam (see Mosiah 23:1-11, 16) and was later appointed to that post in the land of Zarahemla by King Mosiah (see Mosiah 25:19-21; 26:7).

Alma the younger was appointed high priest by his father and was chosen chief judge by the voice of the people (see Mosiah 29:25-26, 42, 44) after the new governmental system had been established by King Mosiah (see Mosiah 29:11). Mosiah turned over to him the "interpreters" and all of the plates containing the Nephite and Jaredite records (see Mosiah 28:11, 20). The guardians of the records and the "interpreters" evidently also kept the sword of Laban, for Moroni showed it to the Three Witnesses along with the plates and the breastplate containing the Urim and Thummim (see D&C 17:1). When he resigned as chief judge in favor of Nephihah, Alma retained the high priesthood (see Alma 4:16-20). He also kept the records because Nephihah had declined to take them (see Alma 50:37-38).

Alma then went on a mission to the Zoramites and took with him his sons Shiblon and Corianton, leaving Helaman behind (see Alma 31:7), evidently to supervise the church in the land of Zarahemla. Later, he turned the records over to Helaman, who became high priest in his father's stead (see Alma 37:1; 45:20; 50:38). The high priesthood then passed, in succession, to Helaman's brother, Shiblon (see Alma 62:52-63:1), then to Helaman, son of Helaman (see Alma 63:10-11; Helaman 3:37). Next came Nephi, son of the younger Helaman (see Helaman 5:4), then his son Nephi (see 3 Nephi 1:2), his son Nephi (see 4 Nephi 1:1), his son Amos (see 4 Nephi 1:19), his son Amos (see 4 Nephi 1:21), and his brother Ammaron (see 4 Nephi 1:47-49). At this point, the records and the priestly/ prophetic responsibility passed from Ammaron to Mormon, a descendant of the original Nephi (see Mormon 2:17), who passed the authority to his son Moroni (see Mormon 6:6).

The Chief Judge

When King Mosiah retired, chief judges were chosen in the place of the kings, but even this office was quasi-hereditary. The first chief judge was Alma, the high priest (see Mosiah 29:25-26,42,44). When Alma resigned as chief judge, he retained the high priesthood, but chose Nephihah, an elder of the church, as chief judge, giving "him power according to the voice of the people" (see Alma 4:16-20; 8:12).

Pahoran succeeded his father, Nephihah, as chief judge (see Alma 50:37-40). When the king-men demanded that the question of kingship be put to a vote, the voice of the people favored the freemen, "and Pahoran retained the judgment-seat, which caused much rejoicing among the *brethren of Pahoran* and also many of the people of liberty" (Alma 51:7; italics added). The rejoicing among Pahoran's family was probably due to the fact that the position undoubtedly brought with it a measure of prestige — and perhaps wealth — to the family.

When Pahoran died, the people had to choose between his three sons, of whom Pahoran was selected. His brother Pacumeni accepted the decision, but another brother, Paanchi, revolted and had Pahoran slain. Pacumeni was then appointed chief judge, “according to his right” (see Helaman 1:1-13). After Pacumeni, the position of chief judge reverted to the family of Alma, so that Helaman, son of Helaman and grandson of Alma (see Helaman 2:2), and his son Nephi (see Helaman 3:37) served as both high priest and chief judge. Nephi delivered the judgment-seat to Cezoram (see Helaman 5:1), who was succeeded by his (unnamed) son (see Helaman 6:15). The next chief judge was Seezoram, whose name is so similar to Cezoram that he was probably a member of the same family – perhaps another son (see Helaman 9:23). Seezoram was slain by his own brother, who perhaps coveted the throne (see Helaman 9:26). After a period of unnamed judges, we encounter Lachoneus (see 3 Nephi 1:1), who was succeeded by his son Lachoneus (see 3 Nephi 6:19; 7:1), in whose day the central government was broken up.

From this information, we can see that the most important offices in Nephite society – including military positions, as we shall see in the next section— were de facto hereditary. This is evidence that clan and tribal affiliation were important in determining one’s social status.

The Nephite Military Caste

A comment made by one of my students in a Book of Mormon class prompted part of the investigation represented by this paper. He suggested that Mormon, the father of the abridger of the Nephite record, was a professional soldier. As evidence, he noted that the younger Mormon was eleven years of age when his father took him into the “land southward” (Mormon 1:6) and that “in this year there began to be a war between the Nephites ... and the Lamanites.... The war began to be among them in the borders of Zarahemla, by the waters of Sidon” (Mormon 1:8, 10). The family’s departure into the war zone hints at a military transfer. In light of this possibility, I suggest that the historian/general/prophet Mormon was, in fact, from a line of army leaders who belonged to a military caste.⁸

Military Castes in Mesoamerica

Typically, Mesoamerican peoples had six basic classes or occupations: peasants, merchants, warriors, priests, judges, and government officials.⁹ Among the Aztecs, all of these were directly involved in war. For example, the merchants formed, when necessary, their own military units. Warriors and priests replenished the ranks of the judges and other government officials and most priests began their service for a time in special military units. Aztec boys destined for a military career were dedicated for the task at birth by their parents and trained at an early age. This fact of Mesoamerican life is reflected in the youth of the Nephite chief captains. It would explain how Mormon came to command the Nephite armies at the tender age of sixteen (see Mormon 2:1-2).

Also of significance was the fact that the Aztec war lord, though elected to his position, was generally a blood relative of the Chief Speaker (king).¹⁰ Among the Maya, the town governor (*batab*) was a hereditary office with judicial and military functions, much like those exercised by the earlier Moroni in the Book of Mormon. There was also a war captain (*nacom*) who was elected for three years, but during all-out war, the *batab* was expected to lead the army.¹¹ Though not identical to the Nephite military organization, there are obvious similarities.

General Moroni

Moroni, who had commanded the Nephite armies some five centuries before Mormon, was also a relatively young man when he became chief captain at the age of twenty-five (see Alma 43:17). Moroni had given up the command

of the armies to his son Moronihah (see Alma 62:43), which implies that the position was inherited. Moroni himself became chief captain in the eighteenth year of the reign of the judges (see Alma 43:3) and his son Moronihah in about the thirty-first year (see Alma 62:39). If Moronihah was born when his father was twenty years of age, he would have been only eighteen when he succeeded him.

The prophet Mormon was so impressed with the faith, the military genius, and the character of the earlier Moroni that his praise of the man seems almost an exaggeration (see Alma 48:11-13,16-18).¹² He likely named his own son Moroni after the earlier general. Mormon's son was also a military captain, leading ten thousand at the great battle at Cumorah under his father (see Mormon 6:12). Like the other military leaders, he appears to have been quite young. If, for example, he was sixty years of age when he buried the plates in about the 421st year after Christ (see Moroni 10:1), he would have been twenty-five years old in the 385th year, when he fought at Cumorah (see Moroni 6:5).

I suggest that Mormon's admiration for the earlier Moroni derives not only from the man's character, but also from the fact that he may have been one of Mormon's paternal ancestors. This reason alone would be sufficient to explain why he would call his own son by the same name. By the same token, Moronihah who, along with Moroni, commanded a group of ten thousand under Mormon, may have been named in honor of the earlier Moronihah, son of Moroni, and may have been a member of the same family (see Mormon 6:14). If Mormon belonged to a military caste, we have a possible explanation of why, after having refused to continue in his position, he was later readily accepted as chief captain once again (see Mormon 5:1) — that is, it was an inherited right and responsibility that he had assumed in his youth.

Origin of the Nephite Warrior Caste

There appear to be two distinct warrior castes in the Book of Mormon. The first was that of the Zoramites, who were appointed chief captains by the Lamanites, as we have noted previously. The Zoramites had likely been military leaders among the Nephites prior to their defection to the Lamanites. We learn that Amalickiah appointed Zoramites as chief captains because they were “the most acquainted with the strength of the Nephites, and their places of resort, and the weakest parts of their cities” (Alma 48:5). When they led the Lamanite armies against Nephite cities fortified by Moroni, they “were astonished exceedingly” because of the changes (Alma 49:5). In the same account, we learn that it was the Zoramite chief captains who had introduced shields, breastplates, and armor (thick clothing) to the Lamanites. These implements had aided the Nephites during previous battles against the Lamanites (e.g., Alma 43:19-21).

In the days of Alma, a man named Zoram was appointed chief captain over the Nephite armies (see Helaman 16:5). Note that his appointment does not preclude his being part of a hereditary military aristocracy from which such choices were made. His two sons, Lehi and Aha, were also military leaders (see Alma 16:5, 7). The names of Zoram's sons may have military significance too. Lehi (also Ramath-Lehi) was the site where the great warrior Samson slew a thousand Philistines with the jawbone of an ass (Judges 15:9-17). And Aha may derive from Egyptian *h3*, “warrior,” which is generally rendered “Aha” in the English transliteration of the name of the first Egyptian king. Lehi later played a prominent military role in the days of General Moroni (see Alma 43, 49, 52-53, 61-62; Helaman 1:28). The family may have descended from Zoram, the servant of Laban.¹³ In the battle to recapture the town of Mulek from the Lamanites, we find Lehi pitted against the Zoramite general, Jacob (see Alma 52). If we are correct in stating that at least some of the Zoramites formed a military caste, then we perhaps have the irony of two Zoramite generals fighting on opposite sides of the fence.

The other warrior caste comprised men such as the earlier Moroni and Moronihah and probably Mormon and his father Mormon, as well as his son Moroni and another Moronihah. It may not be out of line to suggest that this caste descended from the ancient kings. Nephi was the one who had taken the rather special sword from Laban in Jerusalem (see 1 Nephi 4:9). Using it as a pattern, he made other swords (see 2 Nephi 5:14) and personally wielded the sword of Laban in the defense of his people (see Jacob 1:10). In this, he appears to have been following the ancient Near Eastern practice of the king being commander of the army. Saul, Israel's first universally acknowledged king, is called in the earlier parts of Samuel by the term *nagîd*, "commander" (KJV "captain"), indicating his role as leader of the army (see 1 Samuel 10:1; cf. 1 Samuel 11). David's troubles began when he neglected personally to lead the army of Israel in battle (see 2 Samuel 11, esp. v. 1). From Egyptian, Assyrian, and Babylonian records, we learn that kings typically accompanied their armies into the field. Jarom noted that the Nephite kings led their people in battle (see Jarom 1:7, 14).

The sword of Laban appears to have been a relic possessed by the kings. We read that King Benjamin (who, in Omni 1:24, leads the Nephites against the Lamanites) wielded the sword in battle (see Words of Mormon 1:13). He passed the weapon to his son Mosiah at the time Mosiah became king (see Mosiah 1:16), about 130 B.C. It is not impossible that this was the sword used by the king's son, Ammon, against the Lamanite raiders some forty years later (see Alma 17:37-39). Possibly his training in the use of such weapons resulted from his royal status.¹⁴

In any event, the sword was evidently passed down and was kept with the plates and the breastplate shown by Moroni to the Three Witnesses (see D&C 17:1).

The earlier Moroni, who was Nephite chief captain when the war with the Lamanites broke out about 74 B.C., was almost certainly not the son of either Mosiah or any of his sons (who had only recently returned from their fourteen-year mission). But he may have been a descendant of King Benjamin or the first Mosiah, and hence of the royal seed. This would give more meaning to the claim of Mormon to be a "pure descendant" of Nephi (see 3 Nephi 5:20; also Mormon 1:5), since only descendants of Nephi were chosen as kings (see Mosiah 25:13), clearly making it necessary to keep genealogical records.

A Military Record

If these assumptions are correct, then we can more readily understand Mormon's approach to the writing of his people's history, which, while comprising only a small portion of the Nephite history (see Words of Mormon 1:5), is essentially a war record. Mormon's first recorded words in our English Book of Mormon tell of the destruction of his people in the last great war with the Lamanites (see Words of Mormon 1:1-2). Much of the account in his own record (see Mormon 2, 4-6) discusses this war, while in another place (see Alma 43-62), he devoted twenty chapters to the war in the time of the first Moroni. In the latter, he placed great stress on military strategy, descriptions of fortifications, and the like (see esp. Alma 48:7-9; 49:4, 13, 18, 22; 50:1-5). His listing of war casualty statistics in his own time and during earlier periods (e.g., Mosiah 9:18-19; 29:19; Alma 3:26; 24:21-22, 24-27; 51:19; Mormon 6) seems to be a waste of precious space on the plates.

Not only did Mormon spend more time describing battles than any other topic, but he also dwelt on such things as the physical stature and prowess of various Nephites and Lamanites. If Mormon's military profession was the result of a longstanding family tradition, then we can better understand his "blood-and-guts" approach to the history of his people. Ammon's slaying of the Lamanite sheep raiders (see Alma 17:25-39), the lengthy and detailed account of the war led by Moroni (see Alma 43-62) and even Mormon's admiration for the "large and mighty" Lamanite leader Coriantumr (see Helaman 1:15-16), attest to Mormon's special interest in the subject of warfare

and physical strength. When describing the battle scene, he was usually very careful to specify exactly what kinds of weapons were used by each of the armies and the kinds of armor they wore (e.g., Alma 43:18-21). He placed great stress on the bones of the dead Jaredites that lay strewn across the land, along with their weapons, and on the fact that the bodies of the Lamanites were often heaped up or thrown into the river to be washed to sea (e.g., see Alma 3:3; 43:37-38, 44; 44:12-14).

Moroni wrote from the same background as his father. His account of the Jaredite history, aside from the religious comments that he inserts in the form of personal testimony of Jesus Christ, is essentially a military history. Logic and textual evidence would dictate that the Jaredites did, in fact, enjoy many years in which battles were not waged. They could not have grown to number over two million people (see Ether 15:2) had they not lived most of their time in peace and tranquility, growing crops and raising families. Yet, of the small part of Ether's history that Moroni chose to write (see Ether 15:33), virtually all of it concerns the wars of the Jaredites.

Men of Peace

Despite the emphasis on martial history in the Book of Mormon, both Mormon and Moroni were great lovers of peace. To them, military might was to be used only for defending righteous principles. Negotiations and reliance on the Lord were preferable to fighting. As a prime example, we note that the main reason given for the mission of King Mosiah's sons to the Lamanites was to ensure peace between the Nephites and Lamanites (see Mosiah 28:1; Alma 23:16-18; 24:6, 12-13, 15; 28:9).¹⁵ Even in later times, Mormon noted that converted Lamanites laid down their weapons of war and returned captured Nephite lands (see Helaman 5:51-52).

Mormon tied the cycle of alternating evil and righteousness to the cycle of alternating war and peace (see Helaman 12). From prosperity came wealth and then pride, which brought about decadence and war. When the Nephites and Lamanites lived in peace for a couple of centuries following the visit of Christ, it was because there was no pride resulting from wealth (see 4 Nephi 1:1-18). On moral grounds, the Book of Mormon sees defense as justifiable and aggression as unacceptable (see 3 Nephi 3:20-21). War, especially in the time of the first Moroni, was justified only when the Nephites fought for their homes, liberty, families, and religion (see Alma 43:45-47; 46:72; 48:10-14). Moroni and his people, we read, did not delight in the shedding of blood (see Alma 48:11, 16, 23).

By contrast, the Nephites of Mormon's day did not fight the Lamanites for a righteous cause. When they lost battles, they sorrowed, cursed God, and died in rebellion against him (see Mormon 2:11-15). When they won, they boasted in their own strength and swore revenge and destruction on the Lamanites (see Mormon 3:9-16; 4:8, 15). Unlike their ancestors, they delighted in the shedding of blood (see Mormon 4:10-11). Mormon urged them to stand and fight for their families and homes (see Mormon 2:23-24), but, because they remained unrepentant, at one point he resigned in despair as their chief captain (see Mormon 3:9-16). Mormon, then, whose family likely belonged to a military caste, was a righteous man who fought when necessary and whose perspective of Nephite history was military in nature.

Notes

1. See Ross T. Christensen, "The Seven Lineages of Lehi," *New Era* 5 (May 1975): 40-41; John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1985), 310-13; and "Seven Tribes: An Aspect of Lehi's Legacy," *F.A.R.M.S. Update*, November 1987.

2. Mormon may have meant that he had no Mulekite, Zoramite, Jaredite, etc., ancestry, or, at least, that his patrilineage was exclusively Nephite. Also, of course, he possibly meant to exclude people of Asiatic stock from his ancestry. Either way, Mormon's ancestors had kept track of their lineage for many centuries.

3. The subject is treated in a manuscript I am preparing titled "A History of Kingship in Ancient Israel."

4. Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert, The World of the Jaredites, There Were Jaredites*, vol. 5 in *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1988), 242-43; for evidence that the Mulekites preserved some Jaredite names, see John A. Tvedtnes, "A Phonemic Analysis of Nephite and Jaredite Proper Names," in *Newsletter & Proceedings of the Society for Early Historic Archaeology*, No. 141 (Dec. 1977), reprinted by F.A.R.M.S. in 1977.

5. In unpublished notes on Book of Mormon names.

6. The evidence for the Jaredite origin of such names has been compiled in a separate paper being prepared for publication.

7. During his famous speech, King Benjamin recounted a revelation he had received for his people (see Mosiah 3). The fact that his son Mosiah possessed the "interpreters" (see Mosiah 8:13-18; 28:13-17) is further evidence that the king was a prophet.

8. In this paper, the word *caste* has been used in its more general meaning, that is, to denote a lineage group to which certain leadership privileges were attached. It is not to be understood as the term is applied to Hindu groups. William Hamblin has recommended the term "hereditary military aristocracy," which is certainly more accurate but too unwieldy for our purposes. The reader may, however, substitute this term wherever *caste* appears.

9. For an overview of military organization among the Mesoamerican peoples, see Victor W. von Hagen, *The Aztec: Man and Tribe* (New York: Mentor, 1962), 48, 170; and *World of the Maya* (New York: Mentor, 1963), 117.

10. Von Hagen, *The Aztecs*, 170.

11. Von Hagen, *World of the Maya*, 117.

12. Mormon also praised another early Nephite warrior, Gideon (see Mosiah 19; Alma 1:13).

13. Nibley cited evidence that Laban was a high-ranking military officer in Jerusalem (*Lehi in the Desert*, 97-99). His servant Zoram may also have been a soldier. (This is not precluded by the fact that he was a "servant" of Laban. By the time of Lehi, the Hebrew term *ʿebed* was most often used in reference to government officials.)

14. As one trained in both military and political affairs, Ammon would have known the importance of both military might and diplomatic means of establishing peace. For a discussion of the role of Mosiah's sons in establishing peace through their missionary efforts to the Lamanites, see my article, "The Sons of Mosiah: Emissaries of Peace," in this volume.

15. See *ibid.*