

Synagogues in the Book of Mormon

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Alma 31:12 "The Zoramites had built synagogues, and . . . they did gather themselves together on one day of the week."

Synagogues are mentioned several times in the Book of Mormon. Places of worship were called synagogues during the time of Nephi and Jacob (see 2 Nephi 26:26). Several centuries later, they were still being built by the Nephites "after the manner of the Jews" and were used along with temples and other sanctuaries as places of preaching (Alma 16:13).

Later, unusual forms of synagogue worship developed. The Amalekites and Amulonites built synagogues "after the order of the Nehors" in the city of Jerusalem joining the borders of Mormon (Alma 21:4), where Ammon preached. The Zoramites also built synagogues in Antionum (see Alma 31:12), which contained rameumptoms upon which the elect were allowed to pray.

Several points should be noted and explored here. First is the diversity evident in Book of Mormon synagogues. The institution was not rigid. There were synagogues after the manner of the Jews, after the manner of the Nehors, and in Antionum after a manner that amazed Alma and his companions. Similarly, ancient Israelite communal worship appears to have begun as a flexible practice and was known in several developmental stages.

The earliest hints possibly relevant to the origins and development of the synagogue in Israel are references to "holy convocations" (Leviticus 23:4; 2 Kings 4:23; Isaiah 4:5); according to some scholars these were the antecedents of the later established synagogue. It is noteworthy that these very early convocations were for the purposes of prayer and worship, which also seems to be the dominant function of the early synagogues in the Book of Mormon. Nephi expressly calls his synagogues "houses of worship."

It is a matter of much scholarly debate when and how the synagogue as known to later Judaism actually developed. As the *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* cautions, the specific origins of the synagogue are too faint "to venture a conjecture in this kind of antiquity."¹ But there are certain possibilities. Some historians see the development of the synagogue occurring during the captivity of the Jews in Babylonia during the sixth century B.C. Others point to the reforms of Josiah in 621 B.C. as giving rise to the use of local congregations for worship, prayer, and instructions among the Israelites. It is, of course, possible that both are right: there is no reason to believe that the Jewish synagogue suddenly came from nowhere and appeared in one instant in its fully developed form as known to later Rabbinic Judaism.

The Book of Mormon, of course, lends credence to the idea that synagogues, at least as places of worship, were known to Israel before the departure of Lehi from Jerusalem (although no specific statement makes that claim). While most scholars focus their attention on the development of the synagogue in postexilic Israel, those who discuss the preexilic origins of the synagogue include Leopold Loew, Julian Morgenstern, Louis Finkelstein (long-time Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America), Azriel Eisenberg, and others. Jacob Weingreen writes: "It would be natural to suppose that, following upon the enforcement of Josiah's edict, religious services continued to be held outside Jerusalem, but now without sacrifices. . . . These must . . . have constituted the basis of the synagogue service of later times."²

Another interesting point deals with the word *synagogue*, which is of Greek origin. It is the term used in the Septuagint to translate several Hebrew words, including *camp*, *assembly*, *community*, and *congregation*. The Hebrew roots involved here should be explored to cast light on the underlying practices of ancient Israel. Of course, we do not know what Hebrew or other word the Nephites or Zoramites used in naming their places of worship. Note, however, that the English word *synagogue* is made from two parts: the Greek prefix *syn*, which means together, and the verb *agō*, which means to gather or to bring together. Interestingly, in Alma 31:12 the phrase “gather themselves together” appears in immediate literal conjunction with the term *synagogue*: “the Zoramites had built synagogues, and . . . they did gather themselves together.”

Although considerably more work is needed before we fully understand the nature of ancient Israelite places of worship, their sanctuaries, temples, and the names by which they knew them, this history is significant and takes on particular interest to the student of the Book of Mormon.

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Footnotes

1. “Synagogue,” in George Buttrick, ed., *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), 479-80.
2. An extensive treatment of all sides of the history of the synagogue can be found in Joseph Gutmann, *The Synagogue: Studies in Origins, Archaeology, and Architecture* (New York: KTAV, 1975).