

# Religious Groups and Movements among the Nephites, 200–1 B.C.

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The Nephite record refers many times to “religion” and “church” as it speaks about the peoples whose activities it chronicles. The purpose of this article is to examine the text of the Book of Mormon in order to distinguish the major organizational patterns that characterized the sacred aspect of life among those ancients. This article also tries to mirror the attention to detail in the study of sacred texts shown in research by my colleague and friend, Richard L. Anderson.

A great deal about “religion” among Book of Mormon peoples still remains to be discovered from the text by Latter-day Saint students. Our examination of the book to this point has been devoted almost exclusively to discovering instructive parallels to beliefs and practices familiar to us in the restored (Latter-day Saint) church. But it is inevitable that much in the Nephite point of view will prove quite different from our ideas and customs. Scholars have found many ways in which the historical documents show us that, for example, New Testament Christians differed from the Mormons of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The Nephites would have been even more distinct. Because they were culturally based in ancient America, their ways of thinking, feeling, and speaking about divinity and worship are even more likely to differ from the Judeo-Christian tradition from which our ways have developed. Similarities will be found, to be sure, but differences must exist and deserve our careful attention lest we inaccurately relate the two systems.

In general the “religious” realm in the lives of ancient peoples cannot be equated with our current use of that term. Our civilization and language are so different from theirs that it is unthinkable that we could automatically translate concepts from their record to our minds without qualification.

One of the major differences between their conceptual world and ours has to do with the scope of “religion.” A current definition is belief in or worship of a supernatural power accepted as the creator and governor of the universe. Ancient people generally accepted supernatural powers as so pervasive in their world that it did not occur to them to deny their strong relevance to their own life, sacred or mundane. Food-getting, fighting, sex, health, and symbolic expressions were all considered to be imbued with sacred dimensions impossible to separate from the rest of life. Of course there were some skeptics, but we are talking here about the general culture. Eminent Semiticist Dr. Cyrus H. Gordon makes a similar point when he observes: “The Hebrew language has no word for ‘religion.’ The true religion is designated as ‘the fear of God (or Yahwe).’”<sup>1</sup> However, in seventeenth-century Europe a revolution of thought called the Enlightenment took place. As a result, rational thought, not sacred devotion, came to be held up by intellectuals in the European tradition as an ideal. So it has become common to treat “religion” as a distinct category of human experience, which can be held at arm’s length and analyzed as much as, say, “economics.” Today it is common for persons to say, “I am not religious,” meaning that he or she does not choose to think in terms of any specified supernatural power nor to act consciously in the realm that modern culture terms “religion.”

It is because this contrast is so great that I have, to this point (but, for simplicity, not hereafter), set off the term *religion* in quotation marks, lest we automatically suppose that the word means the same thing to us as it did to Alma or Mormon. Consequently we should be warned to look carefully at what the scriptural text’s terminology actually means, as far as careful examination can reveal it.

This discussion will be far from a comprehensive treatment of the sacred elements in Nephite culture. That would require at least a book. We will survey the major groups and movements through which sacred activities were structured organizationally; this will provide an orientation for a future fuller analysis of the whole range of activities, such as roles, rites, and beliefs. Here our concern will be limited to such questions as: What was “the church”? What rival units (“cults”?) existed in the society? What about Lamanite and Jaredite societies—did they too have “churches” or “cults” that may have influenced Nephite patterns?

To some readers of scripture these questions may seem fruitless. To me they are not. From the text of the Book of Mormon, we ascertain that sacred features were central to Nephite culture. We cannot gain an adequate picture of how Nephite society and the modes of thinking of its participants operated without knowing all we can about their religion. Moreover, for me it is important to understand the full range of Nephite life as a context in which to shed light on the words of the Nephite prophets. We are obliged to learn as much as possible about the religious aspect of their life, if we are to understand the book fully.

### **The Social, Historical, and Linguistic Complexity of Nephite Society**

Religious organization in any society mirrors in important ways the structure and logic of social life generally. It would be the same for the Nephites. First, it is necessary to picture the prime units and dimensions of their society,<sup>2</sup> and then we can project the organizational forms for sacred conduct on the background of the broader social structure.

Descent from different founding ancestors marked off four groups in early Nephite society. Nephites in the narrow sense (“the children of Nephi,” Mosiah 25:2) held a preeminent position since rulership in the kingdom “had been conferred upon none but those who were descendants of Nephi” (Mosiah 25:13). Jacobites, Josephites, and Zoramites also had corporate status as tribes (see Jacob 1:13). The distinctions among the four descent groups continued throughout Book of Mormon history (see 3â€¢Nephi 7:2–3; 4â€¢Nephi 1:36–37; and Mormon 1:8), although the tribal distinctions were muted in the overall record by use of the umbrella political term *Nephites* to apply to all four groups.

In the course of centuries, those original tribes would not have continued functioning precisely as they had in the beginning. In the first place, some would have grown so large in numbers of descendants and so spread out geographically that they could not have operated in the old manner. The Nephite and Lamanite labels must have come to designate supertribes, each divided into lesser groups for certain purposes. Thus by A.D. times there would effectively have been more than the original seven groupings, counting subtribes. When 3â€¢Nephi 7:2 reports that “they did separate one from another into tribes”; “they were enemies”; and they had “strict laws that one tribe should not trespass against another,” the reference is to “tribes” within the broad Nephite category.

The people of Zarahemla were more numerous than the descendants of the four tribes who constituted the original broad Nephite faction referred to in Jacob 1:14 (see Mosiah 25:2). These “Mulekites” were also linguistically separate (see Omni 1:17–18). They constituted a population whose social distinctness and political power became so submerged under Nephite rulership that little is heard of them as a group throughout the Nephite record. It is obvious, however, that no majority population simply disappears from a social scene; what must have happened is that the people of Zarahemla, the majority, became socially and politically invisible to the eyes of the Nephite elite record keepers in the capital city. No doubt those “Mulekites” maintained cultural distinctness in their ethnic strongholds, like the Anglo-Saxons under Norman governance. It must also be kept in mind that the people of Zarahemla probably were not a homogeneous group. Given their history of internal

conflict (see Omni 1:17), in fact, it is quite certain that they would not have been unified. With a background in divisive wars, we may conjecture that they already constituted more than a single social and ethnic element under their own previous chiefs before Mosiah<sub>1</sub> took over the rule.

In addition to the differentiation based on ancestry, class differences provided another significant basis for diversity. One Nephite segment claimed “the blood of nobility” (Alma 51:21; actually there could have been two such claimant groups, those descended from chief Zarahemla and various descendants of Kings Mosiah<sub>1</sub>, Benjamin, or Mosiah<sub>2</sub>). In addition, powerful class distinctions based on wealth left major fissures in the structure of Nephite society, we are told (see Alma 32:2; 4 Nephi 1:26). These two factors—nobility and class distinction—were probably interdependent to some degree.

Social segmentation is a well-documented phenomenon in the Nephite record. The Amlicites were one large segment that broke away from the majority and tried to replace the legitimate Nephite rulers with their own man (see Alma 2). The king-men,<sup>3</sup> led by “those of high birth” (Alma 51:8), were perhaps ethnically related to the earlier Amlicites; they attempted the same type of power seizure (see Alma 51) and apparently dwelt in the same area (see Alma 51:17–20). Later on, the Amalickiahites followed the same political course. They wished their leader, Amalickiah, to be king over the Nephites; “The greater part of them [no doubt meaning the instigators of the movement]” were lower judges who “were seeking for greater power” (Alma 46:4; see 46:1–6).

Still another faction, the people of Zeniff, left the main Nephite body to reinherit part of the land of Nephi from which Mosiah<sub>1</sub> had fled (see Omni 1:27; Mosiah 7:9). From them, in turn, two other groups divided off—the Amulonites and the people of Alma.

Other social fragments included Morianton’s people (see Alma 50:29), the group under would-be king Jacob (see 3 Nephi 7:9–12), and the Zoramites, who split off from the Nephite polity in the days of Alma<sub>2</sub> and who worshiped at the notorious Rameumptom. It is unclear whether they traced descent from the original Zoram, but the process of their fission is described in some detail; they progressed from initial geographical isolation, to unorthodoxy in ritual and beliefs, then to internal social turmoil, and finally to formal acceptance of Lamanite rulership (see Alma 30:59–35:11 and 43:4). Still other groups migrated to the land northward without maintaining much contact with their home society (see, for example, Alma 63:4–11).

Many other dissenters are mentioned incidentally. Some fled to dwell among the Lamanites (see, for example, Alma 63:14), but unquestionably other unhappy, separatist-minded elements, whose dissent did not quite reach the “boiling point,” would have remained within Nephite society and simmered. They ranged from followers of Sherem in the second generation (see Jacob 7), through the people of Ammonihah (note their cheeky response to Alma in Alma 8:9–13, confirmed in verse 17), to those who fought in the final wars of the Nephites only to defect finally to the Lamanites (see Mormon 6:15).

Among the separatists were robber groups, who, by the end of Nephite history, were socially, politically, and territorially distinct from the Nephites and Lamanites per se (see Mormon 2:8, 27–28). In earlier days predecessors of these robber groups had maintained distinct traditions and social forms within the nominally Nephite society (see, for example, Helaman 6:18).

Other social enclaves who did not seek autonomy yet surely were culturally distinct existed under the umbrella of the Nephite polity. The people of Alma<sub>1</sub> who had migrated to the land of Zarahemla, the people of Limhi, and the

Anti-Nephi-Lehies were all refugee groups out of Lamanite lands who came to live in areas granted them within the land of Zarahemla. Each group apparently stayed socially distinct. Two of the “seven churches in the land of Zarahemla” (Mosiah 25:23) in the time of Alma<sup>1</sup> probably consisted of his own group from the land of Helam (see Mosiah 24:17–25) and the Zeniffites of Limhi (see Mosiah 25:15–18), both existing as separate residential enclaves.<sup>4</sup> Later, the Anti-Nephi-Lehies, under the name of Ammonites, were first settled in the land of Jershon (see Alma 27:26) and then moved wholesale to the land of Melek for strategic reasons (see Alma 35:13).

All told, we detect substantial variation in the structure of the society termed “the people of Nephi” or “Nephites.” The differences separating the social elements were based on ancestry, geography, culture, language, ethnicity, and class. A careful reading of the record as a description of society reveals a mosaic of groups rather than a socially unified nation. In fact, one of the most insistent lessons we gain from the record is the difficulty that the ruling class had—at least in the period covered by the books of Mosiah, Alma, and Helaman—trying to hold this coalition together within a single political structure.

Human experience worldwide teaches us that religion, however defined, is one of the most powerful adhesives that holds social groups together. It is obvious that the fragmentation of Nephite society would be reflected in—and in part stem from—different views about sacred matters and worship.

## **Beyond Nephite Society**

In addition to the cultural, linguistic, and ethnic variety among the Nephites, neighboring groups must have exerted influence on them. Appreciation of the complexity of the religious aspect of Nephite life demands that we pay attention to those adjacent forces.

In a broad sense the Nephites’ rivals were called Lamanites, but that master rubric obscured differences that seem to have made little difference to the Nephites. At a strategic level, if Nephites wore white hats, they considered that any sort of Lamanite wore a black one. Yet, given the striving, quarrelsome dimension exhibited by the Lamanites, it is unlikely that, out of sight of the Nephites, they were all that unified among themselves.<sup>5</sup>

The most prestigious descent group within that supertribe must have been the Lamanites in the narrow sense—direct descendants of the original Laman. Nothing indicates that his lineage claimed an exclusive right to rule, as Nephi’s descendants did, although the sparseness of our information on them may obscure that point. (Two successive Lamanite kings bore the name—at least in the Nephite record—of *Laman*; that might have been a title, comparable to *Nephi* as a regal title among the Nephites, but we cannot know for sure; see Mosiah 7:21; 9:10–11, 13; 10:6, 18; and 24:3, 9.) The Lemuelites formed another descent group. We do not know whether they lived in a separate area and had a tribal sociopolitical structure of their own, but it is reasonable to believe that they did. It is clear from Alma 24:29 that descent from the two brothers continued to be traced separately. The presence of a “city of Lemuel” (Alma 23:12) further implies that the Lemuelites occupied a distinct settlement area, at least in part, as may “the city of Laman” for that tribe (3 Nephi 9:10). Lemuel himself was heavily dependent on his brother Laman (note 1 Nephi 3:28, “Lemuel . . . hearkened unto the words of Laman”), but that does not mean that his descent group totally gave up their independence to the senior lineage. The fact that they reconstituted themselves as a tribal unit in the third century A.D. (see 4 Nephi 1:38) indicates that not only had individuals kept track of their descent but that the tribe had retained its corporate standing since the beginning, and that in turn implies continuous possession of ancestral lands in a given region.

The tribe of the Ishmaelites also appears to have maintained some autonomy, according to the account of Lamoni, who was king of the people occupying “the land of Ishmael.” The fact that the land was “called after the sons of Ishmael” (Alma 17:19) suggests that Ishmaelite descendants predominantly occupied it or at least had originally done so. More explicitly, Lamoni is reported to have been “a descendant of Ishmael” (Alma 17:21). From the point of view taken in the Nephite account, Lamoni and his people were Lamanites, a term that the king himself may have used (see Alma 17:22, “among the Lamanites, or among his people”). Still we note that there was a rivalrous faction in Lamoni’s land whose men did not hesitate to steal from the king’s own flocks (see Alma 17:26–28; 18:7). Moreover, although their activities and identities were notorious, they remained at the court with impunity (see Alma 19:21–22); that can only mean that they had a significant power base apart from that of their Ishmaelite king. One is led to wonder whether differences in descent may have been behind this division of loyalties and behind the “contention” that “began to be exceeding sharp among” the people over how to interpret what was happening to Lamoni, their king (Alma 19:28).

Lamoni’s father, who dwelt at the capital city Nephi, was “king over all the land” of the Lamanites (Alma 20:8). (Given the patrilineal emphasis evident in royal descent among the Lamanites, we may suppose that the great king, like his son Lamoni, was counted an Ishmaelite.) From that ancient center he ruled over a very extensive territory that extended coast to coast, “even to the sea, on the east and on the west” (Alma 22:27). His prime mechanism of rule consisted of appointing dependent kings over each local land, whose loyalty to him rested on his charisma and the making of sacred oaths (compare Mosiah 19:25–26 and 20:14–15). (Based on similar systems in other parts of the world, there would, of course, have been tribute payments formally and regularly sent by the subsidiary units to their overlord.) Some of the subkings were his sons (see Alma 20:9), although at least one, the king over the land of Middoni, was not (Alma 20:4 says he was only “a friend” to Lamoni, not a brother). Furthermore, the degree of autonomy the subordinate kings enjoyed could vary. Lamoni himself was not completely beholden to the great king; while he “feared to offend him” (Alma 20:11), he still defied his father’s direct command (see Alma 20:14–16). Then, under the threat of Ammon’s sword, the old king granted Lamoni total freedom to rule his own land (see Alma 20:22–26), an arrangement apparently not without precedent. The limitation on the father’s actual power as king is further shown in Alma 20:27–28. According to this passage, he granted that Ammon’s brethren be released from prison in Middoni, yet it was necessary for Lamoni to go there in person and find “favor in the eyes of the king of [that] land” in order to bring about their release. Note too that the old king had gone personally and without advance notification to visit Lamoni in order to find out what was happening in Ishmael. This makes it apparent that the nominally supreme king possessed no settled apparatus even of diplomatic representation within his scattered domain, let alone effective bureaucratic control over it. Given these evident limitations on royal power, we are not surprised in the aftermath of the old king’s conversion to the Nephite faith that a majority of those who had been converted “would not that he should be their king,” as Alma 24:2 indicates.

The title *king* may suggest to modern readers that the Lamanites’ polity was a state—a form of government characterized by the use of relatively stable institutions of law and government (i.e., the legitimate use of force) for the maintenance of an established order of socioeconomic inequality. What we see in the historical sketches in the Nephite record is, instead, a system of “chiefdoms.” Both the Nephite and Lamanite rulers would be labeled by modern social scientists as “chiefs.” In a chiefdom, hereditary rank differences exist, but the position of the elite is only tentatively established, lacking a “formal, legal apparatus of forceful repression.”<sup>6</sup> The political weakness of would-be “kings” and their vulnerability to challenges to their authority are evident in the Book of Mormon record. However, very little evidence from the text supports the idea of a legal framework that the whole of Lamanite society considered a valid charter for elite power and privileges.

From the glimpses the text affords us of conditions in the Lamanite realm, we can deduce that it was divided into a number of semiautonomous societies, regions, and factions, among which relationships were problematic and variable rather than monolithic and stable. Consequently, it is inevitable that the elements making up “the Lamanites” would have displayed a number of versions of religious behavior and belief. The characterization of religious matters among specific subgroups of the Lamanites confirms this state of affairs, as we shall see below.

We have already seen that fragmentation and regional differences were also characteristic of the Nephite polity. Thus multiple sociocultural arrangements prevailed within both the overarching categories, “Nephites” and “Lamanites.” Culture would also have differed among those elements. That means that their religious institutions would be internally differentiated too.

### **Worship among the Nephites**

At the time of Lehi’s departure from the Jerusalem area, priests at the temple were carrying out designated sacrificial practices on behalf of the whole people (see, for example, Leviticus 16:15–16). For certain purposes, priests also made offerings on behalf of an individual person or family (see, for example, Leviticus 15:29–30 and 19:21–22). But, based on old traditions, individual male worshipers had the proper power to carry out many sacrifices (see, for example, Deuteronomy 16:2, 4–6, 14; 33:19; compare Deuteronomy 12:5–7, 26–27; and Leviticus 19:5).<sup>7</sup> Jewish religion at the time of Lehi still allowed certain ritual practices to be carried out legitimately by nonpriests.

We are not surprised, then, to read that Lehi built, in the wilderness, an altar of stones on which he sacrificed (see 1 Nephi 2:7 and 5:9). It is to be expected that sacrifice of this familial sort would survive among some of Lehi’s descendants. The Nephites at the time of Benjamin’s assembly sacrificed at the temple: “They also took of the firstlings of their flocks, that they might offer sacrifice and burnt offerings according to the law of Moses” (Mosiah 2:3). However, later we learn that Alma refers to the people in the land of Sidom “assembl[ing] themselves together at their sanctuaries to worship God before the altar” (Alma 15:17), but no temple has been indicated. This suggests a more informal pattern for managing sacrifices and sounds like Lehi’s practice. As late in Nephite history as the time of the coming of the resurrected Jesus, we find a clear implication that Mosaic rites were still being followed, some of which may have been individually performed (see 4 Nephi 1:12; note Alma 34:10–11).

Old Testament writers tell of many abominable or pagan, syncretistic practices in use at Jerusalem in Lehi’s lifetime, both at the temple and in private quarters (see 2 Kings 23:4–16; 2 Chronicles 34:3–7; Jeremiah 19:13; 32:29; Ezekiel 8:9–16; and Hosea 4:13). We can expect that some of those heretical features were retained in the consciousness of personnel who arrived in either Lehi’s or Mulek’s party. Particularly in the case of Mulek’s group, priests associated with the Judaic royal house (Mulek being a son of King Zedekiah) might well have accompanied the young prince on his journey, and those priests could have been prime channels for importing non-Yahwistic rites to Lehi’s land of promise.<sup>8</sup>

A centralized set of rituals and connected beliefs (called by scholars a “cult” or “cultus,” without any judgment intended regarding orthodoxy) was established by the Nephite founder and first ruler, Nephi<sub>1</sub> (see 2 Nephi 6:2 and 25:2). This official Nephite body of practices centered on the temple built under Nephi<sub>1</sub>’s direction and according to his design (see 2 Nephi 5:16). The observances were carried out or superintended by designated priests and teachers (see 2 Nephi 5:26; 6:2; Jacob 1:17–19; Enos 1:22–23; and Jarom 1:3–5, 10–11).<sup>9</sup> Nephi’s actions followed a Near Eastern pattern spelled out in 1 Chronicles 22, where David started to build the

temple, although his son Solomon completed it (see 1 Chronicles 23–29). According to 2 Chronicles 31:2–3, Judah’s King Hezekiah renewed the royal sponsorship—appointing new priests and supporting them with his own resources “for the burnt offerings”—and otherwise served as sponsor and guarantor of the temple cult at Jerusalem. This official national or tribal system of centralized rites of worship was considered by the people of the Near East to be a royal institution.<sup>10</sup> At the beginning of the Book of Mormon record, Nephi<sub>1</sub> reports that he appointed his brothers the first priests (see 2 Nephi 5:26). Nephi himself was the cultural channel through whom the ordinances and beliefs were transmitted from the Old World (see 2 Nephi 25:2). In his group, only he (and his brother Sam and Zoram) had seen the operation of the Jewish cult at Jerusalem. He was in the position of cultural gatekeeper; he could shape his own version of the Jerusalem cultus in the new land along lines that he defined as orthodox. Since the Nephite ruler appointed the priests (see Jacob 1:18), he would have been thought of as a priest himself, in a formal sense, and subsequent kings surely would fill the same ex officio priesthood role.

This sacred status for Nephite kings is spelled out by Ammon, speaking to King Limhi, who says that he knows of a man—the king in Zarahemla—who could translate “records that are of ancient date; and it is a gift from God” (Mosiah 8:13), by means of a device called interpreters. “And behold, the king of the people who are in the land of Zarahemla is the man that is commanded to do these things, and who has this high gift from God” (Mosiah 8:14). The king (Mosiah<sub>2</sub>), he continued, is a seer and a revelator and a prophet (see Mosiah 8:13–16). Later, in fact, Mosiah<sub>2</sub> did translate the Jaredite record (see Mosiah 28:11–13). A parallel evidence of the king’s priestly status occurs when Benjamin addresses the people, announcing his son Mosiah<sub>2</sub>’s accession to the throne; the event took place at the temple, where Benjamin personally led the people in making a new covenant with God (see Mosiah 1:18; compare the parallel for the people of Zeniff, in Mosiah 7:17–18 and 8:1–2). Clearly the king was central among the Nephite ritual personnel. Furthermore, he was the formal custodian of not only the interpreters, but also the other tribal and national sacred relics—the plates of brass, the Liahona, and the sword of Laban (see Mosiah 1:16). It is unlikely that they would have been kept in any location except the temple, under the practical custody of the senior priest.

The temple-based cult begun by Nephi<sub>1</sub> would have been part of the kingship complex transferred by Mosiah<sub>1</sub> to the city of Zarahemla when he discovered the people living there. King Benjamin’s role as the sacred officiator reveals that, and it is confirmed by the cryptic reference at Mosiah 27:1 to King Mosiah<sub>2</sub>’s consulting “his priests.” They would have been the priests in charge of the (in effect, the king’s) temple and who saw that its rituals were carried out on schedule. (The need for scheduling naturally would have placed responsibility for keeping up the calendar in priestly hands, as had been the case at Jerusalem; compare 3 Nephi 8:1–2.) The refusal by Mosiah’s priests to enter into the particular issue of moral and political behavior (“persecution”) that Alma<sub>1</sub> had raised is consistent with the definition of their role as largely ceremonial, focused on what went on at the temple itself rather than dealing much with ethical issues among the public at large.

When the record says that the Nephites did “keep the law of Moses” (for example, Alma 25:15), that no doubt means that the official cult of sacrifices, offerings, and festivals was being visibly maintained at the temples and that the resources received as offerings were sufficient to enable the priests to carry out “the ordinances of God, according to the law of Moses” (Alma 30:3), in a timely manner and on a respectable scale. The record keepers of the Nephites, all of whom lived at the Nephite capital (Zarahemla in this period), seem likely to have used the degree of public support for these rituals as their key data for interpreting the religious faithfulness of the populace. We are given no hint of a reporting structure through which other sorts of information on the spiritual condition of the people at large would have reached the high priest.



Understanding the heavily ritualistic nature of the official cult, which people could observe only at the city of Zarahemla (or at other major regional centers where there were temples), suggests that the rites may well have been of little importance to many Nephites as far as their personal lives were concerned. If so, we can also understand what Korihor complained about to the high priest and why his charges may have been popular within some circles in the society: “I do not teach this people to bind themselves down under the foolish ordinances and performances which are laid down by ancient priests, to usurp power and authority over them, to keep them in ignorance, that they may not lift up their heads” (Alma 30:23). Korihor’s accusation may not have been accurate, but it is possible that people found the charge plausible, if they viewed the priests’ activities as practically and morally meaningless official rituals that were financially burdensome on them. After all, Abinadi had laid much the same charge on the corrupt priests of Noah: “And they said: We teach the law of Moses. And again he said unto them: If ye teach the law of Moses why do ye not keep it? Why do ye set your hearts upon riches?” (Mosiah 12:28–29). The same pattern is also manifest later among the Zoramites. The poor there felt “despised . . . because of their poverty, yea, and more especially by our priests; for they have cast us out of our synagogues which we have labored abundantly to build with our own hands; and they have cast us out because of our exceeding poverty” (Alma 32:5). These and other statements in the record, which echo Jesus’ accusations against the Jewish religious leaders (see, for example, Luke 20:46–47), confirm a tendency for priests and people in many periods of history to fail to appreciate the symbolic and moral potential of sacred rituals (compare “strayed from mine ordinances,” D&C 1:15; see also Isaiah 24:5). Yet rites need not rob a formal ceremony of spiritual substance, as is illustrated by the powerful teachings of the first Nephite priest, Jacob, to the group of worshipers gathered at the temple in the city of Nephi, probably on a ceremonial day in the Jewish-derived calendar (see Jacob 2:2, 11). And King Benjamin’s marvelous sermon was delivered on another highly ritualized occasion at the temple in Zarahemla (see Mosiah 1–6, especially 2:3).<sup>11</sup>

Considerable light is shed on the formal cult by what the Book of Mormon tells us, explicitly and implicitly, about the organization of religious life at the time when King Mosiah<sub>2</sub> gave up his throne. He had apparently been filling two roles: (1) that of highest judge in the polity and (2) ex officio chief priest (although formally designated subordinate priests carried out the routine sacrifices). The text gives us no explicit description of the transition to the new arrangement when judges replaced the monarch. Not long before this event Alma<sub>1</sub>’s people had come into the land of Zarahemla, as had Limhi and the remaining people of Zeniff (see Mosiah 24:25 and 22:13). Alma<sub>1</sub>’s church took on a semiofficial standing in the society by virtue of the kings’ virtual sponsorship of Alma’s religious role (see Mosiah 25:14–15) before the assembled people. Furthermore, the king “granted unto Alma that he might establish churches throughout all the land of Zarahemla; and gave him power to ordain priests and teachers over every church” (Mosiah 25:19). Limhi and his people came into the new church via baptism (see Mosiah 25:17), but apparently King Mosiah<sub>2</sub> did not do so at that time. Before long, at any rate, more than half the Nephites at Zarahemla belonged to “the people of God” (Mosiah 26:5), and a few decades later we are told that “the establishment of the church became general throughout the land, in all the region round about, among all the people of the Nephites” (Alma 16:15).

If we look for a model to clarify what was going on, we might find it in the case of the early church of Christ led by Jesus’ apostles as outlined in the book of Acts. The gospel as taught by Jesus was presented to the Jews as a reformed version of their belief system, a variant “way” (Acts 9:2; 22:4; and 24:14). Only when the leaders of the Jewish people rejected this interpretation of continuity was the movement viewed, by them, as a heretical “church” to be opposed and destroyed.



To the contrary, Mosiah<sub>2</sub>, the Nephite king, early gave his stamp of approval to Alma<sub>1</sub>'s presentation of his "church" as a reformed and invigorated version of established Nephite religious belief. Thus the church under Alma<sub>1</sub> was shaped as a mainstream form of Nephite religious life rather than as a revolutionary challenge to the established pattern. The king greeted Alma<sub>1</sub> as a religious cynosure, a phenomenal individual who could revivify the religious life of the Nephites through his dynamic new message and the flexible structure of local "churches" composed of baptized believers. He co-opted the new source of religious energy and morality by giving it his royal approval; he gave sanctity and authority to the new system in the eyes of his people by granting Alma<sub>1</sub> "power to ordain priests and teachers over every church" (Mosiah 25:19).

Did he simultaneously make Alma<sub>1</sub> chief priest over the temple rites? Nothing explicit is given to us on that point. When Alma<sub>1</sub> raised to the ruler a question about how to deal with those who refused to accept the church's standards (see Mosiah 26:1–5), the king at first said, in effect, "while I have power to judge those people, I choose not to but give you official power to deal with them" (based on Mosiah 26:12; see Mosiah 26:8). Soon after, however, the matter of nonbelievers persecuting church people arose. Now "Mosiah consulted with his priests" (Mosiah 27:1) about how to handle the problem. Since it was more of a political issue, he felt he could act and proclaimed that there must be no persecution.

Obviously Alma<sub>1</sub>, "high priest" over the church (Mosiah 26:7), presided over a structure of priests and teachers within the structure of the church (see Mosiah 26:7) who were organizationally separate from the priests directly under the king. (Had the former priests simply been given new duties, there would have been no need to ordain new priests and teachers; see Mosiah 25:19–21.) Mosiah's priests could only have been those charged with carrying on the sacrificial duties prescribed under the Nephite version of the law of Moses, that is, the official temple cult.

A certain tension may be inferred between these two priesthood structures at the time of Mosiah 26. How, if at all, it was resolved, is not clear from the text, but some hints appear. One possibility is that Mosiah<sub>2</sub> was himself baptized, which would have given official validity to Alma<sub>1</sub>'s church. The king would have become a kind of Nephite Constantine (the first Roman emperor who became a Christian). Mosiah<sub>2</sub>'s baptism could have provided a basis for his putting the temple cult under the high priest of the church. Another possibility is that when Alma<sub>2</sub> succeeded his father as high priest over the church (see Mosiah 29:42 and heading to the book of Alma) and simultaneously became chief judge in the government, as successor to the king he would have brought together under his aegis both the temple cult and the church. After all, the chief judge retained attributes of kingly power and symbolism. Although the title *king* was now eliminated, the record still refers to "the reign" of Alma<sub>2</sub> as chief judge (Alma 1:2; compare 2:1). Nephite judges also sat on "thrones" as though they were kings (Alma 60:7, 21). In addition, Alma<sub>2</sub> functioned like a king in personally leading his people to battle (see Alma 2:16; compare Words of Mormon 1:13). It is logical that under him both the royal powers (including control of the temple cult) and the control of the church were combined.

Later, Alma<sub>2</sub> resigned his civil role as chief judge while he "retained the office of high priest unto himself" (Alma 4:18). Mention here of "the office of high priest" without limiting that position to the church may mean that there was now a single structure of religious organization and practice that was not thereafter separated as church distinguished from temple cult. This idea is supported by the fact that Alma<sub>2</sub> retained the sacred artifacts, previously a sign of kingship, along with his leadership over the church. These objects were the national treasures emblematic of legitimate rulership in the tradition of Lehi<sub>1</sub> and Nephi<sub>1</sub>, consisting of the brass plates, the plates of

Nephi, the Liahona, and the sword of Laban. Alma<sub>2</sub> passed them on to his son Helaman<sub>1</sub> (see Alma 37:2–47), and they continued down the generations of holy men among descendants of Alma<sub>1</sub>, who were not chief judges (see 3 Nephi heading, and 3 Nephi 26:7, 11).

The idea that the temple cult had been amalgamated into the new church structure is supported by an incident reported in Alma 16. When the military leader Zoram sought the aid of an oracle about how to conduct war, he went to Alma<sub>2</sub>, the “high priest over the church” (Alma 16:5). In the Israelite tradition that oracular function probably had belonged to the chief priest at the temple; looking to Alma<sub>2</sub> to provide it indicates that he was by now over the entire religious structure, not just heading the church as a separate entity.

Within Alma<sub>2</sub>’s lifetime, expansion of the church had made it the dominant Nephite religious structure. Alma<sub>2</sub>, Amulek, and their associates are said to have preached repentance and baptism, the key tenets of the church, “in their temples, and in their sanctuaries, and also in their synagogues” so widely and successfully that “the establishment of the church became general throughout the land, in all the region round about, among all the people of the Nephites” (Alma 16:13, 15). With that turn of events, it is likely that performance of the old sacrificial rituals in the Mosaic tradition would have been subsumed under the priesthood of the church rather than continuing under now redundant temple priests. (We know that the rites were not abandoned because the Savior referred to their continuance a century later; see 3 Nephi 9:19.)

### **Alma<sub>1</sub>’s Church of Christ**

The “church” founded by Alma<sub>1</sub> at the waters of Mormon was a different type of religious institution from the official, royal cult at the temple. First, it was based on individual learning and internalized acceptance of moral principles rather than on preexisting group membership. Alma “did teach them . . . repentance, and redemption, and faith on the Lord” (Mosiah 18:7). No hint is given in the text that he utilized any of the Mosaic rituals in the religious life of his group. (He himself had been a Zeniffite priest under King Noah and surely knew those rites. His rejection of that style of worship could well have resulted from his hearing the prophet Abinadi’s message, which underlined for him the futility of reliance on Mosaic ceremonies as the key to salvation.) He referred to his associates as “the children of God” (Mosiah 18:22). Individual believers were required to “come into” the group by making a covenant wherein baptism in water was a witness or token of their personal mental and spiritual cleansing and willingness to adhere to the fold of believers (see Mosiah 18:8–9, 16–17). This covenant was made one person at a time (see Mosiah 18:12–17) in contrast with the covenant under Benjamin, which was accepted by the whole people simultaneously. The only ritual element mentioned for Alma’s group, beyond the initial baptism, consisted of “assemb[ling] themselves together at their sanctuaries to worship God before the altar, watching and praying continually, that they might be delivered from Satan, and from death, and from destruction” (Alma 15:17). In the church, the priests’ sole function was “to teach them concerning the things pertaining to the kingdom of God.” The people’s duty consisted essentially of “repentance and faith on the Lord, who had redeemed his people” (Mosiah 18:20), as well as giving one another strong social, emotional, and economic support. They assembled on “one day in every week that was set apart that they should gather themselves together to teach the people, and to worship the Lord their God” (Mosiah 18:25). The church’s priests were not supported by offerings but had to labor like common folk for their own support (see Mosiah 18:24, 28; Alma 30:32–33).

The arrangement for worship instituted by Alma<sub>1</sub> was different in concept from that under the law of Moses, at least as Israelite practice in the Holy Land had evolved. The Mosaic order of things never escaped from an orientation to corporate, that is, tribal or national, responsibility for sin. In the older system generally, priests

approached the divine on behalf of the whole people. The individual's possible role in worship, though present in principle, was typically submerged in group conformity. For example, while King Benjamin taught principles of repentance and faith, as in Mosiah 4:4–10, the resulting covenant was framed as a group response: “they all cried with one voice” (Mosiah 5:2). As far as the text of the Book of Mormon indicates, Alma<sub>1</sub>'s church was an innovation among the Nephites (see 3 Nephi 5:12).<sup>12</sup> He taught that individuals must work toward salvation through personal faith, repentance, and actions in voluntary fellowship in a group of like-minded individuals who constituted a church that had no basis in natural descent. Moreover, the key rituals in the new order had to do with furthering individual spiritual advancement, not with the state of the sociotribal group.

Alma 31:9–10 clearly distinguishes this church as a religious framework from the Mosaic temple cult. The Zoramites, we are told, “would not observe to keep the commandments of God, and his statutes, according to the law of Moses. *Neither* would they observe the performances of the church, to continue in prayer and supplication to God daily” (Alma 31:10). A close analysis of all relevant portions of the scriptural text would allow the construction of a fuller picture of the tenets, rules, and rites of both the church and the temple cult, but that cannot be done in the scope of this article.<sup>13</sup>

These characteristics of Alma<sub>1</sub>'s congregation and movement suggest why the text uses the label *church* for his organization but not for the royal-sponsored cult based at the temple. In the multicultural, multiethnic society into which “the Nephites” were evolving at this period of time, the old tribal-based religious system was seriously hampered. Functional social support for those who believed in Alma<sub>1</sub>'s teachings allowed people of different localities, ancestries, and tongues to associate and support one another, free from the bonds of tribal and local affiliation. For example, Helaman 11:21 notes that “both the Nephites and the Lamanites, did belong to the church.” Adherence was not a matter of descent, ethnic background, or locality but of personal choice to believe and accept membership in the body of “Christians” (see Alma 46:13–15).

Note that geographic mobility, such as the movements into the land northward reported in Alma 63, would have hampered the connecting of believers if tribal or kinship ties had been the primary social adhesive. De-emphasis of the rituals centralized at a single temple had to take place if “the Nephites” were to maintain their status as a unified group. The new organizational pattern of separate congregations in different settlements provided a more adaptive social basis for religious life in the Nephites' rapidly evolving situation in the first century B.C. than did tribalism and the traditional royal cult.<sup>14</sup>

Still, while organizationally distinct from the official cult, the church and its members did not abandon the Mosaic tradition but found a way to allow the two patterns to function in parallel rather than in competition. The reconciliation followed in principle the pattern described by Jacob, the son of Lehi. He spoke of how the earliest Nephites conceived the Mosaic and Christ-centered patterns (see 2 Nephi 25:24–27) as complementary. The relationship was phrased in the following manner concerning the people of Ammon a generation after Alma<sub>1</sub>'s day:

They did walk in the ways of the Lord, and did observe to keep his commandments and his statutes. Yea, *and* they did keep the law of Moses; for it was expedient that they should keep the law of Moses as yet, for it was not all fulfilled. But notwithstanding the law of Moses, they did look forward to the coming of Christ, considering that the law of Moses was a type of his coming, and believing that they must keep those outward performances until the time that he should be revealed unto them. Now they did not suppose that salvation came by the law of Moses; but the law of Moses did serve to strengthen their faith

in Christ; and thus they did retain a hope through faith, unto eternal salvation, relying upon the spirit of prophecy. (Alma 25:14–16)

The church founded by Alma<sub>1</sub> actually remained a quasi-tribal affair through the time when his people stayed in the land of Helam, since the entire residential group consisted of member participants. But on their transfer to the Zarahemla area (see Mosiah 25:19–24), their status as a distinct body took on new meaning, for at that point the choice to belong or not arose and the group became an enclave within the larger Nephite society at the capital where alternative systems of belief were encountered. Their voluntaristic standing at first resulted structurally in seven congregations at or near Zarahemla (see Alma 25:23). Before long, new adherents, both individuals (see Alma 4:4–5 and 6:2) and whole new congregations “in many parts of the land” (Alma 8:11) beyond the land of Zarahemla, came to comprise the church overall (see Alma 5:1). This followed the pattern reported for Gideon and Melek of “branch” congregations (see Alma 5:1–3). Personal backsliding also was now recognized as a possibility (see Mosiah 26:4, 36; Alma 4:8–11; 6:3; 45:22–24), and those individuals who became unfaithful were expelled from the organization.

The church of Alma<sub>1</sub> had minority status at first (e.g., Nehor apparently did not encounter church members frequently; see Alma 1:7), yet it quickly became socially influential, for Alma<sub>2</sub>, the high priest over the church, was appointed the first chief judge to head the Nephite government (see Mosiah 29:42). Moreover, when he gave up that political role in order to go about reinvigorating the church, his replacement was “a wise man who was among the elders of the church” (Alma 4:16). (It seems likely that this relationship between church and power would become a source of irritation to those not of the church. At the same time, the linking of secular power with the church leadership must also have been an attraction that aided the evangelizing efforts of the two Almas.) In the course of time, “the establishment of the church became general throughout the land, in all the region round about, among all the people of the Nephites” (Alma 16:15). Despite ups and downs in the faithfulness of members, the church’s beliefs and its organizational strength remained highly influential even down to the beginning of our era (see, for example, Alma 45:22; 46:11–29; Helaman 3:24–26, 31; chap. 5).

## **The Order of Nehor**

“In the first year of the reign of the judges over the people of Nephi, . . . in the first year of the reign of Alma in the judgment-seat,” a man named Nehor was brought before the judge for “bearing down against the church” (Alma 1:1–3). His dissenting message gained adherents, and he “even began to establish a church” (Alma 1:6). When he was put to an “ignominious death” by ritual execution, it did not stop the flourishing of his movement (see Alma 1:15–16). A few years later his “church,” left as his dark heritage and now termed “the order of Nehor,” had spread as far distant as the city of Ammonihah (see Alma 14:18; 15:15; and 16:11), north- and westward from Zarahemla, and hundreds of miles to the south among the Amalekites and Amulonites in Lamanite territory (see Alma 21:4 and 24:28).

The interpenetration of religion, politics, and economy is seen in the development of this order. Founder Nehor had argued vehemently for what Alma<sub>2</sub> called “priestcraft”—payment for priestly services. He declared “that every priest and teacher ought . . . not to labor with their hands, but that they ought to be supported by the people” (Alma 1:3). The movement appealed to “many who loved the vain things of the world, . . . and this they did for the sake of riches and honor” (Alma 1:16, compare Alma 1:27, “wearing costly apparel”). But sheer power was involved as well as the riches that could come from power, for, in the first place, Nehor “endeavored to enforce [his belief system] by the sword” (Alma 1:12). Then after his demise his order showed its power-seeking face through Amlici, a new organizer of dissent against the norms of Nephite society. He was a follower of Nehor who is said to have been

cunning and “a wise man as to the wisdom of the world” (Alma 2:1). His intent was to “deprive [the people] of their rights and privileges of the church; for it was his intent to destroy the church of God” (Alma 2:4). His mechanism was first to amass political support and then to convert that strength to armed force—a rebel army—in order to have himself declared king (see Alma 2:2, 10). To make this agenda palatable to the widest possible mass of supporters, he used Nehor’s materialistic belief system as religious validation to color his political ambitions.

The same syndrome is visible earlier in the case of the Amulonites, the former priests of Noah among the people of Zeniff. Once incorporated into the general Lamanite polity, they got themselves appointed teachers over the Lamanites (see Mosiah 24:1, 4). Their teaching seems not to have been explicitly religious (see Mosiah 24:5), but they did promote literacy among the varied Lamanite groups, by means of which trade was fostered, whereupon they “began to increase in riches” (Mosiah 24:7). Whatever watered-down ideology these teachers first presented to the Lamanites was shortly replaced when they accepted and promoted the order of Nehor. We may suppose that Nehor had come up with a more sophisticated scheme of beliefs that the Amulonites and the Amalekites used to further their own exploitation of the people (see Alma 21:4–8). It is plausible, for example, that membership in the order of the Nehors served merchants by giving them access to Nehorite groups in distant communities. (The apostle Paul did much the same thing by using Jewish communities wherever he journeyed. Today, people still use special group bonds based on shared belief systems—ranging from Masons to Jews to Mormons—to facilitate becoming established in new locations.)

## Secret Societies

The secret organizations mentioned at many points in the history of Book of Mormon peoples also included a religious aspect, that is, they functioned socially somewhat like a church. (The scriptural text is ambiguous about whether only one or multiple secret orders existed.) Anthropological data and logic tell us that any group in the ancient world could have flourished only if a significant sacred dimension was involved with which adherents could identify. Some form of religion probably was instrumental in the maintenance of the tight discipline that a secret operation required. Success would depend on the sanctions that their leaders could bring to bear on wavering members. The positive sanctions of gaining wealth and power by illicit, “cheap” means would initially attract and hold members together. On the negative side, the ultimate threat that would cause group members to maintain affiliation and conformity would be death by execution, but any organization reserves its ultimate sanctions, positive or negative, for rare, exemplary use. An intermediate range of sanctions would be needed to support group solidarity on an everyday basis, and threats and rewards based on religion would have been useful to keep members in line. Historical and social science studies of secret groups in many parts of the world confirm this picture.<sup>15</sup>

That the secret group of Gadianton had a religious dimension is confirmed in Helaman 6:21–31. Initially the text mentions the use of covenants and oaths, combined with attribution of a satanic hand behind the movement. Clarification comes from a statement about “tramp[ing] under their feet the commandments of God” (Helaman 6:31). Finally, all question about the group’s reliance on specifically religious patterns is settled by the statement that the Gadiantons “did turn unto their own ways, and did build up unto themselves idols of their gold and their silver” (Helaman 6:31). (“Ways” often signifies religious behavior in the Book of Mormon text; note Alma 10:18, where the Nehor believers at Ammonihah were “laying plans to pervert *the ways* of the righteous”; and compare, for example, Mosiah 11:1; 23:14; and Helaman 3:20.) Of course no system of “idols” and associated rituals and symbols is ever made up from whole new cloth but at least in part syncretizes preexisting forms and notions. In this case, the secret organization’s “own ways” are specifically said by Giddianhi, one of its leaders, to be a revival of ancient beliefs and practices: “The works thereof I know to be good; and they are of ancient date and they have

been handed down unto us” (3&#x2013;Nephi 3:9). It is reasonable to suspect that this is a reference to the Jaredite secret groups.

## “Mulekite” Cults<sup>16</sup>

The population referred to in the Nephite record as the people of Zarahemla could not help but have their own religious customs when Mosiah<sub>1</sub> first encountered them. The history of their chief, Zarahemla, was interpreted by Mosiah<sub>1</sub> as having a connection to Mulek, the son of Judah’s King Zedekiah. But Zarahemla’s faction was only one among others within his pre-Nephite tradition. Omni 1:17 informs us that they had previously had “many wars and serious contentions.” With whom? Obviously with others from their immigrant cohort, or else with groups descended from Jaredite-period society. Perhaps one basis for such disputes and the fragmentation of the descendants of the original voyaging party was the composition of the group on the “Mulekite” ship(s). It is plausible that Mulek and his party of Jews arrived on a non-Israelite ship, so a crew of Phoenicians or Egyptians might have accompanied them and could have exercised disparate cultural (including religious) influence. The active presence of Egyptian names in Nephite society, such as Paanchi and Pahoran, seems to be evidence for Egyptian cultural influence, which seems more likely to have come via “Mulekites” than via the Nephites. Mosiah<sub>1</sub>’s migration out of the land of Nephi would be likely to filter out unorthodox (by Nephi<sub>1</sub>’s standard), overtly Egyptian elements from the Lehite source, but no such filter screened the tradition that came through the people of Zarahemla.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, if the Judaic prince Mulek was accompanied by people from the court of Zedekiah—a strong likelihood—their religious ideas and forms brought from quasi-pagan Jerusalem in the land of Israel could also have found cultural lodgment among the “Mulekites.”<sup>18</sup>

Furthermore, persuasive evidence in the Nephite record indicates that the “exceedingly numerous” people of Zarahemla included descendants of groups from the Jaredite era.<sup>19</sup> Among the interesting links to the earlier people is that two founders of political/religious dissenting movements among the later Nephites had Jaredite names, Nehor and Gadianton. Kishkumen, another person with a Jaredite name, was also a key figure in the secret society movement (see Helaman 1:9–12). (Interestingly, “Nehor” may even reflect a *pre*-Jaredite cultural influence. It was the name of the first city mentioned in the book of Ether. As I have pointed out elsewhere, the demographic history of the Jaredite immigrant party can hardly account for any such city at the early time of its mention; hence the city and perhaps the name presumably originated due to a preexisting—“indigenous”—group).<sup>20</sup>

The Jaredite tradition reported by Ether was itself culturally complex. Probably four or more strands of religious tradition existed among the people whose history is summarized in the book of Ether: (1) the prophetic belief system of which Ether approved (see, for example, Ether 7:25; 9:28; 12:3–4; and 13:3–13); (2) an idolatrous religion that was tied with the ruling establishment and that justified slaying the prophets (see, for example, Ether 7:23; 8:25; and 11:2–3; note especially 14:9—a king is murdered by “his high priest”); (3) the cult involved with the secret organizations (compare Ether 8:13–16), which were probably ancestral to the Gadiantons among the Nephites; and (4) a folk system of dealing with sacred matters, probably including witchcraft (see Ether 14:1–2; compare Helaman 13:17–24, 30–37, and Mormon 2:10). Whatever the details of the history of its transmission, the possibility exists that not only the cult associated with the Jaredite secret order, but also elements of these other Jaredite patterns of worship dealing with the supernatural, also filtered down through groups who survived past the destruction of Ether’s lineage and were encountered by the Nephites among the people of Zarahemla.

Those people of Zarahemla obviously would have had at least one religious system operating in their culture at the time Mosiah<sub>1</sub> found them (no society exists without some system), and Jaredite elements seem likely to have been involved. In addition, certain beliefs, myths, and ritual elements from the eastern Mediterranean brought by Mulek's voyaging party could have been active in "Mulekite" belief and worship.

### Another Nephite Cult

A possible religious influence from the "Mulekites" appears as a distinct organizational element in the mixture constituting Nephite religion. Shortly after the start of the reign of the judges, toward the end of the second century B.C., a group of young adults in the land of Zarahemla refused to "believe the tradition of their fathers. They did not believe what had been said concerning the resurrection of the dead, neither did they believe concerning the coming of Christ" (Mosiah 26:1–2). They would not join the church recently introduced by Alma<sub>1</sub> but "were a separate people as to their faith, and remained so ever after" (Mosiah 26:4). "A separate people as to their faith" clearly indicates the presence of a cult if not a church. The expression *ever after* may have been a comment from Mormon, more than four centuries later. Soon afterward, adherents to this cult became more numerous than their rivals in the church (see Mosiah 26:5). Among them were Alma<sub>2</sub> and several sons of King Mosiah<sub>2</sub>. Of Alma<sub>2</sub> we are told that "he became a very wicked and an idolatrous man" (Mosiah 27:8). The source of this idolatrous cult is suggested by the fact that Alma<sub>2</sub> named two of his sons, who were born before his conversion (judging by their probable ages and the chronology of their father's career) with Jaredite names—Corianton and Shiblon. It is a reasonable presumption that those names for his sons were derived and conferred when Alma<sub>2</sub> maintained an avid connection with the idolatrous cult of his younger days.

That cultic way probably had enough social strength not to have disappeared even in the periods when Alma<sub>2</sub>'s church publicly dominated Nephite life. It may have been pushed into lesser visibility at times, but very likely it continued among some sectors of the society. After all, as we see in the case of the Zoramites, knowledge by the elite of what was actually going on in the hinterland was far from clear. When Alma 1:32 speaks of "idolatry . . . babblings, . . . wearing costly apparel; [and] being lifted up in the pride of their own eyes," this same cult may be meant. (More careful scrutiny of what Alma<sub>2</sub> preached *against* would probably allow reconstructing more of what the opposition cult was *for*.)

To an anthropologist it appears inevitable that an agricultural society like that of the Nephites, with a sociopolitical system verging between a chiefdom and a state, would involve a nature-based religious cult that included myths and rites connected to the agricultural calendar and astronomy. This system might well have incorporated parts of the royal sacrificial cultus at the temple (originally out of "the law of Moses") into an expanded religious scheme that included elements of interest to the "Mulekites," who were, after all, the majority of the population (see Mosiah 25:2). The idolatrous cult to which young Alma once belonged could have had such a function for many, especially "Mulekites," in Nephite society.

### Other Religious Elements among the Nephites

Since the Zoramites were a branch of Nephite society, we could expect that the information we learn from Alma<sub>2</sub>'s record about his preaching among them, intended to reclaim them to orthodoxy (see Alma 31), would tell us something about religious life among the Nephites generally. The Zoramites, like every other group, would have derived much of their pattern of worship by borrowing concepts and forms from traditions known to them. For example, the synagogue referred to as the site of their religious activity must be essentially similar to the



synagogues among the Nephites in general (“built after the manner of the Jews,” Alma 16:13) as well as among the Amalekite and Amulonite factions in Lamanite territory (see Alma 21:4–5); the Lamanites themselves also had them (see Alma 26:29). Yet Alma<sub>2</sub> and his associates were amazed by the unique prayer used by the Zoramites worshiping at their Rameumptom (see Alma 31:12, 15–18). Robert F. Smith has observed that this prayer “is the virtual counterpart” to a certain Jewish prayer and that, moreover, the “holy stand” in name and form corresponds with “the type of pulpit/platform once found high in the center of Jewish synagogue and Temple.”<sup>21</sup> To all appearances, then, Zoramite religious practice involved Jewish worship forms in use at the time of Lehi’s departure, joined with “perverted” versions of “the performances of the [Nephite] church” or “ways of the Lord” (Alma 31:10–11). The amazement of Alma<sub>2</sub> and his companions at this ritual complex and at the details of the synagogue’s arrangement indicates substantial differences from all that they were familiar with. The Zoramite prayer and structure would seem to have been passed down through a Jewish tradition not known at the Nephite capital. The concepts could have been stimulated locally by statements in the brass plates, or perhaps they were preserved at a local “Mulekite” shrine undetected by Nephite priestly eyes. However, the Zoramites “would not observe to keep . . . the law of Moses” as such (Alma 31:9). Instead they worshiped idols (see Alma 31:1; although so did many Jews at Jerusalem in Nephi’s day). Thus Zoramite religion appears as a hodgepodge of practices whose sources we cannot hope to unravel now.

We should note too that the Zoramite rebellion in regard to their worship forms and beliefs was entwined with issues of political power and no doubt of economy (compare Alma 31:24, 28), for this whole incident resulted in the Zoramite leaders’ anger at Alma<sub>2</sub> and the Nephites in general (see Alma 35:8–9, 13). It also turned into Zoramite realignment under Lamanite political sovereignty (see Alma 43:4) and finally into bitter war against the Nephites (see Alma 43:6–7; 48:5).

The Zeniffite cult also sheds light on Nephite practices. Their priests, of course, came originally from Zarahemla where they would have known the rites of the Nephite temple cult, which was based on the law of Moses. (The whole Zeniff expedition had some connection with the people of Zarahemla that is unclear but may have provided a strand of unorthodoxy of its own;<sup>22</sup> see Mosiah 7:3.) It is sufficient here to note that, as in the case of the Zoramites, the religious practices that developed in the city of Lehi-Nephi combined elements of Mosaic law and ritual with other ways. John W. Welch has pointed out that the trial of Abinadi by King Noah and his priests has strong connections to Jewish law and that they also followed the Israelite festival pattern.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, those priests led the people into idolatry (see Mosiah 11:6–7); where the idolatrous notions and iconography were derived from we cannot tell (perhaps from the Lamanites). Also, a very unusual ritual execution ceremony, the burning of condemned men, was manifested among them (see Mosiah 17:13–15; 19:20–21).

We must conclude that varied sources contributed to the syncretistic pattern of Zeniffite ritual and belief. This could well be a model for what happened not only among the Zoramites but also to the mainline cult at Zarahemla whenever the prophets lost control of it (for example, see Helaman 4:21–24).

In Israel and Judah in Old Testament times, a tradition existed of a corps of prophets acting unaffiliated with sacred sites or the priests. Sometimes prophets filled their role as lone individuals, and at other times they lived together in some obscure type of brotherhood (see, for example, 2 Kings 2:3, 5, 7, 15; compare 1 Nephi 1:4). Lehi was a lone prophet in this tradition (see 1 Nephi 1:18–19). The pattern continued among Lehi’s descendants; for instance, Enos reported that “there were exceedingly many prophets” among the early Nephites (Enos 1:22; see also Words of Mormon 1:16–18; Helaman 13:24–28; and 16:14). Samuel the Lamanite was a notable example of this type of religious figure. No light is shed by the Book of Mormon on any connection between these

isolated prophets and organized, priestly religious systems, whether cult or church. At the time of 3â€¢, Nephi 6:20, 25, “men inspired from heaven and sent forth,” who were “prophets of the Lord,” are portrayed, like Abinadi and Samuel, as enemies of a corrupt political establishment.

Another type of religious activity is also barely detectable in the Book of Mormon text. Virtually all societies contain individual practitioners called shamans, medicine men, healers/curers, witch doctors, sorcerers, or magicians. Such practitioners often specialize: some diagnose illness, some find lost objects, some bewitch an enemy, and so on. While their role activities vary in detail, all share the characteristic that an individual with a special “spiritual” gift acts as intermediary between sacred powers and ungifted people. Quite often these agents manifest what psychologists today would call abnormal personality characteristics. Usually the people themselves claim to be not active seekers but only passive instruments through whom the dead or supernatural beings find voice. Most feel that they are “called” to their role, sometimes against their will. A “fee” or gift may be given to them as either a payment or an offering of gratitude by their clients.

At two places in the Book of Mormon, reference is made to such practices. In the early days of the reign of the judges, Alma records that “those who did not belong to their church did indulge themselves in sorceries, and . . . in babblings,” among other disapproved activities (Alma 1:32). Later Mormon reported much the same: “There were sorceries, and witchcrafts, and magics” (Mormon 1:19). Given worldwide human experience in such matters, we are on safe ground in supposing that these phenomena were common throughout Nephite and Lamanite history. Most of this type of activity occurs at a folk level, where individuals faced with practical or emotional problems seek out those with these “gifts.” The shamans/curers rarely become persons with community—let alone supracommunity—reputation or power. The likely reason they are not mentioned more frequently in the Book of Mormon is that they were so universal and localized as not to seem worthy of notice by the record keepers, who were from the elite level of society.

### **Religious Elements among the Lamanites**

Throughout their history a high degree of mixing of populations took place between Nephite and Lamanite factions. “Dissensions” from the early Nephites in the land of Nephi were noted by Jarom as early as the fourth century B.C. (see Jarom 1:13). More “dissensions away unto the Lamanites” occurred during the reign of Benjamin in the second century B.C. (Words of Mormon 1:16; note an interesting individual case at Helaman 5:35–36). The pattern of Nephite influence penetrating Lamanite ranks continued all the way to the end of Nephite history (see Moroni 9:24, “many of our brethren have deserted over unto the Lamanites, and many more will also desert over unto them”). Yet a reverse flow of genes and culture also can be seen. For example, large numbers of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies settled amidst the Nephites (see Alma 27:26–27) and later were joined by thousands of others who dissented from Lamanite society (see, for example, Alma 47:29; 62:17). Lamanites occupied Nephite lands, and it is likely that not all returned to their own area when Nephite authority was reestablished (see Helaman 4:13–16; 5:19, 52). Captives taken by the Lamanites would have conveyed Nephite influences and brought counterpatterns with them when they returned (see, for example, Alma 58:30). Missionary activity went both directions (see Alma 17:8; Helaman 5:20, 49–51; and 6:4–5). Trade too would have carried ideas and practices back and forth between the two societies (see Helaman 6:6–10).

Because of these influences, no discussion of religion among the Nephites would be complete without also considering Lamanite religious organization and practices. But given the brevity of the record we have on the Lamanites, a more subtle analysis will be needed than can be carried out here; therefore, only limited suggestions about the Lamanite elements will be offered.

Nephi's record lacks detail, so we cannot know what peculiarities of ritual and belief Laman, Lemuel, and the sons of Ishmael and their spouses might have brought with them. That there were some features that Nephi would not have approved of seems likely, inasmuch as Enos 1:20 already charges the Lamanites with being "full of idolatry." (An alternative view could see the idols as evidence of the mixing of descendants of Laman, Lemuel, and Ishmael with other populations whom they had meanwhile encountered.)<sup>24</sup> In any case we are not justified in supposing that the Lamanites had no religious system. No doubt what they followed involved elements of the Jerusalem cult with which Laman, Lemuel, and probably one or more of the sons of Ishmael had had experience as adults. Evidently a "Great Spirit" deity was integral to the later belief pattern (see Alma 18:2–28; 19:25, 27; 22:9–11), and some Mosaic ideas of sacrifice may also have been behind the late Lamanite practice of human sacrifice (see Mormon 4:14–15).

The presence of Amalekites and Amulonites and the order of Nehor in the midst of the Lamanites could not have been without influence on the tribal Lamanites themselves. Some Lamanites under influence of those two dissident groups employed "temples" and "sanctuaries" (Alma 23:2), and they built synagogues "after the order of the Nehors" (Alma 21:4) where the sons of Mosiah and their companions preached. In addition, the Anti-Nephi-Lehi converts to the Nephite church existed for years as a major component of society in the land of Nephi, and subsequently Nephite religion again had much influence on the same Lamanite area (see Helaman 5:50).

While it is not very clear what was believed and practiced in the Lamanite religious system(s), we can note that Nephite dissenters felt enough familiarity and perhaps sympathy with it that they constantly made their way into Lamanite territory. It could well be that what I have referred to above as "another Nephite cult" was similar enough to Lamanite practice to make the dissenters feel somewhat at home religiously in their land of exile. Both Nephite and Lamanite versions could have been syncretized with versions of worship systems in place in the land among maize cultivators before Nephites or Lamanites arrived.

In that regard consider particularly the fact that "corn"<sup>25</sup> was a major—in fact the preferred—grain crop among the Lamanites in the days of the Zeniffites (see Mosiah 7:22 and 9:14). As I have pointed out elsewhere, botanical facts about this native American crop force us to conclude that "Lehi's descendants could only be growing corn/maize because people already familiar with the complex of techniques for its successful cultivation had passed on the knowledge" to the newcomers.<sup>26</sup> But wherever maize was grown in the native societies of pre-Columbian America, it was deeply involved with sacred beliefs that controlled or colored planting, processing, and consuming this most important of all ancient American foodstuffs. The Lamanite preference for corn would also have involved their holding a pattern of beliefs, rites, calendrical interpretations, and myths involving that crop that would have been considered among them of great importance and high antiquity. In other words, Lamanite cultivators would quite surely have followed a cult that involved corn and sought to enhance its fertility through appeal to supernatural powers. A version of that cult was probably shared by many if not all Nephite/"Mulekite" cultivators.

## **Conclusion**

The Book of Mormon reveals time and again that relations with the supernatural were central to Nephite life. Very probably the Lamanites, as with all other peoples at their level of civilization, were also heavily invested in religious concerns. If we are to grasp what motivated people and shaped sacred discourse among the Book of Mormon groups, we need to understand all we possibly can about their worship. Little real analysis has been done by the Latter-day Saints of this matter; nevertheless, it is important. More study should be devoted to it. It is not enough—indeed it is misleading—to suppose, as is often done now, that "understanding" religion in the Book of Mormon consists of taking doctrinal statements from the book and relating them to teachings of today's restored gospel.

Proper Book of Mormon scholarship must go beyond those mere comparisons to shed light on the thought world of the Nephites and Lamanites as such.

## Notes

1. Cyrus H. Gordon, *Introduction to Old Testament Times* (Ventnor, N.J.: Ventnor, 1953), 55.
2. For general discussions of this topic, see my “Book of Mormon Peoples,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 1:191–95; a duplicated paper, “Social Structure and Cult among the Nephites” (presented to the Society for Early Historic Archaeology, Provo, Utah, 26 October 1974), 11, 14; and my article, “When Lehi’s Party Arrived in the Land, Did They Find Others There?” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1/1 (1992): 19–24. See also Ross T. Christensen, “The Seven Lineages of Lehi,” *New Era* (May 1975): 40–41; and John A. Tvedtnes, “Book of Mormon Tribal Affiliation and Military Castes,” in *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 296–326.
3. Compare Tvedtnes, “Book of Mormon Tribal Affiliation,” 299.
4. See John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1985), 190–91. Note the language of Alma 5:6 about “the captivity of your fathers,” in relation to 5:5. This would have been addressed only to his associates. He would have used different language in addressing groups—church believers—with other backgrounds within the immediate land of Zarahemla.
5. Compare Tvedtnes, “Book of Mormon Tribal Affiliation,” 301–2.
6. Elman R. Service, *Origins of the State and Civilization: The Process of Cultural Evolution* (New York: Norton, 1975), 16. In general, see Timothy Earle, ed., *Chiefdoms: Power, Economy and Ideology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).
7. “Altars were extremely numerous and found in every corner of the land.” While priests were the officiators at the temples, “every man of Israel was entitled to offer sacrifices on individual altars without the intermediation of authorized personnel.” Menahem Haran, “Priests and Priesthood,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 13:1071–72. Compare Anson Rainey, “Sacrifice,” in *ibid.*, 14:605–6.
8. John L. Sorenson, “The ‘Mulekites,’” *BYU Studies* 30/3 (1990): 11.
9. See an overview of Nephite priesthood patterns in Daniel C. Peterson, “Priesthood in Mosiah,” in *The Book of Mormon: Mosiah, Salvation Only through Christ*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1991), 187–210.
10. “One of the major responsibilities of ANE [ancient Near East] kingship was the provision of a temple for the god of the state. This act of temple building provided the symbolic expression of the god as the guarantor of the state and the dynasty (2 Samuel 5:12).” Keith W. Whitelam, “King and Kingship,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 4:46–47. Naturally, the king’s residence abutted on the temple precinct or was actually within it. *Ibid.* The roles played by David and Solomon in constructing the first Israelite temple and the latter’s exercising priestly oversight therein are prime illustrations of this principle. On temples in general in the Book of Mormon, see John W. Welch, “The Temple in the Book of Mormon: The Temples at the Cities of Nephi, Zarahemla, and Bountiful,” in *Temples of*

*the Ancient World: Ritual and Symbolism*, ed. Donald W. Parry (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1994), 297–387.

11. See Stephen D. Ricks, “King, Coronation, and Covenant in Mosiah 1–6,” in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1991), 209–19; and Stephen D. Ricks, “Kingship, Coronation, and Covenant in Mosiah 1–6,” in *King Benjamin’s Speech: “That Ye May Learn Wisdom,”* ed. John W. Welch and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1998), 233–75.

12. This leaves the question of what Nephi means early on when he speaks of “the brethren of the church” in relation to Laban in old Jerusalem (1 Nephi 4:26). John A. Tvedtnes discussed the Hebrew words from which Joseph Smith’s translation could have yielded the English expression *church* in his *The Church of the Old Testament* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1980), 18. Might “the church” in Jerusalem have had reference to a special brotherhood of orthodox Jews to which Laban belonged? For an overall discussion of the term *church* among the Nephites, see Rodney Turner, “The Three Nephite Churches of Christ,” in *The Book of Mormon: The Keystone Scripture*, ed. Paul R. Cheesman et al. (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1988), 100–126.

13. This task was approached in John W. Welch, “Book of Mormon Religious Teachings and Practices,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 1:201–5.

14. See the lengthy discussion in chapter 5 of Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting*, 190–238; note particularly “The Expansion of Zarahemla,” 190–93, and “Trends in Nephite Social Structure,” 207–11.

15. See Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting*, 300–309.

16. Here I continue my practice of putting this term in quotation marks to emphasize that it does not occur in the scriptural text but is a modern label.

17. On Egyptian names, see Hugh W. Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert, The World of the Jaredites, There Were Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 25–31; and Paul Y. Hoskisson, “An Introduction to the Relevance of and a Methodology for a Study of the Proper Names of the Book of Mormon,” in *By Study and Also by Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley*, ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 2:130, 135 nn. 18–20; Hoskisson notes that Jaredite names begin to appear only at the time of the book of Alma.

18. See Sorenson, “The ‘Mulekites,’” 6–19.

19. *Ibid.*, 15; see also Sorenson, “When Lehi’s Party Arrived,” 19–24; see initially Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 242–46.

20. See Sorenson, “When Lehi’s Party Arrived,” 33; and Sorenson, “Viva Zapato! Hurray for the Shoe!” review of “Does the Shoe Fit? A Critique of the Limited Tehuantepec Geography,” by Deanne G. Matheny, *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 6/1 (1994): 354–57.

21. *Book of Mormon Critical Text: A Tool for Scholarly Reference* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1986), 2:640–41 nn. 401, 403. Regarding synagogues, which many experts suppose only to postdate Lehi, see Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting*, 234–36.

22. Sorenson, "When Lehi's Party Arrived," 10.

23. See "Abinadi and Pentecost," and "Dancing Maidens and the Fifteenth of Av," in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992), 135–38 and 139–41.

24. See Sorenson, "When Lehi's Party Arrived," 26–29.

25. It has been suggested that the term *corn* in the Book of Mormon was used in the general English language sense of (any) grain. If we had only Mosiah 9:14, "the corn of their fields," that might be possible, but Mosiah 9:9 would be rendered nonsensical by such a reading, for it lists "corn" as a specific crop in addition to and apart from "wheat" and "barley."

26. Sorenson, "When Lehi's Party Arrived," 5.