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Glimpses of Lamanite Culture

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Zeniff Returns to the Land of Nephi

The origin story of the people of Zeniff is told twice in the Book of Mormon. We have a brief introduction to the story in Omni 1:27–30, although Zeniff is not named in that account. The second account comes from Zeniff's first-person record (Mosiah 9–10). What happens to those people after Zeniff's death is recounted in Mosiah chapters 11–21.

Zeniff begins his account: "I, Zeniff, having been taught in all the language of the Nephites, and having had a knowledge of the land of Nephi, or of the land of our fathers' first inheritance, and having been sent as a spy among the Lamanites that I might spy out their forces, that our army might come upon them and destroy them—but when I saw that which was good among them I was desirous that they should not be destroyed." (Mosiah 9:1). His explanation requires a review of the Nephite history that precipitates this action.

Zeniff is part of the generation of Nephites who had lived in the land of Nephi until no later than 162 B.C.¹ He and (probably) the leaders of this expedition were

¹ See Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, 3:197.

among those who had fled for their lives from the land of Nephi with Mosiah₁.² It is quite plausible that their decision to lead a military expedition to the land of Nephi was in retaliation for the perceived injustice of their expulsion. Perhaps now that the people of Zarahemla had swelled their population, the displaced Nephites considered that they had the military strength to “correct” their dispossession. This expedition appears to be a manifestation of both nostalgia for their former home and a grudge against those who had forced them out. This military action was apparently mounted with Mosiah₁’s blessing.

Zeniff, one of the army’s spies, is supposed to learn about the people they want to attack, particularly the ways in which they would be most vulnerable. But what Zeniff learned changed the group’s plans: “when I saw that which was good among them I was desirous that they should not be destroyed” (Mosiah 9:1). What could have changed his mind?

We have no details about how Zeniff conducted his spying mission. It seems probable that he adopted local clothing and went into the city of Nephi. As one who had previously lived in the land of Nephi he was able to pass as a native in both dress and language. Zeniff was among the people of the city of Nephi at least twice. Mosiah 9:5 mentions a second expedition, which leads to the establishment of a colony. Plausibly they left Zarahemla around 157 B.C. and remained separate from the main body of Nephites for at least twenty-seven years.³

Assuming that invading Lamanites were the reason that Mosiah₁ and his people left the land of Nephi does not suggest that all former Nephites left with him. (See “A New World Fleeting Prophet” in Chapter 8.) It is highly likely that many remained, and Zeniff’s ability to blend in so well substantiates that assumption. The pressures for social differentiation that had always been part of the city of Nephi certainly remained, and Zeniff’s suggestion that there was much good among them can be seen as evidence that those who remained had prospered under Lamanite rule.

I hypothesize that the wealth and power of the inhabitants helped Zeniff’s expedition see “that which was good.” The foundational promise of the Nephites was that: “Inasmuch as thy seed shall keep my commandments, they shall prosper in the land of promise” (1 Ne. 4:14). Zeniff may have assumed that the reverse was also true, that evidence of prosperity was evidence of some form of keeping the commandments and of “goodness.”

If the tentative connections between Book of Mormon cities and archaeological sites are accurate, Nephi/Kaminaljuyú was much more spectacular than Zarahemla/Santa Rosa. Internal evidence in the Book of Mormon suggests that difference in size and

² The Book of Mormon always refers to these lands as the “land of Nephi,” and to the “city of Nephi.” However, it seems unlikely that the lands or city would have retained such a Nephite-oriented name once dominated by the Lamanites. We do not know what name would have been used, as we always see the story from the perspective of the Nephites.

³ These dates are not given in the Book of Mormon, but are the result of an examination of the available evidence. See Gardner, *Second Witness*, 3:196–98.

wealth.⁴ Perhaps Zeniff thought that, with Mosiah₁'s people gone, the internal tensions had been relieved and the returning Nephites could settle peaceably in the general area, probably also accumulating some of the same wealth that characterized the city of Nephi. Indeed, the fact that the inhabitants granted lands to Zeniff's people is evidence that they felt no consuming hatred toward those who had fled with Mosiah₁. Although Zeniff doesn't dwell on it, Mormon's introduction to Zeniff's son, Noah, does suggest that Zeniff may have been at least partially correct in foreseeing Nephite prosperity:

And it came to pass that king Noah built many elegant and spacious buildings; and he ornamented them with fine work of wood, and of all manner of precious things, of gold, and of silver, and of iron, and of brass, and of ziff, and of copper;

And he also built him a spacious palace, and a throne in the midst thereof, all of which was of fine wood and was ornamented with gold and silver and with precious things. (Mosiah 11:8–9)

Although Mormon appears to add this information as a sign that Noah has become greedy and has violated expected Nephite egalitarian principles, the descriptions nevertheless show an ability to construct extravagant public buildings. Such displays are typical of larger and wealthier cities. The king must be able to muster the labor and acquire the resources required for such a display. It may have been the very thing that Zeniff and his followers hoped for when they returned to the land of Nephi.

Zeniff provides a description of the turning point in the relations between his people and the surrounding Lamanites:

Therefore it came to pass, that after we had dwelt in the land for the space of twelve years that king Laman began to grow uneasy, lest by any means my people should wax strong in the land, and that they could not overpower them and bring them into bondage.

Now they were a lazy and an idolatrous people; therefore they were desirous to bring us into bondage, that they might glut themselves with the labors of our hands; yea, that they might feast themselves upon the flocks of our fields. (Mosiah 9:11–12)

Zeniff describes the Lamanite intent, and then ascribes motive to that intent. He calls them a “lazy and an idolatrous people.” Certainly worshipping idols could be an observed trait, but the idea that the Lamanites were “lazy” is simply a continuation of Nephite prejudice that began early and continues throughout the Book of Mormon. (See “Becoming Nephites and Lamanites” in Chapter 6).

The Book of Mormon talks of people who are in “bondage,” and Zeniff suggests that the Lamanites fear that the Zeniffites will become strong enough to place them in bondage (Mosiah 9:11). What would that have meant? Zeniff defines bondage by describing what the Lamanites want to do to them: “They were desirous to bring us into bondage, that they might glut themselves with the labors of our hands; yea, that

⁴ The evidence must be deduced, but the nature of the loose political hegemony in the land of Zarahemla and the system of overkings among the Lamanites strongly suggests that there is a significant difference in political power, a power which would have the ability to generate public works that would demonstrate Lamanite wealth and power.

they might feast themselves upon the flocks of our fields” (Mosiah 9:12). The Book of Mormon term “bondage” is easily translated to the term Mesoamericanists use for a particular form of inter-city relationship—tribute.

As a dominant political power, the Lamanites could supplement their own production by requiring tribute of their subject peoples (as opposed to the Nephite ideal of working with one’s own hands). The much later Aztecs of Tenochtitlan (the city of Motecuhzoma) collected extensive tribute from many city-states. They could hardly be called lazy. Alonso de Zorita, a Spanish judge (1511–c. 1585) described some of the Nahua lords and their relationships to their people:

The benefits these lords received were these: Their people gave them personal service in their households and brought them fuel and water, the assignment of tasks being made by the lord. Their people also worked certain fields for the lords, the size of the fields depending upon the number of people. Because of this they were exempt from service to the ruler and from working his fields, and their only other obligation to the ruler was to serve in time of war, from which none was excused. In addition, the ruler furnished them with wages, meals, and lodgings, for they served as gentlemen in waiting in his palace.

These lords were responsible for the working of the fields, both for themselves and for their people, and they had overseers who saw to this. The lords also had the duty of looking after the people in their charge, of defending and protecting them. Thus these lords were appointed and intended to serve the general as well as their private good.⁵

Because tribute allowed people to benefit from the labor of someone else’s hands, it was a concept in direct conflict with a Nephite ideal.⁶ Nevertheless, it is a well-known aspect of the inter-city relationships in Mesoamerica.

The idea of *bondage* is paralleled by the term *plunder* in the Book of Mormon.⁷ When we examine the circumstances behind *plunder*, it is apparent that plunder as well as bondage describes the tributary relationship. Thus the bondage in which the people of Limhi find themselves (Limhi being Noah’s son) is manifest in being required to deliver part of their produce to their Lamanite overlords: “And also Limhi, being the son of the king, having the kingdom conferred upon him by the people,

⁵ Alonso de Zorita, *Life and Labor in Ancient Mexico: The Brief and Summary Relation of the Lords of New Spain*, 47.

⁶ King Benjamin declares: “And even I, myself, have labored with mine own hands that I might serve you.” (Mosiah 2:14). Alma₁ commands his newly formed people: “the priests . . . should labor with their own hands for their support” (Mosiah 18:16). This becomes codified in Zarahemla when Mosiah₂ establishes the rule of law for the reign of the judges:

That they should let no pride nor haughtiness disturb their peace; that every man should esteem his neighbor as himself, laboring with their own hands for their support.

Yea, and all their priests and teachers should labor with their own hands for their support, in all cases save it were in sickness, or in much want; and doing these things, they did abound in the grace of God. (Mosiah 27:4–5)

⁷ For plunder, see: Mosiah 2:13, 10:17, 24:7, 29:14, 29:36; Alma 16:18, 17:14, 18:7, 23:3, 37:21, 50:21; Hel. 3:14, 3:16, 4:12, 6:17, 6:18, 6:21, 6:23, 7:21, 10:3, 11:25; 3 Ne. 4:4, 4:5, and Ether 8:16.

made oath unto the king of the Lamanites that his people should pay tribute unto him, even one half of all they possessed” (Mosiah 19:26).

After Alma₁ and his followers departed from the land of Nephi, they founded the city of Helam (Mosiah 23:19). They were able to remain hidden from Lamanites for a time, but eventually they, too, are required to enter a tributary relationship with the Lamanite king (Mosiah 23:37–39, 24:9–10). They also called their relationship *bondage* (Mosiah 24:13). The conqueror plunders and puts the conquered in bondage. The Book of Mormon vocabulary may be distinctive, but the experience is the same as the Mesoamerican tribute system.⁸

Culture as Explanation: Ammon and King Lamoni

One of the stranger stories in the Book of Mormon is Ammon’s experience with king Lamoni. Although it is a popular story of faith, read without any historical context it appears highly implausible.⁹ Ammon arrived as a lone Nephite among enemy Lamanites. Rather than treating him as an enemy warrior or spy, Lamoni proposes that Ammon marry his daughter, thus inviting him to become a member of the royal family. When Ammon refused, announcing that he preferred to be a servant, Lamoni gave him an assignment that had resulted in the execution of many (if not all) of the previous servants (Alma 17:28, 18:4, 19:20). Seemingly without hesitation Ammon is offered a place in the king’s family, then with dizzying speed he falls from a potentially high social position to that of a servant sent on what amounted to a suicide mission. Ammon is sent to water the king’s flocks at the waters of Sebus.

Mormon suggests that the incident at the waters of Sebus resulted from larcenous Lamanites (Alma 18:7), but he also tells us that the Lamanites scattered the flocks and then made no effort to gather any of them up. Instead of gathering up stolen bounty, they waited around to see what the guards would do. The text never mentions what kind of animals these flocks were.¹⁰ What the text does tell us is that the story depends upon the fact that the flocks are scattered.

Mormon intends us to read this story of manifesting Yahweh’s power—and we do. However, we should also read it for what it tells of us Lamanite society, because

⁸ The desired result of all Lamanite (and Gadianton) military actions is to create this tribute system. The single exception is the lightning raid on Ammonihah that is part of the story of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies. See that discussion for an explanation of why this one military action is different.

⁹ Hugh Nibley, *The Prophetic Book of Mormon*, 539: “The whole affair at the waters of Sebus must strike anyone as very strange; I always thought that it was rather silly until the other day when I gave it a moment’s thought.” After providing his own discussion of the strange aspects of the story, Nibley relates it to ritual games. He concludes, 541, “Granted that the Lamanites at Sebus were depraved barbarians and real Yahoos, what is the logical or ritual explanation, the aesthetic appeal, or sporting spirit of the tag-team wrestling, demolition- or roller-derbies, or laser-tag of our own enlightened age? Nothing could be closer psychologically and historically to the ancient version of this insanity than the doings by the waters of Sebus.”

¹⁰ All we know of the flocks is that they can be driven to water and they can be scattered. Some Mesoamericans kept deer. Lynn V. Foster, *Handbook to Life in the Ancient Maya World*, 312. Perhaps the flocks were deer. Deer could certainly scatter when startled.

otherwise, parts of it make little sense. First, we must understand the basic scene. The waters of Sebus are clearly in Lamoni's territory, as whatever animal making up the flocks would need water twice a day, most logically in the morning and the evening. Obviously their pasturage lacks water, or they would not need to be brought to Sebus. Marauders appear regularly at this watering place and have done so for some time.

Mormon blames these incidents on Lamanites without making any distinction between the thieves and Lamoni's people. In fact, it is probable that the thieves were Lamoni's subjects. They may even have been related to Lamoni, as evidenced by their appearance in the king's bedchamber (Alma 19:21). Furthermore, in Alma 18:20, Lamoni called them "my brethren," a virtually inconceivable term to apply to common brigands or even to anyone from another city. It also seems extremely unusual that the kin of known thieves would be so close to the king that they are among the first to respond when Abish called the people together to witness Lamoni's unconsciousness. In short, the thieves' relatives lived in the royal compound. This situation is much more complicated than a simple livestock raid.

If the thieves lived physically near, perhaps in, the palace and appeared when a witness testified that something important has happened to the king, they are obviously among the city's nobility. Maya culture has several examples of frequently competing factions among the nobles, with different groups vying for power.¹¹ Historian David Drew describes the problem for Maya kings:

Increasingly recognized today . . . is the likelihood of a constant, dynamic tension between the ruler, along with the family group, the royal lineage that surrounded him, and other powerful and long-established lineages within a city state. The centralizing success of royal dynasties almost certainly obscures the extent to which kings depended upon and negotiated with other political factions. For each dynasty of the Classic period had in earlier centuries been merely one among many such patrilineages or kin-groups. It is impossible to know with any precision how ruling lines established themselves at the end of the Preclassic period—as war-leaders, perhaps, or as mediators in local disputes. However they came by their authority, they could only have maintained it through consent and cooperation, despite the impression of absolute power that their monuments create. From the eighth century, at Copán in particular, there is now some evidence of the negotiation that must have gone on behind the scenes. There is little reason to believe that this kind of jostling was not seen in earlier centuries too.¹²

In this context, then, the incident at the waters of Sebus stops being a cowboys-and-rustlers story and instead becomes a sophisticated and subtle political contest. If nobles were scattering the king's flocks, Lamoni may have been restricted in his ability to respond with direct action against them. While the putative thieves did not get many animals, they still got what they wanted: they embarrassed the king and weakened his control over his territory. Since scattering the flocks was an affront to the king, some action was required to save his honor. Unable to act against the true

¹¹ Simon Martin and Nikolai Grube, *Chronicle of the Maya Kings and Queens: Deciphering the Dynasties of the Ancient Maya*, 18.

¹² David Drew, *The Lost Chronicles of the Maya Kings*, 324.

culprits (if, as I hypothesize, they were a powerful rival lineage), the king executed the hapless servants—pawns in this high-stakes game.

Even this action played into the hands of Lamoni's rivals. He could not ignore the action, since that would have been an advertisement of his weakness; but slaying his servants inevitably reduced the number of his servants, which also weakened his strength. As more and more servants were executed, the loyalty of those remaining would be increasingly strained. Either way, the rival is winning.

When Ammon appeared he presented a problem—and then a solution to a problem. He was a prince from an enemy polity. Were he to remain in Lamoni's kingdom, the king needed to be able to control him. The first tactic, perhaps looking to future alliances, was to offer him a daughter. As a member of the royal family, Ammon would have been bound by culture, tradition, and honor to serve this new family. When Ammon refused that marriage, the king came up with another use for Ammon.

If Ammon could not be controlled, then perhaps the king could use that fact to help him with a different problem. The king sent Ammon to the waters of Sebus expecting that Ammon would act where servants who understood the political issues could not. As an “uncontrollable” Nephite, Ammon could upset the status quo to the king's benefit but the king would not be held responsible.

In a Mesoamerican context, these events have a logical explanation. The offer of the king's daughter was an invitation to become family and beholden to the king. Without the ability to ensure Ammon's loyalty, the king inserted him into a politically charged charade. Those who knew the actors in the elaborate game could not change the results, but Ammon did not know the players or the nature of the game. Ammon went in armed with lethal weapons against clubs, which were certainly dangerous, but not the equivalent of a sling and sword that Ammon wielded. Without this cultural background, the story makes little sense.

More than a Man

Ammon's actions at the Waters of Sebus were reported to the king, who was certainly impressed. Lamoni was so impressed with the miracle of the encounter that he suspected that Ammon might be a being from a higher realm:

And when they had all testified to the things which they had seen, and he had learned of the faithfulness of Ammon in preserving his flocks, and also of his great power in contending against those who sought to slay him, he was astonished exceedingly, and said: Surely, this is more than a man. Behold, is not this the Great Spirit who doth send such great punishments upon this people, because of their murders? (Alma 18:2)

Strikingly, he declared: “Surely, this is more than a man.” His speculation is that Ammon might even be “the Great Spirit who doth send such great punishments upon this people, because of their murders?” Both of these statements reflect opinions very much at home in the Mesoamerican religious worldview.

The line between human and divine in ancient Mesoamerican was less firmly drawn than in the modern Western world. Many Mesoamerican religious stories deal with exploits of individuals who are “more than men.” The hero twins of the Popol

Vuh are certainly depicted as men, but they just as certainly have supernatural powers.¹³ The Mixtec deity male 9 Wind is shown in the Codex Vindobonensis as a being in the heavens who descends and acts upon the earth.¹⁴ The myriad legends surrounding the Aztec god Quetzalcoatl suggest that he had both a heavenly aspect and one in which he operates on earth as “more than a man.”¹⁵ These “more than men” may be best understood as demi-gods, or deities that live and function on earth but who retain other-worldly powers.¹⁶ It is in this light that we should see king Lamoni’s speculation about Ammon—as one of the demi-gods familiar to him from Mesoamerican mythology.

Perplexingly for modern expectations, Lamoni characterized “the Great Spirit” as sending “great punishments upon this people, because of their murders.” How did he come to that conclusion if Ammon were the Great Spirit?

Mesoamerican demi-gods did not act logically or consistently. They acted for their own other-worldly purposes and mysterious motives. Like Greek deities, Mesoamerican demi-gods’ presence among human beings was ambiguous at best. They were not always beneficial—indeed, were often malevolent. In Mesoamerica, a demi-god’s appearance would be, at the very least, risky even if it were not immediately dangerous. Ammon’s prowess confirmed that he was dangerous. There was no guarantee that he would not be just as dangerous to Lamoni’s people as he had been to Lamoni’s enemies.

But what would prompt a demi-god to come among them? Lamoni made a connection between his political expedient of executing the servants and Ammon’s appearance. If the first event caused the second, then Ammon was probably angry. He had saved the current set of servants from being executed by his swift and bloody action at the waters of Sebus. Lamoni would certainly have known that his executed servants had not truly been at fault and obviously had a guilty conscience as a result. In fact, Lamoni told the servants standing before him that Ammon had “come down at this time to preserve your lives, that I might not slay you as I did your brethren” (Alma 18:4).

Lamoni’s response to the news about Ammon’s prowess is authentically cautious and fearful. Were Ammon a demi-god, the extra-worldly power that destroyed the attackers as the Waters of Sebus might easily be turned against the king who sent innocent men to their deaths.

Mark Alan Wright suggests that the result of Ammon’s preaching to Lamoni—the episode where Lamoni, his queen, and Ammon all fall to the ground as though they were dead (Alma 19:13–15)—may also echo Mesoamerican cultural expectations: “Bruce Love shared an account of a Yucatecan man who was working in his field one

¹³ *Popol Vuh: The Definitive Edition of the Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life and the Glories of Gods and Kings*, 140–48, provides some examples. The entire mythological section is applicable.

¹⁴ Jill Leslie Furst, *Codex Vindobonensis Mexicanus I: A Commentary*, 106–8, plate 123.

¹⁵ Brant A. Gardner, “Quetzalcoatl’s Fathers: A Critical Examination of Source Materials,” and Alfredo López Austin, *Hombre Diós*, 75–101.

¹⁶ Foster, *Handbook to Life in the Ancient Maya World*, 159.

day with his brother, only to be overtaken by a strong force that knocked him to the earth. That night they sought out a *j-meen*, a healer, and he consulted his *sastun* [also spelled *zastun*, a physical divination aid] and other sacred objects to determine the cause of his ailment. After three days of prayers, offerings, and cleansing rituals, the man was restored to health and his ‘spiritual balance returned.’”¹⁷

Wright further suggests that the cultural witness to the calling of a Mesoamerican holy man was often an event that was apparently life-threatening.¹⁸ The holy man received his calling through a near-death experience. If that understanding informed the situation with Lamoni, then when the three come back to life it is not only a miracle but also a divine calling. It is the expected behavior of one who has been touched by the gods.

Horses, Chariots, and Other Anachronistic Nouns

Alma 18:9 introduces us to the two most obvious anachronisms in the Book of Mormon: “And they said unto him: Behold, he [Ammon] is feeding thy horses. Now the king had commanded his servants, previous to the time of the watering of their flocks, that they should prepare his horses and chariots, and conduct him forth to the land of Nephi; for there had been a great feast appointed at the land of Nephi, by the father of Lamoni, who was king over all the land.”

To date, there is no uncontested evidence for horses in the Americas during Book of Mormon times, though there is indisputable evidence that there were many species of horse during the Pleistocene (with an assumed termination of between ten and twelve thousand years ago).¹⁹ As for chariots, no archaeological evidence whatsoever has survived of a large, wheeled conveyance. Several small ceremonial objects with wheels have been recovered,²⁰ but they simply indicate that the wheel and axle were known, not that chariots (or other large, wheeled conveyances) were.²¹

¹⁷ Mark Alan Wright, “Nephite Daykeepers: Ritual Specialists in the Book of Mormon,” Quoting Bruce Love, *Maya Shamanism Today: Connecting with the Cosmos in Rural Yucatan* (Lancaster, Calif.: Labyrinthos Press, 2004), 1–3.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 10–11.

¹⁹ Wade E. Miller, *Science and the Book of Mormon. Cureloms, Cumoms, Horses & More*, 75.

²⁰ Richard A. Diehl and Margaret D. Mandeville, “Tula, and Wheeled Animal Effigies in Mesoamerica,” *Antiquity* 61, no. 232 (1987): 239–46; Paul R. Cheesman, *The World of the Book of Mormon*, 172–73; Paul R. Cheesman, “The Wheel in Ancient America,” 185–97; John L. Sorenson, “Wheeled Figurines in the Ancient World.” Diehl and Mandeville (p. 243) note that while these objects were once described as toys, it is more likely that they had a ritual function for adults.

²¹ If Mesoamerican cultures knew of the wheel and axle, why didn’t they use them for transport? Diehl and Margaret D. Mandeville, “Tula, and Wheeled Animal Effigies in Mesoamerica,” 244, suggest:

A final issue is why Mesoamerican Indians never adopted the wheel as a practical transportation device—a step which seems so natural from our technologically oriented world-view that we have difficulty comprehending why it did not occur. However, anthropologists have long known that most “unexplainable” facets of human culture are the result of factors

Nevertheless, some LDS authors have emphasized the evidence that does support the persistence of the horse into Book of Mormon times. John L. Sorenson notes:

Within the last decade, further efforts have been made to clarify whether some possible American horse bones are really ancient. Under the auspices of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (now the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Research), research has sought to reexamine specimens of purported pre-Columbian origin. Because the research is ongoing, little has been published from it. In the project, a physicist and a paleontologist have radiocarbon-dated as many horse remains in North or Middle America as paleontologists have suspected might predate the arrival of European explorers. Scores of specimens have been dated, although in the case of some of the most promising possibilities the purported bones have proved to be inaccessible (i.e., “cannot now be found”). In three instances the results yield apparently reliable pre-Columbian dates.²²

Wade E. Miller gives more details on the study that Sorenson referenced:

Small scattered populations of horse and ass, especially in remote areas, probably survived in North America until shortly before they were reintroduced by the Spaniards. Some recent datings, mostly unpublished, lead me to this conclusion. The Carbon-14 dating involved was first instigated by Dr. Steven E. Jones, former physics professor at Brigham Young University. I later worked with him on these.

Some of the unpublished dates run on horse fossils that appear to be valid are: 5,890 B.C. (Pratt Cave in Texas); 830 B.C. (southern Saskatchewan, Canada); 815 A.D. (Ontario, Canada); 400 A.D. (Wolf Spider Cave, Colorado). A date of about 120 B.C. was determined using a thermoluminescence method on a horse bone from Horesethief Cave in Wyoming. While these dates are important, it will take a number of others in this age range to convince skeptics that the horse did continue in North America past the Pleistocene into historic times. In my opinion these dates eventually will come.²³

Although this research suggests caution in declaring that there could not have been horses in Book of Mormon times,²⁴ it remains true that there is no evidence that

which are quite logical once they are known. We believe that a set of environmental and cultural factors so reduced the potential advantages of the wheel that it was not adopted. . .

[The absence of] draught animals and appropriate terrain, inhibited and probably prohibited the development of wheeled transportation.

The absence of draught animals was the major obstacle. Wheeled vehicles laden with cargo offer no substantial advantages over human porters if they must be propelled by people, particularly over long distances and on sloping or broken terrain. This is especially true of the very heavy vehicles with solid wooden wheels and axles, the earliest type known in the Old World and logically the first types in the technological evolution of vehicles. Animal traction is essential.

²² John L. Sorenson, *Mormon's Codex: An Ancient American Book*, 317–18.

²³ Miller, *Science and the Book of Mormon*, 77. Wade E. Miller and Matthew Roper, “Animals in the Book of Mormon: Challenges and Perspectives.”

²⁴ Others have also accepted that there would have been modern horses among the Nephites. See: Robert R. Bennett, “Horses in the Book of Mormon,” accepts that the word “horse” accurately represented that animal: “In short, the Book of Mormon claims only that horses were known to some New World peoples before the time of Christ in certain limited regions of

a horse played any significant part in Mesoamerican culture. The Book of Mormon “horse” never fulfills the functions we expect of a horse, nor does it impact Nephite society as it did other societies from the nomadic Mongols (transport, valuable property) to sedentary farmers of Europe (plowing, riding, beasts of burden, etc.).

What’s In a Name?

Two languages collide when new people invade an existing ecosphere. The flora and fauna have no existing names in the intruding language. In those situations, a common solution is to adapt known labels to apply to the new plants and animals. Sorenson therefore notes: “Was a Nephite ‘horse’ a specimen of our *Equus equus*? When they saw Spanish horses, the Aztecs called them ‘the Spaniards’ deer,’ while to Europeans, small Mexican brocket deer were considered ‘goats.’ In the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, the tapir was called ‘once an ass.’ These examples show the difficulty of translating the names of unfamiliar beasts.”²⁵

The same process occurred with plants. In King James English, *corn* was a generic term for *grain*. When friendly Indians introduced maize to English speakers along the Atlantic seaboard, the British called it *corn*, recontextualizing it to differentiate it from wheat.²⁶ Now, four hundred years later, *corn* means *maize* to most English readers/speakers, and the generic meaning of *corn* as *grain* is fading into the realm of historical linguistics.

This process of linguistic adaptation is well understood and represents a plausible explanation for how a seemingly anachronistic term might end up in the Book of Mormon.²⁷ While Mesoamericans might not have known a horse, the Lehiters certainly did and it is therefore plausible that they used their traditional word *horse* to describe the unfamiliar animal. It was this process that gives us our name hippopotamus, which means *river horse*. Although it hardly seems horse-like, it was nevertheless given that appellation.

This known process explains the word *horse* in the Book of Mormon (as well as other anachronistic nouns) by suggesting that Joseph Smith accurately translated the Lehite/Nephite misapplication of a term inherited from the Old World and applied to

the New World. Thus we need not conclude from the text that horses were universally known in the Americas throughout pre-Columbian history.”

Daniel Johnson, “Hard Evidence of Horses in America.”

Michael R. Ash, “Horses in the Book of Mormon.”

John L. Lund, *Mesoamerica and the Book of Mormon: Is This the Place?* 243–58.

²⁵ Sorenson, *Mormon’s Codex*, 313.

²⁶ Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon*, 288. Sorenson also suggested (p. 293): “The lowland Maya at first named all the big animals of the Spaniards—horse, mule, ass—with the name of the nearest native of equivalent size—the tapir. The Spaniards, however, thought the tapir looked like a pig, although it weighs up to 700 pounds. Others considered the tapir to resemble the ass; sixty years ago in southern Mexico the beast was called *anteburro* or ‘once-an-ass.’”

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 318: “A large literature discusses the terminological problem that explorers of new territories face when they come across unfamiliar animals; they usually dub these with names of similar and more familiar creatures. These names prove misleading if taken literally.”

a plant or animal in the New World. The acceptability of this particular explanation is directly related to one's theory of the translation of the Book of Mormon. It requires a very literalist translation which preserved the Nephite cross-labeling.

Did the translation mislabeling occur with the Nephites or with Joseph? Certainly, the Middle Eastern Nephites (who knew what horses looked like and what they were used for) might have mislabeled as "horses" the closest local quadrupeds that they found in the New World. However, retaining this mistaken label assumes that Hebrew continued to be their common language and that they continued to name local animals using Hebrew words. Those local animals already had names in the native languages; and if the Nephites adopted one of those languages as their lingua franca (preserving Hebrew as a sacred language), then there would have been no reason why they insisted on the mislabel (which would, at a minimum, have confused the local people and their own locally born children) rather than adopting the animal's name in the native language. For example, even English-speakers identify the Mesoamerican ocelot by a word derived from Aztec *ocelotl*. The ocelot is not mislabeled; it is known by a borrowed identification. Similarly, our very common words "chocolate" and "tomato" are derived from Aztec loan words: *chocolatl* and *tomatl*. I find it much more likely that anachronistic vocabulary such as "horse" is the result of the modern translator's imposition of his language culture than that such words represent a literalist translation of a Nephite cross-label.

Translation Anachronisms

There are two times where languages collided in the description of the flora and fauna of the New World. One would be when the Lehites encountered the new animals and reapplied labels from Old World animals, such as Sorenson suggests. The other time was when Joseph translated the plate text into English. I suggest that the best explanation for the anachronistic nouns comes from the nature of Joseph's translation.

We need look no farther than the King James translation of the Bible for examples of anachronisms that occur only in the translation and not in the text being translated. The KJV frequently mentions candles²⁸ even though oil lamps provided light during both the Old and New Testaments. Thus, the word *candle* is an anachronism, but only in the translation. With the availability of the Hebrew and Greek source texts, it is clear that the original documents refer to the oil lamps rather than candles.

In the Book of Mormon case, we don't have the original text. We must peer through the translation to determine whether it is an anachronism on the original plate text or only in the English translation. The only way to do so is to examine the text to see if it tells us anything about a horse or chariot that would help us identify the animal and conveyance to which the words refer.

²⁸ Job 18:6, 21:17; Ps. 18:28; Prov. 20:27, 24:20, 31:18; Jer. 25:10; Matt. 5:15; Mark 4:21; Luke 8:16, 11:33, 15:8; Rev. 18:23, 22:5.

When a text uses such terms in contexts that justify our assumptions about the words, then we may reasonably conclude that the translated terms are functioning according to those assumptions. An excellent example from the Old Testament is Jeremiah 51:21: “And with thee will I break in pieces the horse and his rider; and with thee will I break in pieces the chariot and his rider.” It is abundantly clear that men ride horses and ride in chariots. Similarly, Jeremiah 46:9 declares: “Come up, ye horses; and rage, ye chariots; and let the mighty men come forth; the Ethiopians and the Libyans, that handle the shield; and the Lydians, that handle and bend the bow.” Here both the horse and the chariot function in a military setting in which, again, men ride on horses and in chariots.

These are the contexts that establish our assumptions about the relationship between horses and chariots. Deanne Matheny notes: “Twice King Lamoni’s horses and chariots are prepared for traveling (Alma 18:9–10; 20:6). Horses and chariots also are among the items which the Nephites assembled before their battle with the Gadianton robbers (3 Ne. 3:22). These references indicate that horses functioned in several areas to pull conveyances of some sort.” She footnotes this statement with: “Also found in 3 Nephi is Jesus’ warning to the Gentiles that unless they repent, he will cut off their horses out of the midst of them and he will destroy their chariots (3 Ne. 21:14).”²⁹

Unfortunately, the context to which Matheny assigns these verses are not their original context. For example, she says “horses and chariots are among the items with the Nephites assembled before their battle with the Gadianton robbers.” The horses and chariots are clearly in a military context. However, 3 Nephi 3:22 reads:

And it came to pass in the seventeenth year, in the latter end of the year, the proclamation of Lachoneus had gone forth throughout all the face of the land, and they had taken their horses, and their chariots, and their cattle, and all their flocks, and their herds, and their grain, and all their substance, and did march forth by thousands and by tens of thousands, until they had all gone forth to the place which had been appointed that they should gather themselves together, to defend themselves against their enemies.

Although the reason for gathering the material is a military situation, the actual context of horses and chariots is “and their cattle, and all their flocks, and their herds, and their grain, and all their substance.” That is not a military context. Her footnote to 3 Nephi 21:14 neglects to note that the verse is an unlabeled quotation of Micah 5:9–14 (compare 3 Ne. 21:13–18).

The contextual data for Ammon’s activities do not convey a military connection.³⁰ In Alma 18:9, the servants explain: “Behold, he is feeding thy horses. Now the king had commanded his servants . . . that they should prepare his horses and chariots, and conduct him forth to the land of Nephi.” This context explains that

²⁹ Deanne G. Matheny, “Does the Shoe Fit? A Critique of the Limited Tehuantepec Geography,” 305 and footnote 23.

³⁰ 2 Nephi 12:7 and 2 Nephi 15:28, which describe horses and chariots functioning in Old Testament contexts are, likewise, Old Testament quotations from Isaiah.

horses and chariots are near the palace and that horses must be fed. Lamoni is going to the land of Nephi on a formal state visit (“a great feast appointed . . . by the father of Lamoni”) but the role played by the horses and chariots is not clear. We assume that the horse pulls the chariot because that’s what horses do in the histories with which we are familiar. However, it isn’t the relationship between the English words that is important. It is the discernible relationship in the text.

Rather than appear in the context of war, Book of Mormon horses and chariots appear in the context of a formal state visit. Horses and chariots reappear in that setting when Ammon and Lamoni hear that Ammon’s brothers are in prison: “Lamoni . . . caused that his servants should make ready his horses and his chariots” (Alma 20:6) for another state visit to the king of the land where they were held.

Chariots never appear in the context of Book of Mormon warfare. Horses only move and eat. They never explicitly pull anything. They are never ridden. If we replaced the word *horse* with a made-up word (such as *glerk*) we would never suspect that a *glerk* was a horse. Thus, the text itself does not support *horse* as the only or even best translation for whatever word was on the plates.³¹

The use of chariot in the translation represents two different problems of meaning. The first is that the term Joseph used probably intended a meaning that has faded from use. William Henry Holmes (1846–1933) recorded: “[Désiré] Charnay [1828–1915] obtained from an ancient cemetery at Tenenpanco, Mexico, a number of toy chariots of terra cotta, presumably buried with the body of a child, some of which retained their wheels.”³² Holmes had no problem using the same word that Charnay had used: “These chariots are shaped like a flattened *cayote* [coyote] (a kind of long-bodied fox) with its straight ears and pointed face, and the wheels fit into four terracotta stumps; on my renewing the wood axle-tree, which had been destroyed long since, the chariots began to move.”³³ Holmes and Charnay wrote that there were chariots in Mesoamerica. They did not mean Old World war chariots. The Book of Mormon translation need not either.

Holmes, Charnay, and Joseph were likely following standard vocabulary of the times. Webster’s 1828 dictionary indicates that one meaning for chariot was “a half coach; a carriage with four wheels and one seat behind, used for convenience and pleasure.”³⁴ It is this definition that lies behind the use of “chariot” in Doctrine and Covenants 62:7: “I, the Lord, am willing, if any among you desire to ride upon horses, or upon mules, or in chariots, he shall receive this blessing, if he receive it from the hand of the Lord, with a thankful heart in all things.” The contemporary meaning of

³¹ In contrast to the vocabulary issue with “horse,” the use of metal plates in the Book of Mormon is not an anachronism because the context refers to creating them with ore (1 Ne. 19:1; Mosiah 21:27; Morm. 8:5) and they were metal when delivered to Joseph Smith. The process of identifying an anachronism to vocabulary choices cannot be used indiscriminately but must be based on the evidence from the text.

³² William Henry Holmes, *Handbook of Aboriginal American Antiquities*, 20.

³³ Désiré Charnay, *The Ancient Cities of the New World, being Voyages and Explorations in Mexico and Central America from 1857–1882*, 171.

³⁴ Noah Webster, *American Dictionary of the English Language*: 1828.

chariot allowed for a four-wheeled conveyance. Although a “carriage with four wheels” is also unlikely to be an accurate translation for whatever was on the plates, it certainly demonstrates that the Book of Mormon chariot need not suggest Old World war chariots.

What Might Have Been Translated as “Horse” and “Chariot”?

Even assuming that *horse* and *chariot* represent translation anachronisms, the nouns still represent textual placeholders for some animal and conveyance in the original plate language. Fortunately, a Mesoamerican context provides a culturally plausible possibility.

The appropriate conveyance would be a royal litter, carried on men’s shoulders rather than pulled by an animal. The royal litter is also often associated with an animal. Freidel, Schele, and Parker note:

Lintel 2 of Temple 1 shows Hasaw-Ka’an-K’awil wearing the balloon headdress of Tlaloc-Venus warfare adopted at the time of the Waxaktun conquest, and holding the bunched javelins and shield, the original metaphors for war imported from Teotihuacán. He sits in majesty on the litter that carried him into battle, while above him hulks Waxaklahun-Ubah-Kan, the great War Serpent. . . .

Graffiti drawings scratched on the walls of Tikal palaces, depicting the conjuring of supernatural beings from the Otherworld, prove that these scenes were more than imaginary events seen only by the kings. Several of these elaborate doodles show the great litters of the king with his protector beings hovering over him while he is participating in ritual. These images are not the propaganda of rulers, created in an effort to persuade the people of the reality of the supernatural events they were witnessing. They are the poorly drawn images of witnesses, perhaps minor members of lordly families, who scratched the wonders that they saw during moments of ritual into the walls of the places where they lived their lives.³⁵

³⁵ David Freidel, Linda Schele, and Joy Parker, *Maya Cosmos: Three Thousand Years on the Shaman’s Path*, 311–13. David A. Freidel, “Maya Warfare, Myth and Reality,” [no page]:

Gods also accompanied lords and armies in Classic period struggles. One truly great king of Tikal, prosaically termed Ruler A by archaeologists, named himself Hasaw-Chan-K’awil, the spiritual embodiment of the battle standard. In so doing, he virtually claimed to be war itself incarnate. In two beautifully carved lintels spanning the doorways of his funeral temple, Temple 1 of Tikal, Hasaw-Chan-K’awil portrayed himself seated in majesty upon ornate litters. Behind him on one of the litters looms a huge image of the 18-Rabbit Serpent portrayed as a limbed and clawed monster covered with mosaic spangles. The monster leans over him to grasp the battle standard attached to the front of the litter. On the second litter, an enormous jaguar, Nu-Balam-Chak, (“deadly friend great jaguar?”) menaces in the same pose, reaching over the king’s head to hold the battle standard. These Tikal idols no doubt housed gods, but they were made of material. There are numerous informal graffiti scratched on palace walls at Tikal that show lords being carried around in litters with these huge idols. And we can be sure that Maya armies carried these litters into battle. King Flint-Sky-God K of the city of Dos Pilas south of Tikal exulted in one of his victory texts that he captured the predecessor of Hasaw-Chan-K’awil, King Shield-Skull of Tikal. His successor Shield-Sky-God K proudly declared himself guardian

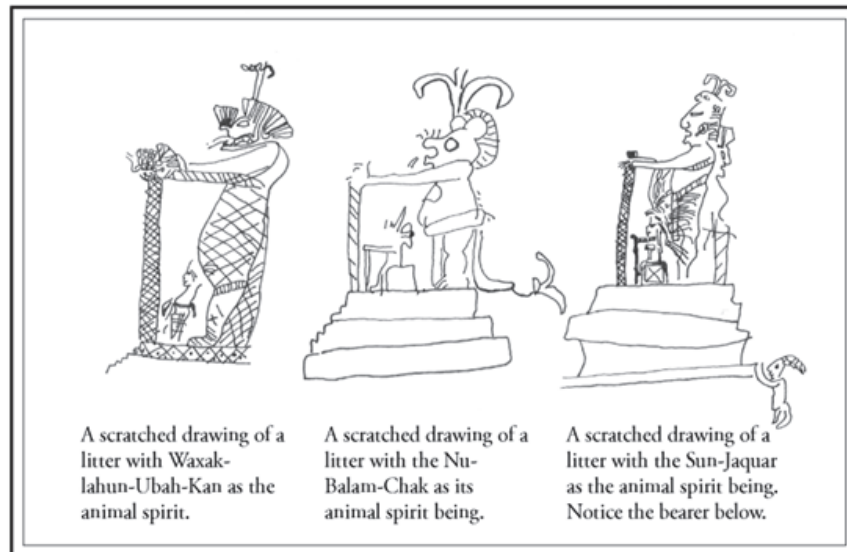


Figure 10: Battle litter graffiti from Tikal

Karl Taube discusses the practice among the later lowland Maya:

Along with warriors and hunters, Maya kings had a distinct relation with the forest, as they were capable of passing beyond political and natural boundaries to visit or conquer distant realms. With this unique ability, they were identified with the jaguar (the “king” of the forest)—a concept vividly expressed by royal litters and palanquins topped by jaguar beings. First appearing on Stela 212 of Late Preclassic Izapa, such jaguar vehicles are common in Classic Maya art, including figurines.

The most elaborate portrayals of jaguar palanquins appear on wooden lintels from Temples I and IV of Tikal. In the lintel scenes, the seated rulers are backed by massive supernatural jaguar figures. . . . The jaguar palanquins reveal that, during the Classic Maya period, Maya kings prowled the landscape as fierce beasts guarding and extending their domain.³⁶

of the Kin Balam, the Sun Jaguar, of Tikal. This is the war god Shield-Skull evidently accompanied on his litter into that catastrophic conflict. No wonder, then, that Hasaw-Chan-K’awil celebrated the construction and activation of new war images for his city. Those gods served Tikal well, for Hasaw-Chan-K’awil’s successor later depicted himself seated on the captured Sun Jaguar litter of an enemy king from the city of Naranjo.

³⁶ Karl Taube, “Ancient and Contemporary Maya Conceptions about Field and Forest,” 480. See also Justin Kerr, “Maya Vase Data Base: A Pre-Columbian Portfolio.” The litter accompanied by an animal may be seen on the vase designated as Kerr Number 767.

Another possibility is that the king in the litter is accompanied by a dog, as seen on Maya vases: Kerr Number 594; Kerr Number 5534; Kerr Number 6317. Justin Kerr pioneered a rollout technique for photographing Maya pots [Kerr developed a method that “unrolls” the pot to create a photography of the full painting as though it were on a flat surface]. That process allows for a better assessment of the entire scene based on a photograph. Photographs in his large collection are identified by Kerr numbers, which allow scholars to easily access the rollout of the indicated pot in the online collection.

Maya art represents the king riding on a litter associated with an animal as an accompanying spirit. The graffiti litters at least open the possibility that these were simply formal litters and not limited to battle context. These litters were accompanied by a “battle beast,” or an animal alter ego, embodied in the regalia of the king and litter.³⁷ I suggest that the plausible underlying conveyance in the story of Ammon was a royal litter, accompanied in peacetime by the spiritual animal associated with the king. I suggest that the appearance of “horse” in this context comes from Joseph’s assumptions in the translation rather than the meaning of the text on the plates.

This animal was a type of alter-ego for the king, and was called the *way* (pronounced “Y”):

The *wayob* [plural of *way*] of the Classic Maya imagery appeared in many guises, including humanlike forms, animals of all sorts, and grotesque combinations of human and animal bodies. . . . It is interesting that pottery scenes from most of the major kingdoms depict creatures who are the *way* of their ruling lords; but with the exception of the rulers of Palenque, individual kings never recorded the names of their *way* in the texts on their monuments. From this we deduce that particular companion spirits were associated with particular lineages and kingdoms, and that their names were generally known to the artist who painted the pots. . . .

The ancient Maya also transformed into their *wayob* when they fought their wars, and they very likely saw the planets and constellations as the *wayob* of the gods and their ancestors.³⁸

There is no way to know precisely what was on the plates. However, there is ample evidence that Joseph’s translation process allowed him to impose modern terms and concepts on ancient but unfamiliar terms.³⁹ Thus, plausible combinations of elements may explain the horse/chariot combination in the Book of Mormon in a way that fits the context and the descriptions rather than just the assumptions embodied in the English words *horse* and *chariot*. Strengthening this hypothesis is the mention of horses and chariots in Alma 18:9 where the context is a “great feast appointed at the land of Nephi, by the father of Lamoni, who was king over all the land.” (See “The Overking and Subordinate Kings” below in this chapter.) The fact that the horses were fed suggests either a live accompanying animal or another instance of assumptive translation.

³⁷ Taube, “Ancient and Contemporary Maya Conceptions about Field and Forest,” 310–13.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 191–92.

³⁹ Alma 14:29: “fled from the presence of Alma and Amulek even as a goat fleeth with her young from two lions.” Neither goats or lions are native to Mesoamerica and are also candidates for a translation issue. The idiom could easily have involved hunter and prey, but they must be a different hunter and prey from the animals used in translation. In this case, it is unclear how the pairing of goats and lions occurred. Lions are certainly not a New York predator and there is no biblical pairing of the goats and lions that might explain the paired translation. There might be a hint in the requirement that there be two lions, but I am not aware of what that might be.

Controversial “Coins”

A similar issue that hinges on both translation and reading assumptions is the notion of anachronous coins in the Book of Mormon. Alma 11:4 says: “Now these are the names of the different pieces of their gold, and of their silver, according to their value.” Perhaps because a common currency in the world during Joseph Smith’s time was the Spanish coin that was give the English name “piece of eight” (a single coin worth eight *reales*), Alma’s “pieces of their gold” were assumed to be coins.

It is not hard to find faithful LDS authors who assume that this text indicated coinage. George Reynolds and Janne M. Sjodahl’s *Commentary on the Book of Mormon* discusses this section in terms of coinage.⁴⁰ Sidney B. Sperry and Monte S. Nyman similarly refer to coins in the Book of Mormon.⁴¹ Richard Pearson Smith even suggested that “in every case it turns out that the [Nephite coinage] system has an edge over the other systems from the standpoint of number of coins required for a purchase.”⁴² So pervasive was the assumptive reading of the text that the heading in the 1920 edition was “Nephite coins and measures,” which was modified only slightly in the 1981 edition: “Nephite coinage set forth.” The 1830 edition did not have a chapter break between our chapters 10 and 11, and the headnote of the chapter including our chapter 11 said nothing at all about this section.

The idea that there would be coins in the Book of Mormon has rightly been the focus of historical criticism of the text. Bill McKeever and Eric Johnson of the *Mormonism Research Ministry* note:

Some have criticized the Mormon Church for its failure to provide evidence for any Nephite coins. But should we really expect the LDS Church to produce them? Coinage in the Western Hemisphere during the *Book of Mormon* time period was unknown. The use of coins did not become popular until the sixteenth century, more than a millennium after the last Nephite had allegedly died. However, the problem does not lie in a lack of Nephite coins. Rather, it lies in Joseph Smith’s implication that such coins existed in the first place.⁴³

McKeever and Johnson are correct that the presence of coins would be anomalous. They also correctly note that many LDS authors have assumed that the text refers to coins. They also correctly note that “over the years, many Mormons—including some scholars—have dismissed [the] description as coins.”⁴⁴ They cite Daniel C. Peterson’s discussion:

It is, alas, quite true that there is no evidence whatsoever for the existence of Book of Mormon coins. Not even in the Book of Mormon itself. The text of the Book of Mormon never mentions the word “coin” or any variant of it. The reference to “Nephite coinage” in the chapter heading to Alma 11 is not part of the original text, and is mistaken. Alma

⁴⁰ George Reynolds and Janne M. Sjodahl, *Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, 3:175–78.

⁴¹ Sidney B. Sperry, *Book of Mormon Compendium*, 335; Monte S. Nyman, *The Record of Alma: A Teaching Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, 135–37.

⁴² Richard Pearson Smith, “The Nephite Monetary System,” 316.

⁴³ Bill McKeever and Eric Johnson, “Are Ancient Coins Mentioned in the Book of Mormon?” (no page).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

11 is almost certainly talking about standardized weights of metal—a historical step toward coinage, but not yet the real thing. [Here ends McKeever and Johnson’s citation of Peterson. Peterson continues:] Genuine coinage was not invented until some years after Lehi’s departure from Jerusalem. And, even then, it scarcely circulated beyond Anatolia and reached Palestine only in the fifth century before Christ. Thus, while an ignorant nineteenth-century con artist might easily have blundered into putting coins in the pockets of his fictional Near Eastern immigrants, the Book of Mormon depicts precisely the monetary situation that it ought to for its claimed time and place of cultural origin. So Latter-day Saint scholars would be as surprised as anybody if we were someday to find a cache of “Book of Mormon coins.”⁴⁵

McKeever and Johnson suggest that Joseph Smith really intended coins, but this conclusion is based on their assumption that “pieces” necessarily refers to coins. Peterson’s point is that the text not only does not say coins, but it does not describe coins.⁴⁶ The textual descriptions actually come much closer to descriptions of exchange systems from the ancient world where there is no assumption nor indication that the system included coins.⁴⁷ John W. Welch notes the initial provisions of Eshnunna’s law code, instituted in Babylon in the early eighteenth century B.C.

1 kor of barley is (priced) at 1 shekel of silver;
 3 *qa* of “best oil” are (priced) at 1 shekel of silver;
 1 seah (and) 2 *qa* of sesame oil are (priced) at 1 shekel of silver. . .

⁴⁵ Daniel C. Peterson, “Chattanooga Cheapshot, or The Gall of Bitterness,” 55. Peterson was responding to a similar discussion of coins in John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *Everything You Ever Wanted to Know about Mormonism*, 285–86.

⁴⁶ McKeever and Johnson, “Are Ancient Coins Mentioned in the Book of Mormon?” (no page): declare:

We disagree with Dr. Peterson’s claim that no variant of the word *coin* is used in the text. Taking his advice that Noah Webster’s 1828 *American Dictionary of the English Language* is perhaps “our best source for the language of Joseph Smith and his contemporaries” (*Review of Books on the Book of Mormon*, 5:8), there are several definitions found under the word “piece” (the word Smith used in Alma 11:4). What’s interesting is that none of them have any meaning that would fit Alma 11:4 until the eighth definition: “A coin; as a piece of eight.” The meaning for “piece” in Joseph Smith’s day was “coin.” This shows that “coin” was interpreted not only by James Talmage but the “translator” of the Book of Mormon himself!

Their evidence for “piece” as “coin” is the eighth definition in Webster’s 1828 dictionary, where it says “a coin; as in a *piece* of eight.” This argument supposes that “piece” necessarily infers the entire phrase “piece of eight.” It rather seems that the word was part of a nominative phrase that had meaning as a whole rather than as the separate words.

A second issue with their analysis is in the supposition that whatever term Joseph used necessarily replicated a meaning from the plate text. It is difficult to see what the plate might have had that necessarily invoked a specific Spanish coin.

⁴⁷ John W. Welch, “Weighing and Measuring in the Worlds of the Book of Mormon,” 43: “The term *pieces* most likely refers to metallic weights of some sort. The first coins known to history—at least coins in the modern sense—appeared in Lydia in western Asia Minor by the seventh century B.C., spreading into the Mediterranean region only after Lehi had left Jerusalem. As in other ancient cultures, the Nephites seem to have used weighted pieces of metal as payment form measured amounts of grain.”

The hire for a wagon together with its oxen and its driver is 1 *massiktum* (and) 4 seah of barley. If it is (paid in) silver, the hire is one third of a shekel.⁴⁸

Welch also notes a parallel between the Babylonian and Nephite systems which:

has to do with the basic reason for establishing values for various goods. At Eshnunna, this valuation was designed to allow merchants to deal in a variety of commodities, each one being convertible into either silver or barley, sesame oil, wool, and other things. Thus precious metal and grain measures were interchangeable. Correspondingly, the Nephite system allowed traders to convert from silver or gold into many other goods: “also for a measure of every kind of grain” (Alma 11:7).⁴⁹

Alma 11:7 specifies: “A senu of silver was equal to a senine of gold, and either for a measure of barley, and also for a measure of every kind of grain.” The fact that these measures, in either gold or silver, are equivalent to a measure of grain tells us that we are dealing with weights. The primary Mesoamerican food crops were corn and beans, both of which could easily be measured by weight.

The Overking and Subordinate Kings

One of the most interesting facets of Lamanite political culture is the interrelationship among kings.⁵⁰ In Mosiah 24:2 we find: “For the Lamanites had taken possession of all these lands; therefore, the king of the Lamanites had appointed kings over all these lands.” This Lamanite practice of a king over kings replicates what is known of many later Maya political interactions. Simon Martin and Nikolai Grube summarize the discernible pattern:

The emergence of new information from the inscriptions, in which the Maya directly describe their political world, allows a reassessment of the topic. Our own research . . . points to a pervasive and enduring system of “overkingship” that shaped almost every facet of the Classic landscape [250 A.D. to 900 A.D.]. Such a scheme accords closely with wider Mesoamerican practice, while seeming to reconcile the most compelling features of the two existing views, namely the overwhelming evidence for multiple small kingdoms and the great disparities in the size of their capitals.⁵¹

⁴⁸ John W. Welch, “The Laws of Eshnunna and Nephi Economics,” 147.

⁴⁹ Welch, “Weighing and Measuring in the Worlds of the Book of Mormon,” 41. John W. Welch, “A Steady Stream of Significant Recognitions,” 348–50. Michael R. Ash, *Of Faith and Reason: 80 Evidences Supporting the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 82–83, summarizes some of the evidence for the weights and measures as opposed to coinage.

⁵⁰ Noel B. Reynolds, “Nephite Kingship Reconsidered,” 164: “The Lamanites seem to have installed a very different system—one of tributary kings appointed by the superior monarch, not by a prophet (see Mosiah 24:2–3), more like the system that appears to have prevailed in ancient Mesoamerica. At no time do we see the Nephites using a multilayered or federal system with subordinate kings.”

⁵¹ Martin and Grube, *Chronicle of the Maya Kings and Queens*, 18–19. See also, Linda Schele and Peter Mathews, “Royal Visits and other Intersite Relationships,” 251: “Our present view of the Classic Maya lowlands is one of many small political units, each ruled over by a king, of ahau

More than a simple statement that the king of the Lamanites appointed other kings, we see specific types of relationships among kings in other parts of the Book of Mormon. For example, after Ammon has earned king Lamoni's trust, Lamoni suggests the way to free Ammon's brethren from imprisonment in the land of Middoni: "Now Lamoni said unto Ammon: . . . I will go with thee to the land of Middoni; for the king of the land of Middoni, whose name is Antiomno, is a friend unto me; therefore I go to the land of Middoni, that I may flatter the king of the land, and he will cast thy brethren out of prison" (Alma 20:4).

Lamoni proposes to use his personal influence with Antiomno to effect the release of Ammon's brethren. He does not propose a military solution. Specifically, he will "flatter" a king in a different land who "is a friend unto me." In the context of known Mesoamerican inter-city relationships, we can see Antiomno and the land of Middoni as part of the collection of cities who are beholden to the overking (who happens to be Lamoni's father).

The nature of these relationships is on display in a different way as Ammon and Lamoni, en route to the land of Middoni, meet Lamoni's father. This man remains unnamed in the text but is denominated as king over all Lamanite kings.

And behold, the father of Lamoni said unto him: Why did ye not come to the feast on that great day when I made a feast unto my sons, and unto my people?

And he also said: Whither art thou going with this Nephite, who is one of the children of a liar?

And it came to pass that Lamoni rehearsed unto him whither he was going, for he feared to offend him.

And he also told him all the cause of his tarrying in his own kingdom, that he did not go unto his father to the feast which he had prepared. (Alma 20:9–12)

The feast is first mentioned in Alma 18:9, when Ammon is feeding Lamoni's horses in preparation for the "great feast appointed at the land of Nephi, by the father of Lamoni, who was king over all the land." Clearly, when Lamoni ordered Ammon to prepare his horses and chariot for travel, he intended to attend the great feast. Presumably, the horses and chariots would have been the conveyance in which the king would make this trip or were otherwise associated with either the journey or Lamoni's reception at the feast.

The father's angry reaction makes it plain that Lamoni's absence was a serious breach of etiquette and, in fact, may be the reason the father is on the road in the first place—he is hunting Lamoni to demand an accounting. Later Classic Maya sites provide glyphic evidence of royal visits from subordinate rulers to their overlords.⁵² According to Schele and Mathews, "The term 'royal visit' may be defined as the peaceful visit of one lord to the city of another. Although instances of royal visits

status, who had under him various other ahaus and cahals [ahau is the royal "lord" and cahal a provincial governor], some of whom were in charge of subsidiary centers within the polity."

⁵² Martin and Grube, *Chronicle of the Maya Kings and Queens*, 249, also 228.

were only sporadically recorded, they were no doubt a common occurrence among the Classic Maya.”⁵³

In Maya culture, such visits could cement a relationship, or, in the breach, lead to war. Thus, a subordinate king who refused to come to the overlord’s feast could have been considered in rebellion. Lamoni’s father has not yet drawn this conclusion about his son but obviously feels that Lamoni owes him a convincing explanation about his absence. All facets of this story, the formal visit to another city and the expectation of a king’s obeisance to the overking fit very comfortably into a Mesoamerican context.

The Treatment of Important Captives

Lamoni’s royal visit to Antiomno provides another glimpse into Lamanite behavior that reflects Mesoamerican culture. The visit will request the release of Ammon’s captive brethren. We learn that they had a very different reception than Ammon. No Lamanite princess was offered as a bride. Rather they were treated as enemies, captured, and tormented:

And when Ammon did meet them he was exceedingly sorrowful, for behold they were naked, and their skins were worn exceedingly because of being bound with strong cords. And they also had suffered hunger, thirst, and all kinds of afflictions; nevertheless they were patient in all their sufferings. (Alma 20:29)

In the Maya world the mistreatment of captives was much more common than Ammon’s remarkable reception. A polychrome Maya vase from Altar de Sacrificios (Early Classic period, A.D. 250–600) shows a captive dancing. The dancer’s face is swollen, apparently as a result of torture.⁵⁴ A remarkable series of depictions on Maya stela shows the treatment of several named captives:

Prestigious captives taken in battle were often kept alive for years on end. They were displayed in public rituals and often participated in these rituals in gruesome, humiliating, and painful ways. Smoking-Squirrel and Wac-Chanil-Ahau were enthusiastic practitioners of this sacred tradition. Kinichil-Cab of Ucanal survived his capture to reappear four years later, on May 23, 698, in an event that was in all probability a sacrificial ritual of some sort. Later in the same year, on September 23, Shield-Jaguar suffered through the same rite in “the land of Smoking-Squirrel of Naranjo.” A year later, on April 19, 699, it was lady Wac-Chanil’s turn. The hapless Kinichil-Cab appeared again in a public ritual she conducted. On Naranjo Stela 24 we see her standing on the bound, nearly naked body of this unfortunate warrior. Finally, on 9.13.10.0.0 (January 26, 702), the day Smoking-Squirrel dedicated both Stela 22 and Stela 24, the young king displayed his famous captive, Shield-Jaguar of Ucanal, in a public blood-letting ritual. As depicted, the ill-fated captive is nearly naked, stripped of all his marks of rank and prestige, holding

⁵³ Schele and Mathews, “Royal Visits and other Intersite Relationships,” 228.

⁵⁴ David Freidel, Linda Schele, and Joy Parker, *Maya Cosmos: Three Thousand Years on the Shaman’s Path*, 265. See also the Jaina captive figurine from the Late Classic (A.D. 700–900), Linda Schele and Mary Ellen Miller, *The Blood of Kings*, 228, photograph on 240.

his bound wrists up toward the magnificently dressed fourteen-year-old king who sits high above him on a jaguar-pillow.⁵⁵

Although these events are separated from the story of Ammon and his brothers by more than seven hundred years, there still remain remarkable parallels, such as the stripping, binding, and blows to the face. Sadly, it would appear that Ammon's brethren might still have been getting better treatment than other royal captives could expect.⁵⁶

Victims were beaten, mutilated, their finger-nails torn out, and they were subjected to prolonged bouts of blood-letting before eventually being killed. The most prized prisoners, nobles or kings like K'an Hoy Chitam of Palenque, men who possessed particularly powerful and efficacious blood, could be held captive for years, their life-blood periodically tapped before an auspicious date was selected for their death. The final method of dispatch was normally decapitation, though it is evident that heart excision, the Aztec mode, was also practised. But as an alternative, or preliminary, men could be disemboweled, scalped, burnt, strapped to wooden scaffolds and shot with arrows, besides being trussed up as balls and bounced down stairways.⁵⁷

Culture as Explanation: Anti-Nephi Lehies

The story of the Anti-Nephi Lehies is not simply one of great faith. Those faithful parents had children of great faith. Helaman's stripling warriors are their children. The Anti-Nephi Lehies' (later Ammonites) conversion to the gospel was sufficient that they were willing to give their lives for it. Dying for their new beliefs demonstrates great faith, but it also provides a confusing backdrop to their relationship with the stripling warriors.⁵⁸ The Ammonites had foresworn war, but were willing to take up

⁵⁵ Linda Schele and David Freidel, *A Forest of Kings: The Untold Story of the Ancient Maya*, 189–91.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 143: "The presence of this captive documents the crucial role played by war and captive taking in early Maya kingship. The Maya fought not to kill their enemies but to capture them. Kings did not take their captives easily, but in aggressive hand-to-hand combat. A defeated ruler or lord was stripped of his finery, bound, and carried back to the victorious city to be tortured and sacrificed in public rituals. The prestige value a royal captive held for a king was high, and often a king would link the names of his important captives to his own throughout his life. Captives were symbols of the prowess and potency of a ruler and his ability to subjugate his enemies."

⁵⁷ Drew, *The Lost Chronicles of the Maya Kings*, 313.

⁵⁸ Duane Boyce, "Were the Ammonites Pacifists?" 44 recognizes that the Ammonites do not fit the definition of a pacifist:

Here's what we can say in summary, then, about the Ammonites and pacifism. It's true that the Ammonites deliberately made themselves noncombatants, and even suffered themselves to be slaughtered in consequence of that decision. And it's true that they supply what must certainly be among the most inspiring examples of repentance, contrition, humility, and sustained devotion to the Lord that can be found anywhere in scripture. In every way we feel on holy ground as we think of these devoted and sanctified people.

arms to defend the Nephites (Alma 53:13–14). “Helaman feared lest by so doing they should lose their souls” (Alma 53:15). The context that explains why the parents would lose their souls but the sons would not must have been so well known to Book of Mormon writers that they didn’t feel a need for explicit description.

The Ammonite oath was evidently binding only upon those who had personally enunciated it. It did not cross generations. While we do not know the year they took the oath, they did so before Ammonihah was sacked, which occurred in the eleventh year of the reign of the judges (Alma 16:1–3, 25:2). The story of the stripling warriors occurs in the twenty-sixth year of the reign of the judges (Alma 56:9).

An unanswered question is how old these young men were. The record does not say whether children also took the oath. If they were too young to speak, it seems unlikely that they did. But taking the outside case, if the oldest of the young men were born after the oath, they would be fifteen. Men age twenty or more would not be considered “young,” since it would not be unusual for even seventeen-year-olds to marry and have families, based on typical data from the ancient world. I hypothesize that some would be as old as seventeen (born prior to the covenant, but too young to repeat the words of the oath), but most would be younger. For the story to be as miraculous as it is in Mormon’s telling, I speculate that these soldiers ranged from perhaps twelve to fifteen.⁵⁹

It seems significant that these young men “called themselves Nephites.” Their parents are the people of Ammon and perhaps maintained some connection to their identity as converted Lamanites. Their sons, however, have spent most (or all) of their lives in their new home and their self-definition is not Lamanite, but Nephite. Understanding why fighting endangered the parents’ souls but not their sons’ hinges on the sons’ age and relationship to the oath.

The nature of the oath is best understood in a Mesoamerican context. The story begins with a remarkable conversion to the gospel. Aaron converted Lamoni’s father, the king of the Lamanites.⁶⁰ When that king crowned one of his sons (original name

But it’s also true that the Ammonites are not examples of pacifism. They were opposed to war only for themselves and for reasons particular to themselves. They were not opposed, in principle, to war itself.

⁵⁹ John W. Welch, “Law and War in the Book of Mormon,” 66, sees them as perhaps twenty years old or older. Welch bases his analysis on a comparison to Hebrew terms that translate to “young man” and indicate one eligible for military service. Thus, he sees “young man” as a technical category, not descriptive. This suggestion is repeated in Stephen D. Ricks, “‘Holy War’: The Sacral Ideology of War in the Book of Mormon and in the Ancient Near East,” 109. Since I am unable to support Hebrew as the language that informs the meaning of the text and have a difficult time arguing that a Hebrew legal definition could survive nearly six hundred years without modification in meaning, I prefer to see the term “young man” as descriptive rather than legalistic.

⁶⁰ The Book of Mormon never makes any clear distinctions among Lamanites, even when the logic of the description strongly suggests that they were not the unified group that the Nephite text seems to describe. In the case of the king of the Lamanites, it is not clear how large this particular king’s lands might have been. However, it is unlikely that they approached the size of some of the later Classic city-states. The evidence of those city-states tell us that this

not known), that son adopted as his throne name—and, not incidentally, as the new name for those of his people who accepted the new identity, Anti-Nephi-Lehi (Alma 24:3).⁶¹ The practice of taking a new name upon assuming the throne can be documented for the Classic Maya based on the evidence of the glyphic texts.⁶²

The new name, Anti-Nephi-Lehi, betokened that they had become a new people with a new identity. These Anti-Nephi-Lehies were still living in their original cities, believers and nonbelievers mingled together as citizens of the same city. Not all Lamanites were converted, but the adoption of the new religion by the ruler would have made for internal dissent, just as it had earlier in Zarahemla. They had a premonition that this religious and political division would lead to rebellion (Alma 24:16). They were right.

Central to their story is their oath and the reason for taking it. The newly renamed brother of Lamoni who had adopted the name of Anti-Nephi-Lehi announced:

And now behold, my brethren, since it has been all that we could do (as we were the most lost of all mankind) to repent of all our sins and the many murders which we have committed, and to get God to take them away from our hearts, for it was all we could do to repent sufficiently before God that he would take away our stain—

Now, my best beloved brethren, since God hath taken away our stains, and our swords have become bright, then let us stain our swords no more with the blood of our brethren.

Behold, I say unto you, Nay, let us retain our swords that they be not stained with the blood of our brethren; for perhaps, if we should stain our swords again they can no more be washed bright through the blood of the Son of our great God, which shall be shed for the atonement of our sins. (Alma 24:11–13)

To protect themselves against breaking this covenant, they buried their weapons (Alma 24:15–16).

Anti-Nephi-Lehies and the Cult of War

The first mystery to examine is why they would covenant based upon “the many murders which we have committed” (Alma 24:11) and why burying weapons of war was an appropriate response. Murder is, by definition, an unsanctioned and intended death inflicted on another person. An accidental death is not murder, nor are legal execution, or typically casualties inflicted on both sides in battle. All societies have ways of accepting and accommodating these deaths—certainly violent and even gruesomely hostile, but not murder.⁶³

particular king would have had several dependent cities, but that there would be other kings with similar power and dependencies not all that far away, and others beyond that. There should be no assumption that the conversion of this particular king meant that everyone in the greater region was also converted.

⁶¹ Lamoni is also a son, but apparently not directly in line for his father’s throne.

⁶² Martin and Grube, *Chronicle of the Maya Kings and Queens*, 91.

⁶³ Boyce, “Were the Ammonites Pacifists?” 39, is ambiguous on this point. Boyce recognizes that “the Ammonites were not repenting of acts of killing that had occurred in conventional

If we assume, as seems logical, that these former Lamanites had adopted the Preclassic Maya-like religion, then they also espoused the values of the Mesoamerican cult of war. Unlike European warfare, which was typically a struggle for territory, Mesoamerican warfare had different objectives. David Drew notes: “The aim of [Maya] warfare, in part, was to capture prominent individuals from an enemy state, put them to torture and finally to sacrifice them, normally by beheading.”⁶⁴

For the Maya, blood was the conduit for *ch’ulel*, or the “inner soul or spirit.”⁶⁵ Sacrificial bloodletting became both nourishment/worship for the gods and the substitute sacrifice that renews creation.⁶⁶ According to anthropologist Dennis Tedlock, this principle of creation through sacrifice appears to have great antiquity in the Mesoamerican region: “*Puz*, all the way from its Mixe-Zoque (and possibly Olmec) sources down to modern Quiché, refers literally to the cutting of flesh with a knife, and it is the primary term for sacrifice. If it is read as a synecdoche in the present passage [of the *Popol Vuh*], it means that the creation was accomplished (in part) through sacrifice.”⁶⁷ The sacrificial blood could and did come from the king and his queen but was augmented by the blood of captives taken in war. Classic Maya inscriptions glorify the personal conquests of the kings and the humiliation and sacrifice of their captives. The Bonampak mural commonly known as “the arraignment” is a graphic depiction of the ritual torture by which bloodletting was inflicted upon captives.⁶⁸

I argue that the Anti-Nephi-Lehies had grown up with a religion that glorified warfare, saw bloodshed as a religious act, and exalted torture and human sacrifice. Men, women, and children all espoused this worldview, whether or not they participated in the actual warfare or death of captives.⁶⁹ In this context, Lamoni’s brother, Anti-Nephi-Lehi, declare that they must make a supreme effort “to get God to take. . . away” their sins, especially “the many murders which we have committed . . . for it was all we could do to repent sufficiently before God that he would take away our stain” (Alma 24:11).

Imagine how far these people had traveled in their spiritual journey. They espoused a worldview in which the very existence of the world depended on shedding the blood of sacrificial victims. They must now forsake that concept and believe that the only

war as we normally think of it.” Nevertheless, it was during wars that they committed “acts that had been motivated by hatred and by a desire for Nephite blood, and that they explicitly describe as ‘murder.’” It is an interesting semantic division to separate some deaths in war from others. I do not find the argument convincing. It does not explain why the women would also be required to take the oath, or the older children, none of whom participated in the wars and who therefore had no opportunity to face the delicate division between killing and murdering.

⁶⁴ Drew, *The Lost Chronicles of the Maya Kings*, 171.

⁶⁵ Freidel, Schele, and Parker, *Maya Cosmos*, 201–2.

⁶⁶ Roberta H. Markman and Peter T. Markman, *The Flayed God: The Mesoamerican Mythological Tradition, Sacred Texts and Images from Pre-Columbian Mexico and Central America*, 179.

⁶⁷ Dennis Tedlock, “Creation in the Popol Vuh: A Hermeneutical Approach,” 79.

⁶⁸ Schele and Miller, *The Blood of Kings*, 217.

⁶⁹ Ruben G. Mendozanotes: “The women of Yaxchilan and Bonampak were clearly implicated in blood sacrifice as were the men; and this pattern holds archaeologically, ethnohistorically, and ethnographically throughout the Americas.” Email to the Aztlan mailing list, April 17, 2005, file copy in my possession.

sacrifice needed would be that of the future Atoning Messiah. Their old worldview had glorified warfare and human sacrifice. Their new worldview now condemned both practices. No wonder they considered themselves “the most lost of all mankind.”

The Anti-Nephi-Lehies resolve never to touch arms again, not because self-defense is wrong or inherently evil, but because of the difficulty and depth of their change of heart (Alma 24:11). They are choosing to stay as far as possible from the feelings aroused by and supporting the cult of war and sacrifice. Rather than risk a return to their former religious passion for sacrificial blood, they turn away from even the very first step along that path. It is a radical step to protect their newly gained cleanliness from the “stain” of that former life.

Burying Their “Weapons for the Shedding of Man’s Blood”

Lamoni’s brother urges the Anti-Nephi-Lehies:

And now behold, since it has been as much as we could do to get our stains taken away from us, and our swords are made bright, let us hide them away that they may be kept bright, as a testimony to our God at the last day, or at the day that we shall be brought to stand before him to be judged, that we have not stained our swords in the blood of our brethren since he imparted his word unto us and has made us clean thereby.

And now, my brethren, if our brethren seek to destroy us, behold, we will hide away our swords, yea, even we will bury them deep in the earth, that they may be kept bright, as a testimony that we have never used them, at the last day; and if our brethren destroy us, behold, we shall go to our God and shall be saved.

And now it came to pass that when the king had made an end of these sayings, and all the people were assembled together, they took their swords, and all the weapons which were used for the shedding of man’s blood, and they did bury them up deep in the earth. (Alma 24:15–17)

Daniel Ludlow has suggested that this ceremony “could have served as the source of the ‘bury-the-hatchet’ tradition of showing peace, which was a common practice among some of the tribes of American Indians when Columbus and other white men came to their lands.”⁷⁰ In both time and space, the bury-the-hatchet symbol is a long way from the Anti-Nephi-Lehies.

Furthermore, “burying the hatchet” symbolized peace between two peoples. The Anti-Nephi-Lehies made their covenant and gesture with Yahweh.⁷¹ There is only

⁷⁰ Daniel H. Ludlow, *A Companion to Your Study of the Book of Mormon*, 210.

⁷¹ This may have become a model for converted Lamanites. Referencing a later group of converted Lamanites:

And behold, ye do know of yourselves, for ye have witnessed it, that as many of them as are brought to the knowledge of the truth, and to know of the wicked and abominable traditions of their fathers, and are led to believe the holy scriptures, yea, the prophecies of the holy prophets, which are written, which leadeth them to faith on the Lord, and unto repentance, which faith and repentance bringeth a change of heart unto them—

Therefore, as many as have come to this, ye know of yourselves are firm and steadfast in the faith, and in the thing wherewith they have been made free.

the slightest connection between the two events—certainly not enough to suggest a causal link.

It is much more likely that this action was related to a well-documented Mesoamerican devotional burying. There was a widespread Mesoamerican practice of caching, or burying, objects associated with specific ritual events originally possibly as early as 1500 B.C. and well established during the Preclassic and Late Preclassic periods which coincides with Book of Mormon times.⁷² These rituals were typically associated with either dedications (beginnings) or terminations. Of the termination burials, Shirley Boteler Mock notes:

Termination actions, although difficult to separate in all instances and often embedded in dedication events, generally include the defacement, mutilation, breaking, burning, or alteration of portable objects (such as pottery, jade, or stone tools), sculptures, stelae, or buildings. They may involve the alteration, destruction, or obliteration of specific parts; the moving of objects such as stelae or the scattering of their broken pieces; and even the razing and burial of a monumental structure before new construction. . . .

Based on the data . . . these actions, as metaphors of sacrifice, often occurred at period endings, such as the termination of a calendric period or ritual cycle.⁷³

Marshall J. Becker suggests that the Maya may have had a single category of “earth offerings” that included both the caches and human burials.⁷⁴ Although there is no indication that the Anti-Nephi-Lehies broke their weapons when burying them, those weapons were considered “dead” to them. Breaking them would not have been surprising, since the reason for burying them was to make them unusable, which breaking would ensure. Even though this action was not, as described, associated with a building, it was definitely associated with the termination of an old way of life and dedication to a new one. It is therefore plausible to see the Anti-Nephi-Lehies at the same kind of liminal point at which their Mesoamerican neighbors made dedicatory caches.

The Impromptu Attack on Ammonihah

The story describes the incredible bravery and faith of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies as they simply accept slaughter rather than break their covenant against raising arms. (See the covenant in Alma 24:18, and the description of the slaughter in vv. 22–23). One of the results was that the attackers broke off the attack, and some of them also converted to the gospel (Alma 24:24–26). It is the next act that is the most remarkable. In the aftermath of slaughtering defenseless people, the Lamanites decide

And ye know also that they have buried their weapons of war, and they fear to take them up lest by any means they should sin; yea, ye can see that they fear to sin—for behold they will suffer themselves that they be trodden down and slain by their enemies, and will not lift their swords against them, and this because of their faith in Christ. (Hel. 15:7–9)

⁷² David M. Pendergast, “Intercessions with the Gods: Caches and Their Significance at Altun Ha and Lamanai, Belize,” 55–57.

⁷³ Shirley Boteler Mock, “Prelude,” 5.

⁷⁴ Marshall J. Becker, “Burials as Caches, Caches as Burials: A New Interpretation of the Meaning of Ritual Deposits among the Classic Period Lowland Maya,” 186.

to leave their city and attack Nephites in the city of Ammonihah (Alma 25:1–2), about a three day’s march distant. Why march for three days to attack Ammonihah as the acceptable postlude to interrupting the slaughter of unresisting men, women, and children—many of whom must have been considered kin—at this particular time?

We are told that: “And behold, now it came to pass that those Lamanites were more angry because they had slain their brethren; therefore they swore vengeance upon the Nephites; and they did no more attempt to slay the people of Anti-Nephi-Lehi at that time” (Alma 25:1). This reason seems improbable. The political reason for the attack was to overthrow the king. Since the Anti-Nephi-Lehies did not resist the army, the Lamanites took control of the government without any losses on their part.

But the key to understanding this strange situation is, in fact, the control of the government. That control provides the background information needed to explain why the Lamanites would risk their army after easily gaining their objective. To govern, the Lamanites had to seat a king, an act that had to meet a particular set of requirements.

The combination of iconographic depiction and translations of the glyphic texts provide a fairly complete picture of how the Maya would have conducted the basic ceremony.⁷⁵

Simon Martin and Nikolai Grube give a more complete description of the pictographic exposition of the scaffolding that the king ascends to be seated upon his throne:

The monuments that Yo’nal Ahk erected here proved especially influential and were emulated at the city for the next 150 years. His Stela 25 established an inaugural motif (the so-called “niche” scene) showing the newly installed king seated high on a decorated scaffold or litter, elevated symbolically to the heavenly realm. A jaguar cushion atop a reed effigy caiman [crocodile] forms his throne, roofed by a canopy representing the sky and crowned by the great celestial bird, the avian aspect of the god Itzamnaaj. The seat itself was reached by a ladder, draped with a cloth marked by the king’s bloody footprints, the contribution of a sacrificial victim slain at its base.⁷⁶

The earliest Classic period description of the ascension ritual is on the Leiden Plaque (a small Epi-Olmec engraved stone, named for its current location in Leiden, Netherlands), a smaller artistic depiction that was portable as opposed to the monumental art carved on stelae. Schele and Miller elaborate:

The image on the Leiden Plaque refers to a second event that is vital to the process of accession. A captive, who is to be sacrificed as a blood offering sanctifying the transformation of the new king, lies bound and prostrate at his feet. The captive, marked as a noble by an ahau glyph on his head, was taken in battle specifically to serve in this ritual. Unhappy with his fate, he lifts his bound wrists and kicks his feet, twisting his body to look back across his shoulder, perhaps hoping for a reprieve. Other representations of accession ceremonies confirm that ritual sacrifice was a regular and necessary part of the process sanctifying the new ruler. At Piedras Negras, victims are shown stretched across an

⁷⁵ Schele and Miller, *The Blood of Kings*, 117.

⁷⁶ Martin and Grube, *Chronicle of the Maya Kings and Queens*, 142.

altar, their hearts excised. The heir designation rites recorded in the Bonampak murals were followed by sacrificial rituals that lasted for over a year. The battle to take the victims, their torture, and eventually their sacrifice are all depicted graphically.⁷⁷

The attacking Lamanites have dethroned Lamoni's brother (king Anti-Nephi-Lehi) and must install a new king. For this particular ritual they need sacrificial victims who have been taken in battle. The pacifism of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies has denied them the right kind of captives; hence, the Lamanites have to find someone who will actually fight back and therefore set their sights on Ammonihah. But why Ammonihah?

Martin and Grube help us understand why the sneak attack on an unsuspecting Ammonihah would have been attractive to the Mesoamerican mind: "Like many a Maya ruler, Bird Jaguar's mystique was closely bound to his image as an indomitable warrior. His favorite military titles, 'He of 20 Captives' and 'Master of Aj Uk,' were seldom absent from his name phrase and much space was devoted to his various campaigns. Yet a modern understanding of these texts shows just how lowly most of these victims were. He made immense capital out of minor successes and Yaxchilan's reputation as a 'conquest state' only reflects how beguiling his efforts have proved."⁷⁸

The Lamanites were in dire need of war captives to make their coronation ceremony valid. To get them with as little risk as possible, they did what Bird Jaguar would later do—they looked for easy victims. Ammonihah seemed like a quick and easy conquest—far enough away to be unsuspecting. As M. Kathryn Brown and James F. Garber note: "Evidence suggests that raiding for the purpose of capturing sacrificial victims was quite common and had strong ritual components."⁷⁹

The story of this invasion (Alma 16:3–6) reports that the Lamanites took their captives and retreated to Lamanite territory when the Nephite army counterattacked. This is the only instance where a Lamanite invasion emphasizes that it transported its captives with the army back to its home base. It made no attempt to enforce a client or tribute relationship with Ammonihah. Indeed, such an effort would have been virtually impossible, given Ammonihah's location deep in Nephite territory. This war has only one real purpose: taking captives.

Stripped of cultural context, the story of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies still inspires, but it doesn't make historical sense. With that context restored from a Mesoamerican perspective, all of the aspects of the record become not only understandable, but many of them were inevitable. This is one of the stories where the context significantly improves the reading.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 130.

⁷⁹ M. Kathryn Brown and James F. Garber, "Evidence of Conflict during the Middle Formative in the Maya Lowlands: A View from Blackman Eddy, Belize," 106.