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## Josiah to Zoram to Sherem to Jarom and the Big Little Book of Omni

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# JOSIAH TO ZORAM TO SHEREM TO JAROM AND THE BIG LITTLE BOOK OF OMNI

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Val Larsen

**Abstract:** *The first 450 years of Nephite history are dominated by two main threads: the ethno-political tension between Nephites and Lamanites and religious tension between adherents of rival theologies. These rival Nephite theologies are a Mantic theology that affirms the existence of Christ and a Sophic theology that denies Christ. The origin of both narrative threads lies in the Old World: the first in conflicts between Nephi and Laman, the second in Lehi's rejection of King Josiah's theological and political reforms. This article focuses on these interrelated conflicts. It suggests that Zoram, Laman, Lemuel, Sherem, and the Zeniffites were Deuteronomist followers of Josiah. The small plates give an account of how their Deuteronomist theology gradually supplanted the gospel of Christ. As the small plates close, their last author, Amaleki, artfully confronts his readers with a life-defining choice: having read the Book of Mormon thus far, will you remain, metaphorically, with the prophets in Zarahemla and embrace the Restored Gospel of Jesus Christ, or will you return to the land of Nephi and the theology you believed and the life you lived before you read the Book of Mormon?*

The first 450 years of Nephite history in the Book of Mormon narrative are dominated by two main threads: the ethno-political tension between Nephites and Lamanites and religious tension between adherents of rival Nephite theologies. One of these theologies affirms the existence of Christ. The other denies Christ. The origin of both narrative threads lies in the Old World: the first in conflicts between Nephi and Laman, the second in Lehi's rejection of King Josiah's theological and political reforms. Having been born around the same time as Lehi, Josiah lived from 649 to 609 BC and reigned for 31 of his 40 years. He was king when Laman, Lemuel, Sam, and Nephi were born and probably when Laman and Lemuel came of age. His policies and actions were surely salient in

the life of Lehi and all his family while they lived in Jerusalem. However, the Book of Mormon suggests that his policies and actions were largely not supported by Lehi, Nephi, and Jacob.<sup>1</sup> Others who accompanied Lehi on his migration, including Laman and Lemuel, apparently did accept the reforms, thus bringing this Old World theological rivalry with them to the Promised Land. This rivalry reverberates throughout the history recorded in the small plates of Nephi and into the Book of Mosiah as a contest between competing Sophic and Mantic theological traditions.<sup>2</sup>

### Josiah's Reforms

Josiah's theological and political reforms began at age 18, when Shaphan the scribe gave him the Book of the Law (Torah) discovered by Hilkiah the high priest during a renovation of Solomon's temple. This book, which many scholars believe to be part of the current book of Deuteronomy,<sup>3</sup> condemned the people's conception of God and the behavioral codes they followed. It predicted that Josiah's kingdom would be destroyed because the people had forgotten Yahweh and the law handed down by Moses.<sup>4</sup> Having torn his clothing to signify distress, Josiah undertook

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1. While Lehi rejected many of Josiah's reforms, as shown below, he presumably celebrated the termination of child sacrifice in the Hinnom Valley and may have viewed some other reforms positively. Rappleye suggests as an analogy the Latter-day Saint view of the Protestant reformation. He also provides much evidence that Laman and Lemuel more broadly supported Josiah's reforms. Neal Rappleye, "The Deuteronomist Reforms and Lehi's Family Dynamics: A Social Context for the Rebellions of Laman and Lemuel," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 16 (2015): 90, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/the-deuteronomist-reforms-and-lehis-family-dynamics-a-social-context-for-the-rebellions-of-laman-and-lemuel/>.

2. Nibley defines these terms as follows: "The Greek word Mantic simply means prophetic or inspired, oracular, coming from the other world and not from the resources of the human mind ... . The Mantic is ... 'vertical' Judaism, i.e. the belief in the real and present operation of divine gifts by which one receives constant guidance from the other world ... . The Sophic, on the other hand, is ... 'horizontal' Judaism — scholarly, bookish, halachic, intellectual, rabbinical." Hugh W. Nibley, "Three Shrines: Mantic, Sophic, and Sophistic," in *The Ancient State: The Rulers and the Ruled*, eds. Stephen D. Ricks and Donald W. Parry (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1991). See also H. Curtis Wright "A Sophic and a Mantic People," *Brigham Young University Studies* 31, no. 3 (1991): 51–65.

3. For a brief survey of the scholarship that leads to this conclusion (and alternative, conservative views) see David Malick, "The Book of Josiah's Reforms," Bible.org, <https://bible.org/article/book-josiahs-reform>.

4. This follows the sequence of events reported in 2 Kings: discovery of the book first, reforms second. 2 Chronicles reverses the sequence, mentioning the

aggressive theological and political reforms that cast down the old social order and erected a new one.<sup>5</sup>

The belief system that Josiah upended in his reform must be reconstructed from its residue in the Bible and other ancient texts and from archeological remains. Since all interpretations are composed from scattered fragments, there are many points on which scholars differ in their reconstructions. These numerous differences notwithstanding, many critical scholars believe that prior to Josiah's reforms, some or most of his people thought of the gods as a divine family, as a council of gods analogous to human royal families and royal courts. They seem to have understood God to be the corporeal Lord Isaiah and Micaiah saw sitting on his temple throne surrounded by angels (Isaiah 6:1–4, 8:18; 2 Chronicles 18:18). They viewed him as the Elohim described in Psalm 82:1 who stands in the midst of a council of Gods. Members of that divine council may have included Elohim's wife, Asherah, his seventy sons who ruled the nations of the earth, the son Yahweh being

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reforms before the discovery of the book. Consistent with Chronicles, some scholars suggest Josiah's reforms inspired the composition of Deuteronomy rather than Deuteronomy inspiring the reforms. "Critical scholars generally tend to interpret the core of the book [of Deuteronomy] as a sort of manifesto, written in support of Josiah's efforts to centralize the religion of Israel in Jerusalem. According to Weinfeld (Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School* [Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1972]), Deuteronomy is ... a profound monument to the theological revolution advocated by the Josianic circles. This revolution involved attempts to eliminate other shrines and centralize all worship of YHWH in Jerusalem, as well as to 'secularize,' 'demythologize,' and 'spiritualize' the religion. It sought to replace traditional images of divine corporeality and divine enthronement in the Temple with more abstract, spiritual notions reflected in its 'name theology.'" Daniel I. Block, *The Gospel According to Moses: Theological and Ethical Reflections on the Book of Deuteronomy* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012), 5.

5. See the following articles for alternative views on Josiah and his reforms. The interpretation in this article is more consistent with the reading of Christensen than with that of Hamblin. Benjamin L. McGuire, "Josiah's Reform: An Introduction," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 4 (2013): 161–63, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/josiahs-reform-an-introduction/>; William J. Hamblin "Vindicating Josiah," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 4 (2013): 165–76, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/vindicating-josiah/>; Kevin Christensen "Prophets and Kings in Lehi's Jerusalem and Margaret Barker's Temple Theology," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 4 (2013): 177–93, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/prophets-and-kings-in-lehis-jerusalem-and-margaret-barkers-temple-theology/>.

the God of Israel (Deuteronomy 32 7–9),<sup>6</sup> and the host of heaven, his angelic army, who likewise surrounded him and made him the Lord of Hosts (Joshua 5:13–15). In addition to their temple home on earth, these divine beings had a heavenly home and were associated with the sun, moon, and stars (2 Kings 23:5).<sup>7</sup>

While we must speculate on how all the elements of this system of belief held together, the Bible text is quite clear about particular beliefs and practices that Josiah rejected and violently suppressed in his reform. The underlying theme of his reforms was a political and theological centralization that, at the limit, verged on monism.<sup>8</sup> The most obvious manifestation of Josiah and the Deuteronomists' monism was their stringent monotheism, a conception of God expressed in the Shema and subsequent elaborations: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord"; "I, even I, am he and there is no god with me" (Deuteronomy 6:4, 32:39).<sup>9</sup> Within this strictly monotheistic conception of God, the identities and

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6. Unlike in the Masoretic text from which the KJV was translated, the older Dead Sea Scrolls fragments of Deuteronomy and Septuagint variants both end verse 8 with "according to the number of the sons of God," suggesting that each nation had one of the 70 divine sons of El Elyon (the Most High) as its god, with Yahweh (the Lord) being the God of Israel. This accords with Canaanite texts which mention that El had 70 sons. See Michael S. Heiser, "Deuteronomy 32:8 and the Sons of God," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158 (January–March 2001): 52–74.

7. John Day, *Yahweh and the Gods and Goddesses of Canaan* (London: Continuum International, 2010); William G. Dever, *Did God Have a Wife?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005); Raphael Patai, *The Hebrew Goddess*, 3rd ed. (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1990); Judith Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah in Ancient Israel and Judah: Evidence for a Hebrew Goddess* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Margaret Barker, *The Mother of the Lord* (London: T&T Clark, 2012), loc. 1209–1210 of 13900, Kindle; Kevin Christensen "Paradigms Regained: A Survey of Margaret Barker's Scholarship and Its Significance for Mormon Studies," *FARMS Occasional Papers* 2 (2001).

8. On the topic of centralization, see Block, *The Gospel According to Moses*. For a more detailed discussion of Josiah's monism, see Val Larsen, "First Visions and Last Sermons: Affirming Divine Sociality, Rejecting the Greater Apostasy," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 36 (2020): 52–58, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/first-visions-and-last-sermons-affirming-divine-sociality-rejecting-the-greater-apostasy/>.

9. Christ both affirmed the Shema (Mark 12:29) and yet claimed to be the Son of God, a God with God. He apparently saw no contradiction in asserting both truths. But read literally as it seems to be in Deuteronomy, the statement appears most consonant with the stringent monotheism of Judaism or Islam.

acts of El and Yahweh were conflated in the one God Yahweh Elohim. The existence of any other divine beings relevant to Israel was denied.<sup>10</sup>

Josiah violently enforced this new orthodoxy. His people had objects that probably signified Asherah: statues with the trunk of a tree at the bottom and the figure of a woman at the top, and almond trees trained to grow in the shape of a menorah.<sup>11</sup> One Asherah object had been in the temple for most of its history, at least 236 years,<sup>12</sup> and another had stood in a high place of worship on the Mount of Olives, apparently since the time of Solomon.<sup>13</sup> Josiah dragged the Asherah in the temple down into the Kidron valley and burned it there (2 Kings 23:6). He cut down the Asherah on the Mount of Olives (2 Kings 23:13–14). Also destroyed in the Kidron valley were various tokens of the heavenly host that had been in the temple (2 Kings 23:11). This destructive violence was not confined to Jerusalem. Josiah went to Beth-el, where Jacob had set up a pillar and made a covenant with Elohim (Genesis 31:13) and to all the high places where his people worshipped. He destroyed the altars and Asherahs and killed all the priests who officiated in those sacred places (2 Kings 23:15–20). In an act consistent with the Deuteronomist condemnation of his father Amon, his grandfather Manasseh, and most of his other ancestors since Solomon, he desecrated graves and burned the bones of the people buried near the high places (2 Kings 23:16).

Josiah and the Deuteronomists also threw into question the visible corporeality of God. Still reflecting the old beliefs, Exodus had portrayed the leaders of Israel as seeing, like Isaiah and Micaiah, an embodied

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10. Some scholars suggest that Israel was Monarchist, not Monotheist in Josiah's time, i.e., that it believed Israel had only one God but did not deny the existence of other gods who governed other nations. Even if this point is technically correct, it is irrelevant when considering the differences between Josiah and Lehiite theology, since both focused on the God of Israel. Whatever his beliefs may have been about the gods of other kingdoms, Josiah aggressively destroyed the tokens and representatives of all other gods within his kingdom. Performatively, he was a stringent monotheist for whom there was no God of Israel but YHWH, who stood alone. For Lehi, there was both a Father and a Son and, arguably, a Mother God, along with the Host of Heaven he saw surrounding God.

11. Joan E. Taylor, "The Asherah, the Menorah, and the Sacred Tree," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 66 (1995): 39–50.

12. "Of the 370 years during which the Solomonic Temple stood in Jerusalem, for no fewer than 236 years (or almost two-thirds of the time) the statue of Asherah was present in the Temple, and her worship was a part of the legitimate religion approved and led by the king, the court, and the priesthood." Patai, *The Hebrew Goddess*, 50.

13. "The grove" in the King James Bible translates the word *Asherah*.

God: “Then went up Moses ... and seventy of the elders of Israel: And they saw the God of Israel: and there was under his feet as it were a paved work of a sapphire stone” (Exodus 24:9–10). The Deuteronomists changed that theology, declaring “ye heard the voice of the words, but saw no similitude; ... for ye saw no manner of similitude on the day that the Lord spake unto you in Horeb: Lest ye [make] the similitude of any ... male or female” (Deuteronomy 4:12, 15–16). Consistent with this Deuteronomist denial that God could be seen was Josiah’s militant aniconism, his aggressive destruction of all images of purported gods.<sup>14</sup> Likewise consistent was Deuteronomy’s new “name theology,” the repeated suggestion that it was the imperceptible, intangible name of God, not God himself as previously suggested, which dwelled in the Holy of Holies (e.g., Deuteronomy 14:23, 16:2, 26:2). While it was probably not fully formed in Josiah’s time (though some Jewish scholars think otherwise),<sup>15</sup> this conception of Yahweh as a transcendent, solitary God was the foundation of the monist metaphysics that ultimately prevailed among Jews and Christians, a metaphysics that frames God as the sole self-existent BEING, the ground of all being, who created all other things *ex nihilo*. The name *Yahweh*, the third person singular “HE IS,” is derived from *eyeh asher eyeh*, I AM THAT I AM (Exodus 3:14) and may have been read to imply that God was the fundamental ground of all being. Whether Josiah and the Deuteronomists clearly or only dimly perceived this theological possibility, their reform put the Judeo-Christian tradition on a path that ultimately led theologians to that conclusion.<sup>16</sup>

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14. Ancient people, like modern people, were able to distinguish between statues of a god and the god him or herself. We worship Christ, not the Christus statue. They worshipped their gods, not the iconic representations of those gods, though they sometimes regarded the image as “a representation of the god in a canonical shape.” See Karel Van Der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 148. Josiah’s destruction of all icons was probably an attack both on all other gods except Yahweh and on the idea that Yahweh was a corporeal being who could be represented iconically.

15. Yehezkal Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel, From Its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile*, trans. and ed. Moshe Breenberg (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 60; Trude Weiss Rosmarin, *Religion of Reason* (New York: Bloch, 1936).

16. For an internet-accessible and readable survey of the Jewish understanding of Exodus 3:14, see K.J. Cronin “The Name of God as Revealed in Exodus 3:14,” Exodus 3:14 (website), [https://exodus-314.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/the\\_name.pdf](https://exodus-314.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/the_name.pdf). This article, which includes citations readers may check to verify the accuracy of the summaries, notes that the following historically prominent Jewish scholars have read *eyeh asher eyeh* and the free standing *eyeh* at the end of the verse

Josiah and the Deuteronomists' reforms also included a new emphasis on strict adherence to the Law of Moses as specified in Deuteronomy and other texts. The Passover and other rituals prescribed by Moses were restored after having been neglected since the time of the judges (Deuteronomy 23:21–23). The written law was declared to be complete and unchangeable: “Ye shall not add unto the word ... neither shall ye diminish ought from it” (Deuteronomy 4:2). This emphasis on the text empowered the king and the scribes he appointed to control religious beliefs and practices.<sup>17</sup> Deuteronomy declared illicit prophecy and other forms of divination, which might disrupt the political and religious order. Prophecy could be accepted only after it was no longer prophecy, i.e., only after unfolding events had proved it to be true (Deuteronomy 13:1–3; 18:21–22). Anyone revealing new knowledge or teaching anything inconsistent with Deuteronomy must be killed (Deuteronomy 13:6–10), possibly by having the people “hang him on a tree” (Deuteronomy 21:22).

It is hard to overstate the importance of Josiah anchoring his reform and his authority in a text. As Moshe Weinfeld has noted: “It was the sanctification and publication of the ‘book of the Torah’ in the time of Josiah which gave rise to scribes with the ability and competence to handle the scripture.” The origin of Sopheric, scribal, Rabbinic Judaism

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as providing a first person etymology for third person YHWH: Shlomo Yitzchaki (Rashi), Judah Halevi, Samuel ben Meir (Rashbam), Ibn Ezra, Moses Maimonides, Nahmanides (Ramban), Menachem Recanati, Moses Meldelssohn, Hermann Cohen, Martin Buber, Nahum Sarna, and Jeffrey Tigay. Summarizing the views of these scholars, Cronin writes: “We have ... encountered a widespread opinion amongst Jewish thinkers, grammarians and kabbalists that *eyeh* is the first person equivalent of the third person name YHWH and that *eyeh* has the same meaning as YHWH” (ibid., 32). The article likewise notes that many of these thinkers, focusing on the root *hayah*, read *eyeh asher eyeh* as affirming that God is BEING, the ground of all that exists. That reading is one of the two dominant Jewish interpretations of the verse's import. See *Encyclopedia.com*, s.v. “God, Names of,” by Marvin Fox, last updated February 19, 2021, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/religion/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/god-names>. See also Margaret Barker, *The Older Testament* (London: SPCK, 1987), 165–67.

17. Ben Parks notes the relationship between a closed canon, stability, and the maintenance of status quo power. “On the one hand, a closed canon served many cultural purposes: in periods where cultural, social, and religious change was constant, a consistent notion of authorized boundaries brought stability and validated authority. Whenever orthodoxy was challenged, the closed limits of a scriptural canon provided the most strident defense.” Benjamin E. Parks, “The Book of Mormon and Early America’s Political and Intellectual Tradition,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 23, no. 1 (2014): 168.

“had its roots in the time of Josiah when the process of canonization of scripture started [and when] in national, social, and military matters the written scribal Torah already prevailed.”<sup>18</sup> Thus, Josiah and the Deuteronomist scribes laid down foundations for the practice of a form of Judaism that would persist until and beyond the time of Christ and that would motivate the charge that Jesus blasphemed when he claimed to bring new knowledge and to be the son of God, i.e., a God with God (Matthew 26:63–65).

Weinfeld notes that “the scribal attitude toward the monarchy is a positive one” and “that the Deuteronomist could not conceive of the implementation of the moral law contained in the ‘book of the Torah’ in the absence of the monarchy. . . . To his mind the Torah was the ideal logical constitution for a monarchic regime.”<sup>19</sup> So though probably enacted sincerely, the reforms of Josiah, Shaphan, and Hilkiah were also politically convenient. They concentrated and centralized political and religious power in the hands of the monarch. Sacrifices and other religious rituals had been practiced throughout the kingdom, notably, in places like Beth-el, Shiloh, and Shechem where Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had worshipped. Deuteronomy mandated that all sacrifices and other key rituals be performed only in the temple at Jerusalem (Deuteronomy 12:13–14). There, through scribes he appointed to interpret scripture and priests he appointed to perform rituals, the king could tightly control religion and, through religion, more fully control the allegiances and behavior of his people.

### Lehi’s Rejoinder

Like Josiah, Lehi, after being given a sacred book, feels called to bring a message of reform to Jerusalem and fathers an enduring theological tradition. The two sacred books both have temple provenance and share the message of impending doom for Jerusalem. But the manner in which each man receives his respective book and his interpretation of the book’s import is completely different.<sup>20</sup> As noted above, Josiah’s sacred book comes to him from the temple in Jerusalem, the house of God (or of God’s name) on the earth, and is given to him by Shaphan, a human scribe, thus underscoring the book’s status as text subject to Sophic, scribal interpretation. Based on their reading of the book, Josiah

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18. Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School*, 162–63.

19. *Ibid.*, 168, 170–71.

20. For a more extended discussion of the contrast between the views of Josiah and Lehi, see Larsen, “First Visions and Last Sermons,” 37–84.

and his disciples view keeping the law of Moses as the proper terminus of a spiritual life (2 Kings 23:21–25).

Lehi's sacred book comes to him from the throne of God in heaven and is given to him by Yahweh ben Elohim, God with God, thus underscoring the book's Mantic status as revelation and its core message that salvation comes only through the Son of God.<sup>21</sup> Based on that revelation, Lehi and his disciples view the Law of Moses not as a terminus but as a temporary token of the coming Christ: "we keep the Law of Moses, and look forward with steadfastness unto Christ ... We speak concerning the law that our children may know the deadness of the law ... and after the law is fulfilled in Christ, that they need not harden their hearts against him when the law ought to be done away (2 Nephi 25:24–27).

The superiority of Lehi's theology is marked by its grounding in a more fundamental reality. The provenance of Lehi's book is the heavenly temple that Josiah's earthly temple merely imitates and symbolizes. Lehi receives with his sacred book the living tradition which, the Book of Mormon suggests, had become in Josiah's temple and theology in many respects a hollow shell.

### **Lehi's First Vision**

The temple provenance of Josiah's sacred book is fully explicit in the Bible. The temple substance of Lehi's experience is almost equally explicit in the Book of Mormon. Lehi's first vision opens when he sees a pillar of fire resting on an unhewn desert stone, an apt symbol of the unhewn stone altar in Solomon's temple on which holocaust offerings are made signifying the atoning Christ of whom Lehi and his book will testify. Lehi's first vision also suggests that Josiah's newly reformed Jerusalem is now a new Egypt, from the darkness of which a pillar of fire will lead Lehi and his family to a new Promised Land.

When Lehi returns home and casts himself upon his bed, his first vision resumes, and he passes from the altar in the outer court of the temple through the literal veil the temple veil signifies and sees "God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels" (1 Nephi 1:8). This is El, the corporeal Lord of Hosts, surrounded by the Host of Heaven. El's throne is the heavenly referent of the mercy

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21. Don Bradley similarly compares and contrasts the reform of Josiah, which is Sophic, and of Mosiah<sub>1</sub>, which is Mantic. Don Bradley, *The Lost 116 Pages: Reconstructing the Book of Mormon's Missing Stories* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2019), 271–72.

seat, its earthly analog that sits behind the veil in the Holy of Holies of Solomon's temple.

Then, in a scene resonant for modern temple attendees, Lehi sees a God with God: "One descending out of the midst of heaven, [whose] luster was above that of the sun at noon-day" (1 Nephi 1:8). Like the gods Josiah sought to suppress, this second, white-robed God is linked with the sun, an object in the heavens.

Apostles, e.g., Peter, James, and John, likewise descend from heaven and come to the man Lehi bearing a heavenly message. Like the One they follow, they are linked with objects in the heavens: "he also saw twelve others following him, and their brightness did exceed that of the stars in the firmament" (1 Nephi 1:10).<sup>22</sup>

The descending Yahweh gives Lehi a sacred book and bids him read. Having read from the book, Lehi exclaims, "Great and marvelous are thy works, O Lord God Almighty!" (1 Nephi 1:14). *Lord God Almighty* is the King James translation of the Hebrew phrase *Yahweh El Shaddai*, so in saying this Lehi may offer praise to Yahweh the Son, El the Father, and Shaddai, the Mother God, Shaddai, like Asherah possibly being a name for Mother in Heaven.<sup>23</sup> Lehi praises Yahweh, El, Shaddai because they will not suffer those who come to them to perish.<sup>24</sup> "And after this manner was the language of my father in the praising of his God [Elohim]; for

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22. Deuteronomy 4:19 condemns these linkages with sun and stars that Nephi uses without compunction, and as noted in the text, Josiah destroyed tokens of the linkage to the sun, moon, and stars.

23. On Mother in Heaven in history and scripture, see Kevin L. Barney, "Do We Have a Mother in Heaven?", *FairMormon*, 2001, <https://www.fairmormon.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/Kevin-Barney-MotherInHeaven.pdf>. See also Val Larsen, "Hidden in Plain View: Mother in Heaven in Scripture," *SquareTwo* 8, no. 2 (2015), <http://squatwo.org/Sq2ArticleLarsenHeavenlyMother.html>.

24. The singular pronouns *thou* and *thee* provide grounds for contesting this reading. But in the Book of Abraham, translated after the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith changed the singular pronouns that referred to God to plurals and suggested that the same would be done in the Bible were it translated correctly. "In the very beginning the Bible shows there is a plurality of Gods beyond the power of refutation . . . . The word Eloheim [sic] ought to be in the plural all the way through . . . . When you take [that] view of the subject, it sets one free to see all the beauty, holiness and perfection of the Gods." Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, ed. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 372. Presumably, the same changes could have been made in the Book of Mormon. Brigham Young said, "I will even venture to say that if the Book of Mormon were now to be re-written, in many instances it would materially differ from the present translation," *Journal of Discourses* (Liverpool : George Q. Cannon, 1862) 9:311.

his soul did rejoice and his whole heart was filled, because of the things which he had seen, yea, which the Lord [Yahweh] had shown unto him” (1 Nephi 1:14–15). Back translating *Lord* and *God* through King James English to their Hebrew equivalents, we get *Elohim* and *Yahweh*. Lehi caps his testimony by saying that his vision “manifested plainly of the coming of a Messiah, and also the redemption of the world” (1 Nephi 1:19).

Whereas Josiah desecrated graves, burned the bones of the dead, and largely repudiated his ancestors, the kings who preceded him and the legacies they handed down, Lehi seems to view his ancestors and their legacy positively. After acquiring the brass plates, he searches them to find his genealogy. Reading the genealogy inspires him and he begins to prophesy (1 Nephi 5:16–17). From the genealogy, he specifically cites his righteous ancestors Jacob and Joseph of Egypt (1 Nephi 5:14). When he praises Yahweh El Shaddai for not permitting followers to perish, Lehi may have in mind the patriarchal blessing Jacob gave Joseph, for that blessing is about to be fulfilled by Lehi and his family.<sup>25</sup> That blessing, like Lehi’s exclamation of gratitude, seems to invoke Son (Abir/Yahweh), Father (El), and Mother (Shaddai): “Joseph is a fruitful bough . . . whose branches run over the wall: . . . his hands were made strong by the hands of the mighty one [אַבִּיר *Abir*, always Yahweh]<sup>26</sup> of Jacob; (from thence is the shepherd, the stone of Israel). Even by El [אֵל translated *God*] . . . who shall help thee; and by *Shaddai* [שַׁדַּי translated *Almighty*], who shall bless thee with . . . blessings of the breasts [שָׁדַיִם, *shaddaim* in Hebrew], and of the womb” (Genesis 49:22, 24–25). Shaddai is a name for God that, as here, typically appears in the Bible in contexts where fertility, especially female fertility, is in play. Word play in this passage links Shaddai, the God(ess) with *shaddaim*, breasts.<sup>27</sup> All uses of the word Almighty in the KJV Old Testament are translations of *Shaddai*.<sup>28</sup> So whether the phrase *Yahweh El Shaddai* is read narrowly as referring only to the corporeal Father and Son or broadly as referring to Father, Son, and Mother, Lehi’s

25. See Michael Austin “A Theory of Types,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 26 (2017): 58–59.

26. The other five occurrences of אַבִּיר, *Abir* (Psalms 132:2, 5; Isaiah 1:24, 49:26, 60:16) all explicitly state that the mighty one (sometimes rendered mighty God) is Yahweh.

27. David Biale, “The God with Breasts: El Shaddai in the Bible,” *History of Religions* 21, no. 3 (1982): 240–56.

28. *Almighty* is a conjectural translation that assumes a linkage with the word שָׁדַד, *shadad*, meaning *destroyer* or *plunderer*. Given associations with procreation and posterity, the God with breasts or Goddess seems to be a more appropriate translation.

theology is not compatible with the stringent, aniconic monotheism of Josiah and the Deuteronomists.<sup>29</sup>

Lehi's temple first vision functions in the Book of Mormon as a kind of prologue for what follows, the establishment of a separate temple tradition. Don Bradley has suggested, citing much evidence, that the creation of a tabernacle and a temple was a major theme in the lost Book of Lehi.<sup>30</sup> While it may have been more apparent in the lost pages, this theme is sufficiently apparent in the Book of Mormon we have.

In First and Second Nephi, both parts of Lehi's temple first vision are expanded upon in the subsequent narrative and temple teaching. Thus, Lehi marks his break with Josiah's Jerusalem by building his own altar in the desert and making multiple holocaust offerings on it (1 Nephi 5:9; 7:21-22). This episode echoes the pillar of fire on the unhewn stone in Lehi's first vision and violates Josiah and the Deuteronomists' proscription on making sacrifices outside of Jerusalem. The second part of Lehi's temple first vision, his look into heaven and subsequent encounter with the One dressed in a lustrous white robe, is further developed when Yahweh continues his earthly mission to Lehi by serving as Lehi's (then Nephi's) guide in their respective tree of life temple visions. These visions, usually referred to as Lehi's dream, bring both Lehi and Nephi back to heaven and back into the presence of the divine beings who dwell there.

### **Lehi's Dream**

Like Lehi's first vision, which begins in the desert outside Jerusalem, Lehi's dream begins in "a dark and dreary wilderness" when "a man ... dressed in a white robe" approaches, stands before Lehi, and says: come, *follow me* (1 Nephi 8:5-6). Yahweh, the One who descended from heaven in a sun-white robe, now stands before Lehi, and will guide him back to the heaven he saw while lying upon his bed in Jerusalem. Having followed his guide through the "dark and dreary waste" for many hours, Lehi, in prayer, speaks to Yahweh, "the Lord," asking "that he would have mercy on me." To ask is to receive: "And it came to pass that I beheld a tree, whose fruit was desirable to make one happy. And ... I did go forth and partake of the fruit thereof." Like other elements already mentioned, the tree of life marks this dream as a temple vision.

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29. The aniconism of Josiah was anticipated by his ideological predecessor, Hezekiah, who destroyed the brass serpent, the Nehushtan (2 Kings 18:4). What Hezekiah had cast down, Nephi repeatedly elevates as an especially important iconic symbol of Christ (1 Nephi 17:41; 2 Nephi 2 Nephi 25:20).

30. Bradley, *The Lost 116 Pages*, 145-47, 286.

Now let us pause and consider the context in which Lehi sees the sacred tree in this temple vision, for the context marks the vision as a pointed rejection of Josiah's reforms. The pointedness of the rejection becomes apparent if we recognize that the dream is set in Jerusalem. Mount Moriah, the temple mount, was the highest point in Jerusalem. East of the temple was the Mount of Olives. Between the two high places was the narrow Kidron valley into which pure water flowed from the Gihon spring and filthy water from dangerous flash floods. Each of these topographical features appears in the dream.

The two greatest and most spacious buildings in Jerusalem were the temple and the king's palace. Both could be referred to with the Hebrew word *hekal*, which could signify the largest room in the temple, the temple as a whole, the king's palace, or any large building. If Lehi used the word *hekal*, as seems likely, when talking about the great and spacious building, alternative translations were the great and spacious temple or great and spacious palace.<sup>31</sup> Both temple and palace, like the building in Lehi's dream, were on the verge of a great fall and like that building were full of people whose "manner of dress was exceedingly fine" (1 Nephi 8:27). Kings and nobles always wear fine clothing, and the Torah mandated fine clothing for the priests in the temple (Exodus 28:5–8, 39; 39:27–29). Among those who mocked Lehi were the temple priests (2 Chronicles 36:14–16).

Overlaying Lehi's dream onto the landscape of Jerusalem, the sacred tree in the dream is located on the Mount of Olives, the very place of worship where Josiah had cut down the Asherah grove and ended worship at sacred trees. Lehi is led to a sacred tree on the mount by his guide, the corporeal God Yahweh, and there partakes of its fruit. That Yahweh is the guide is apparent not only from his earlier descent from heaven in a white robe, but also from the connection between the only two white things in the dream, the guide's robe and the fruit of the tree, which signifies the body of Christ that Christians symbolically eat. Being the future location of the Garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22:39), the place where Christ will ascend into heaven following his resurrection (Acts 1:9–12) and where he will return to earth at the second coming (Zech. 14:1–4, 9),<sup>32</sup> the Mount of Olives is the perfect place for Lehi,

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31. D. John Butler, *Plain and Precious Things* (Scotts Valley, CA: CreateSpace, 2012), 57.

32. In Jewish tradition, when the Messiah comes to the Mount of Olives, he will enter the temple through the eastern gate, accompanied by the Shekhina, the feminine aspect of God. The Shekhina is said to have exited the temple through the

Sariah, Sam, and Nephi to come to the Savior and be saved. And it is a place where Laman and Lemuel would be expected to refuse, as they do (1 Nephi 8:35), to come to a sacred tree and worship, were they disciples of Josiah and the Deuteronomists.

In the dream, a mist of darkness arises from the Kidron valley (1 Nephi 8:23–24; 12:16–17), the place where Josiah burned the Asherah and the tokens of the Host of Heaven which had been in the temple (2 Kings 23:4–6). The darkening mist might thus be read as, among other things, Deuteronomist doctrines that led the people astray by obscuring the connections between El, Asherah, Yahweh, and the Host of Heaven.

### **Nephi's Vision of Lehi's Dream**

The connection between the tree and the heavenly and earthly mothers of Yahweh is made quite clear in Nephi's experience of Lehi's dream, which begins where Lehi's dream ended, in heaven where the tree is located. The Spirit of the Lord<sup>33</sup> carries Nephi up to a high place, where he sees some of what his father saw and much else besides. By answering a question correctly, Nephi qualifies himself to pass through the veil and

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eastern gate just before it was destroyed, i.e. she departed the temple in the time when Josiah was dragging the Asherah from the temple through the eastern gate into into the Kidron Valley. See Larsen, "Hidden in Plain View: Mother in Heaven in Scripture."

33. There may be an equivocation on the term *Spirit of the Lord*. Nephi seems to have been carried to the threshold of heaven by the Holy Ghost. He then encounters Yahweh. Both are referred to as the Spirit of the Lord. As is the case in the Old Testament, Book of Mormon divine titles are sometimes conflated. The title *Spirit of the Lord* most often refers to the Holy Ghost, the indwelling Being through whom Father and Son typically influence people on earth. But it can also refer to the Son who existed as a spirit prior to his birth. To distinguish between the Spirit of the Lord when it refers to Yahweh *qua* spirit and when it refers to the Holy Ghost, we should focus on domain and function. The domain of the Holy Ghost is the earth and its function is indwelling. Indwelling encounters with the Spirit on earth are always the Holy Ghost. The domain of the Son is both heaven and earth, he being the spiritual and corporeal mediator between the two. To distinguish between the Holy Ghost and the Son, we must focus on function. The Holy Ghost does not appear before us. Rather, he dwells within us. The Son does appear before us in heaven (as he does in Lehi's first vision) and on earth (as he does in Lehi's dream). These appearances include his coming to the brother of Jared, where he declares: "this body, which ye now behold, is the body of my spirit" (Ether 3:16). They include appearances in which Moses converses with Yahweh face to face as a man speaketh unto his friend (Exodus 33:11) and they include Nephi's vision of Lehi's dream.

enter the presence of El.<sup>34</sup> His guide, Yahweh, ushers him into heaven, then exclaims “Hosanna to the Lord, the *Most High God*” as if entering the presence of the Father.<sup>35</sup> *Most High God* translates the Hebrew *El Elyon*. Nephi is declared blessed because he believes in both Father and Son (1 Nephi 11:6).

As is typical in temple contexts, Nephi is first told what he will see, after which he then sees it. Still in heaven, he is informed he will see “the tree which bore fruit which thy father tasted,” then descending out of heaven from that tree, the Son of God. What had just been given as plan now occurs in actuality. Nephi sees a tree of superlative beauty, a tree that exceeds all earthy beauty and whiteness. Then Yahweh, the Spirit of the Lord, commands Nephi to “Look!” “And I looked to look upon him, and I saw him not; for he had gone from before my presence” (12). The Son of God has departed the presence of his Heavenly Father and Mother. Suddenly, Nephi finds himself on the Earth, in Nazareth, where he sees the virgin Mary, who is linked to the heavenly tree by being white and fair but whose beauty exceeds that only of all other virgins. An angel descends from heaven to be Nephi’s new guide and repeats Yahweh’s command, “Look!” Nephi looks again as he had when commanded before to look at Yahweh and this time sees Mary, “the mother of the son of God, after the *manner of the flesh*” cradling in her arms a baby, “the

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34. David E. Bokovoy, “‘Thou Knowest That I Believe’: Invoking The Spirit of the Lord as Council Witness in 1 Nephi 11,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 1 (2012): 1–23, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/thou-knowest-that-i-believe/>.

35. As indicated in the text, various cues make it clear that Nephi’s initial guide is Yahweh. So it is Yahweh who says, “Hosanna to the Lord, the Most High God” as Nephi enters the presence of El Elyon. In this phrase, *Most High God* is in apposition to *the Lord*. If the word *Lord* translates the Hebrew *Yahweh* as in the KJV, this phrase confounds the identities of Yahweh, the Son, and El Elyon, the Father. If Yahweh is speaking about El, the phrase does not make sense. One possible solution for this problem is to assume that the underlying Hebrew is *Adonai*, the plural of the Hebrew word for Lord, thus meaning *Lords*. Like Yahweh, the word *Adonai* is translated as *Lord* in the KJV. *Adonai*, like *Elohim*, is a plural, so *Adonai* might be an apt word to use when affirming the Lordship of *Elohim*. Here, the word *Adonai* might not confound the divine identities of Father and Son. But while *ad hoc* explanations of this kind may address local problems, contradictions like this cannot be consistently resolved across all appearances of the words *Lord* and *God* in the Book of Mormon or Bible. In the end, we probably must posit as our explanation for the inconsistencies some combination of translator discretion, evolving understanding of who the Gods are, and overlapping roles and shared purpose among members of the Godhead.

Son of the Eternal Father.” The qualification that Mary is the mother of the Son of God *after the manner of the flesh* is necessary only because the Son of God has another Mother *after the manner of the spirit*, the being of superlative whiteness and beauty whom Nephi saw in Heaven and from whom Yahweh descended to earth.<sup>36</sup>

The angel tells Nephi that the tree, probably meaning the fruit of the tree, is the love of God which sheddeth itself abroad in the hearts of the children of men. The object of the Father’s love, the love of his life, is the Son, who is signified metonomously by his red blood which sheddeth itself abroad and together with his white flesh (the white fruit of the tree) weekly finds place in the hearts of the children of men.

But the object of God’s love is also the Mother. The Gihon Spring, also known as the Virgin’s Spring,<sup>37</sup> which had flowed into Kidron from the temple mount, has now been shifted to the Mount of Olives where it flows from the sacred tree as a fountain of living waters, the waters of spiritual birth. Tree and fountain, both symbols of Mother in Heaven, are also declared by the angel to be objects of God’s love. The firstborn’s spiritual birth, previously symbolized in heaven by his descent from the tree, is now signified on earth by Christ’s emergence from the inherently feminine waters of baptism. This event immediately follows the declaration that tree and fountain, like the sacramental body of Christ, are that which God loves (1 Nephi 11:25–27).

In Jerusalem, under the leadership of Josiah, the king, the priests, and all the elites of the city had made war upon the Mother, the Son or sons, and all the Host of Heaven who were revered in the theology that Josiah suppressed. In Lehi’s dream, multitudes of finely dressed people mock and point and seek to dissuade others from worshipping at the tree on the Mount of Olives. Under pressure from these elites, most seem to turn away from that worship. But in Nephi’s experience of the dream, he is told the elites will be punished: their great building is destined to fall, and the fall thereof will be exceedingly great (1 Nephi 11:36). Twenty-two years after Josiah’s death and 13 years after Lehi’s departure from Jerusalem, the temple and palace were both destroyed by the Babylonians.

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36. On the sacred tree as mother, see John S. Thompson, “The Lady at the Horizon: Egyptian Tree Goddess Iconography and Sacred Trees in Israelite Scripture and Temple Theology,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 38 (2020): 166, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/the-lady-at-the-horizon-egyptian-tree-goddess-iconography-and-sacred-trees-in-israelite-scripture-and-temple-theology/>.

37. Barker, *Mother of the Lord*, loc. 1007, 1012, 2795, 13900 of 13900, Kindle.

## Lehi, Jacob, and Zenos's Olive Allegory

A sacred tree features prominently in each of the three main accounts Nephi gives of Lehi's teaching: the dream, the olive allegory, and his last blessings/sermons. Nephi reports Lehi's teaching on the olive allegory very briefly (1 Nephi 10:12–14), says a little more on that topic himself (1 Nephi 15:12–16), then Jacob gives the full account quoting Lehi's fellow prophet, Zenos. The plurality of divine beings is assumed in the allegory. The Lord of the Vineyard is El, his main servant a composite, but mostly Yahweh. The other main element in the narrative, a tree, has three main parts: a trunk and roots, branches, and fruits. The trunk and roots are four times called the "Mother tree" (Jacob 5:54, 56, 60) and celebrated "because of their goodness" (Jacob 5:36–37, 59). The nations of the world are branches grafted into that tree. All souls in the world are fruits of that tree.

That Asherah might be conceived of as the trunk and roots of a tree in the time of Lehi and Zenos is supported by an artifact commonly discovered in Jerusalem from Lehi's time: a goddess figurine that is the trunk and roots of a tree on the bottom and the torso and head of a woman on the top.<sup>38</sup> In the allegory, human souls, the fruit, have gone bad because they have grown too distant from the roots of the tree which are good. When the Lord of the vineyard asks how the fruit became corrupted, the servant answers:

Is it not the loftiness of thy vineyard — have not the branches thereof overcome the roots which are good? And because the branches have overcome the roots thereof, behold they grew faster than the strength of the roots, taking strength unto themselves. Behold, I say, is not this the cause that the trees of thy vineyard have become corrupted? (Jacob 5:48)

In his introduction to the allegory, Jacob stated:

The Jews were a stiffnecked people; and they despised the words of plainness, and killed the prophets, and sought for things that they could not understand. Wherefore, because of their blindness, which blindness came by looking beyond the mark, they must needs fall; for God hath taken away his

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38. Barker cites Kletter on the distribution of the Asherah figurines (Barker, *Mother of the Lord*, 119). See Raz Kletter, *The Judean Pillar-Figurines and the Archaeology of Asherah* (Oxford, UK: *British Archaeological Reports*, 1996), 4, 10, 45, 47. Dever strongly affirms that the figurines represent Asherah (Dever, *Did God Have a Wife*, 58).

plainness from them and delivered unto them many things which they cannot understand, because they desired it. And because they desired it God hath done it, that they may stumble. (Jacob 4:14)<sup>39</sup>

In the god El who dwelled bodily in the temple, who had a wife, Asherah, and sons, including Yahweh, the Jews had a theology easy to understand. In the Deuteronomist one god Yahweh-Elohim, who became, or would become, the wholly other transcendent first mover and ground of all being, the loftiest Jews, the elites, developed a theology that eschewed plainness and looked beyond the corporeal and familial mark. Following the lead of Zenos and Zeno, Lehi seems to resist that theological transition.

### **Lehi's Patriarchal Blessing for Jacob**

While blessing his son Jacob near the end of his life, Lehi provides, in his discussion of the need for opposition in all things, the clearest example of philosophical reasoning we find in ancient scripture. Lehi's words to Jacob can be read as a pluralist's philosophical rejoinder to the monist metaphysics of Josiah and the Deuteronomists. Where their thinking tended toward a reduction of multiplicity to oneness, Lehi insisted on the fundamental duality or plurality of all things. Oneness, monism, he asserts is nihilistic: "if it should be one body it must remain as dead, having no life, neither death" (2 Nephi 2:11). Were existence not a compound of opposites, both things to act and things to be acted upon, "all things must have vanished away" (2 Nephi 2:13). On Lehi's view, the metaphysical structure of existence must be pluralistic or there would be nothing.<sup>40</sup>

At the end of this blessing/sermon, Lehi mentions two divine beings who stand in opposition to each other, the fallen angel Satan who seeks to destroy humanity and the mediating Messiah who seeks to save them. He then again mentions sacred trees, the tree of knowledge of good and evil and the tree of life.<sup>41</sup> Satan is associated with the first tree, the Messiah Jesus with the second. Each of these preeminent sons of God might be

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39. For a more detailed discussion of the context and import of these verses, see Val Larsen, "A Mormon Theodicy: Jacob and the Problem of Evil," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 15 (2015): 255–60, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/a-mormon-theodicy-jacob-and-the-problem-of-evil/>.

40. For a more detailed discussion of Lehi's philosophical reasoning and how it may be read as a rejoinder to Deuteronomist monism, see Larsen, "First Visions and Last Sermons," 65–66.

41. The tree in this last sermon, like that in Lehi's dream, is the Tree of Life (1 Nephi 15:21–22).

read, as in Lehi's dream, as the fruit of a Heavenly Mother signified by the tree. These trees mark a cycle of departure from Father and Mother in Heaven and a return to them. Thus, Lehi appears to hold to an older, pluralistic theology that is incompatible in many fundamental ways with the reforms of Josiah.

### **Laman and Lemuel, Faithful Deuteronomists**

Grant Hardy has suggested that “Laman and Lemuel are stock characters, even caricatures,” cardboard villains whose actions are irrationally evil.<sup>42</sup> But there are many indications they were, instead, pious Deuteronomist followers of Josiah, the great political and religious leader of their youth. All their actions are not just authorized, they are mandated in Deuteronomy chapter 13. Deuteronomy obligated them to obey their father (Deuteronomy 5:16) but also to violently resist and put to death any prophet or dreamer of dreams or brother — even one who showed signs and wonders — who led them away from Deuteronomist truth (Deuteronomy 13:1–10; 18:20). Given these scriptural mandates and obligations, to understand their motives for acting as they did, one need only stipulate that Laman and Lemuel were sincere when they bore testimony as follows: “we know that the people who were in the land of Jerusalem were a righteous people; for they kept the statutes and judgements of the Lord, and all his commandments according to the Law of Moses; wherefore, we know know that they are a righteous people; and our father hath [wrongly] judged them [and wrongly] led us away because we would hearken unto his words” (1 Nephi 17:22). Laman and Lemuel's pious Deteronomism is manifest both in their initial submission to their father and in their testimony that Josiah's followers in Jerusalem were righteous. The contradictory obligations to honor their father but cleave to Deuteronomist theology explain why they first follow Lehi out of Jerusalem, but then repeatedly rebel against him and Nephi in moments when Deuteronomist mandates are violated and when their remaining connections with Jerusalem and Josiah's political and religious order are severed.

Josiah and Deuteronomy mandated that sacrifices be made only in Jerusalem (Deuteronomy 12:13–14). Laman and Lemuel first rebel when Lehi, who is not a Levite, builds an altar outside of Jerusalem and offers a sacrifice on it (1 Nephi 2:7, 11–13). They complain that their father is

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42. Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2010), 33.

a visionary man, probably a *hōzeh*, implying false prophet.<sup>43</sup> Speaking of this rebellion, Nephi says Laman and Lemuel “were like the Jews at Jerusalem, who sought to take away the life of my father” (1 Nephi 2:13). In saying this, Nephi means to condemn Laman and Lemuel. As Deuteronomists, they may hear the condemnation as a compliment on their fidelity to the faith of their youth and its clear command that they violently resist and kill apostates.

Laman and Lemuel next rebel after being chased from Laban’s house. Impoverished and branded as robbers, their opportunity to resume their former lives would seem to be lost. They begin to beat Nephi and Sam whom they blame for this forced separation from the holy city and their former way of life, then, as instructed by Deuteronomy, ignore a sign or wonder that could lead them astray: the angel who appears and informs them that the Lord has chosen Nephi to rule over them.<sup>44</sup>

Laman and Lemuel next rebel as they take their final departure from Jerusalem with Ishmael and his family. Nephi reports, “they were desirous to return unto the land of Jerusalem,” the place where in their view people righteously follow God’s law. Speaking as a prophet, Nephi admonishes them sharply (1 Nephi 7:8–15). In response, “they sought to take away [his] life” (1 Nephi 7:16), precisely what Deuteronomy instructed them to do if a prophet tried “to thrust [them] out of the way which Yahweh [their] God commanded [them] to walk in” (Deuteronomy 13:5). As previously described, they next rebel in Lehi’s dream by refusing to worship at a sacred tree seemingly located on the Mount of Olives where Josiah had chopped down the Asherah grove and

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43. Neal Rappleye, “The Deuteronomist Reforms and Lehi’s Family Dynamics,” 92. John A. Tvedtnes, “A Visionary Man,” in *Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon: The FARMS Updates of the 1990s*, eds. John W. Welch and Melvin J. Thorne (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1999), 29–31; Matthew Roper, “Scripture Update: Lehi as a Visionary Man,” *Insights* 27, no. 4 (2007): 2–3.

44. It is unsurprising that Laman and Lemuel hold fast to long-held beliefs in the wake of a single angelic visitation and even after seeing a number of seemingly miraculous events. Believers understand that the adversary sends angels and performs miracles (see D&C 129); they are not easily turned from their faith by apparent miracles performed by those of other faiths. Nonetheless, as an anonymous peer reviewer noted, their response is inappropriate. It differs dramatically from that of Alma who was, likewise, visited by an angel: “Whereas Alma reflects on his own sins after the angel appears, Laman and Lemuel look to fear and resentment and all the things they have to give up and the hardships they face. The two stories demonstrate the difference between self-examination and self-justification, one approach leading to repentance and the other preventing it.”

where refusal would manifest loyalty to Josiah's one God, Yahweh, and to a Deuteronomist interpretation of scripture.

They next rebel when Ishmael dies and, perhaps with him, any hope of returning under his aegis to a respectable life in Jerusalem. But with or without Ishmael, they remain "desirous to return again to Jerusalem" instead of being led away by their false-prophet father and brother who "says that the Lord has talked with him . . . . But behold, we know that he lies unto us [and] worketh many things by his cunning arts that he may deceive our eyes [and] lead us away into some strange wilderness [where he] may make himself a ruler and king over us" (1 Nephi 16:36–38). In addition to condemning theologies like those of Lehi and Nephi, Deuteronomy affirms the special status of the firstborn (Deuteronomy 21:17), so Laman and Lemuel resent Nephi "who has taken it upon himself to be our ruler and our teacher, who are his elder brethren" (1 Nephi 16:17). Laman urges others to join him in killing Lehi and Nephi, but the Deuteronomist rebels are pacified, temporarily, by another of the signs and wonders their Sophic faith urges them to ignore and which they later do ignore: a chastisement by the voice of the Lord.

They again rebel when Nephi urges them to help him build a ship, which will carry them far from the place of hallowed memory they still long for, Jerusalem, where living among the righteous, they "might have been happy." Indeed, "it would have been better that they had died [rather than come] out of Jerusalem" (1 Nephi 17:20–22). To persuade them to help him, Nephi attempts to leverage their sure testimonies of Moses, the Deuteronomist hero, citing mighty deeds they "know" he did in leading the Exodus. Nephi frames their beloved Jerusalem as a new Egypt from which they have been led by God. Citing the Deuteronomist Jews of Jerusalem who sought to take away Lehi's life, Nephi again equates Laman and Lemuel with them: "ye also have sought to take away his life; wherefore, ye are . . . like unto them" (1 Nephi 17:44). Perhaps after thanking him for the compliment, Laman and Lemuel move to throw their false-prophet brother into the sea, but they are then once again restrained by a wondrous sign: the shocking power of Nephi. Having rebelled once again during the sea voyage, when Lehi dies in the Promised Land, Laman reasserts his claim to the primacy Deuteronomy afforded him. He and others again try to kill Nephi and, thus, precipitate the final split between Lamanites and Nephites (2 Nephi 5:2–3).

To summarize, while Nephi and the Book of Mormon frame them as villains, the many faults Lehi and Nephi see in Laman and Lemuel might be reframed as stubborn fidelity and diligent obedience to the mandates

of Josiah and the Deuteronomist faith they embraced in their youth. Their intransigence in the face of signs and wonders resembles that of the Jews in the time of Christ who shared and were motivated by the same Sophic, Deuteronomist faith that apparently motivated Laman and Lemuel.

### **Deuteronomist Theology in the Promised Land**

While Lehi, Nephi, and Jacob all appear to reject Deuteronomist theology, it is also apparent that other Nephites embraced it. The brass plates contained a copy of Deuteronomy (1 Nephi 5:11), and as we shall see, Sherem was a committed Deuteronomist. The mystery is how this Josianic theology opposed by Lehi, Nephi, and Jacob not only came to the New World but came to be the predominant theology of the Nephites. One possibility is Lamanite influence. A more likely possibility is Zoram. Whatever the source, an important element of its spread was almost certainly political interests of the Nephite kings that were aligned with those of King Josiah.

### **Zoram the Deuteronomist**

The Book of Mormon provides ample grounds for believing that Zoram was a Deuteronomist. The text strongly suggests that he was a learned scribe. He held “the keys of the treasury” (1 Nephi 4:20) and was clearly the keeper and guardian of the brass plates. When Nephi carried out his daring plan to acquire the plates, he felt compelled to take Zoram with him though he surely would have preferred to depart Laban’s house alone. Zoram knew Laban well, so in taking Zoram, Nephi increased the risk of being discovered as, indeed, he eventually was when he called to his brothers. But Nephi apparently felt he would risk more by taking the plates to a supposed theological gathering without Zoram, their keeper and explicator, than with him.

That Zoram was a learned and confident man is apparent from his interaction with his putative master as he and Nephi carry the plates through Jerusalem. In what was surely a one-sided conversation given Nephi’s need to remain disguised, Zoram boldly expressed his opinion “many times” (1 Nephi 4:27) as he and Nephi traveled to and through the city walls. Since he expressed them so freely to “Laban,” who was almost certainly a Deuteronomist, Zoram probably had conventional views that would not upset Laban or the other power elites Nephi calls the “elders of the Jews” (1 Nephi 4:22).<sup>45</sup> Zoram very likely discussed religion on this

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45. On the identity of the “elders of the Jews,” see John A. Tvedtnes, *The Most Correct Book* (Salt Lake City: Cornerstone, 1999), 59–75.

walk, for the men Laban had been visiting and whom Zoram thinks they are going to visit were “the brethren of the church” (1 Nephi 4:26), which probably means some of the Deuteronomist priests who had mocked and threatened Lehi. The occasion seems to have been a Passover festival when a theological discussion would have been especially appropriate.<sup>46</sup> When Zoram discovered that Nephi was not Laban, “he began to tremble, and was about to flee,” but Nephi “did seize [him] and held him, that he should not flee” (1 Nephi 4:30–31). Zoram then faced a choice between death and being “a free man like unto us if he would go down in the wilderness with us” (1 Nephi 4:32–33). Unsurprisingly, under duress that some of his descendants still resented 500 years later (Alma 54:23), he chose to go with Nephi and his brothers.<sup>47</sup>

In his account of the acquisition of the brass plates, Nephi framed himself as a modern Moses, as one who led enslaved Israel (signified by Zoram) out of a new Egypt into Sinai and, having miraculously subdued his enemies and crossed a daunting sea, on to the Promised Land. A key part of this parallel is his descent into Sinai bearing the Law of Moses.<sup>48</sup> But Nephi was not the only person who could view himself as the bearer of the law. Zoram’s deep theological knowledge and strong theological opinions, his closer and longer connection with the brass plates, probably mean that he came to Sinai and the Promised Land confidently bearing an alternative, Deuteronomist theological tradition. And to the authority of long association with the plates and of great scribal learning, Zoram probably added the authority of age. Judging from his marriage to the oldest daughter of Ishmael (1 Nephi 16:7), he was probably older than Nephi or any of his brothers.<sup>49</sup> The text indicates that Nephi and Zoram were close friends. Lehi says of Zoram, “I know that thou art

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46. Bradley, *The Lost 116 Pages*, 121–44.

47. Ammoron, who expressed this resentment, probably had a mixed heritage because he was quite clearly also of Mulekite descent. He inherited from his brother Amalickiah a rebellion of “those of high birth,” probably Mulekite descendants of David who were attempting to reestablish a Mulekite monarchy in the wake of Mosiah<sub>2</sub>’s abdication. But most of Ammoron’s subjects were Lamanites who had no stake in a conflict between Nephites and Mulekites. Ammoron aligns himself with his Lamanite subjects by emphasizing his Zoramite roots and claiming a shared grievance that was directed, like that of the Lamanites, against Nephi. See Alma 51:8–9 and 54:24.

48. Val Larsen, “Killing Laban: The Birth of Sovereignty in the Nephite Constitutional Order,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 16, no. 1 (2007): 31–34.

49. Keith J. Allred, “Who was Second Nephi?” *Dialogue, A Journal of Mormon Thought* 42, no. 4 (Winter 2009): 3.

a true friend unto my son, Nephi, forever” (2 Nephi 1:30). But friends can differ in their theology. And given his oath that Zoram would be free like himself, Nephi surely respected Zoram’s right to believe and even teach as he pleased.

We have, then, an account that provides for the establishment of vibrant Mantic, Christ-centered and Sophic, Deuteronomist traditions among the Nephites. While he framed himself as the bearer of the written law, Nephi’s authority was ultimately prophetic. It was grounded in miracles performed and revelations received. There is no indication that Zoram performed miracles or received revelations. But scribes do not need either to be authoritative. They have a strong secondary authority grounded in the profound primary authority of scripture. Their literacy and learning, their deep familiarity with the scriptural text gives them Sophic authority that has historically proven to be more durable than its Mantic counterpart.<sup>50</sup>

### **Jacob’s Critique of the King**

Given that the only kings he had known were Josiah, the faithful Deuteronomist, and his sons, it is noteworthy that Nephi did not believe his people should have a king (2 Nephi 5:18). Subsequent events suggest that his reluctance to establish a monarchy was prophetic, that Deuteronomism was an especially alluring temptation for a king. That reluctance notwithstanding, Nephi acceded to the wishes of his people and served as both their king and their high priest. As death approached, he divided his secular and religious power, appointing an unnamed successor (probably his or Sam’s oldest son)<sup>51</sup> as king and Jacob (and his brother Joseph) as high priests (Jacob 1:9, 18). Both king and priest inherited legitimate power from Nephi who was much loved by his people (Jacob 1:10). Eventually, those two centers of power came into conflict.

In discussing the period following Nephi’s death, Jacob affirms his own faithfulness to the mandate Nephi had given him, but implicitly

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50. Prophetic authority soon disappeared in both Judaism and Christendom in the decades following Christ’s death and resurrection, but scribal authority has remained powerful to the present day. Even the political/religious authority of Mosiah<sub>1</sub> and Benjamin seems to have been substantially rooted in their possession of the brass plates. See Benjamin’s emphasis on the plates as he prepares to abdicate in favor of Mosiah<sub>2</sub> in Mosiah 1:2–8.

51. Allred, “Who was Second Nephi?” Allred notes that Nephi passes the small plates to Jacob instead of to a son. This may indicate that he had no son. If Nephi had no son, Sam or Sam’s oldest son would have had a claim under succession principles that were typical in ancient Israel and subsequent Book of Mormon history. Allred addresses Mosiah 25:13, the main evidence that the second king was Nephi’s son.

condemns the second king for dereliction of duty.<sup>52</sup> Jacob condemns the king because he allowed a malignant status hierarchy to develop in which some Nephites dominate others and seize the usual worldly rewards of illicit sex, money, and power.<sup>53</sup> While he is critical of economic stratification and exploitation, Jacob is most scathing about the instrumental use of women and children to form political alliances through dynastic plural marriages: the king and his principal supporters apparently permitted surrounding pagan allies to “lead away captive the daughters of [the Nephites]” (Jacob 2:33) while they themselves took plural wives and concubines from among the daughters of the surrounding peoples — or, at least, that is what they were planning to do.<sup>54</sup> Since marriage, concubinage, and political alliances all fall under the purview of the king, Jacob’s criticisms of these practices are clearly directed at the second king. Jacob repeatedly mentions similar sins committed by previous kings, David and Solomon (Jacob 1:15–16, 2:23–24), and implicit in all his criticisms is the kingship code in Deuteronomy 17:14–20 which forbids both of the behaviors Jacob condemns: “Neither shall he multiply wives to himself, that his heart turn not away: neither shall he greatly multiply to himself silver and gold.” Thus, Jacob used prestige conferred upon him by Nephi and the authority of Deuteronomy to condemn his close acquaintance, the second king, and to forestall the typical abuses of royal privilege and power.

Jacob’s condemnation of him posed a serious threat to the power of the second king.<sup>55</sup> Though the Nephite king could appoint and remove high priests (Mosiah 11:5; 25:19), defrocking Jacob would have been politically fraught given his appointment by Nephi and his status as a son of Lehi. So instead of a direct attack on Jacob, the angry king

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52. Welch notes that direct criticism of the king was not allowed. For both legal and political reasons, Jacob’s criticism is somewhat subtle and indirect. John W. Welch, *The Legal Cases in the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press and the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2008), 159–60.

53. The conflict between Jacob and the new king is discussed in more detail in Larsen, “A Mormon Theodicy,” 248–54.

54. Brant Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, Volume 2, *Second Nephi—Jacob*, (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 484–99. John L. Sorenson, “When Lehi’s Party Arrived in the Land, Did They Find Others There?,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1, no. 1 (1992), 1–34. Larsen, “A Mormon Theodicy,” 251.

55. See John W. Welch, “The Case of Sherem,” in *The Legal Cases in the Book of Mormon*, 113–14 for a discussion of Jacob’s political critique.

seems to have enlisted Sherem to rid him of this turbulent priest. Using Deuteronomy, the same book of scripture that Josiah used to supplant the old theology and that Jacob used to critique the king, Sherem will try to undermine Jacob's prophetic and priestly authority and to condemn his teaching. If successful, he will establish a Deuteronomistic order like that of Josiah in which all power is centered in the hands of the king and his scribal and priestly subordinates who authoritatively interpret scripture and limit the potentially disruptive power of prophets. Prophets speak with the Mantic authority of the King in heaven and often challenge the Sophic authority of the king on earth.

### **Sherem, Agent of the King**

Sherem appears at a pivotal moment in Nephite history. Some have suggested that Sherem was not a Nephite, that he was a Jaredite or Mulekite.<sup>56</sup> But his distinguishing characteristics all suggest that he was born and grew up among the Nephites, or possibly the Lamanites. Sherem is literate, eloquent, and well versed in the scriptures found in the brass plates. He is a master of the Nephite language and culture and is a Deuteronomist (Jacob 7:4, 7, 10). Nephite origins seem to be the most plausible explanation for this constellation of facts. And Zoram is the most plausible original source for this vigorous alternative theological tradition among Nephi's people.<sup>57</sup> As noted above, close reading of First Nephi supports the view that Zoram was the father of the Deuteronomist tradition in the land of Nephi. And Sherem has the attributes, including a similar name, that one might expect to find in a son or grandson of Zoram if Zoram were a Deuteronomist scribe.<sup>58</sup>

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56. Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert & The World of the Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988), 243–44; Alan C. Miner, *Step by Step Through the Book of Mormon*, vol. 2 (Springville, UT: Cedar Fort, 1996), [https://stepbystep.alancminer.com/jacob\\_7](https://stepbystep.alancminer.com/jacob_7).

57. Keith Thompson makes a strong case for Sherem being a son or grandson of Zoram. A. Keith Thompson, "Who was Sherem?," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 14 (2015): 1–15, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/who-was-sherem/>.

58. Sherem has the skills of a scribe, and in Hebrew, the names of Zoram (זֹרַם) and Sherem (שֶׁרֵם) differ only in their initial consonant. So Sherem might be named, loosely, after his father or grandfather Zoram. One etymology for Sh-R-M is the east Semitic word *šarāmu* meaning "to cut out, to hack out." Were he a Deuteronomist scribe, Zoram would probably be familiar with this Assyrian/Babylonian meaning. And he might have charged his descendant with the mission Sherem has clearly taken up: to cut or hack out of the Nephite religion the older elements inconsistent with Deuteronomism. See *Book of Mormon Onomasticon*,

The belief that Sherem was an outsider is undergirded by Jacob's first statement about him: "after some years had passed away, there came a man among the people of Nephi, whose name was Sherem" (Jacob 7:1). But Jacob's impersonal description of Sherem as "a man" does not indicate that he was an outsider. Jacob also called his intimate acquaintance, the second king, "a man" (Jacob 1:9). What this opening may imply is that Zoram did not aggressively proselytize Nephi's people to believe his Deuteronomist theology rather than Nephi's theology of Christ. Zoram may have confined his teaching to his own family. Now Sherem, unlike his progenitor and with the support of the disgruntled king, goes among the people of Nephi, actively and successfully proselytizing them to believe the Deuteronomist theology of Zoram rather than the Christ focused theology espoused by Jacob.

That Sherem was permitted to actively proselytize the Nephites to believe his theology is strong evidence that he had the support of the king. Were the king's views the same as those of the high priest, Jacob, there is little chance that Sherem would have been allowed to teach an alternative theology even as an insider, let alone as an outsider.

Sherem's usefulness to the king would have been a function not only of his theology, which denied prophets like Jacob the right to play their disruptive prophetic role, but also of his rhetorical and political skills.<sup>59</sup> Sherem had been teaching for a while and was popular because he knew how to flatter the people as he taught them (Jacob 7:2). He apparently attempted to leverage that popularity to depose Jacob by purposely gathering a crowd to witness his confrontation with the high priest. He does this by going from place to place ostentatiously seeking to find Jacob, who should have been easy to find in a relatively small community. Jacob twice mentions this ostentatious search, first stating that Sherem

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s.v. "Sherem," last updated August 5, 2019, <https://onoma.lib.byu.edu/index.php/SHEREM>. Close reading also suggests that the Lamanites were Deuteronomists, so it is possible that Sherem was a Lamanite who joined the Nephites, perhaps with the motive of gaining access to his beloved brass plates and Deuteronomy.

59. Weinfeld notes that Deuteronomists were skilled in the use of language and focused, in particular, on moving crowds through oral rhetoric. "The Deuteronomic orator often employs rhetorical phrases . . . and he repeats those phrases again and again as if to hypnotize his audience . . . . Having chosen the oration as their literary medium, the Deuteronomic authors put their speeches into the mouths of kings and political leaders . . . . This emphasis on vast audiences in the oration scenes and the detailed enumeration of the various leading classes participating in them is peculiar to the book of Deuteronomy and deuteronomic literature." Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic School*, 173.

“sought much opportunity that he might come unto me” (Jacob 7:3) and then quoting Sherem to the same effect: “Brother Jacob, I have sought much opportunity that I might speak unto you” (Jacob 7:6).

Having gathered a crowd, one that he may have intended to become the Deuteronomist mob the people are commanded to form to attack and kill heretic prophets (Deuteronomy 13:6–10), Sherem confronts Jacob with arguments that seem to flow out of the quintessential Deuteronomist text mentioned above: “hearken, O Israel, unto the statutes and unto the judgments, which I teach you, for to do them . . . . Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish ought from it” (Deuteronomy 4:1–2). As John Welch has noted, Sherem buttresses his general charge that Jacob has changed or abandoned the Law of Moses with the more specific charge that he has committed three capital crimes: causing the people to apostatize, blasphemy, and false prophecy.<sup>60</sup> Sherem’s charges against Jacob are stated in part as follows:

Thou goest about much, preaching that which ye call the gospel, or the doctrine of Christ. And ye have led away much of this people that they pervert the right way of God, and keep not the law of Moses which is the right way; and convert the law of Moses into the worship of a being which ye say shall come many hundred years hence. And now behold, I, Sherem, declare unto you that this is blasphemy; for no man knoweth of such things; for he cannot tell of things to come. And after this manner did Sherem contend against me. (Jacob 7:6–7)

Turning the tables on Jacob who had used Deuteronomy to critique the king, Sherem now uses that book to challenge Jacob’s authority and doctrine. Arguing, presumably, from the statement that “there is no god with me” (Deuteronomy 32:39), Sherem declares that “there should be no Christ” (Jacob 7:2). Backed by a potential mob, he alludes in Jacob 7:7 to the Deuteronomy passage which urges the people to put to death anyone, including a prophet or miracle worker, who causes them to “go after other gods [i.e. Christ], which thou hast not known” or who would “thrust thee out of the way [Sherem’s ‘right way’] which the LORD thy God commanded thee to walk in” (Deuteronomy 13:2, 5). These allusions

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60. John Welch suggests that Sherem “may have contested Jacob’s doctrines and interpretations of the law for thoroughly pious reasons.” He notes the connection between Zoram and Sherem and discusses the danger Jacob faced in the confrontation with Sherem. Welch, “The Case of Sherem,” 108–20.

to Deuteronomy suggest that Sherem is deadly serious and that Jacob's life is in danger during this encounter.

Sherem ultimately demands that Jacob establish his divine bona fides by providing a sign by the power of the Holy Ghost, a sign that Deuteronomists are counseled to reject if it is given (Deuteronomy 13:1-3) and that Jacob says Sherem would have rejected: "yet thou wilt deny it" (Jacob 7:14). Jacob refuses to provide the requested sign. But a sign is given by God.<sup>61</sup> Sherem receives the measure he meant to mete, the Talionic justice he advocated. He is struck down and eventually dies because he has "perverted the right way" and caused the people to worship a false God.

But before he dies, Sherem the Sophic scribe receives more than the Talionic justice he contemplated for Jacob. He has his own revelatory, Mantic experience of the power and grace of God, ironically the very sign "by the power of the Holy Ghost" (Jacob 7:13) that he had requested: "the power of the Lord came upon him, insomuch that he fell to the earth. And it came to pass that he was nourished for the space of many days" (Jacob 7:15).<sup>62</sup> Like Alma<sub>2</sub> and others who follow in the Book of Mormon,<sup>63</sup> Sherem is struck down and then spiritually nourished by the power of God. Like Alma<sub>2</sub>, after he regains consciousness some days later, Sherem addresses the people he had deceived and declares the faith in Christ he has gained through a first-hand experience of God's power. He now declares that the scriptures, rather than denying the possibility of Christ, in fact testify of him. Like Alma<sub>2</sub>, he now knows something "of hell, and of eternity, and of eternal punishment" but also of "the power of

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61. See Duane Boyce, "Reclaiming Jacob," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 22 (2016): 107–29, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/reclaiming-jacob/>. Boyce persuasively argues that Jacob equivocates on the word sign: "Thus, even though Jacob uses the word 'sign' both times, he uses it in two different senses, just as the Lord does" (p. 119). Jacob refuses to provide the sign Sherem requested, some miraculous manipulation of the natural world, a sign that would not have persuaded Sherem had it been given. Instead, God provides Sherem with a demonstration of his power that the skeptic does find persuasive.

62. While no explicit agent is specified for the passive verb "was nourished" in 7:15, the usual attribution of people nourishing now helpless Sherem seems misguided. The power of the Lord often comes upon people in the Book of Mormon and causes them to fall to the ground, then nourishes them spiritually (Alma 18:42-43; 19:13; 36:10). The reading most consistent with the power of God and other appearances of this phenomenon in the Book of Mormon is that Sherem is now nourished by God's power. His subsequent testimony and acknowledgement of the Holy Ghost are evidence he was nourished spiritually.

63. Alma<sub>2</sub> (Alma 36:1–23), King Lamoni, his wife, servants, and Ammon<sub>2</sub> (Alma 19:1–16), and the Apostle Paul (Acts 22:6–1).

the Holy Ghost, and the ministering of angels” (Jacob 7:17-18). Unlike Alma<sub>2</sub>, he does not have an assurance of salvation. He fears that he may have committed an unpardonable sin by lying unto God.

Sherem’s lie was embodied in a kind of false consciousness, belief in a place holder religion that could anesthetize the spirit and keep it from seeking its true religious home. He promulgated a religion that had the form of godliness but denied the power thereof. Like Noah’s Deuteronomist priests who would later teach the same false religion, he justified abuses of the king. Though ever learning, Sherem had never come to the knowledge of the truth. He had wrested the scriptures and transformed the religion of the living, redeeming council of Gods into the worship of an ancient and absent law giver whose will was reified in texts that could be authoritatively interpreted only by scribes like himself who were in the pay of and were controlled by the king.

While Sherem still fears he may be lost, his last words — “I confess unto God” — and the effect of his final testimony on others both hint that he will be saved by Christ, who focuses not on what we have been but on what we have become through grace. The crowd that has gathered to hear Sherem now experience what he had earlier experienced: “when the multitude had witnessed that he spake these things as he was about to give up the ghost, ... the power of God came down upon them, and they were overcome that they fell to the earth” (Jacob 7:21). For them (and presumably for Sherem who had the same experience), “peace and love of God was restored again” (Jacob 7:21, 23).<sup>64</sup> The people “searched the scriptures” Sherem had taught them to misread in light of Sherem and Jacob’s testimonies that they testify of Christ (Jacob 7:23). So, though he had been a wicked man, Sherem on his deathbed becomes Jacob’s ally in bringing the people to faith in Christ. Following this confrontation with Sherem (and with the belated help of Sherem), Jacob and the doctrine of Christ seem to triumph.

But they don’t. While Jacob and Sherem seem to create a temporary space for the faith of Lehi, Nephi, and Jacob to exist alongside Deuteronomism, belief in Christ will ultimately disappear from the land of Nephi and the small plates. This loss of the knowledge of Christ is fully apparent 350 years later when the gospel must be restored to the Nephites through valedictory sermons by Benjamin and Abinadi, to whom the

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64. While I don’t share his reading of Jacob’s motives, I am persuaded by Adam S. Miller’s reading of Sherem’s fruitful ministry to the people he had once deceived. Adam S. Miller, *Future Mormon* (Draper, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2016), loc. 624 of 3903, Kindle.

gospel has been revealed anew.<sup>65</sup> These restorations make it clear that Christ and the atonement were no longer remembered, and understood by the Nephites. The original theology of Sherem and the second king, which emphasized Deuteronomic adherence to the Law of Moses, has prevailed.

### **Sheremites in the Land of Nephi**

In the next section of this article, we will review what the small plates tell us about how the gospel of Christ was gradually lost in the land of Nephi. But let us here first demonstrate that Sherem's Deuteronomist theology carried the day, supplanting Jacob's gospel of Christ. Presumably, our best index of what religious and political ideas prevailed in the land of Nephi will be the beliefs and practices of the revanchist Zeniffites who were the final Nephite inhabitants of that land. Having loved the land of Nephi so well that they returned to it after departing with Mosiah<sub>1</sub>, the Zeniffites presumably continued to practice the religion and politics that had become normative in their beloved homeland.

In his account of the land of Nephi 350 years after Jacob, Mormon tells a story that recapitulates the encounter between Jacob and Sherem, with the important difference that the original theology of Sherem, not the theology of Jacob, is now the official religion of the kingdom. The original and recapitulated narratives share the same three main actors: the king, the high priest, and an interloper; the same two theologies: Deuteronomism and the gospel of Christ; and the same story arc: the interloper is defeated and dies but his theology ultimately prevails. The prophet role is reshuffled among the main actors, but the story told in the Book of Mosiah at the end of Nephite history in the land of Nephi is structurally very similar to the one told in the Book of Jacob at the beginning of that history.

The precipitating problem in each narrative is the material and sexual excesses of the second king in the dynasty that governs in the land of Nephi. In each narrative, the excesses are described and a prophet steps forward to condemn the materialism and sexual license of the king and his people (Jacob 2:1–35; Mosiah 11:1–15, 20–25). In the first narrative, the prophet role is played by the High Priest, Jacob, who administers the established faith, the gospel of Christ that has been handed down from Lehi and Nephi. In the second narrative, the prophet role is played by the interloper, Abinadi. In each narrative, the critique of the king sets up a conflict between his critic and a figure or figures who defend him. In each case, the defender of the king is one or more Sophic Deuteronomists.

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65. See Mosiah 3:2–4 and 12:1.

In each case, the Deuteronomist defenders of the king hold that salvation comes only through the Law of Moses (Jacob 7:7; Mosiah 12:28, 13:27) and condemn the prophet as a blasphemer for saying that God will come down among men (Jacob 7:7; Mosiah 17:8). The basis for both critiques of the gospel is the Deuteronomist doctrine that there can be no god with God.<sup>66</sup>

Table 1. Parallel Theological Change Narratives.

KING: 2nd Nephite King, unnamed Attributes: sexual/material excess	KING: 2nd Zeniffite King, Noah Attributes: sexual/material excess
HIGH PRIEST: Jacob (Prophet) Official Theology: Gospel of Christ	HIGH PRIEST: Amulon (Agent of King) Official Theology: Deuteronomism
INTERLOPER: Sherem (Agent of King) New Theology: Deuteronomism	INTERLOPER: Abinadi (Prophet) New Theology: Gospel of Christ
STORY ARC: Interloper is defeated and dies but his views ultimately prevail. Jacob's descendants become Deuteronomists, subjects of the king.	STORY ARC: Interloper is defeated and dies but his views prevail. The children of Amulon embrace the Gospel of Christ.

We thus find the Sophic tradition and Deuteronomist beliefs espoused by Sherem are well established as the orthodox religion in the land of Nephi 350 years after the death of Sherem and Jacob. Now completely disconnected from the Mantic tradition that renewed it and kept it vibrant, the Sophic Deuteronomism of Noah and his priests has become debased and corrupt.<sup>67</sup> A brief, implicit account of how the Nephites lost the gospel of Christ is given in the books of Enos, Jarom, and especially Omni.

### Familial and National Decline

Because the account in the small plates is a peculiar mixture of family and national history, we must often infer what is happening in the entire land of Nephi from what is happening to Jacob's family. And what we discover in this record is a pattern of social and spiritual decline. As

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66. Sherem's role as agent of the king is more implicit than Amulon's. It is apparent from the placement of the story immediately following Jacob's take down of the king and from the fact that Sherem was allowed to preach a theology which was at odds with the theology of Nephi and Jacob, the High Priest.

67. An anonymous peer reviewer noted that "the story of Amulon and his priests is told to highlight their behaving like the fallen angels in the Enochic (very Mantic) literature, and then meeting the same fate."

Table 2 indicates, from the time of Nephi to the time of Chemish, each successive scribe except Amaron writes many fewer words than his predecessor did. Then, the state of the family and state of the nation reaches its nadir in the time of Abinadom, who writes slightly more than his father Chemish. Mentions of the Savior (*Messiah, Christ, Son, Holy One*) also decline dramatically and completely disappear after Jarom. Only the last scribe, Amaleki, a special case discussed below, again mentions the Savior and gives a lengthier history than those who preceded him.

Table 2. Words Written by Each Small Plates Scribe.

Writer	Words	Messiah	Christ	Son	Holy One <sup>68</sup>
Nephi	50414	25	29	18	20
Jacob	14924	2	25	1	17
Enos	1185		3		
Jarom	748	1			
Omni	163				
Amaron	159				
Chemish	70				
Abinadom	98				
Amaleki	937		1		2

The social and spiritual decline of Jacob’s family and the Nephite people is apparent in details reported about each scribe’s life and times. Each man is less imposing than his predecessor. Nephi, who stands at the head of the line — Jacob is as much adopted son as brother (2 Nephi 2:3) — is an extraordinary figure, a prophet and patriarch, an architect, builder, and king. In the land of Nephi — not incidentally, a land named after him — he embodies both civil and religious authority. Jacob acknowledges Nephi’s great influence when he notes that the people began to grow hard in their hearts and indulge in wicked practices only after Nephi died (Jacob 1:15).

Jacob, who succeeds Nephi as the keeper of the small plates, is a spiritual prodigy, even Nephi’s equal in things spiritual. He beholds

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68. An anonymous peer reviewer for this article pointed out that the notion of religious decline and apostasy in Table 2 is strengthened by Margaret Barker, who comments on “a pattern clearly associated with the Holy One. Many of its elements are of the later apocalypses, such as visions, heavenly tablets, theophany, and angelic judgement ... and there are associations with the temple” (Barker, *The Older Testament*, 106). That set of associations underscores the significance of writers after Nephi and Jacob dropping the term Holy One.

the Savior and receives an assurance of exaltation while still a youth (2 Nephi 2:3–4). He becomes a presiding High Priest in the land (2 Nephi 5:26). But, though it is considerable, Jacob’s stature doesn’t equal Nephi’s. As noted above, civil and religious authority were divided in his time. Jacob remains influential, but his social influence is countervailed by that of the less righteous king.<sup>69</sup> In his temple sermon, Jacob persuades people to repent of their sins, but these are sins, as Jacob himself notes, which the people didn’t begin committing until after Nephi’s death, so great was the stature of Nephi. In Jacob’s time, Sherem and others begin to reject the doctrine of Christ and publicly teach a competing Deuteronomist theology.

Though he is, in the end, a very good man, Jacob’s son Enos does not have the spiritual and social stature of his father who was a paragon of youthful rectitude and a key community leader.<sup>70</sup> Jacob’s words about Christ sink deep into the heart of Enos, and he provides us with a model of earnest repentance. Following his conversion, Enos prophesies of things to come (Enos 1:19), but he is not, like his father, the High Priest. He is just one more of the “exceedingly many prophets” among the Nephites (Enos 1:22) who find “there was nothing save it was exceeding harshness, . . . exceeding great plainness of speech, [that] would keep them from going down speedily to destruction” (Enos 1:23). The prophetic tradition and doctrine of Christ are still alive, but the people are growing resistant to them.

While Jarom is another fine man, he has even less stature in the community than Enos. Unlike Enos, he doesn’t write any prophesies or revelations, for, he says, “what could I write more than my fathers have written?” (Jarom 1:2). Unlike Nephi, Jacob, and Enos, he doesn’t seem to be among those who actively and prominently teach the gospel to the people. He speaks of the Nephite prophets, priests, and teachers in the third person, as if he were not one of them (Jarom 1:10–12). Jarom describes the people of his time as being hardhearted, deaf, blind, and stiffnecked (Jarom 1:3).

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69. Toward the end of his life, Jacob concedes the normativity of the king’s record and views: “the record of this people being kept on the other plates of Nephi [the large plates kept by the king], wherefore, I conclude this record [the small plates]” (Jacob 7:26). At Jacob’s death, the king could replace him with a fully subordinate High Priest and establish his preferred theology. Omni 1:11 links the normativity of the king’s record with a complete absence of revelation and prophesy.

70. Offering a plausible reading, Spencer W. Kimball wrote, “like many sons of good families [Enos] strayed” (Spencer W. Kimball, *Faith Precedes the Miracle* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1972], 209).

Unlike his grandfather Jacob, Jarom does not critique the Nephite kings of his day. The kings, he says, are “mighty men in the faith of the Lord” who lead them into battle and very strictly enforce observance of the Law of Moses (Jarom 1:5).<sup>71</sup> Deuteronomy required the king to make a personal copy of the Torah and carry it with him at all times (Deuteronomy 17:18–19), so this account of the kings may describe devout Deuteronomist Sheremites (a reading consistent with the beliefs and practices we observe later). But even though they probably do not personally embrace it, these kings permit Jacob’s Mantic theology to coexist with the Sophic Deuteronomism of Sherem. Jarom tells us the prophets and priests of his time teach “the law of Moses, and the intent for which it was given; persuading them to look forward to the Messiah, and believe in him to come as though he already was” (Jarom 1:11). This verse, which clearly refers to Christ, is the last mention of the Savior in the land of Nephi until Abinadi reintroduces Christ to the people of Noah who have no knowledge of him. During the following two hundred and twenty or thirty years, Christ will never again be mentioned by the scribes who write in the land of Nephi.<sup>72</sup>

This reading of the Book of Jarom assumes that the kings who followed the second king continued to prefer the Sheremite theology that served their political interests. It assumes continuity that leads directly from the beliefs of Sherem to those of Noah and his priests. Don Bradley offers an alternative reading of Jarom that frames Jarom’s time as the pinnacle of Nephite cultural achievement and righteousness.<sup>73</sup> In Bradley’s reading, peak righteousness and peak prosperity coincide two hundred years after Lehi’s migration. A rapid descent into wickedness and massive

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71. Unlike their progenitor, Jacob’s descendants are subordinating themselves to the king. By the time of Omni and Abinadom, they are fully subordinate agents of the king who devote their lives to fighting his wars.

72. As noted in Table 2, Amaleki mentions Christ, but he is writing in the land of Zarahemla.

73. As noted in the text, while the kings may be devout Deuteronomists, it is also possible that they remain followers of Christ in Jarom’s day though it is not clear how or why they changed their beliefs from Jacob’s time to Jarom’s. Citing Jarom 1:5–9, Bradley argues Nephite civilization reached its material and spiritual apex in the land of Nephi during the life of Jarom, around the year 400. At that time, the people are very prosperous and seem to be righteous enough to be protected by God. While this may be their civilizational apex, it is not the apex of the Jacob family’s moral and social standing. Bradley notes that 80 years later in 320, Nephite civilization in the land of Nephi has declined to the point that it merits a major warning from God through Aminadi, then suffers massive destruction. Bradley, *The Lost 116 Pages*, 212–14.

destruction soon follow. This reading does not provide a clear account of why Noah shared Sherem's views. On the other hand, my account above does not explain why the Nephites attain peak prosperity while embracing a Josianic faith that brought destruction to Jerusalem. If Bradley's reading is right — and much evidence supports it — the decline we see in the status of the Jacob family does not perfectly match the state of Nephite civilization in this moment. However, the condition of society and the Jacob family again converges in the Book of Omni.

We come, now, to the Book of Omni, where this pattern of decline continues and accelerates. One hundred and forty pages are devoted to treating the lives of the first four generations who lived in the land of Nephi. The next four generations and approximately half of the time covered in the Small Plates are treated in only thirty verses, a striking change in the pace of narration. But it isn't only the pace of the narration that drastically accelerates as the Book of Omni begins. The moral collapse of the scribal line also accelerates as we meet in order Omni, Amaron, Chemish, and Abinadom. Omni is the first scribe in Jacob's line who may be described as "a wicked man." He openly confesses his sins saying, "I have not kept the statutes and the commandments of the Lord as I ought to have done" (Omni 1:2). While he accepts the moral teachings of his ancestors, Omni is a warrior, not a prophet or teacher, and he focuses primarily upon the secular topic of war, having spent his life fighting in the wars of the king. Apparently a representative type for his generation, it should not surprise us that the secular and warlike Nephite nation suffered massive destruction shortly after the death of this wicked man of war.

By specifically characterizing his wickedness as a failure to keep the "statutes and commandments of the Lord," Omni marks himself as a Deuteronomist. The law of Moses is frequently alluded to as the statutes/commandments/judgments of the Lord in Deuteronomy and Exodus. Along with Omni's use, *statute* appears only three other places in the small plates. Laman and Lemuel used Omni's phrasing to commend the Jerusalem Deuteronomists who "were a righteous people" because "they kept the statutes and judgments of the Lord, and all his commandments, according to the law of Moses" (1 Nephi 17: 22). Then, in his deathbed plea, Lehi appears to seek common ground with Laman and Lemuel by plaintively framing his ministry to them as a call to observe the statutes and judgments of the Lord: "I desire that ye should remember to observe the statutes and the judgments of the Lord; behold, this hath been the anxiety of my soul from the beginning" (2 Nephi 1:16). Finally,

in what appears to be rhetoric calibrated to defuse Laman and Lemuel's accusations of infidelity, Nephi declares immediately after separating from his brothers: "We did observe to keep the judgments, and the statutes, and the commandments of the Lord in all things, according to the law of Moses" (2 Nephi 5:10). But as noted above, for Nephi, keeping the law was not the end in itself it appears to be for the Deuteronomists Laman, Lemuel, and Omni (2 Nephi 25:27).

Omni's first son, Amaron, is the exception who proves the rule. He seems more righteous than his father, but there are extenuating circumstances. In the Book of Mormon, there is something about a national cataclysm that clears the eyes and loosens the tongue of a worthy scribe. So upon the larger pattern of national decline, a secondary pattern must be superimposed in which a man of great spiritual and literary stature arises in the last days of a civilization to record the final collapse and offer a final moral evaluation. Amaron, like Ether, Mormon, Moroni, and Amaleki, is such a man. He reports that in his day "the more wicked part of the Nephites were destroyed," then artfully explains why: "For the Lord would *not* suffer . . . yea, he would *not* suffer that the words should *not* be verified, which he spake unto our fathers, saying that: Inasmuch as ye will *not* keep my commandments ye shall *not* prosper in the land. Wherefore, the Lord did visit them in great judgment" (Omni 1:5-7). The negations pile up: *not, not, not, not, not*, and then the people are destroyed.

So like the other great chroniclers of doom, Amaron artfully marks the moral significance of the national disaster he records. And like them, he is unable to regenerate his own goodness. It is striking that, Mormon excepted, none of these men have sons. As a consequence, they cannot follow the usual custom of passing their records and record keeping duties on to their son. Whatever the significance of this childlessness may be historically — and it may be pure accident — literarily it is an apt symbol of the spiritual exhaustion which besets these cultures as they near their end. Goodness can no longer renew itself. Only evil multiplies.

Amaron passes the plates to his brother Chemish, who reinforces the pattern of decline by being a moral cipher. In his perfunctory entry Chemish says, in effect, "it is our custom to write, so I have written. There you have it. I make an end." He lacks moral commitment. His compliance is dead letter.

But it is the son of Chemish, Abinadom, who brings the line to its spiritual nadir. He declares on the one hand, "I with my own sword, have taken the lives of many of the Lamanites" (Omni 1:10) and on

the other, “I know of no revelation save that which has been written, neither prophecy” (Omni 1:11). While Sophic citations of past prophecy are still possible, the Mantic tradition has been extinguished among the Nephites.<sup>74</sup> Abinadom’s life appears to be wholly secular and primarily devoted to taking the lives of his fellowmen. So from the time of Nephi to the time of Abinadom, the scribal line seems to have experienced continual decline in social and moral stature and an ultimate decline in faith with only one man, Amaron, breaking the pattern. Knowledge of and belief in Christ have disappeared, supplanted by the Deuteronomist faith that prevails among the Zeniffites.<sup>75</sup>

### **Amaleki: the Eighth Generation**

The last author to write in the small plates is Amaleki, a man of Mantic faith but Sophic methods. A skilled writer, he gives an artful account of the end of Nephite civilization in the land of Nephi and of the phoenix-like rebirth of prophetic religion out of the ashes of that civilization. Having completed the history of that land, he passes the small plates on to King Benjamin, the prophet leader of a new political order and new gospel dispensation. Amaleki ends the small plates by posing for his readers the fundamental life choice each of them must make having read the record: will they metaphorically return and live in the Sophic land of Nephi or will they remain in the Mantic land of Zarahemla, the place they have come to by reading the words of Nephi, Jacob, and other prophets in the small plates.

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74. See John L. Clark, “Painting Out the Messiah: The Theology of Dissidents,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, 4, no. 2 (2002): 16–27; Gary L. Sturgess, “The Book of Mosiah: Thoughts about Its Structure, Purposes, Themes, and Authorship,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, 4, no. 2 (1995): 107–35.

75. For an alternative, more charitable assessment of the lives of Omni, Chemish, and Abinadom, see Clifford P. Jones, “The Prophets Who Wrote the Book of Omni,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 34 (2020): 221–44, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/the-prophets-who-wrote-the-book-of-omni/>. Jones reads against the grain of the text, denying that Omni was “a wicked man” and that there were no revelations in the time of Abinadom. His reading fits with Mormon’s statement that the small plates contain an account “of the prophets from Jacob down to the reign of this king Benjamin” (Words of Mormon 1:3), which could mean that all keepers of the plates from Nephi to Benjamin were prophets. While consistent with what Mormon says, this interpretation does not explain how knowledge of Christ could have been forgotten and why it needed to be restored through Benjamin and Abinadi. The plain meaning of Omni, Amaron, Chemish, and Abinadom’s words — that an apostasy occurred — does explain why a restoration was necessary.

Amaleki is the eighth generation from the time of father Lehi. The number eight is very often associated with new beginnings in scripture.<sup>76</sup> The best example is Christ's resurrection on the eighth day which inaugurates humanity's resurrection to immortality and the possibility of eternal life. In the Book of Mormon, the eighth generation of inhabitants in the land twice experience a dramatic new beginning in the political and spiritual life of the Nephite nation.

Table 3. Birth, Decline, Rebirth in Eight Generations.

Generation	Land of Lehi/Nephi	Land of Zarahmela (Nephi)
1	Lehi	Mosiah <sub>1</sub> (Zeniff)
2	Nephi <sub>1</sub> , Jacob	Benjamin (Noah)
3	Enos	Mosiah <sub>2</sub> , (Limhi, Alma <sub>1</sub> )
4	Jarom	Alma <sub>2</sub> , Ammon <sub>2</sub> , Aaron, Omner, Himni
5	Omni	Helaman <sub>2</sub> , Shiblon, Corianton
6	Amaron, Chemish	Helaman <sub>3</sub>
7	Abinadom	Nephi <sub>2</sub>
8	Amaleki	Nephi <sub>3</sub>

In the time of Nephi<sub>3</sub>, the eighth Nephite generation in the land of Zarahemla/Bountiful, Christ came to the Americas, did away with the law of Moses, and inaugurated a golden age of faith and peace among the Nephites. Earlier, in the time of Amaleki, the Nephites left their ancestral homeland, the land of Lehi/Nephi after living there for eight generations and began a new religious and political life in the land of Zarahemla.

In Omni, major changes — authorial, spiritual, and geographic — occur in the transition from verse 11 to verse 12 and from the seventh to the eighth generation since Lehi. In verse 11, Abinadom, who has spent his life killing Lamanites in endless wars, knows of no contemporaneous revelation or prophecy. In verse 12, Amaleki opens with Mantic Mosiah<sub>1</sub> who is warned in a dream that, to escape endless war, Nephites who will hearken to the voice of the Lord must flee to the land of Zarahemla. Having the mantle of a prophet and bearing the brass plates, Mosiah<sub>1</sub> and the faithful who follow him help the Mulekites recover their ancestral language and religion. Mosiah<sub>1</sub> becomes king of the combined peoples. Later, his son, Benjamin, to whom Amaleki gives the small plates, calls

76. Examples include circumcision on the 8th day, baptism at age 8, 8 people on Noah's ark, Jaredites crossing the ocean in 8 ships, Lehi's 8 years in the wilderness followed by a water passage to the Promised Land, and Aeneas being healed by Peter after 8 years of sickness. I am indebted to my wife, Allison, for these and other examples.

his people to the temple and restores the Gospel of Christ that they lost while living in the land of Nephi (Omni 1:25).

Being like Mosiah<sub>1</sub>, a member of both the last generation to live in the land of Nephi where his people have lived for four hundred years and the first generation to live in the new land of Zarahemla, Amaleki is a pivotal figure who lives at a pivotal moment in Nephite history. Four hundred years! Imagine what Amaleki and other Nephites felt as they chose, under duress but trusting in the Lord, to leave the ancient seat of their culture. The importance of this event is reflected in the fact that Nephites “go up” to the land of Nephi in all subsequent returns mentioned in the Book of Mormon just as Jews in the Bible always “go up” to Jerusalem and up to the temple, the homes of their heart.<sup>77</sup> Given the emotional resonance of the land of Nephi for the Nephites, it is unsurprising that Amaleki has a retrospective sensibility. Though firm in his commitment to accept guidance given by God through a prophet, Amaleki’s thoughts remain focused on a time and place that have been tragically and irrecoverably lost.

### **Back to the Future**

Amaleki artfully expresses both his sense of loss and his Mantic faith in the way he structures his historical narrative, for the stories he tells regress both temporally and morally. His narrative focuses on four migrations, all but the last of which he records in reverse chronological order. And so his narrative moves backward in time, treating earlier and still earlier migrations, and backward morally, treating migrations which are increasingly less successful in their temporal and spiritual outcomes.

Amaleki first recounts the most recent and, from his point of view, most successful exodus, Mosiah<sub>1</sub>’s migration from the land of Nephi to the land of Zarahemla. As noted above, this migration represents a second beginning for the Book of Mormon, the establishment of a second set of eight generations, who will live in Zarahemla/Bountiful until Christ comes. This migration recapitulates at the close of the small plates the migration with which the plates opened, again establishing the Nephites in a homeland where they will dwell for many centuries and be the standard bearers of the true faith.

Amaleki highlights ironic similarities between Nephi’s founding migration to the land of Nephi and Mosiah<sub>1</sub>’s disestablishing migration

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77. “Why Does Nephi Always Go Down to the Wilderness and Up to Jerusalem?” *Book of Mormon Central*, Jan. 7, 2016, <http://www.knowhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/content/why-does-nephi-always-go-down-wilderness-and-jerusalem>.

from that same land. The two migrations have the same immediate cause, conflict with the Lamanites, the same divine call to migrate, the same sounding of the people, the same hasty departure, the same warnings and revelations, preaching and prophesying. Amaleki highlights this ironic parallel as he describes Mosiah<sub>1</sub>'s migration by echoing rather explicitly Nephi's account of his journey from the land of Lehi or First Inheritance to the land of Nephi. (Compare 2 Nephi 5:5–8 with Omni 1:12–13.)<sup>78</sup> Seeking peace, Mosiah<sub>1</sub> gathered his people to the temple in the land of Shilom<sup>79</sup> (Mosiah 11:13) and departed into the wilderness, eventually arriving in the land of Zarahemla. The crucial point is that Mosiah<sub>1</sub> led a righteous, and from Amaleki's point of view, completely successful migration which saved his own people physically and the people of Zarahemla spiritually.

Amaleki next recounts the earlier, less successful migration of the Mulekites from Jerusalem to the land of Zarahemla. The remnant of this migration has fallen into cultural and spiritual decay. According to Amaleki, "their language had become corrupted; ... and they denied the being of their creator; and [neither] Mosiah, nor the people of Mosiah, could understand them" (Omni 1:17). While the Mulekites are in a fallen state, they receive with rejoicing the restoration of the scriptures through the prophet Mosiah<sub>1</sub>, so they are not entirely lost. (Indeed, for Amaleki's readers, they model the appropriate response for a once faithful but now apostate people when the gospel is restored to them.) Mosiah<sub>1</sub> becomes king of both peoples. The graft of a righteous Nephite branch saves the massive and still vigorous Mulekite root.

Immediately following his account of the earlier but morally less successful Mulekite migration, Amaleki recounts the still earlier and still less successful migration of the Jaredites. In this account, the Jaredite people are described as having departed righteously from the Tower of Babel. But they then unrighteously dwindled to a single man, Coriantumr. In Amaleki's day, only an engraved stone and scattered bones remain to tell the tale of this once great people.<sup>80</sup> He ends his account of the Jaredites

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78. I discuss a more ironic and still stronger parallel between migrations, the Mosiah<sub>1</sub> and Zeniff migrations, in Larsen, "Prophet or Loss: Mosiah<sub>1</sub>/Zeniff, Benjamin/Noah, Mosiah<sub>2</sub>/Limhi" (lecture, Third Annual Book of Mormon Studies Conference, Logan, UT, October 2019).

79. The spelling of Shilom and Shalom (peace) are identical in Hebrew. A vowel shift from *a* to *i* could easily have occurred. On shalom/shalem and the temple, see Butler, *Plain and Precious Things*.

80. Amaleki may feel some kinship with Coriantumr who lived as an alien among the Mulekites, keeper of a text written in a language foreign to them.

in such a way as to emphasize their moral failure: “And the severity of the Lord fell upon them according to his judgments, which are just; and their bones lay scattered in the land Northward” (Omni 1:22).<sup>81</sup>

Amaleki intends for these concluding comments on Jaredite civilization to do double duty. They are also an epitaph for Nephite civilization in the land of Nephi, a token of the just judgment the Zeniffites will merit. Later, in the Book of Mosiah, Mormon places the Zeniffite discovery of Jaredite bones scattered in the land Northward (Mosiah 8:7–8) immediately after a reading of Zeniffite history (Mosiah 8:5–6). In their moment of ultimate misery as they attempt to find Zarahemla, the place they wrongly left, the Zeniffites discover these scattered Jaredite bones which signify the just judgment they merit for having rejected the counsel of God that came to them through the prophet Mosiah<sub>1</sub>.

By recounting these earlier migrations, first the migration of Mosiah<sub>1</sub>, then the increasingly less successful migrations of the Mulekites and Jaredites, Amaleki creates a rhetorical context in which he can conclude the chronicle of his homeland by recounting a final, tragic migration back to the land of Nephi. This last migration does not continue Amaleki’s pattern of temporal regression literally. But figuratively, it does, for it is a desperate journey into the past. Notwithstanding their decision to leave the land of Nephi and follow Mosiah<sub>1</sub> to Zarahemla, a number of Amaleki’s contemporaries, including his brother, were unable to reconcile themselves to the loss of their homeland. After living in Zarahemla for a time, they resolved to return home to the land of Nephi.

This decision to return is a mistake. It continues Amaleki’s pattern of moral regression, for this is the least justifiable of all the migrations he treats. Each of the other three migrations were undertaken at the Lord’s behest to escape destruction in a collapsing society. No matter how badly they ended up, the migrations were initially justified. But this migration represents at the very outset a rejection of the Lord’s counsel. It is the equivalent of Lehi returning to Jerusalem or Jared to Babel. A first half-migration is led not by a prophet of God but by a “stiffnecked man.” It ends in disaster: the stiffnecked man “caused a contention among them; and they were all slain, save fifty in the wilderness, and they returned again to the land of Zarahemla.” Not put off by this great failure — we see here what a powerful hold the land of Nephi had on the imagination of these Nephites — “others to a considerable number ...

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81. Amaleki also echoes Amaron’s earlier destructive “great judgment” in the land of Nephi (Omni 1:7).

took their journey again into the wilderness” (Omni 1:28–29). Amaleki never hears from them again.

This second group of people is Zeniff’s colony. As noted above, we learn about their subsequent tragic history in the Book of Mosiah. In that telling, Amaleki’s point is reinforced: the migration proves to be a serious error and a dead end. Decimated by continual conflict with local Lamanites, a conflict that God had foreseen and sought to forestall, the people are ultimately desperate once more to leave the land of Nephi and settle, even if it be as slaves, in the land of Zarahemla (Mosiah 7:15). When the Zeniffites attempt to find Zarahemla and, thus, save themselves, they discover instead the scattered bones of the Jaredites, which seem to prophesy their own ultimate destiny (Mosiah 8:6–7). Because we hear about them later, we may be inclined to think of Amaleki’s allusion to these Zeniffites in the final four verses of the small plates as a transition which sets the stage for that story which is to follow. But to see the migration in that way is to lose the force and point of Amaleki’s narrative.

Knowing as he does that departure from the land of Nephi was commanded by the Lord, that the first effort to return there was a disaster, that only a few of those who left survived and made it back to the land of Zarahemla, that the Lamanites remain sufficiently powerful to attack Nephites even in the distant land of Zarahemla (Omni 1:24), Amaleki surely believed and expects us to believe that all these people are dead, that their futile effort to return to the land of Nephi represents the final tragedy of that land. In recounting the fate of the Jaredites, Amaleki went back to the future. He expects that, as with the Jaredites, the severity of the Lord will fall upon these Nephites according to his judgements which are just. He is confident that, like those of the Jaredites, their bones lie scattered in the land of Nephi, unburied and unmourned.

Such an ending perfectly fits the pattern of spiritual and political decline among those who reject prophets that he finds recorded in the small plates. He has structured his narrative such that what is known — the fate of the Jaredites mentioned just before he discusses this ill-advised migration — fills in what he assumes we cannot know: the final fate of these faithless Nephites who rejected the Mantic leadership of a prophet and returned to the land of Nephi to be its last Nephite inhabitants. Thus, the image we are meant to have in our mind as the small plates close — and it is not far off the mark from what actually happened — is the same as the one Ether gave us of the slain armies of Shiz and Coriantumr and the one Mormon gave us as he looked over the “flesh, and bones, and

blood” of tens of thousands of his people who were “left by the hands of those who slew them to moulder upon the land” (Mormon 6:15–20).

### **Gifts Given and Rejected**

In Omni 1:23–26, between the image of Jaredite bones scattered over the land, token of the severity of the Lord’s just judgment on those who reject him, and the departure of the faithless, revanchist Zeniffites, Amaleki inserts a seam in his migration narrative that tells us what the departing faithless will face and what they will miss. In verse 24, he speaks of “serious war and much bloodshed between the Nephites and the Lamanites.” Confronted even by those who remain in Zarahemla, this is what will consume the lives of the Zeniffites and what they mostly would have escaped had they remained in Zarahemla to be led by the prophet king Benjamin, “a just man before the Lord.”

By leaving Zarahemla, the Zeniffites also lost the opportunity to hear Benjamin reintroduce faith in “the Holy One of Israel.” They will forego the spiritual gifts “of prophesying, and ... revelations, and ... the ministering of angels, and ... speaking with tongues, and ... interpreting languages” (Omni 1:25).<sup>82</sup> Though the Lord will eventually send a prophet, Abinadi, to warn against the folly of following King Noah, Benjamin’s wicked counterpart in the land of Nephi, most Zeniffites will have no opportunity to “come unto Christ, who is the Holy One of Israel, and partake of his salvation, and the power of his redemption ... and be saved” (Omni 1:26). The people who remain in Zarahemla do receive these blessings under the tutelage of King Benjamin (Mosiah 2:1–5:15).

### **Mantic Faith, Sophic Methods**

The apt, seemingly prophetic quality of this seam in the migration narrative is probably a fruit of the Spirit. Amaleki is obviously a man of Mantic faith. He was brought up, however, in a time “when there were no revelations save that which had been written, neither prophecy” (Omni 1:11). And there are indications that his methods of composition are those of a Sophic scribe. Outside of his migration narrative, most of the things he says quote existing scripture. (In this respect, he is very much like Limhi, another product of that Sophic culture.)<sup>83</sup> His list of

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82. Limhi cannot interpret languages; Mosiah<sub>2</sub> is a seer who can (Mosiah 8:12–17). Benjamin received the ministering of angels (Mosiah 3:2).

83. Ironically, the figure in the Book of Mormon most like Amaleki may be the scholar king, Limhi, the last Nephite king in the land of Nephi. As with Amaleki, most everything he says seems to be quoted from some text written by others. John

gifts of the spirit in verse 24 cites a possible Ur text that is also quoted, more extensively, by Moroni and Paul (Moroni 10:8–18; 1 Cor. 12:8–18).<sup>84</sup> His other gospel reflections in verse 26 mostly quote Nephi or Jacob. Table 4 details the text of Omni 1:26 and the number of times others in the Book of Mormon use the italicized phrase.

Table 4. Omni 1:26 Phraseology Used by Others in the Book of Mormon.

Omni 1:26	Nephi	Jacob	Mormon & Moroni	Christ	All Others
And now, <i>my beloved brethren,</i>	17	16	11		15
I would that ye should <i>come unto Christ,</i>		1	2		
who is the <i>Holy One of Israel,</i>	20	17		1	
and <i>partake of his salvation,</i>	2				
and the <i>power of his (the) redemption.</i>		1	2		
Yea, <i>come unto him,</i>	5				
and offer your <i>whole souls</i> as an offering unto him,	1		3		1
and continue in <i>fasting (fast) and praying (pray),</i>			11		1
and <i>endure to the end;</i>	4	1	1	1	
and <i>as the Lord liveth,</i>	4		3	1	6
<i>ye will (shall) be saved.</i>	1				2

Ten of the eleven phrases of Amaleki’s theological statement include words taken verbatim or nearly verbatim from Nephi or Jacob. Setting aside the special cases of Mormon, Moroni, and Christ, only five phrases Amaleki uses in this verse are used by the many other people who are quoted in the Book of Mormon. Almost half of the incidence of shared words are Alma saying “my beloved brethren,” an expression he used

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Gee, “Limhi in the Library,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1, no. 1 (1992): 54–66. As noted in the text, the connecting thread is that Limhi, like Amaleki, was raised in the Sophic culture of the land of Nephi.

84. See Nicholas J. Fredercik, “Evaluating the Interaction Between the New Testament and the Book of Mormon: A Proposed Methodology,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 24 (2015): 1–30, for a review of perspectives on this textual parallel.

frequently. That phrase and the common oath, “as the Lord liveth,” make up 85% of the overlap with all other Book of Mormon authors.

Mormon, and especially Moroni, are special cases because, as I argue in *Moroni’s Model: Imitatio Amaleki*,<sup>85</sup> there is compelling evidence that Amaleki, the last historian of the land of Nephi, directly influenced their late writings. All of Moroni’s uses of the phraseology in Table 4 and almost all of Mormon’s appear in their accounts of their own civilization’s collapse, the precise context where Amaleki’s words would be most pertinent to their theme. Moroni, who wrote the final chapters of the Book of Mormon, clearly adopted rhetorical strategies and verbiage used by his most similarly situated predecessor, Amaleki.

The heavy vocabulary dependence in Table 4 suggests that Amaleki learned the Gospel of Christ and developed his testimony by immersing himself in the writings of Nephi and Jacob. Revelation having ceased and Christ having been forgotten in the land of Nephi, there seems to have been no other way, apart from personal revelation, for him to have learned about the Savior. Though he was a prophet, even Mosiah<sub>1</sub> seems to have been unacquainted with the doctrine of Christ. Benjamin learned the name and mission of the Savior not from his father but from an angel (Mosiah 3:1–8).

Thus Amaleki, whose tutors are the dead prophets Nephi and Jacob, seems to be a follower of Christ stranded in an unbelieving time, who now sees the first stirrings of a Mantic revival and prophetic restoration of the gospel. Situated himself at the beginning of a restoration, he implicitly calls upon those who read him to embrace the restoration that will be in process when they read his words.

### Like Unto Us

We live in a time which, like that of Amaleki, is saturated in Sophism, the religious sectarian Sophism that was prevalent in the 1820s, which says there are “no such things as visions or revelations in these days” (Joseph Smith — History 1:21) and the naturalistic, secular Sophism prevalent now that denies the existence of spiritual gifts and the rationality of “the gospel or doctrine of Christ,” arguing, among other things, that “no man can tell of things to come” (Jacob 7:6-7). And in our time, as in Amaleki’s, there is an unfolding Mantic restoration of the gospel of Christ that, through the ministrations of prophets, is reestablishing ancient truths and bringing new spiritual light and knowledge into the world.

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85. Forthcoming.

Amaleki artfully marks two paths that are open to people thus situated who have read through the small plates and have come to his concluding message. Reflecting clear thinking about the options that is probably the product of extended, passionate discussions with his brother, Amaleki confronts his readers with a life-defining question: Will you remain with the prophets in Zarahemla or will you return to the land of Nephi. Amaleki and his brother are our surrogates. God honors our agency, so like them, we get to choose the world in which we will live, the Sophic land of Nephi or the Mantic land of Zarahemla.

If having read the small plates, we exercise Sophic faith, we will live in a world where projections from the imagination and self-perceptions of Joseph Smith form the text of the Book of Mormon. We may read the vocabulary similarities in the writings of Nephi, Jacob, Amaleki, Mormon, and Moroni as artifacts of the Mosiah first, Words-of-Mormon last composition of the Book of Mormon.<sup>86</sup> (Tight integration between the books of Omni and Mosiah that I discuss elsewhere<sup>87</sup> makes that reading problematic.) We may read the engraved stone of Coriantumr with its ancient history written in a language that only a prophet can translate as a reflection of Smith's aspiration to have such a text and to be such a prophet. We may read Amaleki's exhortation that people not return to the land of Nephi but rather remain in Zarahemla with a prophet and Christ and gifts of the Spirit as a final value proposition that Smith put to his 19th-century readers as he wrapped up the writing of his book. We may read the implied warning about the severity of the Lord's just judgment falling upon us if we return to the land of Nephi as attempted coercion through an empty threat. Such a reading would come as no surprise to the last author of the small plates, whether it be Joseph Smith or Amaleki. The small plates tell us that the rejection of revelation and the leadership of prophets is the norm for humanity.

But if, having read the small plates, we exercise Mantic faith, we will live in a world suffused with the presence and power of God, where to restore lost truths the corporeal Father and Son appear in pillars of fire to prophets, ancient and modern. Elohim will be for us behind the temple

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86. Brent Lee Metcalfe, "The Priority of Mosiah: A Prelude to Book of Mormon Exegesis," in *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993), 395–444. See also Clifford P. Jones, "That Which You Have Translated, Which You Have Retained," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 43 (2021): 1–64, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/that-which-you-have-translated-which-you-have-retained/>.

87. Larsen, "Prophet or Loss."

veil in the most holy place. Yahweh will be for us an unblemished lamb, sacrificed for our sins upon the altar of the temple, and he will be the atoning Christ suffering for us in the Garden of Gethsemane and on the cross. We will have a Mother as well as a Father in Heaven. We will see richness in the relationships between Book of Mormon authors, Amaleki being a close reader of Nephi and Jacob, Mormon and Moroni close readers of Amaleki. We will adhere to a living faith, animated by manifest gifts of the Spirit and guided by prophets who still walk among us.

While the small plates, as they close, imply that we get to choose which of the two lands we will live in, Sophic Nephi or Mantic Zarahemla, Amaleki makes it clear that we do not fully determine what we encounter in those metaphorical lands. And the outcomes he briefly describes are much more fully revealed by Mormon in the Book of Mosiah. The land of Nephi becomes the debauched, sensual kingdom of King Noah. The temple in the land of Zarahemla becomes the holy place where inhabitants of the land are reborn as purified sons and daughters of Christ through the valedictory ministrations of their prophet king, Benjamin. Decide, Amaleki implicitly tells us, where you want to live.<sup>88</sup>

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88. For testimony on the importance of this choice, see Soloveichik's reflections on the profound existential consequences of living as King David did in a Mantic time rather than as modern Jews do in a Sophic time. Meir Y. Soloveichik, "David, We Hardly Knew Ye," *Commentary* (June 14, 2017).