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The False Priests of the Book of Mormon

DOUGLAS J. MERRELL

Every prophet adapts his message to the needs of his people. While the central message of salvation through Christ remains constant, each prophet must respond to the challenges of his time, which include the false teachings of the world. Moses preached against idolatry to a people who were idolaters. Jesus ministered the higher spiritual law to Jews who were following the letter of the law of Moses. Paul's letters to each city were unique, not because the gospel had changed, but because his audience had. The study of false religions and philosophies can put the prophets' ministries into context by showing the purpose for their doctrinal discourses.

Many diligent readers overlook what is written about false prophets. There is a fascinating and detailed underlying story of the false prophets in the Book of Mormon. This illustrates that the Book of Mormon is not an invented story; it is a complex history of a real people with competing factions and ideologies.

What were the false religions and false ideas among people in the Book of Mormon? Many false teachers appeared over the thousand-year history of the Nephite people. This paper focuses on an ideology that reached the height of its power in the time period covered by the books of Mosiah and Alma, but whose influence stretches throughout history and persists today. This philosophy is what the prophets called priestcraft, which Nephi said is

“that men preach and set themselves up for a light unto the world, that they may get gain and praise of the world” (2 Nephi 26:29).

Other characteristics of preachers of priestcraft in the Book of Mormon include:

- They preach for money and the glory of the world, not for the glory of God.
- They are cunning, and they flatter the people.
- They preach that people need not fear the consequences of sin.
- They say there is no Christ.
- They wish to establish a king.

THE PRIESTS OF NOAH

Under the wicked King Noah, priestcraft flourished. King Noah first removed all the priests of his father and “consecrated new ones in their stead, such as were lifted up in the pride of their hearts” (Mosiah 11:5). The priests flattered the people and corrupted their hearts by turning them to idolatry and whoredoms. The king consumed his life in riotous living with his wives and concubines, constructing vineyards and winepresses to quench his thirst for wine, and building luxurious palaces and towers for himself and his priests. “The seats which were set apart for the high priests, which were above all the other seats, he did ornament with pure gold; and he caused a breastwork to be built before them, that they might rest their bodies and their arms upon while they should speak lying and vain words to his people” (Mosiah 11:11).

There has always been a close relationship between priestcraft and monarchy. Priestcraft seeks the glory and riches of this world, and priests infected with it always seek to establish a king and to reign with him. When Abinadi prophesied against King Noah, the priests challenged the authority of Abinadi to accuse the king.

These priests were angry with Abinadi because his words would destroy their craft; their authority to rule the people would be undermined by a true prophet of God.

One such priest revealed this philosophy when he asked Abinadi the meaning of Isaiah 52:7–10, which proclaims, “How beautiful . . . are the feet of [those who] . . . publish peace [so that] all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of God.” The priests accused Abinadi of heresy against their guilt-free religion. In the next four chapters of Mosiah, Abinadi clarifies the true meaning of the “good tidings” (Isaiah 52:7), or gospel of peace. He condemns them for not teaching or obeying the Ten Commandments. He recites Isaiah 53, explaining that all the holy prophets had testified that Christ would break the bands of death and that through Christ all could be redeemed from their fallen state.

Eventually, Noah and his priests condemned Abinadi to death for his belief in Christ. Noah said, “For thou hast said that God himself should come down among the children of men; and now, for this cause thou shalt be put to death unless thou wilt recall all the words which thou hast spoken evil concerning me and my people” (Mosiah 17:8). Abinadi died, but he had already convinced Alma to abandon priestcraft; Alma became a holy prophet and rescued thousands from unbelief.

THE ORDER OF NEHOR

The priestcraft that pervades the book of Alma is upheld by the order of Nehor. This philosophy was around before Nehor and may have begun with a group of unbelievers in the time of King Mosiah: “They did not believe the tradition of their fathers. They did not believe what had been said concerning the resurrection of the dead, neither did they believe concerning the coming of Christ” (Mosiah 26:1–2). They were idolatrous, they would not be baptized, and they were “a separate people as to their faith” (Mosiah

26:4). They tried to destroy the Church and flattered many away. Alma the Younger and the sons of Mosiah were unbelievers until their conversion. Then, in turn, the unbelievers persecuted them after their conversion. Nehor came immediately after these unbelievers and held similar beliefs.

Nehor preached “that which he termed to be the word of God, bearing down against the Church; declaring unto the people that every priest and teacher ought to become popular; and they ought not to labor with their hands, but that they ought to be supported by the people. And he also testified unto the people that all mankind should be saved at the last day, and that they need not fear nor tremble, but they might lift up their heads and rejoice; for the Lord had created all men, and had also redeemed all men; and, in the end, all men should have eternal life” (Alma 1:3–4). The people supported him with their money, and he established a church after the manner of his preaching. He preached that:

- Priests should be popular and should be supported by the people.
- God had saved all men.
- There was no need for repentance, therefore no need for a Savior.
- There was no bodily resurrection.

The prophets repeated several themes to combat this philosophy:

- Priests must labor with their own hands for their support.
- Salvation is free.
- Christ will rescue the wicked only if they repent and are born again.
- There is a corporeal resurrection in which the righteous are restored to righteousness and the wicked are restored to wickedness.

Nehor killed Gideon, the man who had confronted King Noah, when Gideon opposed Nehor's teaching. Alma, the chief judge, sentenced Nehor to death, saying, "thou art not only guilty of priestcraft, but hast endeavored to enforce it by the sword. . . . And thou hast shed the blood of a righteous man" (Alma 1:12-13). "Nevertheless," the record continues, "this did not put an end to the spreading of priestcraft through the land; for there were many who loved the vain things of the world, and they went forth preaching false doctrines; and this they did for the sake of riches and honor" (Alma 1:16).

Amlici, a cunning man after the order of Nehor, had become so popular that he attempted to make himself king. He endeavored "to destroy the church of God" (Alma 2:4). When the voice of the people opposed establishing Amlici as king, his followers consecrated him as their king anyway and rose up to war against the Nephites. They became one of the first groups of Nephite dissenters to join to Lamanites. Amlici died in battle, and his army was defeated.

ALMA'S RESPONSE

Alma's writings reflect the differences between priestcrafts and the Church of God. He stressed that priests do not depend on the people (see Mosiah 18:26, 27; 27:5; Alma 1:20, 26). Alma mentions the recompense of good or evil deeds (see Alma 3:26). Alma the Elder turned down the chance to be king, and Alma the Younger helped end the reign of kings by establishing the first judgeship. The wickedness of the people caused Alma to leave the judgment seat to preach to the people "that he might pull down, by the word of God, all the pride and craftiness and all the contentions which were among his people" (Alma 4:19).

To the people in Zarahemla, Alma preached that a mighty change must take place in their hearts to be saved. Alma spoke on the judgments of God that fall on the wicked (see Alma 5:17-21)

and on how the resurrection of the body is a restoration (see Alma 5:15). He reiterated that it is impossible for unrepentant sinners to inherit the kingdom of God (see Alma 5:24–25). Then he listed specific sins the people needed to repent of, including pride, envy, and being puffed up in the vain things of the world. Alma responded directly to the false teachings that all men are saved, that there is no need for repentance, and that there is no resurrection.

Next, Alma went to the city of Gideon, which was “called after the man who was slain by the hand of Nehor” (Alma 6:7). Gideon was a stronghold of the Church; Alma focused more on the role of Jesus Christ in Gideon but preached the same principles of repentance and the need to be spiritually reborn to inherit the kingdom of heaven (see Alma 7:14–16).

AMMONIHAH

The two ideologies met face-to-face when Alma, the high priest after the order of God, preached in Ammonihah, a city of men after the order of Nehor. The people spat upon him and cast him out, saying, “We are not of thy church, and we do not believe in such foolish traditions” (Alma 8:11). An angel commanded Alma to return, for “except they repent the Lord God will destroy them. For behold, they do study at this time that they may destroy the liberty of thy people” (Alma 8:16–17).

The people did not recognize Alma’s authority. They said, “Who is God, that sendeth no more authority than one man?” (Alma 9:6). Amulek tried to appeal to his social status by stating what good friends, wealth, and reputation he had among them. Alma spoke of the justice of God which hung over the city, how the righteous will reap salvation and the wicked damnation (see Alma 9:28). The lawyers “thought to question them, that by their cunning devices they might catch them in their words” (Alma

10:13). Amulek accused the lawyers of laying the foundations of the devil (see Alma 10:17, 27). The people accused Amulek of insulting their laws and revered lawyers.

Zeezrom, one of their renowned lawyers, confronted Amulek. First he offered Amulek money to deny the existence of God. Then he began to question him:

And Zeezrom said unto him: Thou sayest there is a true and living God?

And Amulek said: Yea, there is a true and living God.

Now Zeezrom said: Is there more than one God?

And he answered, No.

Now Zeezrom said unto him again: How knowest thou these things?

And he said: An angel hath made them known unto me.

And Zeezrom said again: Who is he that shall come? Is it the Son of God?

And he said unto him, Yea.

And Zeezrom said again: Shall he save his people in their sins? And Amulek answered and said unto him: I say unto you he shall not, for it is impossible for him to deny his word.

Now Zeezrom said unto the people: See that ye remember these things; for he said there is but one God; yet he saith that the Son of God shall come, but he shall not save his people—as though he had authority to command God. (Alma 11:26–35)

Zeezrom's questions fit the order of Nehor's belief that God had redeemed everyone and that to say otherwise was to deny God's power. He tried to trick Amulek into denying Christ by having him deny the need for a redeemer. Amulek could not deny God's word "that no unclean thing can inherit the kingdom of heaven" (Alma 11:37; see also 1 Nephi 15:33). Amulek and Alma expounded on the doctrine of resurrection as a restitution and as a spiritual death for the wicked: "We shall not dare to look up to our God; and we would fain be glad if we could command the

rocks and the mountains to fall upon us to hide us from his presence" (Alma 12:14).

The order of Nehor misunderstood the doctrine of resurrection. Antionah, a chief ruler, asked, "What is this that thou hast said, that man should rise from the dead and be changed from this mortal to an immortal state, that the soul can never die? What does the scripture mean, which saith that God placed cherubim and a flaming sword on the east of the garden of Eden, lest our first parents should enter and partake of the fruit of the tree of life, and live forever? And thus we see that there was no possible chance that they should live forever" (Alma 12:20–21). Alma replied that this was the fulfillment of God's word, "If thou eat thou shalt surely die" (Alma 12:23). He explained that this life is a probationary state in preparation for the eternal state to come.

Next, Alma talked of the order of the priesthood. Alma distinguished between those ordained to the order of God and the self-appointed priests. Most of the references to the order of God in the Book of Mormon are found in Alma's writing (see Alma 4:20; 13:1, 6–9) next to references to the order of Nehor (see Alma 14:16; 21:4; 24:28).

The people were furious; they accused Alma and Amulek of reviling against their law, but some like Zeezrom converted and plead for Alma and Amulek. The believers were cast out and stoned (see Alma 14:7). Alma and Amulek were forced to watch as the women and children were burned alive. The chief judge, who was after the order of Nehor, said, "After what ye have seen, will ye preach again unto this people, that they shall be cast into a lake of fire and brimstone?" (Alma 14:14) The real dispute was over the punishment of the wicked. Even the way they taunted Alma and Amulek alludes to their doctrine: "Will ye stand again and judge this people, and condemn our law? If ye have such great power why do ye not deliver yourselves? And many such things did they say unto them, gnash-

ing their teeth upon them, and spitting upon them, and saying: How shall we look when we are damned?" (Alma 14:20–21).

After taunting and abusing Alma and Amulek for days, all the lawyers smote them, saying, "If ye have the power of God deliver yourselves from these bands, and then we will believe that the Lord will destroy this people according to your words" (Alma 14:24). After the last blow, the prison collapsed, delivering Alma and Amulek and killing all the lawyers and judges.

The people of Ammonihah "repented not of their sins, ascribing all the power of Alma and Amulek to the devil; for they were of the profession of Nehor, and did not believe in the repentance of their sins" (Alma 15:15). Likewise, Zeezrom's conversion was ascribed to the devil. Zeezrom and other believers established a church in Sidom.

The Lamanites attacked the city and "every living soul of the Ammonihahites was destroyed, and also their great city, which they said God could not destroy, because of its greatness. . . . And it was called Desolation of Nehors; for they were of the profession of Nehor, who were slain" (Alma 16:9–11). Alma strengthened the Church, "having got the victory over the devil, and the word of God being preached in its purity" (Alma 16:21).

THE NEHORS AMONG THE LAMANITES

The order of the Nehors spread quickly to the Lamanites by Nephite dissenters. Aaron met Nehors when he preached in the city of Jerusalem: "They had built synagogues after the order of the Nehors; for many of the Amalekites and the Amulonites were after the order of the Nehors" (Alma 21:4). An Amalekite contended with him, saying, "How knowest thou the thought and intent of our hearts? How knowest thou that we have cause to repent? How knowest thou that we are not a righteous people? Behold, we have built sanctuaries, and we do assemble ourselves

together to worship God. We do believe that God will save all men" (Alma 21:6). Aaron asked if he believed Christ would come. He replied, "We do not believe in these foolish traditions" (Alma 21:8). Aaron expounded on the same principles: the resurrection of the dead and the coming of Christ as the only redemption for mankind (see Alma 21:9).

DOCTRINAL CHAPTERS OF ALMA 39–42

The commandments Alma gave to his son Corianton are perhaps the most complete response to the Nehors. Corianton was struggling with much the same problems. Alma 39 is an exhortation for Corianton to repent, naming the specific sins he committed. Alma answered the question, how do you know that Christ will come so far in the future? (see Alma 11:30; 21:8; 30:13, 15). "Behold, I say unto you, is not a soul at this time as precious unto God as a soul will be at the time of his coming?" (Alma 39:17).

Alma taught the doctrine of resurrection in Alma 40. He said to Corianton, "I perceive that thy mind is worried concerning the resurrection of the dead" (Alma 40:1). Alma explained that some have thought that the "raising of the spirit or soul" (Alma 40:15) was what was meant by resurrection. He explained that the corporeal resurrection is when "the soul shall be restored to the body, and the body to the soul; yea, and every limb and joint shall be restored to its body" (Alma 40:23). Alma stressed that the resurrection is a restoration of the spirit to the body and a restoration of good to good and evil to evil: "Ye shall [not] be restored from sin to happiness. . . . The meaning of the word *restoration* is to bring back again evil for evil, or carnal for carnal, or devilish for devilish—good for that which is good; righteous for that which is righteous" (Alma 41:10, 13; emphasis added). Alma said that "some have wrested the scriptures, and have gone far astray because of this thing. And I perceive that thy mind has been worried also concerning this

thing" (Alma 41:1). Alma refers to wresting the scriptures one other time when he is accusing the Ammonihahites (see Alma 13:20).

"I perceive there is somewhat more which doth worry your mind, which ye cannot understand—which is concerning the justice of God in the punishment of the sinner; for ye do try to suppose that it is injustice that the sinner should be consigned to a state of misery" (Alma 42:1). Alma explained that mercy cannot rob the justice of God. Only through Christ's intercession and through true repentance can sinners be saved. This was a direct response to the idea that God had saved all men. "I desire that ye should deny the justice of God no more. Do not endeavor to excuse yourself in the least point because of your sins, by denying the justice of God" (Alma 42:30).

AMULONITES

After abducting Lamanite women, the Amulonites, who were former priests of King Noah, adapted to the changing times and joined the Lamanites and the order of the Nehors. Their cunning and learning helped the Lamanites accept them as teachers. It was these Nephite dissenters who passionately sought to kill and conquer the Nephites. Of all the Lamanites converted by Ammon only one was an Amalekite and none were Amulonites.

The Amulonites were so zealous to kill the Christians that when the Lamanites started to convert, they led the attack on the people of Anti-Nephi-Lehi, and when other Lamanites started to doubt their cause, they were put to death. After the execution of their brethren, the Lamanites quickly grew weary of the Amulonite rule over them, and they hunted the children of Amulon until they were no more, fulfilling the prophesy of Abinadi.

ZORAMITES

The Zoramites were another group of Nephite separatists steeped in priestcraft. Their hearts were set on gold and idolatry. Once a week they would gather and one at a time shout a rote prayer from the holy stand. The basic tenets of their faith were laid out in this prayer; they believed that God had separated them from the Nephites and made them an elect and holy people while all others would be cast to hell. They believed that God was and always would be a spirit and that the coming of Christ was a foolish tradition of their brethren.

The priests cast the poor out of their synagogues, esteeming them "as filthiness" (Alma 32:3). Alma and Amulek preached to the poor Zoramites and converted many of them. The others "were angry because of the word, for it did destroy their craft" (Alma 35:3). They cast out all those who believed in Alma's words. Their hatred was so great that they demanded that the people of Ammon cast out the converted Zoramites. The Zoramites united with the Lamanites, and this dispute caused the war in the eighteenth year of the reign of the judges.

AMALICKIAH

There was a general change of the power seekers from priestcraft to king-men and then to robbers. Amalickiah and his king-men caused the next great Nephite rebellion. There was nothing to suggest that Amalickiah was a priest; he wished to be king and his primary goals were "to destroy the church of God, and to destroy the foundation of liberty" (Alma 46:10). Many of his supporters were lower judges seeking power. Amalickiah flattered many into following him, thereby leaving the Church. The Amalickiahites rebelled against the Nephites; Amalickiah fled and by intrigue became the king of the Lamanites and led the

Lamanites against his former people.

The wars in the book of Alma were caused more by religious than national disputes. All the original Nephites and Lamanites were switching nations so that it became those against the Christians fighting those with the Christians. The Nephite dissenters, all of whom had an undying hatred of the Christians, instigated these wars. Their common goal was to crush the Church (see Alma 46:10). This is why they referred to the Nephite cause as the cause of Christ. "They might maintain that which was called by their enemies the cause of Christians" (Alma 48:10).

The war was a bitter civil war; former Nephites fought Nephites, and former Lamanites fought Lamanites. The letters that were exchanged reeked of enmity. Moroni wrote to Ammoron, "Ye will pull down the wrath of that God whom you have rejected upon you, even to your utter destruction. . . . We will maintain our religion and the cause of our God. . . . It supposeth me that thou art a child of hell" (Alma 54:9–11). Ammoron replied, "We will wage a war which shall be eternal, either to the subjecting the Nephites to our authority or to their eternal extinction" (Alma 54:20).

The Christians vanquished their foes but not until after another group of king-men rebelled against Pahoran, seized the capital, and agreed to offer it to the Lamanite king. Pahoran took refuge in Gideon which was still a Christian stronghold until Moroni was able to rally the people to purge the capital of traitors and defeat the Lamanite army.

LESSONS LEARNED

What do we learn from this study of false religions? First, the reason the prophets spent so much effort reiterating the justice of God, the restitution of all things, and the resurrection was because these were the issues with which the people struggled. Second, we

learn that the spread of priestcrafts had serious consequences. The wars in the book of Alma were a direct result of religious disputes. All of the Nephite dissenters went to war because they wished to destroy the Christians. Third, the world has never been rid of priestcraft; there are still many that preach for riches and the glory of men. Second Nephi 28 specifically warns of priestcraft in the last days, and the Revelation of John prophesies of false priestcraft in the days before the Second Coming (see Revelation 13). The words of the prophets that fought priestcrafts still apply today.

CONCLUSION

Several priestcrafts that were spread during the time period covered by the books of Mosiah and Alma had a major effect on the Book of Mormon people. Studying these false religions helps us to understand several developments in the Book of Mormon. The prophets' emphasis on the resurrection as a restoration of evil to evil and good to good is in response to the priestcraft belief that God had saved all men. The prophets defended Christ's saving power because those who practiced priestcraft believed that no Savior was needed. These priests also sought political power and aided the king-men. The religious and political disputes of these priests and king-men caused the lengthy wars in the book of Alma.