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Seven Tribes: An Aspect of Lehi's Legacy

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Jacob 1:13 "They were called Nephites, Jacobites, Josephites, Zoramites, Lamanites, Lemuelites, and Ishmaelites."

Several years ago it was observed that the descendants of Lehi's party consistently divided themselves into seven tribes. Three times in the Book of Mormon these seven are mentioned, each time in the rigid order of "Nephites, Jacobites, Josephites, Zoramites, Lamanites, Lemuelites, and Ishmaelites" (Jacob 1:13; 4 Nephi 1:38; Mormon 1:8). Significantly, these references come from the earliest as well as the latest periods of Nephite history, indicating the importance and persistence of kinship as a basic element in this society.¹ Now it has been discovered that the origin of this stable societal structure can be traced back to the words of Lehi himself.

One of the many enduring legacies of Lehi's last will and testament appears to be the organization of his descendants into seven tribes. After speaking to several of his sons collectively (see 2 Nephi 1:1–29), Lehi spoke first to Zoram (see 2 Nephi 1:30–32), second to Jacob (see 2 Nephi 2), third to Joseph (see 2 Nephi 3), fourth to the children of Laman (see 2 Nephi 4:3–7), fifth to the children of Lemuel (see 2 Nephi 4:8–9), sixth to the sons of Ishmael (see 2 Nephi 4:10), and seventh to Nephi and Sam together (see 2 Nephi 4:11). This seems to be the precedent that established the social and legal order that lasted among these people for almost one thousand years. The seven groups recognizable here are exactly the same as those listed in Jacob 1:13, 4 Nephi 1:38, and Mormon 1:8.

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Several interesting things can be said about this arrangement:

1. The list was widely used. As a rule, most people named in the Nephite record can be clearly identified as belonging to one of these seven groups. This is a rather amazing element sustained almost imperceptibly throughout the Book of Mormon.

2. The structure was enduring. Though different forms of government might come and go in Nephite history, the underlying family fabric of this society remained permanent. Even in the darkest days of political collapse, all the people still had "much family," and the tribal structure was present to supplant the collapsed government (see 3 Nephi 7:2-4).

3. The arrangement was also foundational. Only the idea that Lehi originated this tribal organization can comfortably explain why it persisted so long and was recognized both by the Nephites and by the Lamanites. This is evidence that Lehi's last words to his sons were taken as being constitutionally definitive. Thus, there are Jacobites and Josephites, but never Samites, in the Book of Mormon.

4. In many ways, Lehi is acting here like Jacob of old. Both Jacob and Lehi pronounced their blessings to "all [their] household," who had gathered around them shortly before they died. The aim was to organize a household of God in a new land of promise (see 2 Nephi 4:12; Genesis 49). Both organized their posterity into tribal groups in the patriarchal tradition of ancient Israel. The claim that Lehi chose that patriarchal role is borne out by the fact that to the end the Nephites remembered Lehi as "Father Lehi." As the Israelites speak of Abraham as "Father Abraham," so the Nephites, including Enos, Benjamin, Alma, Helaman, Nephi, and Mormon, uniformly remembered Lehi as "our father Lehi" (Enos 1:25; Mosiah 1:4; 2:34; Alma 9:9; 18:36; 36:22; 56:3; Helaman 8:22; 3 Nephi 10:17). Indeed, Lehi is the *only* figure in Nephite history called "our father," apparently in reference to his position at the head of Nephite society and religion.

5. Division of these people into kin-based tribes served several functions – religious, military, political, and legal. The Is-

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raelite tribe of Levi was given priestly duties (see Numbers 3:6), as was the family of Jacob and his recordkeeping posterity in the Book of Mormon (see 2 Nephi 2:3). The armies of Israel were numbered according to tribe (see Numbers 1), much like the Nephite practice that “numbered” allies as members of their group (see 3 Nephi 2:13–14).

Land law also was fundamentally interrelated with the tribal structure of Israelite society. Lands of inheritance could not be permanently sold outside of a given tribe, according to a ruling dating back to Moses himself (see Numbers 36:7). Indeed, a “land of inheritance” was unthinkable under the law of Moses without a family structure and a legal system that gave rights of family foreclosure, redemption, and preemption to next of kin. Since Nephi reports that his people observed the law of Moses “in all things” (2 Nephi 5:10), they apparently followed the law of Moses regarding their land laws—another function served by Lehi’s division of his family into these seven paternal groups.

Thus, the sevenfold division of the people was an important feature of Nephite civilization. It may even have set a pattern for other Nephite organizations. After all, Alma established “seven churches in the land of Zarahemla” (Mosiah 25:23), and traditions claim that ancient Mesoamericans sprang from seven “caves” or lineages.²

This Update reflects the work of John L. Sorenson, John A. Tvedtnes, and John W. Welch in November 1987. This research has been developed further in John W. Welch, “Lehi’s Last Will and Testament: A Legal Approach,” in Monte Nyman and Charles Tate, eds., Second Nephi: The Doctrinal Structure (Provo: Religious Studies Center, 1989), esp. 68–70; and John A. Tvedtnes, “Book of Mormon Tribal Affiliation and Military Castes,” in Stephen Ricks and William Hamblin, eds., Warfare in the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1990), 296–326.

Notes

1. See John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1985), 310–13.

2. Mentioned in *ibid.*, 313, and Ross T. Christenson, “The Seven Lineages of Lehi,” *New Era* 5 (1975): 50–51.