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## The Political Economy of the Nephites

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**Abstract:** Power was the most crucial theme in Book of Mormon history. The rivalry of Lamanites and Nephites began and ended as a fight over who should and would control Lehi's people. To grasp the bases of power, and thus of the nature of the conflicts that pervade Mormon's record, is necessary if we are to understand the lessons it holds for us. For us to grasp "what great things the Lord hath done" (Title Page) for the people of that book, we will find it necessary to come to a deeper understanding of why their history took the course it did. Only in the light of that deeper understanding will we be capable of fully appreciating the religious elements ("doctrine") that informed and resulted from their historical course.

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**P**ower was the most crucial theme in *Book of Mormon* history. The rivalry of Lamanites and Nephites began and ended as a fight over who should and would control Lehi's people. To grasp the bases of power, and thus of the nature of the conflicts that pervade Mormon's record, is necessary if we are to understand the lessons it holds for us. For us to grasp "what great things the Lord hath done" (Title Page) for the people of that book, we will find it necessary to come to a deeper understanding of why their history took the course it did. Only in the light of that deeper understanding will we be capable of fully appreciating the religious elements ("doctrine") that informed and resulted from their historical course.

The power issue arose through the reluctance of older brothers Laman and Lemuel to accept their father's leadership in the family. Immediately after the family's exodus from Jerusalem, because of their "stiffneckedness" they "did murmur against their father" and, according to Nephi, "sought to take away" his life (1 Nephi 2:11-13). Intimidated by a divine manifestation "they did as he commanded them" but with still-rebellious hearts (verse 14). Again and again in the following years their unwillingness was brought to reluctant compliance by events beyond themselves. But Nephi faithfully followed his father. The Lord turned the differing responses into a test of qualities for rulership. He told Nephi that "inasmuch as thy brethren shall rebel against thee, they shall be cut off from the presence of the Lord. And inasmuch as thou shalt keep my commandments, thou shalt be made a ruler and a teacher over thy brethren" (1 Nephi 2:21-22). As Noel B. Reynolds has explained, a fundamental purpose in Nephi's reporting (in the books of 1 and 2 Nephi) the incidents of conflict between him and his brothers and their resolution in his favor was to justify to history that the Lord had legitimately conferred the rulership upon him.<sup>1</sup> Almost a millennium later, the dispute was finally resolved,

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in mortality, at the hill Cumorah, where the Nephites were exterminated (see Mormon 6).

Nowhere are the underlying issues made clearer than in written arguments made by the leaders of opposing factions during the middle period of Nephite history. They were Moroni<sub>1</sub>, the Nephite war captain in the first century B.C., and Ammoron, a Nephite dissenter who had become the Lamanite king. The former, in the face of what he considered recalcitrance and hypocrisy by the latter, angrily wrote, if you will not do thus and so, "I will come against you with my armies; yea, even I will arm my women and my children, and I will come against you, and I will follow you even into your own land, which is the land of our first inheritance; yea, and it shall be blood for blood, yea, life for life; and I will give you battle even until you are destroyed from off the face of the earth" (Alma 54:12). Ammoron's response was just as adamant: "Behold, your fathers did wrong their brethren [Laman<sub>1</sub> and Lemuel], insomuch that they did rob them of their right to the government when it rightly belonged unto them. And now behold, if ye will lay down your arms, and subject yourselves to be governed by those to whom the government doth rightly belong, then will I cause that my people shall lay down their weapons" (verses 17-18). If not, "we will wage a war which shall be eternal, either to the subjecting the Nephites to our authority or to their eternal extinction" (verse 20).

This struggle dominated the thinking of many of the leaders of both rival peoples. But the stakes were far greater than mere personal pride or political office. That can be seen in another exchange of letters eighty years later. There we detect more of the meaning behind the angry rhetoric. This time the conflict involved a confederation of Nephites and friendly Lamanites on the one hand versus a great robber combine on the other. The right to rule was again the crux. Giddianhi, "the governor of...the secret society of Gadianton" (3 Nephi 3:9), addressed Lachoneus, governor of the land of the Nephites, thus: "Yield up unto this my people, your cities, your lands, and your possessions, rather than that they should visit you with the sword...I hope that ye will deliver up your lands and your possessions, without

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the shedding of blood, that this my people may recover their rights and government, who have dissented away from you because of your wickedness in retaining from them their rights of government” (3 Nephi 3:6, 10). It is apparent from the language in this epistle that the nub of the conflict was not just political control, as we today might infer from talk about “rights of government.” Rather, “possessions”—the material perquisites that accompanied the ruler’s office—were seemingly the key issue. To paraphrase a modern catch phrase, Ammoron and Giddianhi were each saying, “Its the economy, stupid.”

We are on tricky semantic ground here. Rulership, wealth, and privilege were so wholly intertwined in the societies of *Book of Mormon* peoples (as in all civilizations in antiquity), that terms current in our discourse today, such as “political structure,” “government,” and “economy,” fail to convey adequately the conceptual categories that were used in Nephite and Lamanite thinking. Our categories artificially separate institutions and functions in society in order to analyze them, but ancient thought did not aim to analyze. It was assumed by all that it was the right of the noble class—by virtue of divine approval—to control virtually all aspects and every instrument of wealth, power, decision-making, and social privilege. Fatalistically, commoners were considered to be simply “along for the ride.” This distinction in thinking between ancient times and our day is so fundamental that it would be misleading to refer to the subject of this paper as, say, “Nephite government” or “Nephite economy.”

There is one area of study in modern social science that provides a helpful label; it is “political economy.” Studies conducted under that heading seek to understand how political and economic matters are intertwined with each other. Its attempt to explain governmental power on the one hand in relation to economic matters on the other makes it a suitable label to indicate what this article seeks to elucidate about Nephite society.

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## *The basis of government according to Nephite thought*

The background of Israelite thinking, and thus the background of the Nephites' view of their rulers, was, of course, the ancient Near Eastern civilizations. When it came to formulating the Nephite institution of kingship (and evidently parallel forms among the Lamanites), the model they relied on must have come from two sources: (1) personal experience in the Old World of the founding members of the immigrant parties, and (2) information recorded on the sacred brass plates which the Nephites carried to America (broadly equivalent to "the *Old Testament*"). For the Nephites, the experiential dimension would have come through Nephi and Zoram. They alone (among the males) had personally observed in Jerusalem public manifestations of Judahite rulership, and they would have absorbed some of the popular views in Israel of how kings and their cohorts ought to and did in fact function. (For the Lamanites, it would have been Laman, Lemuel and the sons of Ishmael who brought information about how governing was conceived; of course they did not have access to the brass plates.) There is a slight possibility that courtiers who perhaps accompanied the young prince Mulek from Jerusalem could also have had some influence on Nephite views about governance via Zarahemla, although the monarchical patterns were probably set before the "Mulekites" were ever encountered in the days of Mosiah<sub>1</sub>.

According to the *Old Testament*, Israelite kingship took its basic form in the days of Saul and David.<sup>2</sup> According to the present text of 1 Samuel (which not all scholars consider historically accurate in regard to this matter), the Israelites specifically wanted to copy the governmental ways of their neighbors. "Now make us a king to judge us like all the nations" (1 Samuel 8:5, 20), they told the prophet Samuel. Perhaps from what he knew about the surrounding countries, he prophesied how such a system would work to their harm. His warnings were mostly about economic consequences. A king, he told them, would draft their sons and daughters for his personal service in

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the royal court; he would appoint a large staff of military officers and administrators, who, along with junior royalty, would have to be supported by taxes or tribute payments; he would require his subjects to manufacture his armaments; he would make the people cultivate and harvest the royal fields; and he would appropriate the best of their lands, their grain, and their flocks as his own. Nevertheless, the forms and practices of kingship were adopted by the Israelites, and so were the concepts behind them. For instance, Solomon credited the Lord as the power by which he was established on the throne (see 1 Kings 2:23), mirroring the ancient Near Eastern concept that divine power authorized and supported the king.

A summary of several principles which scholars on the Bible have established to be central to the institution of Israelite kingship<sup>3</sup> will help ground our understanding of what the *Book of Mormon* means when it talks of monarchy.

- The king was the owner of the institutions of the state and as such held ownership, in a formal sense, of all agricultural land.
  - In practice, lands specifically owned and controlled by him were granted to various royal functionaries, or to non-royal officials, as hereditary estates; in return they paid taxes to him and they were obliged to muster military and labor forces from their local subjects as the king required.
  - These elite landlords extracted from the commoners who cultivated the land a substantial portion of their produce (perhaps as much as 50 percent) as tax and rent.
  - This system of land tenure, taxation and furnishing of manpower reinforced the class structure of the society by ensuring that wealth, power and privilege were monopolized by the king and his supporters.
  - A central bureaucracy was the king's mechanism for controlling the various levels of government responsible
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for the military, economic, legal, and ritual activities of the network of cities and villages within the state. (That bureaucracy probably was modeled on Egyptian patterns.) At each level of community, of course, local rulers and their agents had to be supported out of the taxes collected. While “the will of the people” had a certain ultimate role to play in this scheme, it would be misleading to think of the arrangement as approaching “democracy.”

- Widespread belief that the king’s rule was legitimate, just, and effective was of paramount importance if the system was to keep running. Images, attitudes, and ideals associated with kingship were insistently communicated via myth, literary traditions, rites, and icons (such as the temple/palace complex, the scepter, and the throne). Ultimately, a king could be overthrown if enough of the people felt that he was not doing his job, or if he had betrayed his divine charter, or if they had sufficient grievances against the whole system of political economy. Thus those governed did not have a simple passive role in the scheme of rulership, however the only institutions by which the powers of the public could be decisively exercised were violent ones, a palace revolt by a dissatisfied noble who desired the throne enough to risk trying to slay the king, or sedition in which an unhappy sector of the population was mustered in direct revolt under a charismatic dissident.
  - An organized system of religion—expressed particularly as a set of rituals—was crucial in legitimizing the king. The official priests were “his” priests, in theory; they were associated closely with the royal elite class, being supported by tax money or at least by those patrons who controlled major wealth.
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It should be apparent that this form of kingly society was an integral whole, not divisible in practice among conceptual categories such as our terms “economics,” “politics,” or “religion” suggest. This pattern of rule was transferred to Lehi’s New World promised land by Nephi himself (see 2 Nephi 5:18). While details of the system are not systematically sketched in the Nephite record, mention is made of a number of features that were derived from Old World kingship. Those features are made particularly visible in contrasts which the *Book of Mormon* text lays out for us between the pattern of rule by occasional righteous rulers versus the more typical unrighteous ones. Thus Benjamin made explicit how he considered himself different from run-of-the-mill rulers (see Mosiah 2:11-14): he did not tax his people, he did not demand their service to his court, etc. In addition the record of the kings of ancient Israel and Judah was documented on the brass plates of Laban, and that record evaluated the earlier kings according to Israelite cultural standards of rulership.

The discourse on the subject of kingship delivered by King Mosiah<sup>2</sup> further points up features of the conventional system of kingly rule, with which he saw many problems (see Mosiah 29:5-7, 13-19, 21-24, 33-35). He mandated a change in the Nephite system of rule, providing for a chief judge whose powers were more limited than those of a king. However, in many ways the old customs and notions surrounding the king as head of government continued under the “new” system. For instance, judges too were considered “rulers,” who not only “reigned” and sat on “thrones” but controlled the distribution of the government’s resources obtained by tribute or taxation. The chief judge also led Nephite armies in battle. (See Alma 12:20 on a judge as “a chief ruler” in the city of Ammonihah; Alma 35:5, 8, on “rulers” among the Zoramites; Helaman 7:4-5, judges “do according to their wills” and enrich themselves; Alma 60:1, 7, 11, 21, rulers “sit upon your thrones”; Alma 1:2, judges “reign,” the same term used regarding kings; Alma 2:16, and compare Words of Mormon 1:14, the chief judge leads his forces into battle as had the king; Alma 60:19, 34-35, control of tax resources.)

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Moreover, while in the modified system of rule under the judges the people are said to have “cast in their voices” (Alma 2:6) to choose the judges who would “rule” them, this would not have been anything like a “one-man, one-vote” election but probably was an expression of preference by the senior males who led the various kin groups (lineages) who would have arrived at their decision by consultation within their groups and spoke for their unit.

It must be realized that many political institutions familiar to us nowadays were in ancient times undeveloped. Concepts and cultural forms for managing issues of power and authority have been worked out slowly and painfully by the experience of many nations throughout history. Such commonplaces in modern thinking and political practice as career public servants, public record keeping, reliable reports, police, the accepted notion of “an opposition,” elections, and widespread “rights” have allowed modern governments options for adjustment and continuity not feasible in early times.

It appears that the structure of Nephite government had only one solution when it was seriously challenged by opponents. That was military coercion. For instance, when the king-men challenged the system of government by judges, the only mechanism open to them and to their opponents to resolve the issue was organized armed violence. Thus Moroni<sub>1</sub> “commanded that his army should go against those king-men, to pull down their pride and their nobility and level them with the earth” (Alma 51:17). Or consider the later case where Moroni<sub>1</sub>, out in the field with his troops and uninformed about the situation in the capital city, believed that Pahoran, the chief judge, and those with him in charge of the government were disloyal. The only option he could see was, again, violence. “I will come unto you,” he wrote, “and...stir up [armed] insurrections among you, even until those who have desires to usurp power and authority shall become extinct” (Alma 60:27-8).

“Power and authority” were on everybody’s mind among the society’s elite. Those who lacked them wanted to get hands on the levers by controlling the monarchy.

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- “Amalickiah was desirous to be a king,” and his most ardent supporters were “the lower judges of the land...seeking for power.” They had been led by him to believe that “he would make them rulers over the people” (Alma 46:4-5). (Note that this ring leader wanted to become “a king,” that is, any king! )
- Earlier, Morianton had tried his hand at setting up rule over an alliance of the lands Bountiful and adjacent Desolation (see Alma 50:29, 32). (Interestingly, this man with an old Jaredite name hoped to rule over an old Jaredite stronghold; compare Ether 10:19-21.)
- Later, one Jacob, head of a secret combination, was declared king by his band but could not get enough supporters to take over control of the Nephites which is what he wished. So they fled to the land northward to “build up unto themselves a kingdom” (3 Nephi 7:9-12).

And if the ambitious ones could not bring off monarchy in a single step, the ambition for “power and authority” drove them to try for initial control of the judgeship form of government—a kind of watered-down monarchy. The original Gadianton secret group wanted control of the chief judge’s office, to be “placed in power and authority among the people” (Helaman 2:5), but their ultimate faith was in kings, for when the corrupt judges eventually did get control, their real aim turned out to be “to establish a king over the land” (3 Nephi 6:30, see also 21-29).

The evident rigidity or brittleness of the system of Nephite political behavior acted like a shackle to the people. Their devotion to the notions of kingship were so ingrained that, apparently, they were trapped by the institution and its cultural assumptions so as to preclude any other possible institutional forms for dealing with each other.

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*“Your lands and your possessions”*

The concept that formal ownership of (or at least possession of certain legal rights over) lands and other property lay in elite hands is evident in language used in the *Book of Mormon*. The key words that alert us to how the Nephites thought about these matters are “possessions,” “possess,” and related terms. There may have been two senses of possess. Sometimes the word could be translated merely “occupy,” as in Helaman 1:20 (an invading army “took possession of the city.”) But a prime example gives us the more usual and pointed sense, which is that possession involves the right to exploit the resources of an area including its inhabitants. Consider Mosiah 23:29. Alma and his brethren “went forth and delivered themselves up into [the hands of the Lamanites]; and the Lamanites took possession of the land of Helam” where they and their Amulonite toadies then oppressively exploited the goods and labor of Alma’s people for the economic support of the masters (see Mosiah 23:38-39; 24:9).

This pattern of exploitation of what was possessed was, however, not confined to the Lamanites. An event within the Nephite land of Zarahemla shows a similar general arrangement in the control of territory and power over its people. When captain Moroni confronted the rebellious “king men” in order forcibly “to pull down their pride and their nobility” (Alma 51:17, 20), he first defeated them by military force, then he “compelled [their leaders] to hoist the title of liberty upon their towers, and in their cities” (verse 20). “Their cities” and “their towers” make clear that this was a rebellion based in a particular geographical area which the leaders “possessed,” as indicated by the phrase, “their” cities.<sup>4</sup> This may look at first like a mere political showdown, but material measures were involved, for the aim and result was to make them “take up arms and support the cause of liberty” (verse 17). That is, the defeated leaders were forced to arm and muster their people and supply arms and provisions for the war. The rest of the Nephite people were similarly compelled by

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their leaders to be economically and physically involved in carrying on the war, just like those in the cities possessed by the king-men. The demand for obedience and the production of resources for use by the central government was as firmly established and inescapable as in the case where Alma's people in the land of Helam were forced to answer the demands that their overlords placed on them. Whoever happened to be in charge, the pattern of compliance remained the same.

The fact that rulers held certain ultimate powers to demand land and other property, thus "possessing" it in a certain sense, does not mean that families and other elements of society (for example, a temple or shrine?) did not also hold certain rights of ownership. Note that when the people led by Lachoneus and Gidgiddoni had won victory over the robbers, they "did all return to their own lands...every man, with his family, his flocks and his herds, his horses and his cattle, all things whatsoever did belong unto them.... And they did return to their own lands and their possessions" (3 Nephi 6:1-2). Rulers held some, but not all, rights, and the same relationship between group and individual was true in lineages or families.

A series of additional texts moves us closer to seeing the meaning of what it meant to "possess." Tentatively, it appears that to possess means to control the use of, and take advantage of the benefits from, real or personal property, including the resources and labor of the inhabitants of the real property possessed.

Mosiah 7:22. Zeniffites were taxed, "one half of all we have or possess."

Mosiah 11:3. Noah "laid a tax of one-fifth part of all they possessed."

Mosiah 29:7. "My son, to whom the kingdom doth belong."

Alma 7:27. "Flocks, and herds, and all that you possess."

Alma 8:7. Lands, settlements were named "after the name of him who first possessed them."

Alma 22:15. The Lamanite king would "give up all that I

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possess, yea, I will forsake my kingdom.”

Alma 47:31, 35. Amalickiah “entered the [Lamanite] city Nephi with his [Lamanite] armies, and took possession of the city,” becoming the Lamanite king.

Alma 53:2. Moroni<sub>1</sub> “went to the [recaptured] city of Mulek with Lehi, and took command of the city and gave it unto Lehi.”

Alma 58:10. “Our cities, and our lands, and our possessions.”

Alma 58:32. “So great a number of cities, and so great possessions.

Helaman 5:52. Yielded up “the lands of their possession.”

Mormon 2:4. Mormon’s retreating [Nephite] armies “did come to the [Nephite] city of Angola, and we did take possession of the city.”

To “get gain” is a related concept.

Alma 10:32. The object of contentious lawyers was to “get gain.”

Helaman 6:17. “Set their hearts upon riches”; “to get gain, that they might be lifted up”; “to rob and to plunder, that they might get gain.”

Helaman 7:5, 21. “They might get gain and glory of the world”; “to get gain, to be praised of men.”

Among the things desirable to gain was “power.”

Alma 43:5. In contrast to the worldly ambitious luminaries, Nephite loyalists claim not to be fighting for monarchy or power.

Alma 43:6-8. The Lamanite leader Zerahemnah strove to “bring [the Nephites] into subjection...that he might usurp great power over them, and...gain power over the Nephites by bringing them into bondage.”

Alma 46:4. Amalickiah and his cohorts “were seeking for power.”

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Helaman 1:16. Another Lamanite king seeks to “gain power over the Nephites.”

Helaman 2:8. The Gadianton band’s object was “to murder, and to rob, and to gain power.”

Repeatedly and clearly the text of the *Book of Mormon* lets us know that what Lamanites and Nephites alike termed the right of government integrally involved power, possessions, gain and social glory. But underlying the rhetoric, what the Lamanite aggressor leaders, Nephite dissidents, and the robbers really wanted under the banner of recovering “their rights of government” was to live in the manner of Noah, king over the Zeniffites. His pattern of government, like that prophesied by the ancient Samuel to Israel about kings in general, permitted him to be “supported in...laziness, and in...idolatry, and in...whoredoms,” living in a “spacious palace” surrounded by ambitious public monuments and kowtowed to by dependent priests and courtiers (Mosiah 11:6-9). But, excluding only the factor of wisdom, he fit very much in the mold of Solomon, the landed king over combined Israel. Of course the pattern had been known in America earlier among the Jaredites (see Ether 10:5-7), as in many other historically unconnected lands around the world.

### *Nephite production and consumption*

Among the Nephites “possessions” were accumulated primarily on the basis of the wealth produced by the majority agrarian population. The Nephites from the beginning were agriculturists:

- “We did sow seed, and we did reap again in abundance” (2 Nephi 5:11).
  - “The people of Nephi did till the land, and raise all manner of grain, and of fruit, and of flocks” (Enos 1:21).
  - The king of the Zeniffites (a Nephite branch) reported in
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the second century B.C. that “I did cause that the men should till the ground, and raise all manner of grain and all manner of fruit of every kind” (Mosiah 10:4).

- In the land of Zarahemla the Nephite dependence on cultivation is emphasized in the account in and between Alma 3:2 and 4:2, where we learn that “many of their fields of grain were destroyed” by battling armies near the city of Zarahemla; the damage caused a severe, though temporary, famine.
- Military action was, of course, dependent on agriculture; “the people of Ammon did give unto the Nephites a large portion of their substance to support their armies” (Alma 43:13).
- The picture of continuing dependence on grain crops is provided by the report of two disasters, one natural, the other human.
- Helaman 11:5-6 reports a “great famine upon the land, among all the people of Nephi” in which “the earth...did not yield forth grain in the season of grain.”

A generation later (3 Nephi 4:2-3) the Nephites abandoned their settlements in order to congregate in a refuge location to defend themselves against armies of robbers, whereupon the latter left their wilderness strongholds to occupy the formerly settled areas. “But behold, there were no wild beasts nor game in those lands which had been deserted by the Nephites, and there was no game for the robbers save it were in the wilderness. And the robbers could not exist save it were in the wilderness, for the want of food.” The robbers “durst not spread themselves upon the face of the land insomuch that they could raise grain, lest the Nephites should come upon them and slay them” (verse 6).

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The overall structure of the economy is laid out most clearly in a passage in Helaman 6.

“They did raise grain in abundance, both in the [land] north and in the [land] south; and they did flourish exceedingly....And they did multiply and wax exceedingly strong in the land. And they did raise many flocks and herds, yea, many fatlings. Behold their women did toil and spin, and did make all manner of cloth, of fine-twined linen and cloth of every kind, to clothe their nakedness” (verses 12-13).

We see in the same description that the structure of commerce was built on the agrarian base: “The Nephites did go into whatsoever part of the land they would, whether among the Nephites or the Lamanites. And...the Lamanites did also go whithersoever they would, whether it were among the Lamanites or among the Nephites; and thus they did have free intercourse one with another, to buy and to sell, and to get gain, according to their desire. And...they became exceeding rich, both the Lamanites and the Nephites” (Helaman 6:7-9).

Upon such an economic base it became possible for rulers to undertake the construction of substantial public buildings and to support a sizable population of non-producers as well as a military apparatus:

- King Laman and his “lazy and...idolatrous people” subjected the Zeniffites “that they might glut themselves with the labors of” their hands, it was said (Mosiah 9:12).
  - King Noah “laid a tax of one fifth part of all” his people possessed “to support himself, and his wives and his concubines; and also his priests, and their wives and their concubines” Mosiah 11:3-4, 6).
  - Noah “built many elegant and spacious buildings....And
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he also built him a spacious palace” and “a very high tower” near the temple (verses 8-13).

- Zoramite society displayed a similar structure; the poor complained about their leaders, “our priests...[who] have cast us out of our synagogues which we have labored abundantly to build with our own hands; and they have cast us out because of our exceeding poverty” (Alma 32:5).
- The rebellious, newly-rich Nephites in the third century A.D. set out “to build up churches unto themselves, and adorn them with all manner of precious things” (4 Nephi 1:41).
- Commoners who ultimately produced the crops supported not only the elites but also craftsmen (“curious workmen,” Helaman 6:11) who constructed buildings and made “precious things” or “riches” (Mosiah 21:21; Helaman 3:36) which they saw as the epitome of their culture.

It has been supposed by some readers of the *Book of Mormon* that the Lamanite economy differed markedly from that of the Nephites, but that is largely due to not reading the text with sufficient care. The Nephites display a prejudiced stereotyping of their enemies, claiming that they subsisted by hunting, in contrast to the Nephites’ agrarian ways. The difference would have been only a matter of degree, however. As I have argued elsewhere,<sup>5</sup> the large numbers of Lamanites reported, including the existence of Lamanite cities, as against the Nephites’ smaller population, can only be accounted for by a Lamanite economic system that was also basically agrarian. As shown by the lengthy quotation from Helaman 6 above, Lamanite economic activities were essentially like those of the Nephites.

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### *The political structure of “possession”*

By whom and how power was exercised is not explicitly described at any one point in the *Book of Mormon*. We must tease out the way possessors related to possessions from a variety of statements and descriptions in the text plus collateral information from other societies at a similar level of development. Nor is the Israelite pattern of land tenure and economic decision-making, which lay behind Nephite customs and law historically, clearly explained in the *Old Testament*. The picture in that case has to be based on a variety of sacred and secular texts which range from the *Old Testament* to Egyptian economic documents. Taken together, they show a partially feudalistic system that was anciently common throughout the Near East, with some national variations. For instance, King Solomon’s economic transactions are mentioned in passing in 1 Kings 4:21-28 and 5:6-18, but the pattern of taxation and labor tribute is obscured by euphemisms such as “they brought presents” to him; of course that shorthand expression describes a system of taxation. He also “raised a levy out of all Israel” consisting of over 180,000 workmen drafted for his temple project! All told, the picture comes out that kings, their kin and their favorites controlled great possessions in the form of lands, rights to annual or seasonal tax payments (“gifts”) in provisions and goods, and tributary labor. Sacred institutions run by priests were also involved in the economy by receiving payments for services and by owning land which was cultivated for the priests or temples by the farmers, “willingly because they had to.” Families, lineages, and other kin-based units of several sizes also owned or controlled to varying degrees fields (“lands of their inheritance”), vineyards, herds, buildings and other means of production, but typically they had to scabble hard to meet the demands put upon them by their elite, and ultimately royal, overlords in addition to supporting their own.

Recall relevant passages (cited above) from the Nephite record which agree with this picture:

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Mosiah 7:22. Zeniffites were taxed by the Lamanite king, “one half of all we have or possess.”

Mosiah 11:3. King Noah “laid a tax of one-fifth part of all they possessed.”

Alma 8:7. Lands and settlements were named “after...him who first possessed them.”

Alma 22:15. The Lamanite king possessed his kingdom and could give away control over such as he wished of it.

Alma 53:2. Moroni<sub>1</sub> “went to the [recaptured] city of Mulek with Lehi, and took command of the city and gave it unto Lehi.”

King Mosiah<sub>2</sub> laid out vividly the dark side of this picture when he discoursed against monarchy among his people (see Mosiah 29:17-23). He told them that they would be at risk of being “brought into bondage” by one or another wicked king who “has his friends in iniquity,” and “whosoever doth rebel against him he will send his armies against them.” His people looked on Mosiah<sub>2</sub>, as an exception, a monarch who knew the system yet was not “a tyrant<sup>6</sup>...seeking for gain...[nor one who] exacted riches of them” (verses 39-40). We may safely infer from various scriptural passages that fundamental control of lands was exercised by kinship units—probably most immediately and operationally by extended (three-generation) families. Not a single statement in the text when taken in context demonstrates strictly individual ownership. There may have been such a phenomenon, but no evidence for it exists in the record that I can discover. Beyond families lay “kindreds,” which refers to kin-based corporate units presumably composed of multiple extended families with a connection to a common ancestor. (I use the term “lineage” to denote one organizational form of a “kindred.”) A certain level of control of land and other legal rights was in the hands of kin units, however.

The modern term “to own land” often poorly translates arrangements occurring in other, especially ancient, societies. Several types or levels of control of resources were sometimes distinguished.

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For instance, in some societies the right to harvest fruit from a certain tree might be independent of who “owned” the land on which it grew, and all formal members of a community might share the right to gather firewood from a tract of land held in common by the village. Or, operational decisions about who would cultivate a certain parcel of kindred-controlled land for a period of time might be announced by the senior male member of the group, but he would be acting on the basis of consensus in the group, not merely exercising his personal will as the arbitrary “owner.” (Descent was reckoned exclusively in the male line in all instances where descent is alluded to in the *Book of Mormon*, as at Alma 10:2-3.) He would consult with the other kinfolk involved and would negotiate a compromise among competing concerns of members of the group; consideration would also have to be given to rights of surrounding groups, say within a village in which more than one lineage resided.

It would be a serious error for modern readers simply to suppose, as our notions and language about “rights” could lead us to suppose, that Nephite individuals were free to make their own decisions about any issue that was socially significant. An individual’s position and security in ancient societies was assured only by participating in a network of associations, primarily with kinfolk. The individual alone was too vulnerable to stand isolated in a society that was built upon corporate kinship units and class relationships as that of the Nephites was. Thus the *Book of Mormon* correctly paints the picture that, “There was no man among them save he had much family and many kindreds and friends” (3 Nephi 7:4). For instance the ambitious, crooked judges described in 3 Nephi 6:27 “had many friends and kindreds; and the remainder, yea, even almost all the lawyers and the high priests, did gather themselves together, and unite with the kindreds of those judges.”

Furthermore, since these men were of the social elite their attaining educational qualifications for their high role would have come because, as verse 12 reports, people then were “distinguished by ranks, according to their riches and their chances for learning.”

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That is, rich families produced the judges, lawyers, and high priests, who in turn ensured that their kin and friends—their supporters—received favors in return. Even King Benjamin reveals his dependence on a power base of kinfolk, or at least of subjects construed as kin, when he addresses his audience as, “My friends and my brethren, my kindred and my people” (Mosiah 4:4). Where individuals were pried loose from their support units, for whatever reason, they found refuge if they could, in a new set of quasi-kin relations even to survive, let alone to flourish. Two instances reported in the *Book of Mormon* make clear how the system worked. Zoram, Laban’s servant, could be persuaded to accompany Nephi and his brothers peaceably only when they exchanged oaths that assured that he would receive equal legal standing in the party—“thou shalt have place with us.”<sup>7</sup> In fact the language used assured him that he would share in the kin/tribal structure equally with Lehi’s sons.<sup>8</sup>

No doubt the same form of oath and relationship was established to induce Ishmael and his family to come along (see 1 Nephi 7:4-5.) In another instance, Amulek was deprived of his social and legal position in Ammonihah because he joined his fortunes with Alma<sub>2</sub>. At first he had made assertions that sound to us as though he were the individual controller of his wealth (“I have also acquired much riches by the hand of my industry,” Alma 10:4), although he carefully prefaced his statement with “I have many kindreds and friends.” But after Alma and Amulek were imprisoned and then miraculously freed, they were expelled from the city, later to end up in the land of Zarahemla (see Alma 15:1, 18). We are told that Amulek had “forsaken all his gold, and silver, and his precious things, which were in the land of Ammonihah...being rejected by those who were once his friends and also by his father and his kindred” (verse 16). In short the riches that he said he had “acquired...by the hand of my industry” were not truly his but were ultimately under the control of his kin group. Dislodged from his kin system, he was taken in by Alma<sub>2</sub>, probably in the status of “friend.” He thus likely became attached to the high priest’s own kindred as quasi-kin: “He took

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Amulek...to his own house, and did administer unto him in his tribulations” (verse 18). In yet another case, when Ammon sought to establish a position within Lamanite society, he offered himself as a servant to King Lamoni. That role would offer him a livable socioeconomic situation for an isolated individual but with notable social disadvantages. The king, however, liked him enough to offer him a still better connection, as a son-in-law (see Alma 17:24-25). On the contrary, pitiful Korihor ended up without any support network, having to “go about from house to house, begging food for his support” (Alma 31:58).<sup>9</sup>

The principle of building supportive relationships applied to whole groups as much as to individuals. “Those who were the children of Amulon and his brethren, who had taken to wife the daughters of the Lamanites, were displeased with the conduct of their fathers, and they would no longer be called by the names of their fathers, therefore they took upon themselves the name of Nephi, that they might be called the children of Nephi” (Mosiah 25:12). On the same principle, those rebellious fathers, having taken Lamanite women as wives, became elite Lamanites by getting themselves connected as teachers to the king (see Mosiah 23:33-34; 24:1, 4). It seems likely that the “people of Ammon” took upon themselves a quasi-kin relation with Ammon, the key person in their conversion and the leader of their flight to live among the Nephites; he, of course, was prominent, in fact probably the senior male in the powerful Mosiah<sub>2</sub> lineage (see Alma 27:7-15). Moreover, the relationship of the stripling Ammonite warriors to their commander, Helaman, was facilitated by another quasi-kin relationship permitted him to call them his “sons,” and of course they would have termed him “father” (Alma 56:10).

As we have seen, among the Nephites key rights over land and other property were probably vested in kin units. These family lands, however, were controlled to a degree by more encompassing kin units. That is shown in the first century A.D., when the central government collapsed. “And the people...did separate one from another into tribes, every man according to his family and his kindred and friends”

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(3 Nephi 7:2). “Now behold, there was no man among them save he had much family and many kindreds and friends” (verse 4). A pyramidal structure of kin associations must have existed in which extended families, no doubt with certain limited rights, were involved in units of larger scale, lineages or sub-tribes. The largest operational units reported for this time in the passage just noted, “tribes,” were “exceeding great” in size. There is, however, no indication that these tribes reached the scale of the seven more comprehensive “super tribes” of longstanding reference among Lehi’s descendants: Nephites, Jacobites, Josephites, Zoramites, Lamanites, Lemuelites and Ishmaelites (see Jacob 1:13 and Mormon 1:8-9). The tribes which emerged from the breakdown of the Nephite central government controlled their own specific territories: “they did establish very strict laws that one tribe should not trespass against another” (3 Nephi 7:14). (Recall here the “king men”; they probably were “noble” lineages, again with their own territories, as discussed above.) No doubt the independent tribes of 3 Nephi 7 were composed in turn of a number of “sub-tribes,” each of which traced its history to an intermediate ancestor who was claimed in common by the set of component extended families. Within a tribe’s area no doubt the subunits, down to extended families, each exercised certain rights over their own “lands of inheritance.” Their “chiefs and leaders” (3 Nephi 7:14) would have coordinated intertribal issues to resolve potential conflicts among them regarding land use. Perhaps it was a council of subtribal heads who “did establish their laws, every one according to his tribe” (verse 11).

This picture is not of some new-fangled structure of social affiliation and governance that emerged all of a sudden when the government by judges collapsed. These units already were deeply grounded in traditional Nephite society or they would not have emerged so universally; their existence is revealed at this point in time by default. Their earlier existence must have been limited by the national or state political structure; the previously limited powers of decision-making and social control that they had long exercised

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suddenly now expanded to fill the political vacuum. Perhaps they had formerly concentrated on maintenance of ancestral tombs or other sacred structures and on keeping a tribal or sub-tribal historical record or tradition (compare Alma 10:2-3, a sketchy history of the kin group to which Amulek belonged). But now suddenly they faced weightier issues—such as war and peace—which had been ceded to the central system to deal with. Of course, that central system had entailed a cost in resources—taxes or tribute (compare the picture in Moroni’s epistle, Alma 60:19, 22, 24-25). Hitherto a regular schedule of tribute/tax payments would have gone up the chain of authority from local community leaders to regional rulers and ultimately to the control of the chief ruler in the Nephite capital, Zarahemla. After all, it took vast resources to support the “many lawyers, and many officers” in the political heart of the country (3 Nephi 6:11) who were said “to sit upon...thrones in a state of thoughtless stupor” (Alma 60:7) or “in idleness” (verse 22).

There is an aura of sheer democracy in referring to kinship units, but even they must have leaders. No society exists in which all decisions about divisive issues can be avoided. Tribal land had to be allocated to family units; families surely would disagree with other families over questions of fairness or historical rights. Conflicts over disputed agreements or transactions likewise demanded settlement. Ethical and value issues invariably would arise about how powerful people treated lessers or each other. “Foreign relations” must also have been dealt with, including heading up military defense. Benjamin, king over the Nephites, prided himself on being “just one of the folks,” yet he too had inescapable duties as ruler which he considered onerous (see Mosiah 2:11-13).

More often than not tribal or lineage leaders would have been the oldest male or males in the leading ancestral line. While men in such a position typically tread lightly in making decisions, they do in fact have more power than most others in their unit. If they push their advantage, they may become local “rulers” in effect. (Their own people may see pushiness and accumulation of wealth and power on their

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part, nominally in the name of the group, as bringing glory to all.) Thus the seeds of inequality and dominance would exist even in what looks, at first glance, to be an egalitarian structure based on “blood” relationships. While the Nephite record is all but silent on this level of organizational detail, the general principle must still have applied.

While basic rights of land tenure remained in the hands of the structure of kin groups, royalty or other privileged groups among Lehi’s descendants tried to erode that basic control of the kin groups by pushing their own claims to special rights and enhancing their own power. The ambitious did not always “play by the rules” of the culture. For instance, King Noah went well beyond the norms of kingship in his demands to such an extent that his pattern of rule became notorious (see Mosiah 29:18). The word “usurp” signals other cases where someone was perceived as breaking the rules. Thus some Amulonites “usurped the power and authority over the Lamanites” in a certain area (Alma 25:5), and ended up by paying with their lives for going too far (verses 8 and 9). Amalickiah “usurp[ed] great power” over the Lamanites for his own ends (Alma 43:8), while Gadianton robbers at one time were “filling the judgment-seats, having usurped the power and authority of the land” (Helaman 7:4).

The structure of state rulership was, of course, layered. Any administration would obviously involve not only top-level authority but also dependent agents to take care of more localized matters. There could be several levels in such a structure, depending on how large and complex was the polity:

- Rebel Amlici, upon being consecrated king by his faction, immediately “appointed rulers and leaders over his people” (Alma 2:14).
  - The king of the Lamanites, whose realm was far greater, “appointed kings” over the several lands which he had “taken possession” of (Mosiah 24:2).
  - A later Lamanite king too had subordinate kings, including his sons (see Alma 18:9; 20:9; compare 61:8).
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- Mosiah<sub>2</sub>'s ideal pattern of rule by judges involved higher and lower judges appointed "to rule over them" (Mosiah 29:28-29, 41; compare Alma 62:47).
- The Zoramites and the people of the city of Ammonihah both had "chief rulers" in their regions and presumably, then, lesser rulers as well (Alma 12:20; 35:8).
- Amalickiah, desirous to be king over the Nephites, has his most ardent supporters in "the lower judges of the land" who had been led to believe that "he would make them rulers over the people" (Alma 46:4-5).
- The rebel "king men" "were supported by those [of lesser rank] who sought power and authority over the people" (Alma 51:8).

In some cases the regional or local rulers or judges would have been the "natural" leaders, that is, political bosses by virtue of their positions as heads of powerful local "tribes" or subtribes. A smart king or sub-king would appoint such persons to head local affairs in order to co-opt the support of their followers or power base. In other cases the appointees could have been kin or "friends," with or without "the blood of nobility" (Alma 51:21), who had curried favor to get the appointment from the key overlord with the appointive power. When the secret society of Gadianton was powerful, members who gained positions of authority appointed their fellow members to subordinate slots (see Helaman 6:38-39).

We might wonder whether Nephite military leaders constituted an independent political force. The structure of the armed force in *Book of Mormon* times makes that unlikely. A vast majority of the military personnel were simply militia, commoner men called up to serve as needed for a battle or campaign. (That had been the case in ancient Israel, of course.)<sup>10</sup> For example, we read that on one occasion "the Lamanites had come in...into the borders of the land...and began to slay the people and destroy the city" of Ammonihah. "Before the Nephites could raise a sufficient army to drive them out of the land,

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they had destroyed the people” (Alma 16:2-3). There was no army at the ready; one had to be raised. Likewise, when chief judge Pahoran was driven out of Zarahemla by a royalist insurrection, he reported to Moroni<sub>1</sub> in a letter that “I have sent a proclamation throughout this part of the land; and behold, they are flocking to us daily, to their arms, in the defence of their country” (Alma 61:6). Moroni<sub>1</sub> himself “gained whatsoever force he could in all his march” to reach Pahoran and aid him; “thousands did flock unto his standard, and did take up their swords in the defence of their freedom” (Alma 62:4-5).

Appeal to tribal or national interests and pride, or to prejudice against the enemy (note the basic Nephite antipathy toward the Lamanites shown in Alma 26:24-25), was probably a common justification claimed by leaders seeking office. But personality-based desire for power and its privileges certainly drove others to leadership, both political and military. For instance, “as soon as Amalickiah had obtained the kingdom he began to inspire the hearts of the Lamanites against the people of Nephi; yea, he did appoint men to speak unto the Lamanites from their towers, against the Nephites” until “he had hardened the hearts of the Lamanites and blinded their minds, and stirred them up to anger, insomuch that he had gathered together a numerous host to go to battle against the Nephites” (Alma 48:1, 3). The central ruler had the authority to requisition force units, no doubt by sending mustering orders down through his administrative hierarchy (see Alma 60:1-2), however, local rulers might or might not respond. The possibility of their refusing to support a national-level conflict actually served as a quasi-democratic discipline against the ruler’s too-easy decision to fight; he had to keep those below him reasonably happy in their relationship with him to guarantee their participation in the ultimate case. They were persuaded to join in when the prospects were positive. This is shown in the results of Moroni<sub>1</sub>’s prudent fortifying of the land of Zarahemla against pending Lamanite attack: Moroni<sub>1</sub>’s armies, “did increase daily because of the assurance of protection which his works did bring forth” (Alma 50:12).

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On the contrary certain Lamanites resisted their king's order: "The king of the Lamanites sent a proclamation throughout all his land...that they should gather themselves together again to go to battle against the Nephites," but "they feared to go to battle against the Nephites lest they should lose their lives...being fixed in their minds with a determined resolution that they would not be subjected to go against the Nephites." Even though "the king was wroth because of their disobedience," they defied him and fled to a place they considered safe against his levy (Alma 47:1-2, 6). The turncoat Nephite groups who joined the Lamanites rather than fight with Mormon in the final wars display the same point (see Moroni 9:24; compare Mormon 2:21).

Rather than being a separate force in Nephite political activity, the armies were mainly the population writ large. It was the duty of rulers to lead their own people, formed into militia armies, probably one from each major area. (Local leaders here modeled on the joint civil/military leadership pattern of the king—see Words of Mormon 1:13 and Alma 2:14, 16). Those appointed captains<sup>11</sup> were likely people with demonstrated military experience and wisdom, yet there is little reason to believe that they had a permanent staff role. Note that chief captain Moroni<sub>1</sub>, after the extended Amalickiahite war was over, "yielded up the command of his armies into the hands of his son...and he retired to his own house that he might spend the remainder of his days in peace" (Alma 62:43). No doubt he had been from a notable family when he was appointed 14 years earlier at the age of 25 (Alma 43:16-17), but he was not a career soldier. (Compare the completely inexperienced lad Mormon appointed to a similar role centuries later, quite certainly on the basis of his social position in the Nephi kin line; see Mormon 2:1-2.)

To all appearances, then, military leaders were simply appointees out of the major kin groups or from the ranks of regional rulers. The military as such was not a separate factor in the political economy apart from the general elite class.

A pattern of trade is revealed as part of the political economy

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represented in the Nephite text. It is crucial to understand its nature and role since it turns out to have been the dynamic element in the generation of the “riches” sought by ambitious Nephite dissidents. Riches were as central to “the Nephite disease”—that cycle of wickedness and resultant decline in their society that repeatedly resulted from prosperity—as a virus is to influenza. From Mosiah 24:1-7 we see the role of trade among the Lamanites as stimulated by the influence of Nephite dissenters, the Amulonites. A political structure is described in which “the Lamanites had taken possession” of at least five local lands—Nephi, Shemlon, Shilom, Amulon and Helam—spread over an area perhaps a hundred miles in diameter.<sup>12</sup> The pattern of taking possession is revealed in the previous chapter where a Lamanite military force occupies Helam and begins to exploit the inhabitants, Alma<sub>1</sub>’s people. The listed lands were located at different altitudes and represented varying ecological (resource) zones.<sup>13</sup> Hitherto they had apparently existed at a fairly rudimentary level of sociopolitical integration in which the several areas were only lightly in touch with each other. When the Amulonites emerged on this scene as a distinct group looking opportunistically to advance their fortunes, they possessed skills not previously apparent in the Lamanite realm. This coincided with the rise of an ambitious Lamanite king (functionally he was what would be called by social scientists today a chief rather than a true king).

The two ingredients triggered rapid social development. First, “the king of the Lamanites granted unto [the Amulonites] that they should be appointed teachers over his people” in all those lands (verses 1-2). “Thus the language of Nephi began to be taught among all the people of the Lamanites” (verse 4). That “language” quite certainly consisted of a system of writing, not the speech or tongue of the Nephites (which, of course, the Lamanites would have refused to accept); that script was capable of providing a common medium for written communication throughout the five lands.<sup>14</sup> “They taught them that they should keep their record, and that they might write one to another” (verse 6). The following verse then contains a telling

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connective: “And *thus* the Lamanites began to increase in riches, and began to trade one with another and wax great, and began to be a cunning and a wise people, as to the wisdom of the world.”

The operative sequence is implied to be this:

- peaceful travel
  - ↳ shared elite writing
    - ↳ trade
      - ↳ riches
        - ↳ worldly learning

It is immediately obvious that only a small proportion of the people under the Lamanite king would have become rich and thus partake of the educational process that permitted their acquiring the “cunning and...wisdom of the world” mentioned. That is, Lamanite nobles and the teacher priests were the ones who obtained the greatest benefits from the trading system.

What is most important for our immediate topic is to understand that the transformation of Lamanite society from relative simplicity to a new level of sophistication depended critically on trade (and literacy). This agrees with what we know about trade in other ancient societies; the object of trade was the acquisition of scarce items of high social prestige and symbolism connected with rule. Trade was carried on mainly for the rulers and by their agents. After all, it would only be those who already possessed substantial resources—in this case the old Lamanite elite—who had the wherewithal to capitalize and reward merchants. Capital and rewards they must have to be willing to invest in collecting local products of value (“precious things”?, Helaman 12:2), and then to send agents traveling through intervening wilderness to other lands (Mosiah 23:28-29 shows some of the hazard), where they had to deal with unpredictable persons and customs (compare Mosiah 7:6-11). There is no hint anywhere in the text, and this is true of nearly all ancient trade systems, that basic commodities were exchanged. Instead, it was luxury goods, to be used by the elite, that motivated commerce. In short, trade was promoted by and benefitted those who already had

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wealth. Naturally they were the ones who “began to increase in riches...and wax great” (Mosiah 24:7).

A similar picture is given of later trade involving both Nephites and Lamanites. In Helaman 6:7-11, around 30 B.C., “there was peace in all the land, insomuch that the Nephites...and...the Lamanites did...go whithersoever they would [they were both already literate peoples]...and thus they did have free intercourse one with another, to buy and to sell, and to get gain....And...they became exceeding rich” (verses 7-9). But again it is apparent that only a small proportion of the people could have become “exceeding rich” (the account is only talking about a three year period for all this to happen). The lot of the basic population is treated separately, and the phrasing is more modest; they “did flourish exceedingly” by raising grain in abundance, raising flocks and herds, and toiling and spinning “all manner of cloth...to clothe their nakedness” (verses 12-13). Nothing is said about riches for them, naturally.

The analysis of incidents and statements from the *Book of Mormon* which we have made to this point reveals a system of organization in which kin-based groups were fundamental in the structure of “possession.” But typically superimposed upon that structure was an elite who were seen as playing a positive role in society as decision-makers; no normal society can do without the services they provide. Their ability to provide leadership was deeply dependent upon support of their role by sacred sanctions, which were mustered to communicate to all, “these our leaders are right and good.” For their use as leaders, and as tribal or national icons, material resources were passed upward through the political-economic chain in the form of taxes, tribute or offerings. These came from the only place they could come from—the mass of people who worked the fields, tended the flocks and carried out the basic crafts. The distillation of wealth, power and privilege into the hands of the elite class occurred by processes so ingrained in the social system that the traditions normally make no mention of the mechanisms. “Everyone knew” how the system worked since they

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were involved in it; they felt no need to explain the obvious. Do fish talk about the water? Furthermore, we should note that the historical record as we have it was recorded and phrased by men of the Nephite elite—kings, priests, high priests, chief judges and military leaders. They would necessarily tell the story and provide commentary in terms familiar to them as part of their lives in the dominant class. It could not have been otherwise. Thus much is left unsaid about their circumstances. Even more is left unsaid about the commoners. We are left to pick up what we can about conditions in their world, which were left largely undescribed.

Incidentally, it is common in various parts of the world for the ruling stratum to consist of people of a different ethnic background and language from the masses. Sometimes they attained their dominant spot because of conquest or intrigue. In any case, they would be insulated from inevitable long-lasting struggles among factions of the main population. Their foreignness would permit their exercising relatively even-handed judgment, where any local monarch would inevitably favor his own kin. We may wonder whether this phenomenon in part explains why the people of Zarahemla were willing to accept a stranger, Mosiah<sub>1</sub>, as their king, and why dissenters from the Nephites could rise to power among the Lamanites.

In this type of system there was such an integration of decision-making power, ancestral rights, control over resources, and rank or class privileges that much involved in the amalgam escapes the attention of modern readers to whom such a system is strange. We need to recognize that we should keep our culturally unaware eyes open to detect, as far as we can, what they did not think to explain to us about their society and culture.

### *Dynamics of the political economy in Nephite history*

In the *Book of Mormon* we learn that the political and economic situation did not remain static. For example, changes in population required accommodations in access to land and other resources, and

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the rises and falls of particular tribes or kindreds demanded accommodation in power arrangements.

Lands were sometimes made available internally to accommodate growth and settlement. Thus when the robber armies besieged the rest of the population and then were defeated, a portion of them “entered into a covenant to keep the peace.” At that point they were “granted...lands, according to their numbers, that they might have, with their labors, wherewith to subsist upon” (3 Nephi 6:3). (It is reasonable to speculate that one of the reasons those people had joined the robbers in the first place had been a shortage of land available for their use and a resulting sense in them of social isolation or even desperation.) Also, probably the periodic losses of men in armed conflict resulted in a certain reshuffling in the ownership of or at least accessibility to lands. For instance the slaughter of so many Zeniffite men in fighting against the Lamanites had to result in changes in their land use customs. “Now there was a great number of women, more than there was of men; therefore king Limhi commanded that every man should impart to the support of the widows and their children” (Mosiah 21:17). But seeking new lands for an expanding population might come at the cost of conflict with a neighbor. That happened between the peoples of Morianton and Lehi, two new cities founded in the “borders by the east sea” in part as garrisons to protect against a Lamanite attack (Alma 50:9-10, 14-15, 25).

More often there was expansion outward to new territory. The second and first centuries B.C. were a period of expansion of Lamanite population and land holding. When, around 200 B.C., the Zeniffites went to occupy a small part of the greater land of Nephi, the territory was controlled by the Lamanite king. The Lamanite hold there was recent and tentative, for the king agreed that he and his people would move out so that Zeniff “might possess the land of Lehi-Nephi, and the land of Shilom” (Mosiah 9:6-8). The Lamanite king’s actual stronghold was probably the land of Shemlon or nearby, down nearer the coast, toward or in “the land of first inheritance”; it was to there

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that he withdrew.<sup>15</sup> But by the time three generations had passed, the Lamanites had expanded to “taken possession of” the lands of Nephi, Shilom, Amulon and Helam (see above and Mosiah 23:35-24:3). By then the Lamanite population had expanded greatly (see Mosiah 25:3).

In about another half century the sons of Mosiah came into the land to find the Lamanite domain had further grown. They had now inhabited some of the wilderness area northward from Nephi in the direction of Zarahemla, occupying places like the lands of Ishmael, Middoni and Jerusalem, plus various other cities and “regions round about” (Alma 20:30-21:13; 23:9-13). Moreover, the expansive Lamanites, seemingly squatters in this case rather than organized colonists, had also occupied the strip of coastal wilderness “on the west of the land of Zarahemla, in the borders by the seashore” as well as “on the east [sea] by the seashore,” reaching in two pincers virtually to the narrow neck of land until “the Nephites were nearly surrounded by the Lamanites” (Alma 22:28-29). Later Moroni<sub>1</sub> “caused that his armies should go forth into the east wilderness...and...drove all the Lamanites who were in the east wilderness [southward] into their own lands” (Alma 50:7). While this was partly a strategic military move, it allowed the settlement of significant numbers of people from the land of Zarahemla to gain lands to “possess” (verses 9, 14-15). In the same area the Nephite leaders decided to settle the people of Ammon, giving them the land of Jershon “for an inheritance” (Alma 27:22, 26). Meanwhile the Nephites had, in some manner not explained, come into control of territory north of the narrow neck and of Bountiful, “possessing all the land northward...according to their pleasure” (Alma 50:11). Still later, in the mid-first century B.C., systematic colonization of the land northward proceeded (Alma 63:3-9) “to inherit the land” (Helaman 2:3-5). There “they did multiply and spread...insomuch that they began to cover the face of the whole earth,” so to speak (verse 8). Obviously the need for new land was a driving force in both Nephite expansion and Lamanite aggression.

Overall there were centuries of Lamanite pressure upon the Nephites. A long sequence of wars originated in the Lamanite land of

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Nephi and were directed against the Nephites in the land of Zarahemla intended to destroy them or push them farther northward. From at least the time of Benjamin until the time of Mormon and Moroni this recurrent conflict could have had as much to do with the desire or need for *lebensraum* (expansion territory) as of ethnic hate against the enemy. At the same time, of course, the Nephites were hedging their bets by keeping a northward avenue open for their own safety and, apparently, for economic expansion (note the strategic thinking in Alma 50:32).

A pattern becomes evident, when the entire Nephite text is studied, of an expansion of population which coincided both with the expression of dissidence internally and of expansion externally. It is plausible, even likely, that both processes were connected to the need for new land to cultivate. Rulers of various ilks among both Nephites and Lamanites were as much in favor of expanding their “possessions” as were politicians in the nineteenth-century United States in favor of “manifest destiny.” In both cases there was a promise of political power to be exploited and of agrarian economic strength to meet the people’s demands.

The point should also be made that politico-economic bosses, whether called kings, judges, rulers, or whatever, required a suitable ideology—a system of beliefs, cast in traditional religious terms if possible—to justify their desire to seize or to continue in power. Benjamin, the Nephite king, emphasized his divine calling as monarch (see Mosiah 2:11). When Amalickiah connived to take over rule of the Lamanites, he had his agents “inspire the hearts of the Lamanites” (Alma 48:1) against the Nephites in order to have a cause that would aid his aims. Moroni’s counter-ideology emphasized traditional Nephite values phrased particularly in terms of “liberty” (Alma 46:12-20). Giddianhi, the robber leader, had his own ideology expressed as regaining his peoples’ “rights of government” and avenging the historic Nephite “wrongs” against them (3 Nephi 3:9-10). In fact, most prominent dissidents among the Nephites, such as Korihor, Nehor and Gadianton, raised economic, political and

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ideological issues simultaneously, claiming that right and morality were on their side. As a matter of fact Abinadi was also a dissident, against the politico-economic system of King Noah (see Mosiah 12), and he too talked about all aspects of society (polity, verses 2-3, 12; economy, verses 4-7; ideology, verses 21-37). Further, when Nephites and Lamanites briefly shared their religion, a shared economy and cooperative intergroup relations resulted (see Helaman 6:1-14). In each of these cases, whatever the political and economic structures, a religious/ideological dimension provided support for the status quo. That is, cults and churches both shaped and were in turn shaped by the more materialist structures.<sup>16</sup> To borrow language from Mormon, “and thus we see” what may be obvious but needs to be underlined—political economy and religion tend to constitute a seamless whole in any society. Understanding Nephite society as fully as we can ought, then, to enlighten us about their “religion,” which concerns Latter-day Saint readers most. Contrariwise, if the practical structure is unclear, our grasp of Nephite religion must lack something.

A brief discussion of the situation that prevailed following the great destruction at the time of the crucifixion of the Savior further serves to illustrate the dynamics of these interrelationships.

Think of the economic structure of life among the Nephites following the great catastrophe. Obviously the vast number of casualties would have reduced the population dramatically (see 3 Nephi 8 and 9). At least in the short-term, normal agriculture would have become impossible over much of the area because “the face of the whole earth” had become deformed (3 Nephi 8:17). Commerce would have been completely disrupted. The loss of so many people would have reduced the old social and political institutions, perhaps beyond recognition, or at least would have rendered them non-functional. Populations who had once sent tribute or tax payments up the political structure would now either have nothing to send, or no power structure to salute and no threat of compulsion to enforce collections. Class distinctions would have been destroyed

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because of the destruction of the material goods, such as “palaces,” which had marked the old social differences. Everyone would have been plunged to near a survival level. “Money” would have lost its meaning since little or nothing existed to be bought or sold.

Yet life went on for the survivors. Food, shelter and clothing were obtained somehow. The injured were cared for. Births and further deaths would not have been absent. Under such extreme circumstances, it is not surprising to learn that the life pattern they worked out was new in many of its dimensions. Its overall configuration was revolutionarily different from what had existed, say just a year before.

In the terms used in this paper, a new polity, economy and religious/ideological arrangement developed. “The people were all converted unto the Lord, upon all the face of the land, both Nephites and Lamanites” (4 Nephi 1:2). Stemming from that unity, which was based on the powerful teachings of Jesus given at Bountiful, “there were no contentions and disputations among them, and every man did deal justly one with another” (verse 2). Further, “there were no envyings, nor strifes, nor tumults, nor whoredoms, nor lyings, nor murders, nor any manner of lasciviousness” (verse 16). In their poverty and given their now-powerful religious beliefs, they understood that it was desirable, and likely it was necessary for survival, that they have “all things common among them” (verse 3); that is, “possession” was defined in new terms. Among the consequences was that no overarching political system seemed to be needed; with contentions and anti-social offenses absent, inter-group peace universal, and property quarrels a thing of the past, there was little or nothing for political figures to do, hence no political institutions as such. Such a question as who would cultivate which land was likely settled at local community level either by local church congregations and their leaders or by the remnant kinship organizations. After all, there was now abundant land available since the population had declined so greatly. And of course rank or class differences had disappeared in the wake of equality. The basics of

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most trade, catering to the demand of the elite for luxury goods and social emblems, was also now absent.

Minimal social institutions, such as kinship units, surely continued to function. Local church congregations were ubiquitous (see 4 Nephi 1:1) (but there is no hint of an overarching ecclesiastical organization). Social difficulties, such as competition, seem not to have arisen as a problem; natural resources were abundant enough for the reduced population that rivalry did not become an issue. In any case the compelling system of beliefs would have overwhelmed divisive tendencies.

In time, however, the parameters of the society changed. Over many decades population would have grown dramatically under the peaceful, prosperous conditions. By the time young Mormon was a youth, in the beginning of the fourth century A.D., “the people were as numerous almost, as it were the sand of the sea” (Mormon 1:7). Available lands and goods would have come to be relatively scarce as the population recovered and as the fervor for the gospel of Christ perhaps waned with the death of the eyewitnesses of his appearance. At least before the second century A.D. was over, “a small part of the people...had revolted from the church and taken upon them the name of Lamanites” (4 Nephi 1:20). We may suppose that the reappearance of the old tribal identification coincided with claims to land on the basis of descent—that is, on the revival of the old concept of “lands of our inheritance.” Eventually each tribe reasserted its old claims to its historic territory. The Lamanites were still located in their traditional area up in mountainous Nephi and the Nephites again, or still, inhabited Zarahemla and lands to the northward (see Mormon 1:8-10).

Shortly before A.D. 200 “there began to be...those who were lifted up in pride.... And from that time forth they did have their goods and their substance no more common among them. And they began to be divided into classes; and they began to build up churches unto themselves to get gain, and began to deny the true church of Christ” (4 Nephi 1:24-26).

In short, when the political economy was transformed, in large

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measure due to population growth, the idyllically simple ways of the last few generations were jettisoned and the old cultural patterns and institutions of wealth-and-power-driven society were revived. The Christian belief system had to be drastically modified because its egalitarian teachings clashed too much with the reinstated customs for dealing with what was perceived anew as a scarcity of property. By the third century, making tribal and class claims to wealth and privilege seemed more important than seeking the general good, and churches that justified and supported the changed notions of “possessions” and social power came to replace the old, naive (in the eyes of the new sophisticates) Christian church.

### *Summary*

We have seen through careful analysis of the text of the *Book of Mormon* that the political and economic aspects of Nephite life throughout most of their history featured ideas and institutions reminiscent of those of ancient Israel and other Near Eastern nations. Tribal and sub-tribal control of land undergirded the system of land tenure and agrarian production; the concept of individual ownership was insignificant. Superimposed upon the pattern of kin-based control was the monarchy. The role of a king and his court was crucial. In a certain sense he “owned” the land and people. Since he served as chief decision-maker on behalf of the people or nation, he had a legitimate claim to have the people support his establishment and projects, including a network of local and regional rulers whom he designated. Yet royal demands were often pushed so hard as to cause economic distress to the general populace. This caused dissent, and at the extreme, rebellion, after which another monarch might or might not prove more satisfactory.

The power of the monarchy was deeply embedded in a system of social privileges shared among an elite class. Their superior standing interests depended on a system of belief or ideology that explained to all why power and privilege were ordered as they were.

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That meant that a cult or church with an appropriate priesthood was needed. It was closely allied with the royal court and dependent on the system of taxation.

The relatively impassive farmers and craftsmen who constituted the masses had to put up with the behavior of royalty and the associated elite. But certain ambitious individuals, families or lineages periodically felt that they had been deprived of their deserved perquisites of rulership, consequently they strove to replace the king and his cohorts with someone from their own clique. The pervasive “dissension” and “contention” in Nephite history probably centered on this contest for privilege. Meanwhile religious beliefs were shaped and reshaped to make sense of and support the claims, either conservative or revolutionary, of the faction in control or their opponents.

Given this nature of Nephite (and, broadly, Lamanite) “political economy,” it seems important that we learn all we can about it as a context. It is likely that our understanding of why the Nephites or Lamanites believed or disbelieved what they did throughout their history will be enhanced to the extent that we can see the religious component as related to the polity, the economy, and the general social structure within which it was manifested.



# Notes To Chapter 8

- <sup>1</sup> "Nephi's Political Testament," in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne, editors, Salt Lake City and Provo, Utah: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1991, pages 220-9. See also Reynolds' "The Political Dimension in Nephi's Small Plates," *BYU Studies* 27 (1987), pages 15-37; and "Nephi's Outline," *BYU Studies* 20 (1980), pages 131-49, reprinted in *Book of Mormon Authorship: New Light on Ancient Origins*, edited by Noel B. Reynolds, Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1982, pages 53-74.
- <sup>2</sup> Although those initial rulers were called kings, the full set of state institutions that go with kingship was not in place until at least Solomon's day and perhaps later. In social science terminology the pattern of society and rule of the earlier pair of "kings" probably qualified only as a "chiefdom." See the discussion and references in Keith W. Whitelam, "King and Kingship," *Anchor Bible Dictionary* IV:40-48.
- <sup>3</sup> *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, "King and Kingship," IV:40-48.
- <sup>4</sup> Sorenson, *The Geography of Book of Mormon Events*, revised edition, 1992, page 266.
- <sup>5</sup> Sorenson, "When Lehi's Party Arrived, Did They Find Others in the Land?" which is included as Chapter 4 in this volume, originally published in *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1/1 (1992), pages 1-4, 26-8.
- <sup>6</sup> He was credited with legally eliminating slavery in Nephite society; see Alma 27:9. Benjamin said that he had not "suffered that...ye should make slaves one of another" (Mosiah 2:13), yet the Zeniffites, approximately 60 years after they left Zarahemla, expected to become slaves of the Nephites in order to escape bondage to the Lamanites (see Mosiah 7:15), so the institution still may have been practiced until Mosiah<sub>2</sub> terminated it definitively. Perhaps Benjamin forbade the making of new slaves but permitted the institution to continue where it already existed, while his son put a total stop to it.
- <sup>7</sup> Regarding oaths in ancient society, see Terrence L. Szink, "An Oath of Allegiance in the Book of Mormon," in *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, edited by Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin, Salt Lake City and Provo: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990, pages 35-45.
- <sup>8</sup> Note his marriage to one of Ishmael's daughters on the same basis as Nephi's sons, and see 1 Nephi 4:33-35 on his tribal standing. Also compare Lehi's blessing upon him, "thy seed shall be blessed with [Nephi's] seed," 2 Nephi 1:30-32.
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- <sup>9</sup> Interestingly the same search for kin-based connections was manifest in the early days of The Church of Jesus of Christ of Latter-day Saints through the principle of adoption by sealing. Individuals and families who were vulnerable when forced to stand alone in the risky frontier setting logically sought to be adopted to prominent Church leaders, thus forming virtual tribes. See Gordon Irving, "The Law of Adoption: Development of the Mormon Concept of Salvation, 1830-1900," *BYU Studies* 14 (1974), pages 291-314.
- <sup>10</sup> John W. Welch, "Law and War in the Book of Mormon," in *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, pages 1-4, 26-8; and A. Brent Merrill, "Nephite Captains and Armies," also in *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, pages 266-95.
- <sup>11</sup> Welch's "Law and War" and Merrill's "Nephite Captains and Armies," in *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*.
- <sup>12</sup> Sorenson's "The Geography of Book of Mormon Events" regarding the dimensions.
- <sup>13</sup> See Sorenson's "Geography" for detailed analysis of the locations of these lands in relation to each other and to natural features.
- <sup>14</sup> This "language" is discussed in my article, "The Book of Mormon as a Mesoamerican Record," in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins*, edited by Noel B. Reynolds, Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1997, pages 391-522.
- <sup>15</sup> Sorenson's "Geography," pages 225, 228.
- <sup>16</sup> See further on these points my paper, "Religious Groups and Movements among the Nephites, 200-1 B.C.," to appear in 1998 in a festschrift for Richard L. Anderson.

