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Priesthood in Mosiah

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It has been correctly observed that the Book of Mormon is probably the earliest published Mormon scriptural text to discuss the structure and the nature of the priesthood. Therefore, an understanding of just what the book has to say about the priesthood is important. In this paper I intend to examine priesthood authority in the Book of Mormon in general and in the book of Mosiah specifically. I will trace the changes in the responsibility of delegating and regulating the priesthood from the familial priesthood organization during Lehi's time to the ecclesiastical priesthood organization during the time of Alma the Younger.

Familial Priesthood Organization

Our sample is perhaps too small to allow definitive judgments about how priests and priesthood are viewed in the small plates of Nephi, but it appears that the attitude of the authors of the small plates may not have been entirely positive. For example, Jacob predicts that "priestcrafts and iniquities . . . at Jerusalem" will lead to the crucifixion of the Savior (2 Nephi 10:5). Nephi defines "priestcraft" as "that men preach and set themselves up for a light unto the world, that they may get gain and praise of the world; but they seek not the welfare of Zion" and states that the Lord condemns it (2 Nephi 26:29). He also says that the latter days will be characterized by contentions

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between “priests” who will “teach with their learning, and deny the Holy Ghost, which giveth utterance” (2 Nephi 28:4). Nephite prophets share these negative feelings with other prophets such as Jeremiah (Jer 1:18; 2:8, 26; 4:9; 5:30–31; 6:13; 13:13; 23:11, 33–34; 32:32; Lam 2:6; 4:13), Isaiah (Isa 24:1–6; 28:7), and Nehemiah (Neh 9:33–34). One needs to think only of Hophni and Phinehas in 1 Samuel 2–4, or of the parable of the Good Samaritan related in Luke 10, to realize how widespread the notion of the evil priest is in the scriptures.

This negative view may reflect the unpleasant experience which Lehi and his family had with the political and ecclesiastical authorities in Jerusalem. Certainly that experience would have been a frequent topic of conversation and teaching among Lehi’s believing children. More likely, since Jacob had seen Jerusalem only in vision (1 Nephi 18:7; 2 Nephi 6:8–10) and since Nephi prophesied of the evils concerning priestcraft in the latter days (2 Nephi 25:7; 26:14; 28:1, 3), the unfavorable view of priestcraft was actually the Lord’s, reflecting his evaluation of the corruption wrought among his people in the Old World. Nevertheless, whatever may have been the attitude of the early Nephites toward the potential abuses of priesthood authority, it is clear that their earliest records contain very little positive material—indeed, very little material of any kind—on priests and priesthood.

It is equally clear, however, that the Nephite prophets did not reject the idea of priesthood as such. I suggest that early Nephite priesthood was mediated and given structure through family and clan organization, rather than through an as yet unfounded church. Nephi himself, for example, ordained his brothers Jacob and Joseph “after the manner of [God’s] holy order” (2 Nephi 6:2; compare 2 Nephi 5:26; Jacob 1:18; Alma 13:1–2, 6, 8; D&C 107:2–4). Alma 6:1 and Moroni 3 make it clear that, at least in Nephite history following the close of the book of Mosiah, priests and teachers were both clearly ordained in a manner not unlike that practiced by Latter-day Saints today. Indeed, it can be argued on the basis of Moroni

2:1 that Moroni 3 represents the instructions given by the resurrected Lord during his visit to the Nephites at the beginning of the dispensation of the meridian of times. If this is true, it is very clear that the practice of ordaining by the laying on of hands was carried across dispensations, both before and after the advent of Christ.

Governmental Priesthood Organization

By ordaining priests, Nephi functioned as a kind of king among his people—which was precisely how they viewed him (2 Nephi 5:18–19; 6:2). Indeed, while it lasted, legitimate Nephite kingship remained within the line of Nephi. For example, Mosiah’s kingship was the primary kingship, and the kingship of Zeniff was derivative and subordinate. It is interesting to note that Mosiah II ruled a people who were mostly natives of Zarahemla and descendants of a colony established by Mulek; Mulek’s royal prerogatives (Hel 6:10; 8:21) had been swallowed up in those of the line of Nephi (Mosiah 25:2, 13). We do not know why or how this occurred, but then we know very little about the Mulekites at all. I suspect that the explanation for this is to be found in John Sorenson’s notion of the Book of Mormon as “lineage history” (50–56).

Priestly ordination is primarily a royal prerogative in the book of Mosiah as well, although Mormon documents a dramatic shift on this very issue toward the end of the book. This point must be clearly understood. I do not mean to say that Nephite kings somehow had the right to ordain simply because they held political rule; instead, I wish to suggest that kingship among the Nephites was a priesthood calling. A survey of the evidence from the book of Mosiah and elsewhere in the Book of Mormon should serve to make this suggestion plausible, if not to prove it. Indeed, at least several of the Nephite kings—Nephi (a quasi-king; 2 Nephi 6:2), Mosiah I (Omni 1:12–22), Benjamin, and Mosiah II—were also major prophets. King Benjamin appointed priests at Zarahemla (Mosiah 6:3). In the

secondary Nephite kingdom which endured briefly in the land of Nephi, Zeniff exercised his right as ruler and ordained priests. These priests were then dismissed by his son and successor, Noah. In their place, Noah ordained his own priests, who were presumably more supportive of his lifestyle and more pliable in his hands (Mosiah 11:5). When Noah's priests were exiled by the Nephites and given refuge by the Lamanites, it is noteworthy that the king of the Lamanites appointed them to be teachers among his people (Mosiah 24:4–5). We must remember that Amulon and the other priests do not appear to have exercised priestly functions under the Lamanites. They were never really influenced by their religious offices, and so their teaching among the Lamanites—Nephite language, record-keeping, and a literacy program—was entirely secular. But the Amulonites' characteristically secularized view of their own offices should not blind us to their sacerdotal origins, any more than Noah's abuse of his rank should blind us to its priestly nature.

This notion of a priestly kingship is perhaps a bit jarring to modern readers, living in a society where church and state are kept separate as a matter of principle. But it should not be so disturbing to Latter-day Saints, whose aspirations for the life to come include becoming both “priests and kings” (D&C 76:56). This eschatological ideal may partially explain why the priest-king has been so frequently an earthly ideal as well. Furthermore, it seems that Christ, the true king of Israel, holds his kingship as a priesthood office. The Nephites were not modern, and we should not be surprised to see them untouched by more recent institutions. Kingship in the Book of Mormon is very much a religious affair, much as it had been (or had been intended to be) among the Israelites of the Old World (see Tvedtnes 19, n. 23). Following his famous speech, for example, Benjamin “consecrated” his son Mosiah as his successor (Mosiah 6:3) just as he had been “consecrated” by his own father (Mosiah 2:11). King Benjamin thought of kingly service to his people as precisely equivalent to service to God (Mosiah

2:16–17). Even Amlici’s followers “consecrated” him king (Alma 2:9). That very same verb is used for the ordination of priests in the Book of Mormon (2 Nephi 5:26; 6:2; Jacob 1:18; Mosiah 11:5; 23:17; Alma 4:4, 7; 5:3; 15:13; 23:4). Noah Webster’s 1828 *American Dictionary*, a marvelous resource for understanding the language Joseph Smith used to translate the Nephite record, defines consecration as “the act or ceremony of separating from a common to a sacred use, or of devoting and dedicating a person or thing to the service and worship of God, by certain rites or solemnities.” As examples, Webster cites “the consecration of the priests among the Israelites” (see Ex 29:9) and “the consecration of a bishop.”

Indeed, Mosiah, the son of Benjamin, was not merely a secular ruler but also a seer, which the Book of Mormon informs us is a more exalted title than the title of prophet (Mosiah 8:13–18; 21:28; 28:16). Seership was connected with possession of certain objects, known as “interpreters” (Mosiah 8:13). Nephite kingship was also connected with and was even symbolized or legitimized by possession of certain material objects.¹ Thus, Nephi took the brass plates with him when he abandoned the land of Nephi, perhaps in part as a token of his legitimacy. The Lamanites shared his perception of the importance of the plates; they claimed that by taking them Nephi had “robbed them,” just as “they said that he had taken the ruling of the people out of their hands” (Mosiah 10:15–16; compare 2 Nephi 5:3; Alma 20:10, 13). When Benjamin transferred the kingdom to his son Mosiah, he gave Mosiah the brass plates, as well as the plates of Nephi, the sword of Laban, and the Liahona (Mosiah 1:15–16; see also 2 Nephi 5:14; Jacob 1:10;

¹ In the medieval Near East, the Shi’ite imams likewise preserved certain objects as emblems of their legitimacy. Ja’far al-Sadiq (d. AD 767), for example, who was the sixth imam, received not only the explicit designation, or *nass*, of his father, Muhammad al-Baqir, but, according to common report, the weapons, the book, and the scrolls of the Prophet Muhammad. These were not only valuable in their own right, but apparently were thought to contain the esoteric knowledge given by Gabriel to the Prophet, and then passed down the line of imams as their special birthright. Al-Muqtadir, one of the last ‘Abbāsid caliphs to hold real political power, used the Prophet’s staff and cloak as both symbols and proofs of his authority. (See, for the two cases respectively, Jafri 293 and Mottahedeh 186.)

WofM 1:13). Similarly, the sword of Goliath was preserved as a trophy for the Israelites (1 Sam 21:9; 22:10). There is undoubtedly more to the royal possession of such items than simply a claim to legitimate sovereignty. God stipulates that the Israelite king should keep a copy of the law with him at all times so he might always keep the commandments in mind (Deut 17:18–20). It should be clear that the Nephite monarch too was more than merely the supreme secular official in a secular government.

The priestly nature of Nephite kingship is evident in certain other ways as well. According to Benjamin, God appointed kings (Mosiah 2:4). However, it appears that there are several possible methods by which kings were appointed. Many believed that Nephi was chosen by God to lead his people (Mosiah 10:13). From king Benjamin's proclamation of Mosiah II as king, we see that lineage seems to have been important (Mosiah 1:10); however, there is no clear evidence that the Nephites strictly followed a rule of primogeniture (Mosiah 27:34; 28:10; 29:2–3, 6). Also, as another possibility, the people of Zarahemla conferred the kingdom upon Benjamin (Mosiah 2:11) in a kind of common consent, where the Lord reveals his choice of a king and then asks the people through his appointed servant to sustain that revelation (D&C 20:63–67; 26:2). He was "chosen by th[e] people, and consecrated by [his] father, and was suffered by the hand of the Lord that [he] should be a ruler and a king over th[e] people" (Mosiah 2:11).

Regardless of the method that God used to choose him, the king represented God on the earth, and his actions, when he was righteous and inspired, were God's actions. Joseph F. Smith defines the priesthood as "the authority given to man to act for God" (136; see also 139). Therefore, it is not inconsistent for the book of Mosiah, which repeatedly speaks of kings ordaining priests and teachers, to speak also of God as the appointer of teachers (Mosiah 2:4). Likewise, an inspired king can be said to speak for and on behalf of God, and the

distinction between them means very little in this respect (Mosiah 2:31; compare D&C 1:38; 68:4). God and the king are correlatives, mirroring each other in their respective spheres (Mosiah 2:19)—God rules the universe, while the king rules subordinately over a limited portion of God’s universe.²

The society in which the Nephite kings ruled was a temple-centered one. The king made important announcements at the temple (Mosiah 1:18; 2:5–6) both in the society at Zarahemla and in Zeniff’s derivative society in the land of Nephi (Mosiah 7:17). When Jesus Christ appeared to the Nephites, he came to them at the temple in the land of Bountiful (3 Nephi 11:1–10). Even king Noah lavished money upon his temple in which his chosen priests served (Mosiah 11:10–11). The role of Nephite priests was to teach; specifically, they taught, or at least claimed to teach, the law of Moses (Mosiah 12:25, 28; 18:18; 23:17; 25:21). Abinadi attacks the priests of Noah for not having taught it well (Mosiah 13:25–26), but he does not say that they should not have taught it at all. They claimed that salvation came through the law of Moses—a proposition which Abinadi condemns as false and apostate (contrast Mosiah 12:32 with 13:28, 32). Instead, both king Benjamin and the prophet Abinadi insist that the law of Moses had been given because the Israelites had been “stiffnecked” and resistant to a higher law, and that its chief purpose was to point forward to the coming of Christ (Mosiah 3:14–15; 13:29–31; compare 2 Nephi 11:4; 25:24–30; Jacob 4:5; Alma 25:15; 34:14).

It seems striking that priests in Mosiah specifically, and in the Book of Mormon generally, only seem to teach and to preside (Mosiah 25:20). The book of Mosiah repeatedly mentions “priests and teachers.” Could this be related to Joseph Smith’s use of the word *priest* for the preachers of his own day?

² This idea is very common in hierarchical systems. It may be observed, for example, in the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius (ca. AD 500) among Christian thinkers, and in those of Isma‘ili Shi‘ism among the Muslims. Similarly, it is hardly coincidence that the various presidencies and bishoprics of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints seem to reflect the Godhead itself.

Webster's 1828 dictionary notes that "in the United States, the word [*priest*] denotes any licensed minister of the gospel." This is, in fact, much the way that Joseph Smith used the term. For example, the draft of his Joseph Smith-History speaks of "several learned Priests" who visited him in order to dispute his theological claims, which, in this context, would certainly refer to Protestant preachers rather than Catholic or Orthodox priests (Jessee 1:238; compare 1:298). The same usage is apparent in his account of the religious disputes which preceded his first vision (JS-H 1:6).

In other words, were the priests of Mosiah real priests, in the same sense as those of Levitical lineage in the Hebrew Bible? Surely, if they were really teachers of the law of Moses, we should see some evidence not merely that its moral precepts were discussed, but also that its sacrificial system was conveyed and put into practice. And we do. The temple was the spiritual (and perhaps literal) center of Nephite society, and we have some evidence for Mosaic sacrifice in the book of Mosiah (Mosiah 2:3–4; compare 1 Nephi 5:9; Alma 34:13–14). Furthermore, a careful reading of Mosiah 1–6 offers plausible evidence that the Nephites on at least this occasion celebrated a full-fledged Mosaic Feast of Tabernacles (see Tvedtnes, "A Nephite Feast of Tabernacles"; Welch, "King Benjamin's Speech in the Context of Ancient Israelite Festivals").

Incidentally Mosiah 1–6 also offers an interesting interpretive possibility: If king Benjamin's address coincided with a Nephite Feast of Tabernacles, then the solemn and moving celebration of the Day of Atonement would have preceded it by only a few days. Thus, when the people cried out for application of "the atoning blood of Christ" (Mosiah 4:2), it is not difficult to imagine that cry as an echo of this deeply religious season, as well as of the sacrifices characteristic of the feast in which they were at that very time engaged.

The Nephites were a pre-Christian people who understood the gospel of Jesus Christ. Their king had just proclaimed an angelically delivered message about "the atoning blood of

Christ” (Mosiah 3:18). The people understood the real significance of the ordinances and rituals laid down in the Mosaic law, which were intended to point forward to Christ (2 Nephi 11:4; 25:23–26; Jacob 4:5; Jarom 1:11; Mosiah 3:14–15; Alma 25:15–16). Their minds were thus directed to the coming of the Savior in a singularly powerful way by the rites of the Day of Atonement and the Feast of Tabernacles. “Significantly,” John Tvedtnes observes, “[the] law prescribes more sacrifices for *Sukkot* [Tabernacles] than for any of the other festivals” (10). The Book of Mormon attests that before the coming of Christ the Nephites practiced the Mosaic law (2 Nephi 5:10; 25:24), and therefore the priests of the Book of Mormon were really priests and not merely a nineteenth-century farm boy’s retrojection of the circuit-riding revivalist preachers of his own day into his pseudo-Biblical historical yarn.

If priests are present in Nephite society, why is the law of Moses so much less prominent in the Book of Mormon than it is in the Hebrew Bible? First of all, as Kent P. Jackson has observed, the law is really not so prominent in the Old Testament (outside of a few priestly writings) as one might think. The apostle Paul clearly talks more about it than do Lehi’s contemporaries in Jerusalem, at least as they are represented in the prophetic books of the Bible. A further explanation is that Mormon edited much of the book and wrote several centuries after the coming of the Messiah had put an end to the sacrificial law. In the small plates which Mormon did not edit, there is almost no mention of priests or priesthood, a fact to which I have already alluded. Perhaps most importantly, the Book of Mormon is the record of a people who understood the subordinate and provisional role of the law of Moses, and who had among them the higher or Melchizedek priesthood (Smith, Joseph Fielding, 1:125–26).

The priests and teachers referred to throughout the Book of Mormon were often two distinct groups, even though the book often attributes teaching functions to its priests. The terms *priests* and *teachers* are mentioned in close proximity of one

another twenty-two times in the Book of Mormon, and in every instance except one “teachers” are mentioned after “priests,” suggesting that they might represent a subordinate priesthood office among the Nephites as they do in the Church today.³ It is clear also from Moroni 3 that the offices were distinct, at least in later Nephite practice. This seems to be confirmed by the incident depicted in Mosiah 26:7, where the teachers are subordinate to the priests in a hierarchy consisting of teachers, priests, and Alma the Elder as “high priest.” For example, Jarom knew a hierarchy of “the prophets, and the priests, and the teachers” (1:11). Alma also took the place of the king, who seems to have presided over the priests among the earlier Nephites.

According to Mosiah 11:11, even king Noah had “high priests.” It may be that we are here referring to an office analogous to that of high priest in the contemporary Church (that is, a priest of the higher priesthood, as opposed to a priest of the Aaronic order), which many are able to hold simultaneously. In its many other occurrences in the Book of Mormon, the term *high priest* seems to resemble the high priest in ancient Israel, of whom there was normally only one at a time. Alma I, for instance, was the high priest over the Church, both when he and his people were in exile (Mosiah 23:16) and after they arrived in Zarahemla and experienced the subsequent expansion of the Church (Mosiah 26:7). In later periods, possibly owing to the sheer size of the Church and to difficulties of communication and centralization, regional high priests seem to have been established in Jershon and in Gideon (Alma 30:20–21), and very likely elsewhere—perhaps subordinated to the overall high priest, in this case Alma II, a resident in the capital city of Zarahemla (Alma 30:29; compare 46:6, 38;

³ See 2 Nephi 5:26; Jacob 1:18; Jarom 1:11; Mosiah 23:17; 25:19, 21; 26:7; 27:5; Alma 1:3; 14:27; 15:13; 23:4; 30:31; 35:5; 45:22–23; Helaman 3:25 (“high priests” and “teachers”); Moroni 3:1, 3–4; 6:1. Only in Alma 4:7 do we find “teachers, and priests, and elders” (compare Alma 6:1 for “priests and elders”), where it is clear that the offices are simply being mentioned in reverse or ascending order.

Hel 3:25; 3 Nephi 6:21–22, 27). King Noah's employment of multiple high priests in the same location may simply have been another of his apostate and grandiloquent innovations, which tended everywhere to exchange Nephite simplicity for the lavish and the overdone.

Nephite priests served as a kind of council to which the king could go for advice. Mosiah II consulted with his priests (Mosiah 27:1), as did the king of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies (Alma 23:16). Whether the latter was carrying on Lamanite practice or simply adopting Nephite habits as he had adopted Nephite religion is unclear (Sorenson 50–56). King Noah also consulted with his priests at his own imitative court in the land of Nephi (Mosiah 12:17). It is in fact the priests of Noah who advised the king to put their former colleague Alma to death for abandoning their unrighteous ways (Mosiah 17:11–12).

The case of Alma brings up at least two interesting questions: (1) Were the priests of Noah legitimate holders of legitimate priesthood, and (2) Where did Alma get his authority? We have to assume Alma and his one-time colleagues were ordained validly by Noah (Mosiah 11:5), who was also ordained validly by his father, Zeniff. The fact that Noah was not righteous after he was ordained and that Alma himself was part of Noah's priestly group during his early ministry has nothing to do with Alma's priesthood authority. Until superior priesthood authority withdraws permission to exercise priestly functions, a legitimately ordained holder of the priesthood continues to hold valid priesthood—however unrighteous he may be, however dead to spiritual promptings, and however unlikely it may be that he will ever actually exercise his priesthood.⁴

⁴ The ancient Christian church faced this problem in the form of the Donatist schism, which was finally declared heretical in AD 405. The Donatists held that unrighteousness in a bishop or priest invalidated any and all ordinances that he might have performed. However, the Synod of Aries determined in AD 314, that the validity of baptisms and ordinations and the like did not depend upon the worthiness or merit of the officiator. (On the Donatists, and the related Novatianist and Meletian movements, see Christie-Murray 96–97.) Granted, the

Alma, in fact, claimed to have authority from God (Mosiah 18:13), a claim which Mormon implicitly acknowledges as valid (Mosiah 18:18). Alma was a descendant of Nephi (Mosiah 17:2), a fact which may or may not be significant in discussing his priesthood authority since we do not know precisely how the priesthood functioned or was apportioned among the Nephites. Certainly most, if not in fact all, of the priests and kings of whom we know anything in the Book of Mormon up to this point were of the lineage of Nephi. Furthermore, in the power vacuum left by the absence of king Noah, the people implored Alma to assume the royal title and prerogatives (Mosiah 23:6). He turned down the title, but out of necessity, he did carry out some kingly duties. Alma ordained priests and teachers for his outcast people, among whom he was in fact the sole human source of authority (Mosiah 18:18; 23:17).

The situation involving Alma, Noah, and Abinadi also illustrates that if the king fails to exercise his responsibility, someone else may be called to assume his role. At the Lord's command, Abinadi speaks for him as the king was supposed to do (Mosiah 11:20; 12:1–2; 13:6). Because both the king and the priests failed to discharge their responsibilities, the Lord sent Abinadi to chastise them: "Have ye taught this people that they should observe to do all these things for to keep these commandments? I say unto you, Nay; for if ye had, the Lord would not have caused me to come forth and to prophesy evil concerning this people" (Mosiah 13:25–26; compare 12:29).

It is not surprising that king Noah, who does not acknowledge his own neglect of his divinely-ordained stewardship,

Christian church at this period was essentially apostate, but Latter-day Saints take basically the same position, and for good reason. If serious sin, as such, invalidated priesthood ordinances, we could never know whose marriage was legal, or who was really a member of the Church. Did the man who ordained you to the priesthood have a secret, unrepented sin? If he did, your ordination is invalid. Your mission was illegitimate, any converts you baptized are actually non-members, and you are living in adultery since you should never have been admitted to the temple. Any of your converts who served missions and baptized are similarly fraudulent, and the consequences ripple onward and outward in utterly unforeseeable ways. How could we ever be sure of anything?

demands to know, "Who is Abinadi?" Who is this unauthorized person trespassing upon my royal prerogatives, who has the effrontery to declare "that I and my people should be judged of him?" But when king Noah follows the first question with the arrogant "Who is the Lord?" it becomes painfully clear why the Lord sent Abinadi (Mosiah 11:27).⁵ Noah broke his covenant with God, the ultimate source of his authority. Rather than recognizing himself as the earthly analogue of the heavenly king, he seeks to deny the authority of that heavenly king.⁶ Thus, when God sends Abinadi to Noah, he tells the prophet of the king's impending death by fire, "For he shall know that I am the Lord" (Mosiah 12:3).

Ecclesiastical Priesthood Organization

Noah's breach of the normal order of things in Nephite kingship greatly affected Nephite history. First, it helped transform his one-time priest, Alma, into an ardent anti-monarchist. Drawing upon divine revelation as well as upon his own experiences with Noah, Alma declared:

Behold, it is not expedient that we should have a king; for thus saith the Lord: Ye shall not esteem one flesh above another, or one man shall not think himself above another; therefore I say unto you it is not expedient that ye should have a king. Nevertheless, if it were possible that ye could always have just men to be your kings it would be well for you to have a king. But remember the iniquity of king Noah and his priests. . . . Trust no man to be a king over you. (Mosiah 23:7-9, 13)

Later, in Zarahemla, Alma emphasized equality within the Church, insisting that priests and teachers should labor for their own support rather than relying upon the surplus of others

⁵ Precisely the same question had been asked of Moses and Aaron by Pharaoh (Ex 5:2; compare Qur'an 26:23-29), and, rhetorically, by Cain (Moses 5:16). Compare too the Rab-shakeh's speech at 2 Kgs 18:35.

⁶ Compare the Pharaoh of Qur'an 26:29: Having arrogantly asked Moses and Aaron just who the Lord is, he says (as I translate the Arabic), "If you take a god other than me, I will have you imprisoned!"

(Mosiah 27:4–5), a clear contrast to the practice of king Noah’s priests (Mosiah 11:6, 14).

Another consequence of Noah’s iniquity was the establishment of a Nephite church. It is striking that the small plates of Nephi do not record a single reference to any church actually existing in the New World, while such references are quite common in and after the book of Mosiah. The small plates refer to only one actually existent church at Jerusalem with which Laban was thought to be affiliated (1 Nephi 4:26). Laban’s link with that church is perhaps almost enough in itself to account for the strange neglect of the term throughout the small plates—a neglect broken only by occasional references, the majority of which are negative. Again, it is striking that no mention occurs of an actually existent New World church, despite the fact that the small plates cover nearly the first five centuries of Nephite history.

Alma founded the Church among the Nephites (Mosiah 23:16) in the sense of a separately existing organization within the larger society. It is easy to see why he did so. King Noah had rejected his part in the hierarchical social system of the Nephites, and Alma had taken his place as the spiritual leader and the earthly source of priesthood authority for those who dissented from Noah’s leadership. Alma’s colony thus became a secessionist group. Birth as a Nephite was no longer enough to make a man or woman one of God’s people;⁷ instead, a conscious and personal decision was required of anyone who wished to be numbered among the people of God.

For Alma and his followers, this decision was expressed in baptism. Alma cried out to his people:

Now I say unto you, if this be the desire of your hearts, what have you against being baptized in the name of the Lord, as a witness before him that ye have entered into a covenant with him, that ye will

⁷ The Qumran community of the shore of the Dead Sea existed almost simultaneously with Alma’s Nephite community. Like Alma’s group, they were secessionists, and birth no longer assured one place in the group. For the dating of the Qumran Essenes, see Koester 234–39.

serve him and keep his commandments, that he may pour out his Spirit more abundantly upon you? . . . And they were called the church of God, or the church of Christ, from that time forward. And it came to pass that whosoever was baptized by the power and authority of God was added to his church. (Mosiah 18:10, 17; compare 18:13–16; 25:17–18)

Even Alma was immersed as a sign of his commitment to the Lord (Mosiah 18:14).⁸

In another part of the country, king Limhi and his people also desired baptism as an expression of their commitment to do the will of God, but “they did not at that time form themselves into a church” because “there was none in the land that had authority from God” (see Mosiah 21:33–34). Alma had already fled, as had the wicked priests of Noah. Noah was dead, and under such circumstances he had obviously not managed to consecrate Limhi his successor according to Nephite practice. Ammon, the warrior from Zarahemla who had led the expedition to find them, evidently had priesthood authority, but felt himself unworthy to exercise it and declined to perform the ordinance of baptism for them (Mosiah 21:33–35). Later, when the groups led by Alma and Limhi were reunited in Zarahemla, Limhi’s people were baptized by Alma: “Yea, and as many as he did baptize did belong to the church of God” (Mosiah 25:17–18).

It would be foolish to argue that baptism was unknown among the Nephites before the time of Alma. References to baptism are not uncommon in the small plates. Indeed, Moses 6:52–53, 64 informs us that the ordinance was known to Adam. Although baptism is said to “fulfil all righteousness” (Matt 3:13–15), to open the gate for salvation (2 Nephi 31:17), and to enable us to obtain a remission of sins (Mark 1:4), no text in the small plates describes baptism as an initiatory rite for entrance into a church. It is also important to bear in mind that

⁸ The Qumran sectaries also emphasized ritual washings, which may be related to Christian baptism. On this, see LaSor, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the New Testament* 40, 70–71, 134, 149–151; idem, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Christian Faith* 78–80, 203–06, 208, 214, 236–39; Bruce 50–51, 118, 128, 133–34, 136, 140, 142, 149, 151.

the Church and the priesthood are not inseparably linked. It is possible for the priesthood to exist without a church, although it is impossible for the true church to exist without priesthood. The Church today is simply the essential but temporary scaffolding which surrounds an eternal structure of family and priesthood. Until we are worthy, the priesthood is mediated through and associated with the Church. Although Nephi makes it clear that baptism is the first step on the path toward eternal life (2 Nephi 31:9, 18), it is not self-evident that baptism has always signified entrance into a church, or that entrance to a church has always been a part of that path.⁹

I propose that before the ordinance of baptism signified membership in the Church the early Nephites found their primary social and religious identification in the very fact that they were Nephites. In the earliest days of the Nephites in the New World, following Nephi required a deliberate commitment which demanded sacrifice from those who made it. Baptism was preached, and, indeed, stressed to these early Nephites as something pleasing to God and as a necessity for salvation in his kingdom—but it would be easy for unbaptized Nephites to think of themselves as members of God’s people strictly because of their heritage. Eventually, however, it became apparent that being a Nephite had become merely a matter of lineage, that it involved no deliberate personal commitment to serve the Lord (Jacob 1:13–14; Omni 1:1–2; WofM 1:12–13). It was obvious that the Nephites, as such, were not “the Lord’s people.” A more precise definition of that phrase, and a marker for who was to be counted among the Lord’s people and who was not, became necessary.

In any event, the Church maintained its separate existence in the land of Zarahemla. King Mosiah granted Alma the right to “establish churches throughout all the land of Zarahemla” and authorized him “to ordain priests and teachers over every

⁹ By saying this I do not mean to imply that eternal life is available without the ordinances of the priesthood or that those ordinances are available or valid in this dispensation apart from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

church” (Mosiah 25:19)—a prerogative heretofore pertaining only to kingship. The overall organization was called the “church,” but it was made up of subordinate local units also called “churches.” There were seven of these local units in Zarahemla alone (Mosiah 25:22–23). Indeed, Mosiah gave Alma authority over the Church (Mosiah 26:8), thus effectively delegating to another man a major portion of the sacral authority which had traditionally been attached to the Nephite throne. Priests of the Church in Zarahemla taught the people as Alma directed them (Mosiah 25:21), he having been directed by God. Thus despite the separation of church and state, the pyramidal hierarchy of heavenly king, earthly king, priests, teachers, and people, so characteristic of earlier Nephite thought and practice, survived under the new order.

It is true that king Mosiah retained a council of priest-advisers even after the establishment of the Church at Zarahemla (Mosiah 27:1). This is not surprising. If the Nephites followed the universal pattern of advanced cultures in the ancient world, their priesthood represented many of their best educated and most astute men and was a natural reservoir of talented advisers for the monarch. There was no reason, even after the establishment of the Church, for king Mosiah to dismiss his council of advisers, regardless of their priestly status. And, indeed, it is noteworthy that the issues upon which they advise him are political matters transcending the Church and extending, in fact, to all subjects of the king, whether they were members of the Church or not (Mosiah 26:38–27:2). The king retained authority and responsibility for dealing with such issues.

Questions of ecclesiastical discipline, however, were now handled within the Church organization itself, without the direct involvement of the monarchy. The establishment of a church within Nephite society, membership in which was both theoretically and practically distinguishable from simple Nephite nationality, led to unprecedented problems. For one thing, some of the younger generation—those who had not experienced the great spiritual outpouring which occurred at

the abdication sermon of king Benjamin—refused to be baptized or to join the Church (Mosiah 26:1–5). This fact shows that the Church in Zarahemla was meant for all of the inhabitants of that place, and not merely for the refugees from the land of Nephi. Organization of the Church by Mosiah and Alma represented a major restructuring of Zarahemlan society.¹⁰

The new generation's worldly influence began to take its toll on those who had already joined the Church, which was itself well into its second generation. These members of the Church began to commit "many sins," which obviously raised the issue of whether and how they were to be disciplined (Mosiah 26:6–8). In a community of intention, as the Church was, one had to ask just how seriously one could sin before it became obvious that the intention to serve God had ceased to exist. And if that intention were gone, could that person any longer be validly considered a member of that community? Such questions would not arise where simple Nephite citizenship made one a member of the people of God without personal decision. Because this was no longer the case, the dilemma of transgression by Church members deeply affected Alma:

Now there had not any such thing happened before in the church; therefore Alma was troubled in his spirit, and he caused that they should be brought before the king. And he said unto the king: Behold, here are many whom we have brought before thee, who are accused of their brethren; yea, and they have been taken in divers iniquities. And they do not repent of their iniquities; therefore we have brought them before thee, that thou mayest judge them according to their crimes. (Mosiah 26:10–11)

¹⁰ In addition to the problem discussed in the main text, it might be noted that the only references to a historically existent priesthood in the entire Book of Mormon occur in Alma 1:12, 16, immediately following organization of a separately existing church. As Alma II told Nehor, "Behold, this is the first time that priesthood has been introduced among this people." 2 Nephi 26:29 defines the offense, saying that "priestcrafts are that men preach and set themselves up for a light unto the world, that they may get gain and praise of the world." Perhaps the reason that it occurred now was that, in contrast to the earlier Nephite system where kings (who, by virtue of their very rank, had no lack of glory or, presumably, of such wealth as was available to Nephites) presided over the priesthood, separation of priesthood from lineage-based leadership now opened up the "ecclesiastical" route to power, glory, and success for people who would otherwise not have had access to it.

Old habits die hard. Alma, who claimed anti-monarchical views, turned to the monarch for assistance in solving a grievous ecclesiastical problem. But he had miscalculated king Mosiah II, for he was probably Alma's greatest convert to the anti-monarchical position. And, at least in this instance, Mosiah was a more consistent partisan of that stance than was the high priest. He refused to become involved in the kind of religious-ecclesiastical issue that he had put onto Alma's shoulders. "Behold," he said, "I judge them not; therefore I deliver them into thy hands to be judged" (Mosiah 26:12).

This was extremely troubling to Alma, who now had no other option but to approach the Lord in prayer for a solution to the pressing problem facing him (Mosiah 26:13). The earthly king, who, in earlier Nephite tradition, had been the fount of religious authority and the last resort for religious questions, had definitively given up such a role. Only the Heavenly King could help him. In answer to Alma's earnest entreaties, the Lord revealed the idea of excommunication, whereby "who-soever will not repent of his sins the same shall not be numbered among my people" (Mosiah 26:32). Put into practice, this idea resulted in "blotting out" the names of a number of former adherents of the gospel. This idea of excommunication was obviously new to Alma, who had grown up under the old ideology where birth as a Nephite "numbered" one among the people of the Lord in a way which could not be "blotted out," and where one's primary ecclesiastical identity was national or genealogical rather than, as we might express it, intentional or voluntary. "And it came to pass that Alma did regulate all the affairs of the church" (Mosiah 26:36-37).

As a result of the changing responsibilities of the Nephite monarch and the fact that none of his sons would accept the kingship, Mosiah proposed the abolition of Nephite monarchy in language strongly reminiscent of Alma's own position:

If it were possible that you could have just men to be your kings, who would establish the laws of God, and judge this people according to his commandments, yea, if ye could have men for your kings who

would do even as my father Benjamin did for this people—I say unto you, if this could always be the case then it would be expedient that ye should always have kings to rule over you. . . . Now I say unto you, that because all men are not just it is not expedient that ye should have a king or kings to rule over you. For behold, how much iniquity doth one wicked king cause to be committed, yea, and what great destruction! Yea, remember king Noah, his wickedness and his abominations, and also the wickedness and abominations of his people. Behold what great destruction did come upon them. (Mosiah 29:13, 16–18)

The example of king Noah is surely a clue that Alma's experiences in the land of Nephi had been deeply influential if not decisive in forming Mosiah's new position.

Like Alma, Mosiah talks about monarchy from the perspective of human equality. But, although the two men may superficially seem to be saying much the same thing, there is a fundamental difference between their two positions. Mosiah says,

I command you . . . that ye have no king; that if these people commit sins and iniquities they shall be answered upon their own heads. For behold I say unto you, the sins of many people have been caused by the iniquities of their kings; therefore their iniquities are answered upon the heads of their kings. And now I desire that this inequality should be no more in this land, especially among this my people. . . . And many more things did king Mosiah write unto them, unfolding unto them all the trials and troubles of a righteous king, yea, all the travails of soul for their people, and also all the murmurings of the people to their king; and he explained it all unto them. And he told them that these things ought not to be; but that the burden should come upon all the people, that every man might bear his part. (Mosiah 29:30–34)

Alma expresses his anti-monarchical sentiments in much the same terms which we today would employ, with our insistence on human rights and the equality of all humanity before God and the law. Mosiah, however, comes to the question from the king's perspective. Mosiah worries about the undue burden which kingship imposes even on those who conscientiously strive to carry out their responsibilities. Having attempted for more than three decades to discharge his royal

duties well, Mosiah feels that the king is victimized by the inequality inherent in the Nephite monarchical system. He carries not only the responsibility for his own mistakes, but risks responsibility for the mistakes of his subjects if he has in any way, even inadvertently, misled them. Moved by Mosiah's obviously deep feelings, the people agree to his plan to abolish the monarchy: "Therefore they relinquished their desires for a king, and became exceedingly anxious that every man [even those of royal blood] should have an equal chance throughout all the land; yea, and every man expressed a willingness to answer for his own sins" (Mosiah 29:38).

So the relatively secular institution of the judgeship was introduced among and accepted by the Nephites (Mosiah 29:11, 41–42) to complement the religious office of high priest which had already been introduced. In a certain sense, this merely formalized the division of functions that Mosiah and Alma had already worked out some time before. However, the people chose Alma II as their first chief judge, who had previously received the office of high priest from his father, Alma I (Mosiah 29:42). Mosiah II had no willing heirs and gave Alma the plates of brass, the records, and the interpreters, which were sacred relics that once formed an important part of the symbolism of Nephite kingship (Mosiah 28:10, 20). Therefore, the bestowal of the chief judgeship upon Alma may be read as an attempt by the people to recombine the secular and sacred functions of the kingship in one man, who might not bear the title of king, but would nonetheless serve essentially the same role. Kingship, after all, had been a rather popular institution. Nephi's brothers thought that he coveted the title (1 Nephi 16:38), but he later refused it from his people (2 Nephi 5:18). Zeniff was made king by the voice of the people in the land of Nephi (Mosiah 7:9). Alma's people sought to persuade him to accept kingly honors, but he refused (Mosiah 23:6–7). And it was only after Mosiah's passionate appeal to his people that "they relinquished their desires for a king" (Mosiah 29:38). Furthermore, the monarchy continued to fascinate and attract

at least portions of the Nephite population long after its abolition, as is shown by repeated efforts through the years to effect its restoration. Alma 51–62, for instance, records the struggles Moroni had with the so-called “king-men,” who sought to alter the laws in order to reestablish a monarchical order. 3 Nephi 6:30 alludes to yet another attempt to put a king on a Nephite throne, and 3 Nephi 7:9–10 describes a temporarily successful effort by a Nephite splinter group to return to monarchy. Obviously, kingship appealed to many people, not only to the lucky one who would, if successful, gain the throne.

The apparent attempt of the Nephite people to circumvent their king’s rejection of kingship did not succeed. After only about five years, Alma II gave up his position as chief judge to concentrate his attention upon the high priesthood as the solution for the urgent problems which faced his people (Alma 4:15–20). Never again would a Nephite king serve as both religious and temporal leader of his people. The relatively secular office of the chief judgeship would continue almost to the end of Nephite civilization, but we have no record of any chief judge ever ordaining priests. Instead, sacerdotal ordinations were the prerogative of the high priests before the coming of Christ (see Alma 6:1), and then, after the coming of Christ and the apparent disappearance of that office, ordinations to the priesthood were performed by the disciples or “elders of the church” (Moroni 3:1). The office of high priest is not mentioned after 3 Nephi 6:21–22, 27, by which time it had clearly become corrupt. Priesthood functions were essentially severed from governmental functions, and the two would never be fully recombined in the sacral kingship with which Nephite history had begun in the New World. The material objects which had once pertained to the Nephite monarchy continued to be passed down, but now along a non-royal line of high priests and prophets (see Alma 37; 63:1–2, 10–13; 3 Nephi 1:2–3; 4 Nephi 1:47–49; Mormon 1:2–5; 4:23; 8:3–5; Moroni 10:2; JS-H).

This brief glance at the question of priesthood and authority in the book of Mosiah has revealed an intricately complex and remarkably consistent system underlying the many incidental details of its already highly involved narrative. We should be impressed with what the book of Mosiah discloses about the nuanced richness of the Book of Mormon.

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