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Unanswered Questions in the Book of Mormon

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Source: *The Most Correct Book: Insights from a Book of Mormon Scholar*

Published: Salt Lake City; Cornerstone Publishing, 1999 (1st Edition)

Page(s): 317-327

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS IN THE BOOK OF MORMON

Now these mysteries are not yet fully made known unto me; therefore I shall forbear. (Alma 37:11)

The author once had a student who, whenever she didn't know the answer to an exam question, would write, "See Alma 37:11." Even after many years of study, none of us has all the answers regarding the scriptures. Some of the questions we pose may not even have answers. Some of the chapters in this book seek to provide additional information on a few of these questions. In this chapter, we shall discuss a few of the remaining "unanswered questions" regarding the Book of Mormon.

DID LEHI'S FAMILY ENCOUNTER OTHER PEOPLE IN THE NEW WORLD BESIDES THE MULEKITES?

According to anthropologist John L. Sorenson, it is quite likely that Lehi's family encountered native peoples when they arrived in the promised land.¹ Unfortunately, the abridged account in 1-2 Nephi doesn't provide that information. But such encounters might explain a number of things, such as:

- How the Lamanites got a dark skin (2 Nephi 5:21) and how Lamanites who joined with the Nephites became white skinned (3 Nephi 2:14).
- Why the Lamanites so readily "became wild, and ferocious, and a blood-thirsty people, full of idolatry and filthiness" (Enos 1:20). Did they just "invent" idols, or were they introduced by other people? Where did the later Lamanites

¹ John L. Sorenson, "When Lehi's Party Arrived, Did They Find Others in the Land?" *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1/1 (Fall 1992).

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get the idea of human sacrifice (Mormon 4:15, 21)?

- Why the Lamanites were so much more numerous than the Nephites even in the first generations (Jarom 1:6). By the time of Mosiah II, the Nephites and Mulekites together “were not half so numerous” as the Lamanites (Mosiah 25:3).

HOW DID MOSIAH GET THE INTERPRETERS?

Latter-day Saints have become accustomed to referring to the two stones that came with the plates translated by Joseph Smith as the “Urim and Thummim.” This is because this is the term that the Lord used in some early revelations to the Joseph Smith (D&C 10:1:17:1), and it is the term the prophet used in his 1838 account of the visit of the angel Moroni (Joseph Smith History 1:35, 52). But the Book of Mormon uses the term “interpreters,” while the modern scriptural accounts employ the term found in the Bible.

The Lord gave the two stones to the brother of Jared and told him to “seal them up also with the things which ye shall write” (Ether 3:22-24, 27-28). The record kept by the brother of Jared at some point came into the hands of the Jaredite prophet Ether, who included it in the account he recorded on twenty-four plates of gold. When Ether had “finished his record . . . he hid them [the plates] in a manner that the people of Limhi did find them” (Ether 15:33).

The discovery of Ether’s twenty-four plates by a group of men sent out by the Nephite king Limhi is recounted in Mosiah 8:6-12. Because none of his people could read the record, Limhi inquired of Ammon if he knew of anyone who could read the ancient language. Ammon replied,

I can assuredly tell thee, O king, of a man that can translate the records; for he has wherewith that he can look, and translate all records that are of ancient date; and it is a gift from God. And the

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things are called interpreters, and no man can look in them except he be commanded, lest he should look for that he ought not and he should perish. And whosoever is commanded to look in them, the same is called seer. And behold, the king of the people who are in the land of Zarahemla is the man that is commanded to do these things, and who has this high gift from God. (Mosiah 8:13-14)

Limhi was pleased to hear that king Mosiah, who then reigned in Zarahemla, would be able to translate the plates, and declared, "Doubtless a great mystery is contained within these plates, and these interpreters were doubtless prepared for the purpose of unfolding all such mysteries to the children of men" (Mosiah 8:19). Mosiah subsequently translated the record "by the means of those two stones which were fastened into the two rims of a bow" and the mystery of the Jaredites was solved (Mosiah 28:11-17).

What remains unanswered in all this is how Mosiah got the interpreters. They seem not to have been found by Limhi's men, for the expedition brought back only the plates, some breastplates, and some swords (Mosiah 8:9-11). Moreover, Mosiah already had the interpreters in his possession at the time that his subject, Ammon, learned of the plates of Ether. Were they the same interpreters given to the brother of Jared, or were they a different set of stones?

The evidence suggests that Mosiah probably possessed the same interpreters previously hidden by the brother of Jared. Mosiah transferred the plates of brass and "all the records" (which would include the account of Ether) to the custody of the younger Alma, "and also the interpreters" (Mosiah 28:20). Alma subsequently passed the twenty-four plates to his son Helaman, instructing him to "preserve these interpreters" (Alma 37:21). He then spoke about the future translator of the records, saying,

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And the Lord said: I will prepare unto my servant Gazelem, a stone, which shall shine forth in darkness unto light, that I may discover unto my people who serve me, that I may discover unto them the works of their brethren, yea, their secret works, their works of darkness, and their wickedness and abominations. And now, my son, these interpreters were prepared that the word of God might be fulfilled, which he spake, saying: I will bring forth out of darkness unto light all their secret works and their abominations; and except they repent I will destroy them from off the face of the earth; and I will bring to light all their secrets and abominations, unto every nation that shall hereafter possess the land. And now, my son, we see that they did not repent; therefore they have been destroyed, and thus far the word of God has been fulfilled; yea, their secret abominations have been brought out of darkness and made known unto us. (Alma 37:23-26)

The twenty-four plates found by Limhi's people ultimately came into the hands of Moroni, who abridged the account to produce the book of Ether we know in the Book of Mormon (Ether Preface; 1:1-2). That he possessed the plates themselves, and not merely Mosiah's translation thereof, is suggested by the fact that just after recording the Lord's commandment to the brother of Jared to "seal up" (hide) both his record and the interpreters (Ether 3:22-24, 27-28), Moroni noted that the Lord had commanded him to write "the very words" of the brother of Jared "and he commanded me that I should seal them up; and he also hath commanded that I should seal up the interpretation thereof; wherefore I have sealed up the interpreters, according to the

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commandment of the Lord” (Ether 4:4-5).²

When Moroni appeared to Joseph Smith in September of 1823, he told him of the plates he had hidden and noted “Also, that there were two stones in silver bows—and these stones, fastened to a breastplate, constituted what is called the Urim and Thummim—deposited with the plates; and the possession and use of these stones were what constituted ‘seers’ in ancient or former times; and that God had prepared them for the purpose of translating the book” (Joseph Smith History 1:35; see also 1:42, 52, 59).

The use of the term “seers” ties the two stones to Mosiah, whose role as seer was established by the fact that he possessed and used the interpreters. But the fact that “God had prepared them” reflects verbiage from the story of the brother of Jared, to whom the Lord had given the interpreters. In a revelation addressed to the three witnesses, the Lord spoke of the “the Urim and Thummim, which were given to the brother of Jared upon the mount, when he talked with the Lord face to face” (D&C 17:1). Clearly, the stones given to Joseph Smith were the very ones that had been sealed and prepared to translate the Jaredite record. But were they the same interpreters possessed by Mosiah? Based on the description of how Mosiah translated the Jaredite record, we must respond in the affirmative.

And now he translated them by the means of
those two stones which were fastened into the two
rims of a bow. Now these things were prepared

² Though passages like this make one think of the “sealed portion” of the Book of Mormon (Joseph Smith History 1:65), the term “sealed” as used here by Moroni and elsewhere in the Book of Mormon and other ancient texts often means simply “hidden.” Both the plates and the interpreters were hidden. It may be, of course, that Limhi’s plates of gold were physically sealed shut and thus were that portion of the Book of Mormon that Joseph Smith did not translate. This issue will be dealt with by the author in a forthcoming book on the Book of Mormon and other hidden books.

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from the beginning, and were handed down from generation to generation, for the purpose of interpreting languages; And they have been kept and preserved by the hand of the Lord, that he should discover to every creature who should possess the land the iniquities and abominations of his people; And whosoever has these things is called seer, after the manner of old times. (Mosiah 28:13-16)

The description of the interpreters as “fastened into the two rims of a bow” parallel’s Joseph Smith’s use of “two stones in silver bows.”

We are still left with the question of how Mosiah got the interpreters. They were obviously not found with the plates by Limhi’s people, since Mosiah already had them with him in the city of Zarahemla when the plates were brought to Limhi in the city of Nephi.

Some possible answers come to mind. The Lord could have retrieved the interpreters from their hiding place and given them to Mosiah. The Nephites of Zarahemla may have found the hiding place of the stones. They may have come into the possession of the Mulekites, who founded the city of Zarahemla, and then passed to Mosiah’s grandfather when he became king of that land.

Some of these possibilities prompt other questions, such as why the interpreters were not with the plates Ether had hidden. For that matter, did Ether even possess the stones? His record never indicates that he had more than the plates. But if he possessed the account of the brother of his ancestor Jared, which Moroni translated from Ether’s record, why did he not also have the interpreters? Did he retrieve the record that the brother of Jared had hidden (presumably with the interpreters), or did he possess a different version of the Jaredite history that gave some of the same information? The questions may, in fact, outnumber the answers when it comes to this issue.

WHERE DID ALMA GET HIS PRIESTHOOD AUTHORITY?

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From the story of Alma baptizing people at the waters of Mormon, it is clear that Alma had “authority from God” (Mosiah 18:13, 17-18; see also 23:16-17). He was, in fact, the high priest over the Nephite church (Mosiah 23:16; 26:7). The younger Alma declared that he had “been consecrated by my father, Alma, to be a high priest over the church of God, he having power and authority from God to do these things” (Alma 5:3; see also Mosiah 29:42; Alma 4:4).

We know that the elder Alma was convinced by the preaching of the prophet Abinadi (Mosiah 17:2; Alma 5:11), but the account in Mosiah 17 suggests that Abinadi, then a prisoner in the palace of King Noah, was killed shortly thereafter. This seems to allow no time for him to ordain Alma. Could he have performed such an ordination before he was arrested and brought to trial before the king? If this be true, then Alma must have been converted by Abinadi’s earlier preaching, not by his appearance in court. We simply do not have the answers, though the questions continue to intrigue us.

WAS ABINADI ONE OF ZENIFF’S PRIESTS?

When Noah replaced his father Zeniff as king of the Nephites living in the land of Nephi, “he put down all the priests that had been consecrated by his father, and consecrated new ones in their stead, such as were lifted up in the pride of their hearts” (Mosiah 11:5). The new priests professed to keep the law of Moses even while they disobeyed some of its more important principles (Mosiah 12:27-37; 13:27-28; 16:14-15). Later, when they became assimilated into Lamanite society, they even abandoned the pretense of following the law of Moses (Mosiah 24:4-5).

We know that Abinadi “spake with power and authority from God” (Mosiah 13:6). Amid the political and religious corruption in the land of Nephi, how did he receive this divine authority? It is possible that he was one of the deposed priests who

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had served under the righteous king Zeniff, but, alas, the record is silent on this matter.

WHO WERE THE AMALEKITES?

The Amalekites are first mentioned in Alma 21, where we learn that they were associated with the Lamanites and Amulonites and that they had built synagogues after the order of the Nehors (Alma 21:2-5, 16; 22:7). So hardened were these people that the sons of Mosiah managed to convert only one Amalekite and none of the Amulonites (Alma 23:14). Indeed, it was these two groups who stirred up others to fight against the Lamanites who had been converted by the sons of Mosiah (Alma 24:1-2; 27:2, 12, 29), and we read that “the greatest number of those of the Lamanites who slew so many of their brethren were Amalekites and Amulonites, the greatest number of whom were after the order of the Nehors” (Alma 24:28; see also verse 29).

The religion of Nehor was founded by a Nephite of that name who was subsequently executed for murder (Alma 1:2-15). He had gained followers in the Nephite city of Ammonihah (Alma 14:16, 18; 15:15), which the Nephites renamed “desolation of Nehors” after its destruction by a Lamanite army (Alma 16:11). The Book of Mormon never informs us how the religion of Nehor came to be accepted by both the Amalekites and the Amulonites, though we do learn that both of these people built synagogues to practice that religion (Alma 21:4).

Alma 43:13 lists the “Amalekites and Zoramites, and the descendants of the priests of Noah” among “those who had dissented from the Nephites,” and we note that the Amalekites and Zoramites “were of a more wicked and murderous disposition than the Lamanites were, in and of themselves, therefore, Zerahemnah appointed chief captains over the Lamanites” (Alma 43:6; see also verse 44). The fact that most of the Lamanites at the time were nearly naked when they went into battle, while the Zoramites and Amalekites were clothed (Alma 43:20) suggests that both groups

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had their origin in the Nephite culture.

The Zoramites apostatized from the Nephite religion (Alma 30:59), then defected to the Lamanites (Alma 35:10-13; 43:4). The Amulonites were descendants of the priests of the wicked Nephite king Noah who had taken Lamanite wives and later were given positions of leadership in lands under Lamanite domination (Mosiah 23:31-35, 39; 24:1-11). We later find them living in the land of Amulon with the Amalekites (Alma 24:1).

But who were the Amalekites? Were they the same as the Amlicites, a Nephite apostate group who had joined the Lamanites in the time of Alma the elder (Alma 2:24)? If so, why the change in spelling 19 chapters later? We simply cannot be sure.

JUST HOW DID NEHOR DIE?

Nehor, the founder of the apostate religion that bore his name, was brought to justice, not because of his beliefs, but because he had slain an innocent man, the beloved soldier and teacher in the church, Gideon (Alma 1:2-14). “And it came to pass that they took him; and his name was Nehor; and they carried him upon the top of the hill Manti, and there he was caused, or rather did acknowledge, between the heavens and the earth, that what he had taught to the people was contrary to the word of God; and there he suffered an ignominious death” (Alma 1:15).

We are never told how Nehor was executed. The term “ignominious” merely suggests that he did not die honorably. Was he stoned, as was the most common punishment for murders under the law of Moses? Based on the fact that he made confession “between the heavens and the earth,” some have suggested that he may have been hanged. But the expression may simply reflect the place of execution, atop a hill. Again, the Book of Mormon is silent on this subject.

HOW DID AN ISHMAELITE BECOME KING OF THE LAMANITES?

When the sons of Mosiah went to perform missionary labors among the Lamanites, “Ammon went to the land of Ishmael, the land being called after the sons of Ishmael, who also became Lamanites” (Alma 17:19). “Ammon was carried before the king [Lamoni] who was over the land of Ishmael; and his name was Lamoni; and he was a descendant of Ishmael” (Alma 17:21).

We are not surprised by the fact that Lamoni, a descendant of Ishmael, was king over the land named after his ancestor. But it seems curious that Lamoni’s father was king over all the Lamanite territory (Alma 18:9; 22:1). To be sure, “the Lamanites . . . were a compound of Laman and Lemuel, and the sons of Ishmael, and all those who had dissented from the Nephites” (Alma 43:13, 35), so the Ishmaelites were part of the Lamanite nation. But the very name “Lamanite” suggests that descendants of Laman would have typically enjoyed royal privileges.³

It is possible, of course, that an Ishmaelite usurper had taken the throne, just as the Zoramite usurper Amalickiah later did (Alma 47:20-35; see Alma 52:3; Alma 54:16, 23-24). But the Book of Mormon is silent on the matter.

CONCLUSION

The only conclusion we can reach for the moment on the questions considered here is that we can come to no conclusion. Had the Book of Mormon been a full account of the history of the Nephites and Lamanites, rather than an abridgment, we might have the answers to these and other questions. But if past experience has taught us anything, it is that constant study of the scriptures, bringing to bear the latest scholarly tools and facts, often sheds

³ There is an argument that the father-son relationship between Lamoni and the Lamanite king was one of lord and vassal, but that explanation seems too facile and not in accord with the record.

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light on things that were previously obscure. It is therefore possible that subsequent research by someone will shed light on the questions we have discussed in this chapter. In any case, it is not unusual to find such unanswered questions in genuine ancient historical documents. It would be much more likely that the Book of Mormon was a clever fiction if it contained no unanswered questions.