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Nephite “Great Spirit” Religion and the Amalekite Religion

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Chapter 4

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“Great Spirit” Religion

Ammon’s missionary efforts to the land of Ishmael (so called after the “sons of Ishmael,” an individual tribe within the Lamanite tribe), precipitated a discussion of the “Great Spirit” religion.

Alma 18:2–6

2 And when they had all testified to the things which they had seen, and he had learned of the faithfulness of Ammon in preserving his flocks, and also of his great power in contending against those who sought to slay him, he was astonished exceedingly, and said: Surely, this is more than a man. Behold, is not this the Great Spirit who doth send such great punishments upon this people, because of their murders?

3 And they answered the king, and said: Whether he be the Great Spirit or a man, we know not; but this much we do know, that he cannot be slain by the enemies of the king; neither can they scatter the king's flocks when he is with us, because of his expertness and great strength; therefore, we know that he is a friend to the king. And now, O king, we do not believe that a man has such great power, for we know he cannot be slain.

4 And now, when the king heard these words, he said unto them: Now I know that it is the Great Spirit; and he has come down at this time to preserve your lives, that I might not slay you as I did your brethren. Now this is the Great Spirit of whom our fathers have spoken.

5 Now this was the tradition of Lamoni, which he had received from his father, that there was a Great Spirit. Notwithstanding they believed in a Great Spirit they supposed that whatsoever they did was right; nevertheless, Lamoni began to fear exceedingly, with fear lest he had done wrong in slaying his servants;

6 For he had slain many of them because their brethren had scattered their flocks at the place of water; and thus, because they had had their flocks scattered they were slain.

Based on this passage of scripture, the “Great Spirit” religion was not a practiced religion by king Lamoni, but he simply recognized that there was a Great Spirit, an understanding that was passed to him by his father. The basis of his fear of the Great Spirit was caused by regret that he had ordered the murder of his servants for not protecting his sheep. Why this fear specifically related to the death of his servants? His first thought was also that the Great Spirit had appeared in the form of Ammon, a Nephite.

Who were these servants? They were described as being “Lamanitish”:

Alma 17:26

And after he had been in the service of the king three days, as he was with the Lamanitish servants going forth with their flocks to the place of water, which was called the water of Sebus, and all the Lamanites drive their flocks hither, that they may have water—

Abish, a servant of the Lamanite queen, was also characterized as “Lamanitish”; she was converted on account of a vision by her father.

Alma 19:16

And it came to pass that they did call on the name of the Lord, in their might, even until they had all fallen to the earth, save it were one of the Lamanitish women, whose name was Abish, she having been converted unto the Lord for many years, on account of a remarkable vision of her father—

This is the only instance in the Book of Mormon of the use of the term *Lamanitish*. The servants referred to each other as “brethren” (Alma 17:28), and Ammon referred to them as “fellow-servants” who he “termed to be his brethren” (Alma 17:29–30). He later directly called them “my brethren” (Alma 17:31). These servants were actually the first targeted choice of Ammon for missionary work, not the Lamanite king or other Lamanites, as he wanted to “win their hearts” which in turn would “lead them to believe in my words.”

Later during the conversion of king Lamoni, the unique affiliation of the Great Spirit to the Nephites was further insinuated as the Great Spirit was again thought to have come in the form of a Nephite, Ammon, or at least was sent by him. It was stated that the Great Spirit has always attended the Nephites, and was the god who had destroyed Lamanites.

Alma 19:25–27

25 And it came to pass that there were many among them who said that Ammon was the Great Spirit, and others said he was sent by the Great Spirit;

26 But others rebuked them all, saying that he was a monster, who had been sent from the Nephites to torment them.

27 And there were some who said that Ammon was sent by the Great Spirit to afflict them because of their iniquities; and that it was the Great Spirit that had always attended the Nephites, who had ever delivered them out of their hands; and they said that it was this Great Spirit who had destroyed so many of their brethren, the Lamanites.

It is abundantly clear that the “Great Spirit” religion is simply the Lamanite description for the religion of the Nephites. The fact that king Lamoni feared the Great Spirit for the actions he had taken against his servants is also an indicator that the Great Spirit had an affinity to his servants, with the implication that they were Nephites or of Nephite descent. Ammon referred to these servants as his brethren, and thought they were fertile ground for conversion (or perhaps reconversion) so this is also evidence that they were of Nephite descent. Abish was converted to the Lord based on a vision of her father. She may have had Nephite lineage, as her conversion required a religious intervention different than merely learning or assimilating religion available in the surrounding Lamanite culture.

Having established that these servants were of Nephite lineage, where did they come from? They must have been there for some generations as there was no immediate obvious affiliation to Ammon or recognition that he was a prince. The servants were described as Lamanitish, so there was some significant degree of assimilation into the Lamanite culture. The fact that they were servants is indicative that the original assimilation of the original group from which they came was not voluntary.

The Limhite and Alma groups do not appear to be candidate sources for these Nephite descendant servants located in the land of Ishmael, as the conflicts that the people of Zeniff had with the Lamanites were all based on Lamanite plundering of flocks and food, not of taking any captives. The Limhites and Alma groups left the land of Nephi by stratagem so did not leave any of their group behind (at least none are mentioned). The descendants of the priests of Noah constituting the Amulonites were their own people within the land of Nephi and were not part of the slave/servant class. The same can be said for the Amalekites.

There is conflict mentioned between the Lamanites and Nephites during the reign of king Benjamin, but none afterwards up to the mission of Ammon. In that conflict there is no mention of captive Nephites, although capture of a small number may not have warranted mention. Also under king Benjamin there is mention of “many dissensions away unto the Lamanites” from the Nephites (Words of Mormon 1:16), however it would seem unlikely that a group of Nephites would dissent over to the Lamanites only to end up in servitude although it does have some oblique precedence with the people of Zeniff. With the departure of king Mosiah₁ from the land of Nephi occurring approximately 115–120 years prior to the mission of Ammon, it would seem likely that the initial assimilation sufficient to later call persons Lamanitish must have occurred prior to Mosiah₁’s departure, meaning that the ancestors of the Nephite servants of king Lamoni were likely those left in the land of Nephi when king Mosiah₁ departed. The only Nephites who followed Mosiah were “as many as would hearken unto the voice of the Lord” (Omni 1:12).

Zeniff, who was born in the land of Nephi, went back to the land of Nephi thirty-one years after Mosiah left, with the intent to destroy the Lamanites with his army. But as he went in as a spy (which in and of itself may have been indicative of some Nephitish Lamanites) he saw “that which was good” among the population of the Lamanites so decided that they should not destroy the Lamanites (Mosiah 9:1). It would seem reasonable that Zeniff was referring to some original Nephites or their descendants, since after arriving he did not characterize the Lamanites as having those that were good among them; in fact, his description of the Lamanites was just the opposite (Mosiah 9:12) calling them “lazy” and “idolatrous.” It is also of note that when Zeniff arrived, the king of the Lamanites specifically commanded “his people” to move to make way for Zeniff, leaving open the possibility that there may have been some other Nephites still present that did not have to move away. Given that the original group of Zeniff numbered sixty people (Grover 2015, 49, 203) and given that a mere thirteen years later the Zeniffite army suffered the loss of two hundred and seventy nine Zeniffites yet killed three thousand and forty-three Lamanites in one day, the Zeniffite population had to have been significantly augmented by others in addition to the offspring and population of the original group (Mosiah 9:18–19).

Thoughts on the Origination of the Amalekites and Their Religion

Amalekite Religion

Some portion of the Amalekites practiced the order of Nehor, at least those that participated in a particular battle against the Nephites:

Alma 24:28

Now 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.

However, there are indications that the Amalekites either practiced a modified form of the order of Nehor, or some of them practiced a religion different from the order of Nehor. In Ammonihah, Alma and Amulek are attacked by those of the order of Nehor for believing only in one God (Alma 14:5). The father of king Lamoni indicates that the Amalekites “say that there is a God, and I have granted unto them that they should build sanctuaries, that they may assemble themselves together to worship him” (Alma 22:7). Alma 21:6 also mentions the use of sanctuaries among the Amalekites. The only other mention of sanctuaries in the Book of Mormon involves worship among the Nephites. Those of the order of Nehor are only known to have utilized synagogues (as did the Amalekites) (Alma 21:5). After his conversion, the king of Lamanites sent a proclamation giving the sons of Mosiah access to the synagogues, houses, temples, and sanctuaries of all those under his jurisdiction, which statement is not definitive either way as to the exclusive use of sanctuaries by the Amalekites (Alma 23:2–3).

The Amalekites were dissenters from the Nephites but were not just political dissenters; they were fully vested and righteous participants in the Nephite religion prior to apostasy:

Alma 24:29–30

29 Now, among those who joined the people of the Lord, there were none who were Amalekites or Amulonites, or who were of the order of Nehor, but they were actual descendants of Laman and Lemuel.

30 And thus we can plainly discern, that after a people have been once enlightened by the Spirit of God, and have had great knowledge of things pertaining to righteousness, and then have fallen away into sin and transgression, they become more hardened, and thus their state becomes worse than though they had never known these things.

The belief in “a God” as opposed to many and the use of sanctuaries sets the Amalekites apart from the mainstream order of Nehor and a bit closer to the Nephite religion.

Amalekite Origins

The Amalekites are the only group in the Book of Mormon mentioned without explanation or introduction (Conkling 2005). This fact has generated various theories as to their origination. Royal Skousen has made an argument that all of the instances of Amalekite are misspellings of the Amlicites (Skousen 2006, 1605–1609). McMurtry (2017) has countered that assertion based primarily on the geographical, chronological, and religious inconsistencies of the theory. McMurtry offers the theories:

1. The Amalekites are dissident Mulekites that left for the Lamanites under king Benjamin during the conflict and dissensions previously mentioned. This theory is based primarily that the Amalekites in Alma 43 fight alongside the Zoramites and Lamanites with an Amalekite leader named Zarahemnah (Alma 43:5). As his name is close to the name *Zarahemla* this must indicate that he was also a Mulekite (presupposing *Zarahemla* is a Mulekite name).
2. The Amalekites were a very large group of people who dissented from the church and disputed points of doctrine and “were a separate people as to their faith” (Mosiah 26:4). Later the people (with no indication that this was the dissenter group) “began to scatter abroad upon the face of the earth, yea, on the north and on the south” (Mosiah 27:3, 6), the theory being that this group must have gone south and joined the Lamanites.
3. The children of Amulon that returned with Alma when he returned to Zarahemla after being in bondage desired to return to be with their fathers. No scriptural support for this premise is provided.
4. The Amalekite origin story was never recorded in the large plates of Nephi, so Mormon simply did not know what it was; or,
5. The Amalekite origin story is found in the lost 116 pages.

The Amalekites were clearly identified as a dissident group of Nephites, not Mulekites (Alma 43:13).

With regard to the name *Zarahemla* being a Mulekite name, McMurtry apparently was not aware that the place name *Zarahemla* is found in the “Caractors” Document and it is not a Mulekite name; it is a fairly straight forward Hebrew-based name (Grover, 2015, 121–22). The Mulekites had a corrupted language that was not apparently mutually intelligible (Omni 1:17–18), so it would not be expected that they spoke Hebrew. Zarahemla was thus a name assigned by the Nephites. Identifying the Amalekites as dissident Mulekites is also not likely as Mormon indicates that the Amalekites at one point were enlightened by the Spirit of God before they fell away, which does not sound like a group of Mulekites who did not believe in their Creator. In addition, there is no mention of pre-

Benjamin conversions of Mulekites. Options 2, 3, and 4 are theories that are not actually supported by any direct scriptural support.

Surprisingly, the possibility of the Amalekite origin being found in the lost 116 pages does have scriptural support. Namely that the Amalekites were dissidents at the time that Mosiah₁ and his followers left the land of Nephi, and the Amalekites, probably with assistance from the Lamanites, were the ones who forced the exodus from the land of Nephi of Mosiah₁ and his followers. Unlike the Amulonites, the Amalekites retained a few vestiges of the Nephite religion such as the belief in one God and the use of sanctuaries.

Mosiah₁ was warned that he should flee out of the land of Nephi and that as many as would hearken unto the voice of the Lord should also depart out of the land with him into the wilderness (Omni 1:12–13). It seems fairly clear that they left under some sort of military threat, and it seems that it was religion based, and that they left other Nephites there (at a minimum, those that would not hearken to his voice).

During the time of king Noah, a hill is mentioned north of the land of Shilom that had been a “resort” for Mosiah₁ and his followers just before their exodus to Zarahemla. The term for a location called a “resort” is found in three other locations in the Book of Mormon (Alma 48:5, 8; 52:6) and in each it is referring to a defensive fortified military location or a “small fort.”

Mosiah 11:13

And it came to pass that he caused many buildings to be built in the land Shilom; and he caused a great tower to be built on the hill north of the land Shilom, which had been a resort for the children of Nephi at the time they fled out of the land; and thus he did do with the riches which he obtained by the taxation of his people.

Mosiah₁ and his followers were forced into a military defensive position on a hill, and from there fled into the wilderness starting their exodus to Zarahemla. A few things can be logically derived from the situation. Not all of the Nephites were leaving with Mosiah₁, only those that were religiously affiliated, so the situation is not the standard Book of Mormon scenario where the Lamanites are battling the Nephites as a whole. If that was the case, then all of the Nephites would have been fleeing, not just Mosiah₁'s group. Mosiah₁ and his followers were clearly losing the battle to someone—if not to the Lamanites (or at least exclusively the Lamanites) then the only other real possibility is that they were battling a group of rival or dissident Nephites. Since the Amalekites are the only dissident group in the land of Nephi that we do not know the origination of, by a process of elimination, they are the logical group. It is likely, just like the other Nephite dissident rebellions in the Book of Mormon, that the Amalekites were in league with the Lamanites and thus remained on friendly terms with the Lamanites afterwards. Nephites who were perhaps sympathetic to Mosiah₁ (or at least were not in league with the Amalekites and/or Lamanites) but were not able to leave with him because of geographic location or other factors are the likely ancestors of the king Lamoni servants. The fact that the servants (unlike the Amalekites) were still favorable to the Nephite religion when Ammon arrived is a clue to their ancestry.

Further verification of the origin of the Amalekites is found in the name itself. A pattern has been identified in the Book of Mormon by S. Kent Brown called the “Exodus Pattern”:

The Israelite deliverance from Egypt serves as a type for several Book of Mormon accounts of deliverance. Book of Mormon authors and teachers such as Nephi, Alma, and Limhi allude to the Exodus and draw parallels with their own experiences. One perceives similarities not only with groups, such as Lehi's family leaving Jerusalem, but also with personal experiences, such as Alma's deliverance from the bondage of sin. (Brown, 1998, 75)

Although Brown did not mention the Mosiah₁ exodus as a candidate for this pattern, all of the elements are there, in fact more so. You have a prophetic leader with 20,000 followers (according to the “Caractors” Document, Grover 2015, 203) trapped in a defensive position (as was Moses against the Red Sea) against an overwhelming military force, who then escaped miraculously into and through the wilderness, arriving finally at a more friendly land. Mosiah’s followers were referred to as his “children” (Grover 2015, 178), similar to the reference to those who fled in the Exodus as the “children of Israel” (1 Kings 6:1).

A Biblical type for the Book of Mormon Amalekites is directly found with the Amalekites of the Bible. The Bible records the long-lasting feud between the Amalekites and the Israelites and God’s direction to wipe the Amalekites off the face of the earth (Exodus 17:8–13; 1 Samuel 15:2–3; Deuteronomy 25:17–19).

Deuteronomy 25:17–19

17 Remember what Amalek did unto thee by the way, when ye were come forth out of Egypt;

18 How he met thee by the way, and smote the hindmost of thee, even all that were feeble behind thee, when thou wast faint and weary; and he feared not God.

19 Therefore it shall be, when the LORD thy God hath given thee rest from all thine enemies round about, in the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee for an inheritance to possess it, that thou shalt blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven; thou shalt not forget it.

Samuel 15:2–3

2 Thus saith the LORD of hosts, I remember that which Amalek did to Israel, how he laid wait for him in the way, when he came up from Egypt.

3 Now go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not; but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass.

The reason for the commandment to annihilate and show no mercy to the Amalekites was because they attacked the Israelites during the Exodus, laying in wait for them and killing the feeble persons (likely women and children) in the back who were weary and fainting. The Amalekites in the Book of Mormon attacked the children of Mosiah₁, causing them to flee in front of them in order to escape. In the Bible, when battling the Amalekites, Moses climbs a nearby hill to watch the battle, which has some similarities to Mosiah₁ retreating to a hill north of Shilom.

As one of the Edomite tribes, the Biblical Amalekites were also treated as “brothers” (Deuteronomy 23:7) of the Israelites, something similar to the Nephite relationship to the Amalekites—Alma 43:14 refers to them as “brethren” of the Nephites. The nature of the Book of Mormon description of the Amalekites is similar to the Bible, as they are described as “of a more wicked and murderous disposition than the Lamanites” (Alma 43:6) and the Nephites knew that if the Lamanites led by the Amalekites defeated the Nephites, their wives and their children would be “destroyed” (Alma 43:9).

Ironically, in a later battle of Moroni₁ against the army led by Zerahemnah the Amalekite, Moroni₁ used a stratagem of laying in wait to hem in and defeat Zerahemnah, the same strategy used by the Biblical Amalekites against the children of Israel (Alma 43). When trapped, Moroni gave Zerahemnah and his army the opportunity to surrender, and if they did not, similar to the fate of the Biblical Amalekites before Saul, Moroni₁’s army would “fall upon” them that they “may become extinct” (Alma 44:7).

After the exodus from Egypt, Amalekites later joined with the Canaanites and attacked the Israelites at Hormah (Numbers 14:45). As recorded in Judges, they banded with the Moabites (Judges 3:13) and the Midianites (Judges

6:3) to wage war on the Israelites. They were responsible for the repeated destruction of the Israelites’ land and food supply. The Biblical Amalekites continued to harass and plunder the Israelites in successive generations that spanned hundreds of years. First Samuel 30 reports an Amalekite raid on Ziklag, a Judean village where David held property. Much later, during the reign of King Hezekiah, a group of Simeonites “killed the remaining Amalekites” who had been living in the hill country of Seir (1 Chronicles 4:42–43). The last mention of the Amalekites is found in the book of Esther where Haman the Agagite, a descendant of the Amalekite King Agag, connives to have all the Jews in Persia annihilated by order of King Xerxes. God saved the Jews in Persia, however, and Haman, his sons, and the rest of Israel’s enemies were destroyed instead (Esther 9:5–10). The Amalekites of the Book of Mormon formed similar military coalitions over time to destroy the Nephites.



Figure 12. The Amalekites fight against the Israelites led by Joshua, with Moses pictured in the background on a hilltop. (Wikipedia Commons, 2016)

One interesting Mesoamerican correlation involving the etymology of the Amalekite name is the Hebrew *ama lak* meaning “people who lick blood.” Considering that the Lamanites early on in the Book of Mormon were characterized as loving murder and drinking “the blood of beasts” (Jarom 1:6) and generally delighting in blood (Mosiah 11:19) this might be an apt description of the religious integration of Lamanite practice among the Amalekites. Also of interest in a Mesoamerican setting is an interesting (but somewhat speculative) correlation involving the fact that the Biblical Amalekites were considered one of the tribes of the area of Edom (based on Amalek being a descendant of Esau). *Edom* means “red” in Hebrew (www.abarim-publications.com 2015) and so would also have the potential correlation with blood, and, since the color red is associated with the cardinal direction of east is fitting as under the Sorenson model, the land of Nephi where the Amalekites were lay east of the land of Zarahemla.

Based on the Sumerian etymology of the name *Zerahemnah* it seems certain that he was after the order of Nehor, which is after the Maya religion of Itzamna (the Principal Bird Deity):

zeh: a bird

era: leader (of the assembly)

rah: to beat, kill; to break, crush

e-rah₂, rah₂-am₃ (form of *rah*)

na: man

ah: phlegm, mucus, sputum; foam, scum; saliva, spittle; poison

Constructed Compound Name: **Ze(h)rah₂am₃nah**

Based on the Sumerian etymology the meaning of the name would be approximately “Bird leader who kills; man of scum.”

Consequently, in Biblical Hebrew the verb זָרַח (*zarah*), means to arise, or come up (www.abarim-publications.com 2015) referring to the rising of the sun which occurs in the east, which is consistent with the earlier correlation of the Amalekites and the east.