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Abstract: Ancient world civilizations believed that the perceived order of territorial environment, in its “natural” and built-up features, revealed the structure of a sacred universe. The epitome of this symbolic order was a capital city or ceremonial center. “In those religions which held that human order was brought into being at the creation of the world there was a pervasive tendency to dramatize the cosmogony by constructing on earth a reduced version of the cosmos, usually in the form of a state capital.” Characteristic of complex societies throughout the ancient world, this phenomenon is referred to as cosmic urban symbolism. The principles of cosmic urban symbolism account for many ideas and events in the Book of Mormon which are otherwise unexplained within a nineteenth-century American context.



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Steven L. Olsen

The Book of Mormon makes the claim of being the translation of ancient records of peoples who lived in the Western Hemisphere from 4000 to 1500 years ago. Nevertheless, from the time of its publication, historians theologians have largely ignored that claim and have tried to identify similarities between the Book of Mormon and nineteenth-century America. Historian Fawn Brodie made perhaps the most concise statement of this approach:

Any theory of the origin of the Book of Mormon that spotlights the prophet and blacks out the stage on which he performed is certain to be a distortion. For the book can best be explained . . . by his responsiveness to the provincial opinions of his time. . . . If his book is monotonous today, it is because the frontier fires are long since dead and the burning questions that book answered are ashes.¹

Despite what specific relevance the Book of Mormon had for the “burned-over district,” its full significance cannot be reduced to early nineteenth-century American concerns. A growing number of Book of Mormon scholars is taking seriously the book’s claim of antiquity. Students from various professional disciplines have identified ways in which the content and organization of the Book of Mormon depend on influences from a far wider context than Brodie and others have been willing to acknowledge.² This article examines a basic aspect of the Book of Mormon which is viewed more adequately from the perspective of ancient civilizations rather than that of the American frontier.

Cosmic Urban Symbolism

Ancient world civilizations believed that the perceived order of territorial environment, in its “natural” and built-up features, revealed the structure of a sacred universe. The epitome of this symbolic order was a capital city or ceremonial center. “In those religions which held that human order was brought into being at the creation of the world there was a pervasive tendency to dramatize the cosmogony by constructing on earth a reduced version of the cosmos, usually in the form of a state capital.”³

Characteristic of complex societies throughout the ancient world, this phenomenon, referred to as cosmic urban symbolism, appeared first in the

Near East some five thousand years ago. While by no means universal in ancient civilizations, cosmic urban symbolism has been documented in South and East Asia, the Mediterranean area, Africa,⁴ and “in the New World zone of aboriginal complex societies that in pre-Hispanic times extended from Central Mexico to Peru.”⁵ Despite its significance for and pervasiveness in the pre-modern world, cosmic urban symbolism was virtually neglected as a topic of study by American and European scholars until the present century.⁶ The existence of cosmic urban symbolism was unknown in Europe and America at the time the Book of Mormon was published.

The specific features of this model of spatial organization vary from culture to culture but can be generally expressed in terms of three principles: centripetality, cardinality, and inductance. Centripetality is the notion that terrestrial space was created from and ordered by an “existentially centered point.”⁷ This center or “navel of the earth” was considered to be the point of contact between heaven and earth, the most elevated place on earth and the point at which the creation of the earth began.⁸ The construction of a temple or other holy sanctuary celebrated the sacredness of the *axis mundi*. Rituals and other observances were performed in those holy places to preserve the parallelism of the macrocosmos (heaven) and the microcosmos (earth).⁹ Natural, political or social catastrophe often succeeded in dislocating the *axis mundi*. When this occurred, the holy of holies was likely relocated to another site declared auspicious by the ritual leader of the group.¹⁰

Cardinality required that the “land,” or ritually habitable territory, be ordered according to the cardinal compass directions, beginning at the ceremony center.¹¹ Peripheral settlements became imitations of the center, dominated by cardinally oriented streets and buildings. In addition, the “land” and the cosmos were divided by the cardinal axes into four segments or “quarters.” This structural dependence of the periphery upon the center was also expressed in a functional dependence—moral, economic, and political—of the hinterland upon the capital.

Inductance, the third principle of cosmic urban symbolism, links the territorial order to all aspects of life in the “land.” In these societies, the moral order of the cosmos was binding upon all inhabitants of the land—often in the form of communal covenant—and was reflected in social and historical consciousness as well as in territorial organization. “In this context social responsibility implied not merely passive adherence to a primary ethical norm but rather a positive commitment to spatial and temporal patterns of terrestrial organization that simulated the order of the macrocosmos.”¹²

These three principles of spatial organization were “applicable at each of the main levels of human experience, namely the global level (in so far as it was comprehended by the societies concerned), the state level, the

level of the capital city, the level of the temple housing the palladium of the kingdom, and so on down to the level of the tomb.”¹³ The limited data contained in the Book of Mormon does not permit a complete investigation of this phenomenon at each of its manifested levels. Nevertheless, the principles of cosmic urban symbolism account for many ideas and events in the Book of Mormon which are otherwise unexplained within a nineteenth-century American context.

Centripetality in the Book of Mormon

One of the recurring themes in the Book of Mormon is the establishment and maintenance of a centralized social and territorial order. The Book of Mormon narrative opens in Old Jerusalem during the reign of Zedekiah with the minor prophet Lehi preaching that the city of the Jews is about to be destroyed because of the wickedness of its inhabitants. The citizens respond by trying to kill Lehi; consequently, he flees with his family into the wilderness. They do not leave, however, without first receiving the promise of being guided by God to another land of promise, “a land choice above all other lands,” to establish another *axis mundi*.

Having abandoned their traditional, though profaned, sanctuary, Lehi’s company constructs a temporary axis in the wilderness: Lehi’s tent. That Lehi “dwelt in a tent” is mentioned fourteen times in the desert narrative and appears at critical events in the historical sequence: after Lehi reported his “dream of the tree of life” and after Nephi reported his vision of the promised land (1 Ne. 8:11–14); after Lehi’s sons acquired the Hebrew scriptures from a corrupt religious leader in Jerusalem and after additional refugees from Jerusalem joined Lehi’s company (1 Ne. 4; 7:1–5); and on the occasion of essential observances of the Mosaic law (1 Ne. 2:6–7; 6:7–9; 7:22). Lehi’s tent thus secured contact with the heavens, despite the nomadic existence of his following, and allowed him and his people to continue in confidence toward the promised land.¹⁴

The image of the center as a holy mountain was also established early in and maintained throughout the Book of Mormon.¹⁵ In relation to the wilderness Jerusalem was always “up,” while the wilderness in relation to Jerusalem was either “down” or “into” (1 Ne. 3–7, *passim*). Once in the promised land, the people always went “up” to the temple and to the “lands of our first inheritance” (Jacob 2:11; Mosiah 1:18; 2:1–11; 7:2–4; 20:7; 28:1; 29:3; Alma 17:8; 20:2; 24:20; 26:23). Finally, the elevated status of the kingdom of God was emphasized in millennial imagery and ecstatic experiences, such as Nephi’s vision of the promised land (1 Ne. 11:21; 17:7).¹⁶ In the nearly thousand-year period that this civilization occupied the promised land, four successive centers were established—Lehi, Nephi, Zarahemla, and Bountiful. Except for the land of Lehi, in which Lehi’s tent served as

the *axis mundi*, a temple was established at each center. Ritual officials were appointed to perform the prescriptions of the Mosaic law, with major observances, such as renewal ceremonies,¹⁷ occurring at the temple. Important sermons were also delivered to the community from the temple (2 Ne. 5:10, 16; Mosiah 2:5; Jacob 2–5; 3 Ne. 12–17).

Each succeeding center became more complex than the previous. Lehi's tent constituted the *axis* in the land of Lehi, with the society founded upon Lehi's patriarchal authority. In the land of Nephi, kingship was instituted, with Nephi serving as the first king. Subsequent kings were called Second Nephi, Third Nephi, and so on (Jacob 1:11).¹⁸ The ultimate authority in the society at this time rested with the prophet king. Although many urban functions existed in the land of Nephi (including commerce and redistribution, politics and defense, ritual and residence), the focus of the society, as judged from the narrative, was the temple.¹⁹ Even though the Nephite occupation of the land of Nephi lasted from three to four hundred years, the narrative of this period consists almost entirely of sermons and prophecies delivered from the temple or elaborations of those sermons from scriptures or other prophecy (2 Ne. 6–10; Jacob 2–6; 2 Ne. 12–13). Virtually none of the daily life of the people during this period is reported.²⁰

Although cities existed in the land of Nephi, they were apparently not the focus of the social order to the extent that they became during the nearly two hundred years of Nephite history at Zarahemla. The temple at Zarahemla was important in the narrative, but less so than the capital city itself, containing the headquarters of the major social institutions—church, government, and military. Reform movements began at Zarahemla. Missionary parties and settlement expeditions departed from Zarahemla (Alma 5:1; Hel. 5:14; Alma 17:7; Omni 1:27–29; Mosiah 9). In addition, when the “people of the land were threatened by invasion, they “did gather together” their families and provisions “unto one place,” to “dwell in one land and in one body” at Zarahemla, the “center of [their] lands,” to prepare their defense (3 Ne. 3–4). By contrast, Zarahemla, when weakened by dissent and internal conflict, jeopardized the security of the entire kingdom (Alma 59–62).

In one final example of centripetality at Zarahemla, the Nephite society had been weakened by dissent and was left vulnerable to invasion by the Lamanites, who were led by a Nephite dissenter. The Lamanites directly attacked and captured Zarahemla. This action completely surprised the Nephites, “for they had supposed that the Lamanites durst not come into the heart of their lands to attack that great city Zarahemla.” Not content with possessing the “center of the land,” the Lamanites “took courage . . . to go forth against all the land.” Nevertheless, having “plunged . . . into the midst of the Nephites, insomuch that they were in the power of the

Nephites,” the Lamanites were surrounded by the Nephite armies and held captive until they relinquished control of Zarahemla. At the time, the Nephite leader released them and “caused that the Lamanites . . . should depart out of the land in peace,” as if control of the capital were the only object in the Nephite counteroffensive (Hel. 1).

The importance of an urban identity for the Nephites is further seen in the cultural stereotype of their enemies, the Lamanites. The Nephites, “people of the land,” viewed those upon whom the curse of the land had fallen as being

led by their evil nature that they become wild, and ferocious, and a blood thirsty people, full of idolatry and filthiness; feeding upon beasts of prey; dwelling in tents, and wandering about in the wilderness with a short skin girdle about their loins and their heads shaven; and their skill was in the bow, and the cimeter, and the ax. And many of them did eat nothing save it was raw meat; and they were continually seeking to destroy us (Enos 1:20).²¹

The principal ecclesiastical mission to redeem the Lamanites, however, found the opposite—that a highly structured urban society similar to that of the Nephites had been established among the Lamanites; that love and faith existed among them, often superior to that of the Nephites; and that many accepted the word of God more readily than many Nephites had done (Alma 17–28).²²

The city in the Book of Mormon was the unit of territorial control, the “generator of effective space.”²³ The capital city—whether Nephi, Zarahemla, or Bountiful—was, with its temple, the *axis mundi* for all the land. Furthermore, each subordinate city controlled its immediate surroundings, and residence throughout the land occurred with the city dominating that part of the territory. The polity, therefore, consisted of a confederation of city-states related to one another through the supreme capital.²⁴ In every case in the Book of Mormon, the city and the land it controlled have the same name and are often considered equivalent (Mosiah 7:1; Alma 53:3). In the language of the Book of Mormon: “Now it was the custom of the people of Nephi to call their lands, and their cities, and their villages, yea, even all their small villages, after the name of him who first possessed them” (Alma 8:7).

The significance of the city for the Nephites was manifest at all levels of their society. In times of peace and stability, one of the characteristic social activities was urban renewal or expansion (Mosiah 23:19–20; 27:6–7; Alma 50:13–23; 63; Hel. 3–4; 3 Ne. 6:4–8; 4 Ne 7–9; Morm. 1:7; Ether 10:4). On the other hand, the principle objectives of warfare were the defence of capture of cities. Although “the design of the Nephites was to support their lands, and their houses, and their wives, and their children . . . that they might preserve their rights and their privileges, yea, and also their liberty,

that they might worship God according to their desires” (Alma 43:9),²⁵ the means for preserving their society was in defending their cities, which was equivalent to controlling their lands and assuring their welfare (Alma 51:23–28; 56:13–15).

Whenever Lamanites captured Nephite cities, the capture was attributed to Nephite wickedness and was successful only after intense fighting and the loss of many lives. “And it came to pass that he [Ammoron, the Lamanite general] did command that his people should maintain those cities, which they had taken by the shedding of blood; for they had not taken any cities save they had lost much blood” (Alma 52:4).²⁶ At the loss of a major city, the Nephite generals, who were also considered prophets (3 Ne. 3:19), “doubted and marveled . . . because of the wickedness of the people, and this because of the success of the Lamanites over them” (Alma 59:11–12).²⁷ By contrast, when the Nephites were righteous, they were able to defend their cities without difficulty (Alma 48–50; 3 Ne. 3–4) and were able to retake lost cities by stratagem, without losing any lives, as if to reassert their divine right to possess the land (Alma 52:19; 56:30–57; 57:3–12; 58:1–28; 62:22–26).

At times, extreme wickedness among the “people of the land” produced natural catastrophe, and in such cases the principal unit of destruction was the city as well as the territory it controlled:

[B]ehold, the whole face of the land was changed, because of the tempest and the whirlwinds and the thundering and the lightnings, and the exceeding great quaking of the whole earth. . . .

And many great and notable cities were sunk, and many were burned, and many were shaken till the buildings thereof had fallen to the earth, and the inhabitants thereof were slain, and the places were left desolate.

And there were some cities which remained; but the damage thereof was exceeding great, and there were many of them who were slain (3 Ne. 8:12–15).²⁸

The final demise of the Nephites came when their wickedness prevented their establishing an *axis mundi* anywhere in the promised land—when there was “one complete revolution throughout the face of the land” (Morm. 2:8) and “the Lamanites were about to overthrow the land” (Morm. 4:23). As a result, the Nephites were scattered and driven from their homes and lands. “And it came to pass that whatsoever lands we [the Nephites] had passed by, and the inhabitants thereof were not gathered in, were destroyed by the Lamanites, and their twons, and villages, and cities were burned with fire” (Morm. 5:5). Without the moral order necessary to establish an *axis mundi*, the Nephites were driven out of the land of promise into the land called “Desolation” and were there completely destroyed by the Lamanites.

In short, Nephite society exemplifies the quality of centripetality in its settlement processes, ritual patterns, political organization, warfare, and cultural stereotypes. The ideal of a centralized urban society founded on the moral force of religion pervades the Book of Mormon narrative. In its general as well as specific features, the Book of Mormon abundantly manifests this characteristic of ancient ceremonial centers.

Cardinality in the Book of Mormon

An awareness of the principle of cardinality is also fundamental to a through understanding of the Book of Mormon. For example, settlement expansion was seen to radiate from the center along the cardinal compass directions:

And there began to be much peace again in the land; and the people began to be very numerous, and began to scatter abroad upon the face of the earth, yea, on the north and on the south, on the east and on the west, building large cities and villages in all quarters of the land (Mosiah 27:6).

Dividing the land into “quarters” for defence purposes was also practiced by the Nephites. The war narrative suggest that defending the four “quarters of the land” was the responsibility of four Nephite generals although the record reports the activities of only three: Teancum, Helaman, and Moroni (Alma 43–48; *passim*).

In addition, the north-south axis possessed sacred meaning for the Nephites. With regard to general topography, south was sacred and north was profane.²⁹ Each succeeding relocation of the *axis mundi*—required because the existing one had degenerated—was north of the preceding center, and each successive dislocation of the axis was increasingly destructive to the moral structure of Nephite society.³⁰ The complete destruction of the “people of the land” occurred in the northernmost section, “Desolation,” being the place of annihilation of the Jaredites as well as lying beyond the boundaries of the promised land (Alma 22; Ether 7:6; Alma 46:17). Thus, the “people of the land” were destroyed when their wickedness prevented them from remaining in the land.³¹

The north-south opposition in the topography of the promised land also existed on other levels. The most general level of this opposition was between the promised land and Desolation. The promised land, however, was divided between the land of Lehi-Nephi (“the land of our first inheritance”) and the land of Mulek. Mulek, in turn, was divided into the land of Zarahemla and the land of Bountiful, which bordered the land of Desolation (Hel. 6:10; 3 Ne. 3:23). With each paired territory, the southernmost land (that is, the promised land, Nephi-Lehi, and Zarahemla) was the preferred residence for the “people of the land” while residence there was

possible. In each case destruction of the *axis mundi* carried the people to a less auspicious land to the north. East and west have no corresponding significance in the Book of Mormon.

Although the Book of Mormon contains no information regarding settlements locations, evidence of cardinality appears at the more general levels of spatial organization to a degree that leaves no doubt of its significance for the societies in the Book of Mormon.

Inductance in the Book of Mormon

Inductance is the most inclusive characteristic of cosmic urban symbolism in the Book of Mormon. The moral foundation of the territorial order permeated the social order, was binding upon all who occupied the land and was considered to be an eternal condition of residence in the promised land:

And the Lord . . . had sworn in his wrath . . . that whoso should possess this land of promise, from that time henceforth and forever, should serve him, the true and only God, or they should be swept off when the fulness of his wrath should come upon them (Ether 2:7–9).³²

The basis of this moral order was a covenant—“Inasmuch as ye shall keep my [God’s] commandments ye shall prosper in the land; but inasmuch as ye will not keep my commandments ye shall be cut off from my presence” (2 Ne. 1:20). Thus, possessing the land of promise was equivalent to living in the presence of God and being his chosen people. This covenant is repeated many times throughout the Book of Mormon and often at critical points in the narrative: to justify the killing of a Jewish religious leader and theft of the Hebrew scriptures (1 Ne. 4); to justify the divine curse which came upon the Lamanites (2 Ne. 5:20–25); to focus the final blessing of the patriarch Lehi to his posterity (2 Ne. 1–4); to give the succession of ritual office and the inheritance of sacred objects its proper moment (Alma 36–38); to rally the Nephites in defense against the invasion of Lamanites (Alma 45–48); and to explain both the inability of the Nephites to retain their homelands and the destruction of the Jaredite predecessors of the Nephites in the promised land (Jarom 1:9–10; Omni 1:5–12; Ether 2:8–9). In short, the conditions of the covenant with the land provided the framework for interpreting a wide variety of events, many of which were of principal importance in the Book of Mormon.

Another indication of the significance of this covenant is the frequency with which the terms *land* or *lands* appear. These words are used 1,361 times in the narrative, with only three other nouns appearing more often: *God* (1,681), *Lord* (1,578), and *people* (1,774).³³ The Nephite covenant integrated the concepts of God, land and people into the foundation of

the Nephite social order, which was theocentric in ideology, authority, institutional arrangement and metaphysics.³⁴ The leaders of the Nephite society—whether patriarch, king, priest, judge or general—claimed legitimacy through contact with deity (1 Ne. 2:22; Mosiah 2:11; 29; 3 Ne. 3:19). They in turn, prescribed the means whereby their followers could retain an identity as God’s people (Jacob 2–6; Mosiah 2–5; 3 Ne. 12–16; 4 Ne. 17). All social and civic functions were expressions of an all pervasive religious foundation for the society.³⁵ Even the insistence upon their own existence and the existence of the universe was founded upon the assertion, “but there is a God” (2 Ne. 2:11–16; 11:6–7).³⁶ Furthermore, for them the ideal social order was communitarian and egalitarian:

And it came to pass in the thirty and sixth year, the people were all converted unto the Lord, upon all the face of the land, both Nephites and Lamanites, and there were no contentions and disputations among them, and every man did deal justly one with another.

And they had all things common among them; therefore there were not rich and poor, bond and free, but they were all made free, and partakers of the heavenly gift (4 Ne. 2–3).³⁷

Efforts were continually made by Nephite religious leaders to minimize the aristocratic tendencies of the theocratic society.³⁸ By contrast, the social order was destroyed when distinctions of wealth and power emerged:

[T]here began to be some disputings among the people; and some were lifted up unto pride and boastings because of their exceeding great riches, yea, even unto great persecutions;

For there were many merchants in the land, and also many lawyers, and many officers.

And the people began to be distinguished by ranks, according to their riches and their chances for learning, yea, some were ignorant because of their poverty, and others did receive great learning because of their riches. . . . And thus there became a great inequality in all the land, insomuch that the church began to be broken up. . . . Now the cause of this iniquity of the people was this—Satan had great power unto the stirring up of the people to do all manner of iniquity, and to the puffing them up with pride, tempting them to seek for power, and authority, and riches, and the vain things of the world. (3 Ne. 6:10–15)³⁹

The moral order of the territorial and social environments was a direct reflection of how well the covenant was kept. Through the people’s strict adherence to Christ’s teaching and their ability to convert “the people . . . upon all the face of the land,” they were able to maintain a utopian existence for nearly two hundred years following the visit of the resurrected Christ among them. On the other hand, the periodic necessity to relocate the *axis mundi* as well as the ultimate inability of the people to establish an effective center resulted from their breaking the covenant with the land

(4 Ne. 2; 2 Ne. 5:1–8; Omni 1–13; 3 Ne. 8–10). Thus, notions of order and well-being in the Book of Mormon are intricately connected to the communal covenant with God, the sign of which is the promised land.

In addition to its effect upon the social order, the covenant with the land influences the historical consciousness of the Nephites. The model for historical interpretation in the Book of Mormon is Nephi's vision of the promised land and its subsequent expansion (1 Ne. 11–14; 2 Ne. 25–30). In the first place, Nephi's vision places the concept of salvation introduced in Lehi's "dream of the tree of life" into a historical and universal context. Nephi received the vision in response to his desire "to know the things that my father had seen." The vision focuses on the salvation of "Jews and Gentiles," the two main divisions of the human family in the Book of Mormon, rather than on the individual members of Lehi's family, as in the dream. According to the vision, the covenant with the land would be God's *modus operandi* of both the salvation of the righteous and the destruction of the wicked. Furthermore, the "land choice above all other lands" would provide the foundation for Christ's millennial kingdom. Nephi's expanded version of these events developed the role of the Book of Mormon—the ancient history of the covenant with the land—in realizing God's promises of salvation (1 Ne. 11:1; 14:1–5; 2 Ne. 27; 29).

Secondly, the events foretold in the vision and subsequently reported in Mormon's abridgment of the Nephite records are identical in sequence and relative importance. Nephi's vision and Mormon's history each give considerable emphasis to Christ's three-day mission to the land of promise (1 Ne. 12:1–10; 2 Ne. 26:1–9; 3 Ne. 8–28). By contrast, they show almost no interest in the "three generations of righteousness" following Christ's visit (1 Ne. 11:11–12; 2 Ne. 26:9; 4 Ne. 1–20). Finally, the destruction of the civilization of the Book of Mormon is given increased attention in both accounts (1 Ne. 12:13–23; 2 Ne. 26:10–11; 4 Ne. 20; Morm. 6:22). In short, Mormon used Nephi's vision of interpreting historical events which had been foreseen in the vision.

Thirdly, the events of the vision, including those to occur after the close of the Nephite record—namely, the gentile occupation of the promised land, the reappearance of the Nephite record in the last days, the destruction of the gentile kingdoms, the restoration of the covenant people to their lands of promise, and the advent of the Millennium—constituted the prophetic tradition of the Nephites (1 Ne. 13:14; 2 Ne. 27–30). Each of the events was amply foretold by Nephite prophets. Conversely, that condition which is virtually omitted from Nephi's vision—the utopia following Christ's visit—is likewise ignored by Nephite prophets. Only the resurrection of the dead and the Last Judgment were foretold by Nephite prophets but were not contained in Nephi's vision. The Last Judgment, however, was

part of Nephi's expanded vision of the promised land given at the end of his life (2 Ne. 29:11–13; 30:10–18). In short, Nephi's vision of the promised land became the pattern of historical consciousness and prophetic expectation for the people of the Book of Mormon.

Eschatology in the Book of Mormon is strongly affected by the covenant with the land. The gathering—the means of realizing the social and territorial ideals of the Nephites—was expressed as the process of assembling the covenant people “from the four parts of the earth . . . to the lands of their inheritance” (2 Ne. 10:7–8).⁴⁰ If repetition is an indication of emphasis, one of the strongest messages of Christ to the Nephites was that “this is the land of your inheritance; and the Father hath given it unto you” (3 Ne. 15:13).⁴¹ Christ also informed the Nephites that the restoration of the covenant people to the lands of their inheritance was the only covenant which the Father had yet to fulfill prior to the Millennium (3 Ne. 15–16; 20). The promised land during the Millennium would be secured and ordered by a new *axis mundi*, the New Jerusalem, to be built by a coalition of Jews and gentiles, constituting all the righteous inhabitants of the promised land in the last days:

And they [the gentiles] shall assist my people, the remnant of Jacob, and also as many of the house of Israel as shall come, that they may build a city, which shall be called the New Jerusalem. . . .

And then shall the power of heaven come down among them; and I [Christ] also will be in the midst (3 Ne. 21:23–25).⁴²

Failure to establish an urbanized society according to the divine pattern would result in a curse upon the land and its people. “Prepare slaughter for his [the evildoer's] children for the iniquities of their fathers, that they do not rise, nor possess the land, nor fill the face of the world with cities” (2 Ne. 24:21).⁴³ In addition, Christ promised the Nephites that the Father would “cut off the cities” of the land of the wicked gentiles and “throw down all [their] strongholds” (3 Ne. 21:14–21).

Conclusion

As can be seen, cosmic urban symbolism affects every aspect of society and culture in the Book of Mormon, from the universal to the mundane, from the immediate to the eternal. It provides a broadly based and compelling connection between the Book of Mormon and civilizations of the ancient world. A final assessment of this enigma in American religious history must explain the ability of the Book of Mormon not only to relate to specific historical contexts, but also to bridge great gaps of time and space in the human experience.

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1. Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith*, 2d. ed., rev. and enl. (New York: Knopf, 1977), p. 69; cf. pp. 34–49. See also Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800–1850* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1950), pp. 144–46.

2. See Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 2d. ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976) and *Lehi in the Desert and the World of the Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft); John W. Welch, and *Lehi in the Desert and the World of the Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1952); John W. Welch, “A Study Relating Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon to Chiasmus in the Old Testament, Ugaritic Epics, Homer, and Selected Greek and Latin Authors” (M. A. thesis, Brigham Young University, 1970); Richard Bushman, “The Book of Mormon and the American Revolution,” *Brigham Young University Studies* 17 (Autumn 1976): 3–20; Truman G. Madsen, ed., *Reflections of Mormonism: Judeo-Christian Parallels* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1978), chaps. 6–8; and Bruce W. Jorgensen, “The Dark Way to the Tree: Typological Unity in the Book of Mormon,” Part 2, *Encyclia* 54 (1977):16–24.

3. Paul Wheatley, *The City as Symbol* (Edinburgh: T& A Constable, 1969), p. 10.

4. Joseph Rykwert, *The Idea of a Town: The Social Anthropology of Urban Form in Rome, Italy, and the Ancient World* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1978); Numan Denis Fustel de Coulanges, *The Ancient City* (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, n. d.); and Paul Wheatley, “The Significance of Traditional Yoruba Symbolism,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 12 (1970): 393–423.

5. Paul Wheatley, “The Suspended Pelt: Reflections on a Discarded Model of Spatial Structure,” in Donald R. Deskins, Jr., George Kish, John D. Nystuen, and Gunnar Olsson, eds., *Geographic Humanism, Analysis and Social Action: A Half-century of Geography at Michigan*, Michigan Geographical Publications, no. 17 (1977): 54; and Paul Wheatley, *Pivot of the Four Quarters* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co., 1971), pp. 225–57.

6. Paul Wheatley, “Review of Joseph Rykwert, *The Idea of a Town*,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 68 (1978): 426.

7. Wheatley, “The Suspended Pelt,” p. 53.

8. See A. J. Wesnick, “The Idea of the Western Semites Concerning the Navel of the Earth,” *Verhandelingen der Koninklijke Academie van Wetenschappen te Amsterdam* 17, n.s. (1916): 1–65.

9. Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954), pp. 67–27.

10. Wheatley, *City as Symbol*, p. 38, n. 90.

11. Wheatley, “The Suspended Pelt,” p. 53.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 52. *Inductance* is a term borrowed from electronics and refers to the process of generating sympathetic forces among a set of associated circuits. In the present context, it refers to the complementarity of the territorial and social orders in those societies expressing cosmic urban symbolism.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 53.

14. The tent as an *axis mundi* Hebrew thought is explored briefly in R. E. Clements, *God and Temple* (Philadelphia: Portress Press, 1965), pp. 28–39.

15. See Wesnick, “Navel of the Earth,” pp. 1–10.

16. Cf. Ether 3; 2 Ne. 12:2–3; 14:5; 18:18; 20:12; 21:9.

17. Nibley, *Approach to the Book of Mormon*, pp. 243–56.

18. Of Nephi’s reluctance to become king (2 Ne. 5:18), see Fustel de Coulanges, *The Ancient City*, p. 179.

19. "This does not imply that the ceremonial centers did not exercise secular functions as well, but rather . . . these were subsumed into an all-pervading religious context" (Wheatley, *Pivot of the Four Quarters*, p. 225).

20. "There was a poorly developed sense of public life [in the earliest form of ceremonial centers], and opportunities for civic communalism were restricted virtually to limited participation in ceremonial festivals and marketing excursions," Wheatley, *City as Symbol*, p. 21. This characteristic, of course, changed as society evolved. See Wheatley, *Pivot of the Four Quarters*, pp. 311–16; and Fustel de Coulanges, *The Ancient City*, pp. 224–343.

21. See also 2 Ne. 5:20–25; Alma 17:14–15; 22:28. For the Nephite self-evaluation, see 1 Ne. 18:23–25; 2 Ne. 5:7–19; Enos 1:21.

22. Cf. Jacob 3:5–6; Hel. 6:1.

23. Wheatley, *Pivot of the Four Quarters*, pp. 386–99.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 398.

25. Cf. Alma 43:30.

26. Cf. Alma 56:13.

27. Cf. Alma 57.

28. Cf. 3 Ne. 8–9.

29. For evidence of south as a sacred direction in non-Western cultures, see Robert Hertz, *Death and the Right Hand*, trans. Rodney and Claudia Needham (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1960), pp. 110–11. See also John L. Sorenson, "An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon," chap. 1, pp. 33–37.

30. See Daniel H. Ludlow, *A Companion to Your Study of the Book Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), p. 383, for a hypothetical geography of the Book of Mormon confirming these territorial relationships.

31. Compare this to the biblical injunction, "ye shall therefore keep all my [God's] statutes, and all my judgments, and do them: that the land, whither I bring you to dwell therein, spue you not out" (Lev. 20:22).

32. Cf. Ether 9:20.

33. R. Gary Shapiro, comp., *An Exhaustive Concordance of the Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price* (Salt Lake City: Hawkes Publishing Co., 1977).

34. "The connection between Yahweh, Israel, the land, Sinai, the Temple is primordial: It is grounded in a necessity of the divine purpose and is, therefore, inservable" (W. D. Davies, *The Gospel and the Land: Early Christianity and Jewish Territorial Doctrine* [Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974], p. 57. See also Gerhard von Rad, *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays*, trans. E. W. Trueman Dicken [Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1966], pp. 79–93.

35. "Socially these ceremonial cities were composed of relatively undifferentiated groups that tended to exhibit relative similarity. . . . All individuals were subsumed within a unitary moral system which was expressed through laws of a primary penal and repressive character" (Wheatley, *City as Symbol*, p. 21).

36. See also Alma 30:44.

37. "Socially these ceremonial cities were composed of relatively undifferentiated groups that tended to exhibit relative similarity. . . . All individuals were subsumed within a unitary moral system which was expressed through laws of a primary penal and repressive character" (Wheatley, *City as Symbol*, p. 21).

38. See Mosiah 2. "In the earlier phases of their development the polities conceived on the basis of this model were predominantly patrimonial in character, that is state and court administration were largely coincident so that government was essentially an

extension to political subjects of the ruler's patriarchal control over his extended family. Derivative features included the legitimization of the ruler's authority in terms of the subject's welfare, the conception of administrative duties as personal services stemming from sentiments of obedience and respect, and a tendency to transform questions of law and adjudication into problems of administration" (Wheatley, "The Suspended Pelt," p. 59).

39. "The causes of its destruction may be reduced to two. One was the change which took place in the course of time in ideas . . . , which, in effacing ancient beliefs, at the same time caused the social edifice to crumble, which these beliefs had built, and could alone sustain. The other was a class of men who found themselves placed outside this city organization, and who suffered from it. These men had an interest in destroying it, and made war upon it continually" (Fustel de Coulanges, *The Ancient City*, p. 224). The Book of Mormon emphasizes the second cause of the secularization (see Orson Scott Card, "Dissent and Treason," *The Ensign* 7 (September 1977): 52–58.

40. See also 1 Ne. 18:15–16; 22:25; 3 Ne. 5:24–26; 16:5; Ether 13:11.

41. Cf. 3 Ne. 16:16–20; 20:14–29; 21:22.

42. See 2 Ne. 30:2 for an explanation of the gentiles' relation to the covenant.

43. Cf. Isa. 14:21.