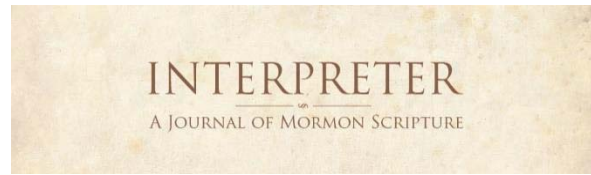




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## The Cultural Context of Nephite Apostasy

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## The Cultural Context of Nephite Apostasy

Mark Alan Wright and Brant A. Gardner

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# THE CULTURAL CONTEXT OF NEPHITE APOSTASY

*Mark Alan Wright and Brant A. Gardner*

*Abstract: Nephite apostates turned away from true worship in consistent and predictable ways throughout the Book of Mormon. Their beliefs and practices may have been the result of influence from the larger socioreligious context in which the Nephites lived. A Mesoamerican setting provides a plausible cultural background that explains why Nephite apostasy took the particular form it did and may help us gain a deeper understanding of some specific references that Nephite prophets used when combating that apostasy. We propose that apostate Nephite religion resulted from the syncretization of certain beliefs and practices from normative Nephite religion with those attested in ancient Mesoamerica. We suggest that orthodox Nephite expectations of the “heavenly king” were supplanted by the more present and tangible “divine king.”*

Scriptures frequently call us back to walking in the Lord’s way. Ancient Israel received repeated prophetic calls to return from a specific type of apostasy. A typical report of Israelite apostasy is found in Judges 2:13: “And they forsook the Lord, and served Baal and Ashtaroth.”<sup>1</sup> Israelite apostasy typically occurred when Israel embraced certain religious and cultural elements from a nearby people with whom they shared similar traits and merged them with their own.<sup>2</sup>

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1. See also, among others, Judges 2:11; 3:7; 6:25, 30; 8:33; 10:6–10; 1 Samuel 7:3–4; 12:10; 1 Kings 16:31–32; 18:18–26; 22:53; 2 Kings 3:2; 10:18–28; 11:18; 17:16; 21:3–5; Jeremiah 2:23; 7:9; Hosea 2:8; Zephaniah 1:4.

2. See, for example, Mark S. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism, Israel’s Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); and William G. Dever, *Did God Have a Wife? Archaeology and Folk Religion in Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005).

In the New World, Nephites frequently received similar calls to repentance. For them there was no Baal to lure them away from the God of Israel. Nevertheless, something tempted them to turn away from their covenantal obligations. This influence was strong enough that within perhaps only forty years in the New World, Jacob was moved to call his people to repentance: “I can tell you concerning your thoughts how that ye are beginning to labor in sin, which sin appeareth very abominable unto me, yea, and abominable unto God” (Jacob 2:2, 5). After some 320 years, this early Nephite apostasy eventually had become sufficiently generalized that, as Omni noted, “the more wicked part of the Nephites were destroyed” (Omni 1:5). The record of the reign of Alma<sub>2</sub> (as the first chief judge) began not with preaching the “pleasing word of God” (Jacob 2:8), but with exhortations against the apostate teachings of Nehor, who “did teach these things so much that many did believe on his words” (Alma 1:5). The New World scriptures, like the Bible, trace a history of apostasy and consequent calls to repentance.

We do not suggest that all instances of syncretism invariably result in apostasy. To the contrary, the Lord typically manifests himself and his will to the faithful according to the cultural context in which they find themselves.<sup>3</sup> Our concern here is with those cultural borrowings that allow some to distort truth and lead people away from correct beliefs and proper worship. *Apostasy* (from the Greek ἀποστασία) literally means “defection” or “revolt” and typically refers to the renunciation of a religious or political belief system. The word *apostasy* never appears in the Book of Mormon, but the process is described throughout the text by expressions such as “dwindling in unbelief” (occurring in some form twenty-six times) or being in

3. Mark Alan Wright, “According to Their Language, Unto Their Understanding’: The Cultural Context of Hierophanies and Theophanies in Latter-day Saint Canon,” *Studies in the Bible and Antiquity* 3 (2011): 51–65.

“open rebellion against God” (occurring in some form fifteen times).

On an individual level, ancient apostasy was more dangerous than our contemporary versions. In many parts of the modern world, one may turn away from the teachings of a particular church yet remain a solid member of society. Such compartmentalization was inconceivable in the ancient world: religion, politics, economics, and even culture were thoroughly intertwined. As Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh note:

Our new social arrangements, with the separation of religion and economics from kinship and politics, would have been inconceivable to [biblical authors and their primary audiences]. In fact, the separation of church and state, and of economics and state, are truly radical and unthinkable departures from what has heretofore been normal on the planet.<sup>4</sup>

This complicated interaction of socioreligious elements may help explain why Nephite apostasy often led to intense social and political divisions and even to armed rebellion or civil war. The seriousness of Nephite apostasy suggests a need to better understand how it occurred and why it so often resulted in violent upheavals.

### Elements of Nephite Apostasy

Descriptions of Nephite apostasy remain remarkably consistent throughout that people’s thousand-year history. Daniel C. Peterson has noted that “common factors repeatedly spoken of in the Book of Mormon that lure people into apostasy include (1) pride and the quest for status . . . ; (2) an exagger-

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4. Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1998), 1. See also the brief note of the same idea in Marcus J. Borg, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time: Taking the Bible Seriously but Not Literally* (San Francisco: Harper, 2001), 245.

ated trust in human learning or wisdom . . . ; and (3) material wealth/prosperity and ease.”<sup>5</sup> The most complete summary of apostasy is found in the way Alma<sub>2</sub> describes the religion to which he attaches Nehor’s name:

And he [Nehor] had gone about among the people, preaching to them that which he termed to be the word of God, bearing down against the church; declaring unto the people that every priest and teacher ought to become popular; and they ought not to labor with their hands, but that they ought to be supported by the people. And he also testified unto the people that all mankind should be saved at the last day, and that they need not fear nor tremble, but that they might lift up their heads and rejoice; for the Lord had created all men, and had also redeemed all men; and, in the end, all men should have eternal life. And it came to pass that he did teach these things so much that many did believe on his words, even so many that they began to support him and give him money. And he began to be lifted up in the pride of his heart, and to wear very costly apparel, yea, and even began to establish a church after the manner of his preaching. (Alma 1:3–6)

These verses contain what Mormon believed were the essential elements of the order of the Nehors. These elements appear as the common descriptions of virtually all Nephite apostasies.<sup>6</sup> In order of appearance, they are as follows:

5. Daniel C. Peterson, “Apostasy,” in *The Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, ed. Dennis L. Largey (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 69.

6. Although Alma<sub>2</sub> discusses an order of the Nehors (“order of Nehor,” Alma 14:16; 24:29; “order of the Nehors,” Alma 21:4; 24:28), the same traits can be identified among the priests of King Noah. For a more detailed discussion of the characteristics and spread of this apostate religious/political/economic system, see Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Kofford, 2007), 4:41–51.

- Nehor claims he preaches “the word of God.” Nehorism appears to maintain a connection to the “brass plates” Israelite religion (though clearly “looking beyond the mark,” Jacob 4:14).
- Nehor emphasizes a different role for priests. They “ought to be supported by the people” rather than laboring to support themselves. This is an endorsement of social hierarchies and a blatant rejection of equality.
- All are saved and redeemed and will have eternal life (i.e., there is no need for an atoning Messiah).
- A manifestation of Nehor’s social and religious position was the wearing of “very costly apparel.”

### Cultural Manifestations of Apostasy

Although Alma<sub>2</sub> describes the religion Nehor preached, many elements of this religion were manifested in social or cultural traits that the modern mind might separate from religion. For example, moderns might quite naturally ascribe the wearing of “very costly apparel” to a cultural norm, whereas Alma<sub>2</sub> saw it as a sign of apostasy.<sup>7</sup> The earliest occurrences of Nephite apostasy as recorded by Jacob prompted similar concerns: “The hand of providence hath smiled upon you most pleasingly, that you have obtained many riches; and because some of you have obtained more abundantly than that of your brethren *ye are lifted up in the pride of your hearts, and wear stiff necks and high heads because of the costliness of your apparel, and persecute your brethren because ye suppose that ye are better than they*” (Jacob 2:13).

Jacob specifically condemns those who imagine they are better than those who do not wear costly apparel. This tendency toward social segregation was probably much more economic

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7. Gardner, *Second Witness*, 6:257–58, discusses costly apparel as a general sign of apostasy signaling a shift in social and economic patterns.



in nature than religious at that early point.<sup>8</sup> However, it becomes clear after the Nephites relocate to Zarahemla that such economic pressures gave rise not only to social stratification but also to changes in Zarahemla's religious climate. The political and religious unity that King Benjamin achieved (Mosiah 4:12–16; 5:5–10) had sufficiently disintegrated during Alma<sub>2</sub>'s tenure as the chief judge, that Alma had to relinquish the judgment seat to spend all of his time in missionary efforts among his fellow Nephites (Alma 4:6–19).

Two interrelated additions to the catalog of apostate ideas appear late in the book of Mosiah: a desire for a particular kind of king and a denial of the existence and mission of the heavenly king, Jesus Christ. The desire for a king was not inherently apostate. Indeed, King Mosiah<sub>2</sub> affirmed, “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” (Mosiah 23:8). In the Book of Mormon, righteous kings sought to bring their people closer to the Lord. Jarom rejoiced that “our kings and our leaders were mighty men in the faith of the Lord; and they taught the people the ways of the Lord” (Jarom 1:7). In contrast, unrighteous kings led their people away from correct beliefs and practices. The story of King Noah is the earliest manifestation of this particular type of apostasy in the Book of Mormon. Noah became a king who was very clearly contrary to the egalitarian ideals King Benjamin had espoused and modeled (Mosiah 2:14). King Noah's priests clearly held to a version of what might be called “brass plates religion,” but they also quite clearly denied the atoning Messiah.<sup>9</sup>

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8. Brant A. Gardner, “A Social History of the Early Nephites,” at <http://www.fairlds.org/pubs/conf/2001GarB.html>.

9. While it is not clear from Alma's brief synopsis, Nehorite religion appears to have maintained belief in some aspects of the Mosaic law. During Alma<sub>2</sub>'s discourse to the Ammonihahites, he pointedly remarked, “The scriptures are before you” (Alma 13:20). Unless the people of Ammonihah believed in those scriptures, Alma<sub>2</sub>'s admonition makes no sense. Further, the Ammonihahite demand to hear more than one person declare Alma<sub>2</sub>'s message may be related to the Deuteronomic law of witnesses (Deuteronomy 19:15). The most obvious

The connection between apostasy in Zarahemla and the Nehorites' desire for a king begins early in the book of Alma:

And it came to pass in the commencement of the fifth year of their reign there began to be a contention among the people; for a certain man, being called Amlici, he being a very cunning man, yea, a wise man as to the wisdom of the world, he being after the order of the man that slew Gideon by the sword, who was executed according to the law—Now this Amlici had, by his cunning, drawn away much people after him; even so much that they began to be very powerful; and they began to endeavor to establish Amlici to be a king over the people. (Alma 2:1–2)

### Syncretization of Nephite Beliefs

Until recently, we lacked the ability to trace the cultural influences that created Nephite apostasy in the same way that we could see how the Canaanite religion influenced Israelite apostasy. New information about the plausible location of the Book of Mormon in the New World opens the possibility of tracing the ways in which Mesoamerican religion served as the model for Nephite apostasy.<sup>10</sup> Important to our understanding of Nephite apostasy is the realization that when Lehi and his family landed in the New World, they found other peoples in the land. Abundant evidence from the archaeological record

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instance of Nehorite believers accepting the law of Moses comes from Abinadi's testimony before Noah's priests, who declared, "We teach the law of Moses" (Mosiah 12:28).

10. John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1985); Lawrence Poulsen, "Lawrence Poulsen's Book of Mormon Geography," at <http://www.poulsenll.org/bom/index.html>. While their geographies differ in some aspects, Sorenson and Poulsen agree on the essential culture areas where Nephite history would have taken place.

attests that the New World was inhabited long before Lehi's colony arrived, including the Mesoamerican region.<sup>11</sup> Though the authors of the Book of Mormon do not explicitly discuss the preexisting populations they encountered, they do provide clues about their presence.<sup>12</sup> This suggestion, while novel to some, is certainly not new. Matthew Roper notes that

many Latter-day Saints over the years, including a number of church leaders, have acknowledged the likelihood that before, during, and following the events recounted in the Book of Mormon, the American hemisphere has been visited and inhabited by nations, kindreds, tongues, and peoples not mentioned in the text. They also concede that these groups may have significantly impacted the populations of the Americas genetically, culturally, linguistically, and in many other ways.<sup>13</sup>

As with the Israelite acculturation to the cults of Baal and Asherah, the New World Nephites also became acculturated to aspects of the prevailing Mesoamerican cults.<sup>14</sup> The process of combining elements from different religions into a new religion is known as syncretism. Syncretism occurs when different beliefs are seen to have sufficient similarities to bridge the differ-

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11. Frederick Joseph Bové, *The Evolution of Chiefdoms and States on the Pacific Slope of Guatemala: A Spatial Analysis* (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1981), 302.

12. John L. Sorenson, "When Lehi's Party Arrived in the Land, Did They Find Others There?" in *Nephite Culture and Society*, ed. Matthew R. Sorenson (Salt Lake City: New Sage Books, 1997), 65–104, originally published in *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1/1 (1993): 1–34. See also Matthew Roper, "Nephi's Neighbors: Book of Mormon Peoples and Pre-Columbian Populations," *FARMS Review* 15/2 (2003): 91–128; and James E. Smith, "Nephi's Descendants? Historical Demography and the Book of Mormon," *FARMS Review* 6/1 (1994): 255–96.

13. Roper, "Nephi's Neighbors," 127.

14. *Cult* is here defined in the anthropological sense as a system of religious veneration and devotion directed toward a particular figure or object.

ences.<sup>15</sup> The process begins with the ability to accept and merge different ideas into one's worldview and becomes formalized when a sufficient number of people come to accept the same amalgam. In that case, a new cult is created that merges elements from the two different systems. How did Nephite apostates manage to form a new religion by combining two systems of belief that modern readers would find totally incompatible? They were able to see similarities where we see only irreconcilable differences, just as their distant descendants were able to syncretize their pagan religion with the Spaniards' Roman Catholicism.<sup>16</sup> Mesoamerican scholar Michael E. Smith describes that process:

The Nahuas [i.e., the indigenous peoples of Mexico, also referred to as Aztecs] did not have the concept of a "faith" or "religion" as a domain separable from the rest of culture, and their new religion is best seen as a syncretism or blend of Aztec beliefs and Christian beliefs. Conversion involved the adoption of essential Christian rites and practices while the basic mind set remained that of traditional Nahua culture. Rather than passively accepting a completely new and foreign religion, people created their own adaptation of Christianity, compatible with their colonial situation and with many of their traditional beliefs and values.<sup>17</sup>

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15. Michio Kitahara, "A Formal Model of Syncretism in Scales," *1970 Yearbook of the International Folk Music Council* 2 (1970): 121–22. Kitahara provides a model of five elements underlying syncretism. While his model is given in the context of syncretism in music, the concepts hold for any two disparate systems that merge to create a third system.

16. *Pagan* is a blanket term referring to polytheistic, non-Abrahamic religions.

17. Michael E. Smith, *The Aztecs* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1996), 284. See also Enrique Florescano, *Memory, Myth, and Time in Mexico: From the Aztecs to Independence*, trans. Albert G. Bork (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), 114. The conversion of European pagans to Christianity followed an analogous syncretic path. See Lewis R. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New

We propose that certain Nephite beliefs and practices were syncretized with those of the surrounding native cultures, analogous to what would happen well over one thousand years later in the aftermath of the Spanish conquest of Mesoamerica. As we examine the potential perceptual similarities between Nephite and Mesoamerican religion, it is important to bear in mind that we are not describing normative Nephite religion but, rather, the ways in which those perceived similarities accommodated apostate Nephite religion.

### **Bridging the Nature of God**

Syncretizing Nephite and Mesoamerican religions had to deal with concepts of deity. On this most fundamental point, where modern monotheists would see tremendous differences with the Mesoamerican polytheists, there were sufficient perceived similarities that the Nephite explanation of deity could accommodate, or be accommodated to, Mesoamerican ideas about the nature of the divine.

Although the Nephites cannot be equated with the Maya, Maya culture was already widespread in Mesoamerica in the Preclassic period (400 BC–AD 250) and appears to have exerted great influence on surrounding cultures.<sup>18</sup> We have the best data for this culture, thanks to the preponderance of carved stone monuments and ceramic vessels painted with historical and mythological scenes and texts that have been preserved archaeologically. As plausibly influential neighbors of the Nephites, the Maya exemplify the kind of religious ideas to which some Nephites accommodated. Though certainly not homogenous, Maya beliefs and practices bear fundamen-

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Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 77: “Conversion of European peoples [to Christianity] did not involve the complete rejection of pagan religious practices; more often than not it brought about a blending of those elements into the new religion.”

18. Francisco Estrada Belli, *The First Maya Civilization* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 61–63.

tal similarities to other Mesoamerican cultures and therefore exemplify the points of congruence along which our proposed syncretism occurred.<sup>19</sup>

Maya scholars use the terms *god* and *deity* interchangeably in the scholarly literature on the Maya. The problem with the terminology is that our modern ideas of “god” and “deity” may not replicate the Maya notion of “supernatural sentient beings that appear in sacred narrative.”<sup>20</sup> Maya scholars Stephen Houston and David Stuart lament a scholarly ethnocentrism that has hindered understanding of Classic-period Maya deities. They argue that the western conception of gods as perfect, immortal, and discrete beings is not applicable to the Mesoamerican pantheon.<sup>21</sup> Gabrielle Vail’s assessment of the Postclassic Maya (AD 900–1521) representations of gods found in their bark-paper books can usefully be applied to the earlier Classic depictions of gods found on ceramics and monuments. She observes that “the picture that emerges is one of a series of deity complexes or clusters, composed of a small number of underlying divinities, each having various aspects, or manifestations.”<sup>22</sup> Vail argues that in a deity complex a variety of distinctive gods could be lumped together into a single category, predicated on a core cluster of bodily features or costume elements. Conversely, a single god could be represented with a variety of differing characteristics or manifestations. Their names, attributes, and domains of influence were fluid, yet they retained their individual identity. Each of the elaborations that

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19. Lars Kirkhusmo Pharo, “The Concept of ‘Religion’ in Mesoamerican Languages,” *Numen* 54/1 (2007): 28–70.

20. Karl Taube, *The Major Gods of Ancient Yucatan* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1992), 8. This definition will be recalled several times throughout this paper; it is a key insight for drawing comparisons to the Book of Mormon.

21. Stephen D. Houston and David Stuart, “Of Gods, Glyphs, and Kings: Divinity and Rulership among the Classic Maya,” *Antiquity* 70 (1996): 290.

22. Gabrielle Vail, “Pre-Hispanic Maya Religion,” *Ancient Mesoamerica* 11 (2000): 123.

a modern reader might see as a different deity was actually considered to be merely an elaboration of the complex essence of one particular deity.

Although not precisely the same concept, Nephite religion understood a proliferation of “names” for the Messiah. For example, Isaiah declares that “his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6; 2 Nephi 19:6). Each of these names is different, each proclaims a different quality, yet all of these names apply to the same God. The Maya deity complexes similarly expanded the qualities of the underlying deity, albeit with a more complete elaboration than just a name.

An example from the modern Ch’orti’ demonstrates how this Mesoamerican deity complex expands the names and manifestations of an underlying deity according to different conditions. One particular god manifests itself as a solar being during the dry season but transforms into a maize spirit during the rainy season.<sup>23</sup> Even in the form of the solar deity, it has multiple manifestations throughout the course of a single day that also demonstrate syncretism with Christian ideals:

They say that the sun has not just one name. The one which is best known by people continues to be Jesus Christ. They say that when it is just getting light its name is Child Redeemer of the World. One name is San Gregorio the Illuminator. One name is San Antonio of Judgement. One name is Child Guardian. One is Child Refuge. One is Child San Pascual. One is Child Succor. One is Child Creator. They say that at each hour, one of these is its name.<sup>24</sup>

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23. Rafael Girard, *People of the Chan*, trans. B. Preble (Chino Valley, AZ: Continuum, 1995), 350.

24. John G. Fought, *Chorti (Mayan) Texts*, ed. Sarah S. Fought (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972), 485. Among the Ch’orti’, San Antonio

Although it is foreign to the way we understand our Christian tradition, a people who lived in the context of a world that saw manifestations of the divine in deity complexes might easily reenvision the Nephite God (with multiple names) as a deity complex, being composed of distinctive manifestations in different circumstances. For example, God the Father and Christ the Son are considered “one Eternal God” (Alma 11:44). From a syncretic perspective, the Book of Mormon can be read as teaching that each deity had his own identity and at times was described in terms of different manifestations. When the text declares, “Behold, I am Jesus Christ. I am the Father and the Son” (Ether 3:14), the syncretist might easily interpret it as a deity complex. Abinadi’s explanation in Mosiah 15 of how Christ is both the Father and the Son could also be read as an example of multiple manifestations of a single deity:

And because he dwelleth in flesh he shall be called the Son of God, and having subjected the flesh to the will of the Father, being the Father and the Son—The Father, because he was conceived by the power of God; and the Son, because of the flesh; thus becoming the Father and Son—And they are one God, yea, the very Eternal Father of heaven and of earth. And thus the flesh becoming subject to the Spirit, or the Son to the Father, being one God, suffereth temptation, and yieldeth not to the temptation, but suffereth himself to be mocked, and scourged, and cast out, and disowned by his people. . . . Yea, even so he shall be led, crucified, and slain, the flesh becoming subject even unto death, the will of the Son being swallowed up in the will of the Father. (Mosiah 15:2–5, 7)

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is the fire god, San Gregorio emits beams of light, and San Pascual is Venus as morning star.



Once a Nephite apostate accommodated the idea of a deity complex, that concept could easily be read into the scriptural tradition, and the Nephite God of many names could be reinterpreted in a much more fluid Mesoamerican light. Such a syncretic perspective would reread descriptions of God as differing manifestations, such as a creator deity (Jacob 2:5), a destroyer (3 Nephi 9), a rain god (Ether 9:35), a god of agricultural fertility (Alma 34:24), a solar deity (1 Nephi 1:9; Helaman 14:4, 20), a fire god (1 Nephi 1:6; Helaman 13:13), a king (Mosiah 2:19), a god of medicine (Alma 46:40), a shepherd (Alma 5:38), a lamb (1 Nephi 14), and even a rock (Helaman 5:12). Clearly, some of these manifestations are metaphorical in their appropriate context, but the ancient Maya similarly used rich metaphorical language, and they often used visual metaphors in their works of art. In an apostate/syncretic mindset, the metaphor shifted to a different underlying meaning.<sup>25</sup>

### **Bridging Heavenly Expectations**

A similar recasting of Book of Mormon theology can link the future goal of both Nephite and Mesoamerican religion. Just as the concept of a deity complex could tie together Mesoamerican and Nephite ideas about God, so could perceived similarities in the nature of the afterlife create another syncretic thread. The early Nephite declaration of a king allowed for a direct point of parallelism with surrounding cultures that similarly proclaimed a king. Apostate Nephite religion accepted a king who was modeled after Mesoamerican ideals of what a king was and did.

Classic-period rulers considered themselves holy, but they never explicitly claimed they were gods during their lifetimes.<sup>26</sup> After death, however, kings were clearly venerated and

25. Kerry M. Hull, *Verbal Art and Performance in Ch'orti' and Maya Hieroglyphic Writing* (University of Texas at Austin, 2003), 337.

26. Houston and Stuart, "Of Gods, Glyphs, and Kings," 296.

eventually were apotheosized as deities, merging with one of the gods.<sup>27</sup> Although rulers were apotheosized as a variety of deities, the maize god and sun god seem to have been the most popular choices because they both were linked to cycles of birth, life, death, and resurrection—the sun in its daily journey and maize in its seasons of planting and harvest.

Perhaps the most well-known example of apotheosis as the maize god among the ancient Maya comes from Pakal's sarcophagus at the site of Palenque. The scene depicts Pakal's simultaneous descent into the jaws of the underworld and his resurrection as the maize god. A beautiful example of deification occurs as the sun god comes from the Rosalila temple, which was built to honor *K'inich Yax K'uk Mo'*, the founder of the Copan dynasty. The artist plays with multiple themes to show his change to deity status. In addition to this visual sign, the artist included visual puns to identify this particular emerging ancestor as *K'inich Yax K'uk Mo'*. The head of the sun god (*K'inich*) is shown emerging from the mouths of serpent-winged birds, which are marked with features of both quetzal birds (*k'uk'*) and macaws (*mo'*). The imagery not only visually depicts the name *K'inich Yax K'uk' Mo'* but also conveys the message that he had merged with—and had therefore been apotheosized after his death as—the sun god.

Apostate Nephites would see a parallel in a similar expectation of apotheosis after death: “And for this cause ye shall have fulness of joy; and ye shall sit down in the kingdom of my Father; yea, your joy shall be full, even as the Father hath given me fulness of joy; and *ye shall be even as I am, and I am even as the Father; and the Father and I are one*” (3 Nephi 28:10). The ancient Maya kings expected to be merged with the sun and/or maize gods—gods of death and rebirth. The Nephite apostates

27. Mary Miller and Karl Taube, *An Illustrated Dictionary of the Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico and the Maya* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993), 76.

would draw a parallel expectation of being merged with the resurrecting Christ and the Father.

The Nephite heaven was “a place where God dwells and all his holy angels. . . . He looketh down upon all the children of men; and he knows all the thoughts and intents of the heart; for by his hand were they all created from the beginning” (Alma 18:30, 32). The ancient Maya parallel associated the sky with the glorious celestial realm and frequently depicted deified ancestors looking down from the skyband, or heavens. For example, on Tikal Stela 31 the deceased *Yax Nuun Ahiin* takes on the form of the ancestral sun god as he overlooks his son *Sihyaj Chan K’awiil II*.<sup>28</sup> This Mesoamerican practice of depicting ancestors or gods overseeing the affairs of the earth from the heavens has its origins in Olmec art.<sup>29</sup>

The celestial paradise that Mesoamerican rulers hoped for has been dubbed “Flower Mountain” by scholars because it is portrayed in the iconography as a place lush with plant and animal life.<sup>30</sup> Flower Mountain is depicted in Maya art as both the paradise of creation and origin as well as the desired destination after a ruler’s death, where he would be deified as the sun god. Evidence for the belief in Flower Mountain dates to the Middle Formative Olmec (900–400 BC), and is attested among the Late Preclassic and Classic Maya as well (300 BC–AD 900).<sup>31</sup> Maya scholar Karl Taube argues that “although the notion of a floral paradise recalls Christian ideals of the original Garden of Eden and the afterlife, the solar component is wholly

28. Simon Martin and Nikolai Grube, *Chronicle of the Maya Kings and Queens: Deciphering the Dynasties of the Ancient Maya*, 2nd ed. (London: Thames and Hudson, 2008), 34–35.

29. Martin and Grube, *Chronicle of the Maya Kings and Queens*, 26.

30. Jane H. Hill, “The Flower World of Old Uto-Aztecan,” *Journal of Anthropological Research* 48/2 (1992). Similar imagery is also found among ancient and modern southwestern Native American tribes, and scholars refer to it as “Flower World.”

31. Karl A. Taube, “Flower Mountain: Concepts of Life, Beauty, and Paradise among the Classic Maya,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 45 (2004): 69.

Mesoamerican.”<sup>32</sup> To Nephites, however, that solar component would have resonated with their beliefs about Christ. Alma alluded to the correlation between Christ’s celestial glory and the radiance of the sun when he stated, “Behold the glory of the King of all the earth; and also the King of heaven shall very soon *shine forth* among all the children of men” (Alma 5:50). He later uses the same language to liken the state of the faithful unto Christ after their resurrection: “then shall the righteous *shine forth* in the kingdom of God” (Alma 40:25).

Only minimal recontextualization of Book of Mormon categories is required to make them resemble the Mesoamerican worldview (and vice versa). All these points of perceptual parallelism in Nephite and Mesoamerican theology could have provided an adequate basis for the emergence of a syncretic religion. If so, the foundational elements of the Nephite apostasy were in place. This would have facilitated the acceptance of the principal element of Mesoamerican theology, one that had the greatest impact on Nephite history—the Mesoamerican divine king.

### The Divine King Replaces the Heavenly King

At the beginning of King Benjamin’s remarkable discourse recorded in Mosiah 2–4, he describes several things that he is *not*, or *has not done*—for example, he is not divine, idle, or a seeker of status, and he has not suffered his people to be enslaved or to go to war for plunder:<sup>33</sup>

I have not commanded you to come up hither that ye should fear me, or that ye should think that I of myself am more than a mortal man. But I am like as yourselves, subject to all manner of infirmities in body and mind; yet I have been chosen by this people, and con-

32. Taube, “Flower Mountain,” 70.

33. Gardner, *Second Witness*, 4:649, examines the set of terms *murder* and *plunder* as literary codes representing warfare undertaken with the intention of creating a tributary relationship with the dominated city.

secrated by my father, and was suffered by the hand of the Lord that I should be a ruler and a king over this people; and have been kept and preserved by his matchless power, to serve you with all the might, mind and strength which the Lord hath granted unto me. I say unto you that as I have been suffered to spend my days in your service, even up to this time, and have not sought gold nor silver nor any manner of riches of you; Neither have I suffered that ye should be confined in dungeons, nor that ye should make slaves one of another, nor that ye should murder, or plunder, or steal, or commit adultery; nor even have I suffered that ye should commit any manner of wickedness, and have taught you that ye should keep the commandments of the Lord, in all things which he hath commanded you. (Mosiah 2:10–13)

Such descriptions make little sense unless the conditions he described as absent under his reign were actually common elsewhere.<sup>34</sup> Benjamin seems to be contrasting his reign with a well-known set of traits from the surrounding cultures.<sup>35</sup>

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34. Terrence L. Szink and John W. Welch, “King Benjamin’s Speech in the Context of Ancient Israelite Festivals,” in *King Benjamin’s Speech: “That Ye May Learn Wisdom,”* ed. John W. Welch and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998), 172. “The text of [the Babylonian king’s] negative confession is as follows: ‘I did not sin, lord of the countries. I was not neglectful of the requirements of your godship. I did not destroy Babylon; I did not command its overthrow; I did not . . . [broken] . . . the temple Esagil, I did not forget its rites; I did not rain blows on the cheek of a subordinate. . . . I did not humiliate them. I watched out for Babylon; I did not smash its walls.’” The parallel suggests that the format of the negative confession may have had a traditional base. However, the elements of the Babylonian king’s confession make sense only if they could have been reversed. Similarly for Benjamin, regardless of the ritual format of a negative confession, the individual elements require the possibility that they could have happened. The people’s great love for Benjamin (Mosiah 2:4) also suggests that they saw these possibilities as actual, not merely theoretical or rhetorical.

35. For a detailed reading of these verses against Mesoamerican cultural environment, see Gardner, *Second Witness*, 3:125–30.

Virtually all of these elements appear in apostate Nephite religion, which likely explains the reason Benjamin highlighted them. In particular, Benjamin's desire that "ye should [not] think that I of myself am more than a mortal man" (Mosiah 2:10) is pointed directly at the Mesoamerican divine king. Benjamin's speech underscores the competing ideas. In the nature of those divine kings, we find further lines of coincidence upon which Nephite apostates appear to have built a syncretic religion.

As was true for the vast majority of ancient civilizations, ancient Maya kings were linked to the supernatural realm and were believed to have divinely sanctioned authority.<sup>36</sup> By the Classic period (AD 250–900), virtually all rulers of large polities wielded the title *k'uhul ajaw*, which has been variously translated as "holy," "sacred," or "divine" lord.<sup>37</sup> Among Mesoamericanists, the issue of how "divine" these rulers actually were is still a matter of debate, but it is clear that during certain rituals they stood as intermediaries who bridged the gap between the natural and supernatural realms. The rulers often depicted themselves in communion with deities and emphasized their special role as intermediaries between the human and the divine realms.<sup>38</sup>

For the ancient Maya, the right to rule came by descent from the gods, but typically these gods were historical ancestors that became gods only after their deaths. On Altar Q from Copan, we see a literal passing of the torch of rulership from *K'inich Yax K'uk Mo*, the dynasty's long-dead but apotheosized ancestor, to the sixteenth ruler, *Yax Pasaj Chan Yoaat*. By claiming descent from a deified ancestor, a king imbued himself with a portion of his ancestor's divinity through birthright, and his

36. Houston and Stuart, "Of Gods, Glyphs, and Kings," 289.

37. Houston and Stuart, "Of Gods, Glyphs, and Kings," 307–8.

38. Julia L. J. Sanchez, "Ancient Maya Royal Strategies: Creating power and identity through art," *Ancient Mesoamerica* 16/2 (2006): 264.

legitimacy as ruler thus became firmly established in the mind of the people.<sup>39</sup> Nephite rulers similarly traced their right to rule through their lineages, albeit to an honored rather than deified ancestor. Nevertheless, the similarity of the genealogical component is a parallel concept that allowed for syncretism.

King Benjamin did not rehearse his own genealogy back to a prominent apotheosized ruler, but he did declare that all of his people were descended from the “heavenly King” (Mosiah 2:19). In addition, they had become “children of Christ, his sons, and his daughters; for behold, this day he hath spiritually begotten you” (Mosiah 5:7). Benjamin, as representative of his people, might have been seen as claiming a connection with the heavenly king, as could his entire people (who were about to make a covenant with God).

Perhaps at least the Mesoamerican idea of tracing one’s lineage to a dynastic founder is easily set parallel to Book of Mormon practice. Lamoni traced his genealogy back to Ishmael (Alma 17:21), King Ammoron (Alma 52:3) traced his genealogy back to Zoram (Alma 54:23), and among the Nephites “the kingdom had been conferred upon none but those who were descendants of Nephi” (Mosiah 25:13). Zarahemla, a descendant of Mulek, who had even tighter links to indigenous Mesoamerican ideas, claimed links back to Zedekiah of Judah (Omni 1:15–18). Even after the institution of kingship was eliminated, many of the chief judges who sat in rulership were Nephi’s descendants (Alma<sub>2</sub>, Helaman<sub>2</sub>, Nephi<sub>3</sub>). Even Nephi, the first king among his people, is careful to tell us he is a son of Lehi, who is a descendant of Joseph, ruler over Egypt (1 Nephi 5:14). Among the Jaredites, Ether traced his genealogy through nearly thirty predecessors back to Jared, their dynastic founder (Ether 1). Because Israel was also patriarchal, the idea of transmitting rights through lineage was firmly established as part of

39. Houston and Stuart, “Of Gods, Glyphs, and Kings,” 290.

early Israel's cultural tradition, and this practice seems to have continued in the New World.

We are not suggesting that either the Israelite or Mesoamerican tradition of lineage-based authority influenced the other to develop the concept. The idea was sufficiently widespread in the ancient world that it was clearly the result of multiple instances of independent invention. However, where the Nephites and native Mesoamericans were two otherwise disparate cultures, sharing that concept of lineage-based authority provided a point of similarity conducive to syncretism. The Nephite genealogical principle could easily have acquired the more mythological Mesoamerican overtones.

### **The King, Ritual, and the Replacement of the Messianic Expectation**

Two things combined to create the most dangerous instances of Nephite apostasy. The first was the notion of the divine king, and the second was the communal rituals by which that king's place in the community and universe was made real. We have examined some of the ideas and related ideological parallels that possibly underlay the apostate Nephites' creation of a new, syncretized religion. What we have yet to understand is how that syncretism took place and why the syncretic religion took the specific form of denying the Nephite God (Yahweh being understood as the heavenly manifestation who would become the atoning Messiah in an earthly manifestation; see Mosiah 3–4).<sup>40</sup> We suggest that it was the didactic nature of ritual that created both the focal point and indoctrination method for the religious change.

The Nephite community's background in the law of Moses necessarily provided an expectation of certain types of communal ritual. The Book of Mormon clearly describes temples

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40. Gardner, *Second Witness*, 1:216–17.



as focal points of Nephite communal life, being the location for speeches, sacrifices, and eventually the sacred appearance of their God in their midst. In these communal rituals, the Nephites shared common traits with most state-level societies. Anthropologist William Y. Adams notes:

The principal rituals of which we have evidence, from texts and mural depictions, were the great state ceremonies, which often lasted over many days. They were carried on in and around the temples, which were the principal architectural monuments as well as the foci of religion in all the early states. The most sacred parts of the ceremonies were rites of adoration, offering, and sacrifice, conducted by the professional priests within sacred precincts from which the laity were often excluded. But there were also public parades, pageantry, and feasting. Costumed religious pageantry, already well developed in tribal societies and chiefdoms, undoubtedly reached its peak of elaboration in the early states.<sup>41</sup>

In addition to any possible entertainment value, communal rituals served as public instruction that underscored and reinforced the shared communal understanding of how the world worked. Lewis Rambo, professor of psychology and religion at the San Francisco Theological Seminary, reports that

scholars have come to recognize that ritual can play a vital part in religious life. Indeed, some argue that ritual precedes all other aspects of religion: people first *perform* religiously, and then *rationalize* the process by way of theology. Whichever comes first, it is clear that ritual may have an important effect on the conversion process. It is my view that religious action—

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41. William Y. Adams, *Religion and Adaptation* (Palo Alto, CA: Leland Stanford Junior University, 2005), 263.

regularized, sustained, and intentional—is fundamental to the conversion experience. Ritual fosters the necessary orientation, the readiness of mind and soul to have a conversion experience, and it consolidates conversion after the initial experience.<sup>42</sup>

The law of Moses required communal, visual ritual that centered on the performance of sacrifices. One was a bloody sacrifice of a lamb (or whatever constituted the lamb surrogate in the New World) intended as a symbol and enactor of communal atonement. The Nephite perception of this particular sacrifice had to have been expanded by their understanding that the symbol foreshadowed the Messiah’s atoning mission. Thus Nephite communal ritual provided a focus on the bloody sacrifice of an animal that represented a future sacrifice of a deity (Mosiah 3). The doctrine made it clear that it was the person and not the animal that provided atonement, regardless of the enacted symbol.

As Nephites accommodated to the surrounding cultures, the idea of social hierarchies became more and more appealing.<sup>43</sup> At the summit of Mesoamerican hierarchical society was a king who represented a divine lineage and whose ritual presence enacted both the presence of deity and the power of blood sacrifice. The connection between king, blood, and communal ritual provided a powerful means of educating, or reeducating,

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42. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 114.

43. For example: “And it came to pass in the commencement of the ninth year, Alma saw the wickedness of the church, and he saw also that the example of the church began to lead those who were unbelievers on from one piece of iniquity to another, thus bringing on the destruction of the people. Yea, *he saw great inequality among the people, some lifting themselves up with their pride, despising others, turning their backs upon the needy and the naked and those who were hungry, and those who were athirst, and those who were sick and afflicted*” (Alma 4:11–12).

the Nephites, who were already economically motivated to some kind of accommodation with surrounding cultures.<sup>44</sup>

The parallel of place combined ideas of Nephite and Mesoamerican ritual space. For the Nephites, their temple was the focus of their ritual. Similarly, the Maya temple complexes were designed with public performances in mind.<sup>45</sup> Mesoamerican temples “served as a ‘focusing lens’ to concentrate attention on ideal models of existence and behavior.”<sup>46</sup> Mesoamerican rulers used temples as places to “communicate with and influence the gods on behalf of the community.”<sup>47</sup> Similarly, Nephite kings acted as intermediaries between the people and their god in association with temples. Benjamin, in his address at the temple, taught his people the words that “the angel of the Lord” had given him (Mosiah 4:1).<sup>48</sup> For both cultures, place and practice were sufficiently similar to allow the temple and the rites performed at the temple to be conduits of syncretism.

Most important to the syncretistic emergence of a religion that denied the atoning Messiah was the replacement of that person and function with a more present substitute. The Mesoamerican king fulfilled that conceptual place with a presence at once more comprehensible and “real” than the predicted Messiah, whose presence was far in the future and geographically distant from the Nephites (Helaman 16:20).

The living Mesoamerican king became, in ritual circumstances, the living and present deity. There were rituals where

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44. Gardner, *Second Witness*, 2:487–90.

45. William M. Ringle and George J. Bey III, “Post-Classic and Terminal Classic Courts of the Northern Maya Lowlands,” in *Royal Courts of the Ancient Maya, Volume Two: Data and Case Studies*, ed. Takeshi Inomata and Stephen D. Houston (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001), 278.

46. Jeff K. Kowalski, “Temple Complexes,” in *Oxford Encyclopedia of Mesoamerican Cultures*, ed. David Carrasco (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 3:196.

47. Kowalski, “Temple Complexes,” 194.

48. Jacob delivers the Lord’s message in a temple setting. See Jacob 2:2–5.

the king not only put on the mask of deity but, for ritual time and in ritual space, became that deity—commonly called god impersonation or “deity concurrence.”<sup>49</sup> In deity concurrence, a ritual specialist, typically the ruler, puts on an engraved mask or elaborate headdress and transforms himself into the god whose mask or headdress is being worn. There is a glyphic formula that essentially says, “His holy image (*u-b’aah-il*), [that of] God X, [is upon] Ruler Y.” The Maya used the head metaphorically as a mark of individuality, and it stood as a representation of the whole body.<sup>50</sup> In their minds, they were not playacting—they would actually become that god, acting as he would act and performing the godly duties pertaining to that particular deity. As Houston et al. state, “There is no evident ‘fiction,’ but there is, apparently, a belief in godly immanence and transubstantiation, of specific people who become, in special moments, figures from sacred legend and the Maya pantheon.”<sup>51</sup> There are many situations where deity concurrence takes place and a wide variety of deities are impersonated, such as wind gods, gods of incense burning, gods of ball playing, even major gods such as the sun god or the supreme creator deity, Itzamnaaj.<sup>52</sup> This practice goes back to the Formative period (1500 BC–AD 200), as cave paintings in Oxtotitlan dating to the eighth century BC attest.<sup>53</sup>

Against that context, Alma’s question “Have you received *his image* in your countenances?” (Alma 5:14) and its rhetorical companion, “Can you look up, having the image of God [Jehovah] *engraven* upon your countenances?” (v. 19), become

49. Stephen Houston, David Stuart, and Karl Taube, *The Memory of Bones: Body, Being, and Experience among the Classic Maya* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), 64.

50. Houston, et al., *Memory of Bones*, 64.

51. Houston, et al., *Memory of Bones*, 270.

52. Houston, et al., *Memory of Bones*, 274.

53. David C. Grove, *The Olmec Paintings of Oxtotitlan Cave, Guerrero, Mexico*, Studies in Pre-Columbian Art and Archaeology, no. 6 (Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1970).

highly nuanced. Alma may have been referencing a concept that he expected his listeners to understand and attempted to shift that understanding into a more appropriate gospel context. The masks and headdresses that deity impersonators wore were literally *graven*; numerous ancient Maya ceramics depict artists in the act of carving them.<sup>54</sup>

### Explaining Nephite Apostasy

Nephite prophets exhorted their people to walk steadfastly in the ways of the Lord. There was another option. As social and economic pressures led apostate Nephites to desire a Mesoamerican-style king, the king's accepted and expected ritual roles made deity present rather than distant and merely predicted. The deity before them became a more real and important symbol than the one who was predicted to come in the distant future. This is precisely the argument that Korihor employs to diminish the belief in the future Messiah:

O ye that are bound down under a foolish and a vain hope, why do ye yoke yourselves with such foolish things? Why do ye look for a Christ? For no man can know of anything which is to come. Behold, these things which ye call prophecies, which ye say are handed down by holy prophets, behold, they are foolish traditions of your fathers. How do ye know of their surety? Behold, ye cannot know of things which ye do not see; therefore ye cannot know that there shall be a Christ. (Alma 30:13–15)

When Alma<sub>2</sub> praised the people of Gideon, he did so by contrasting them with Nephite apostates: “*I trust that ye are not in a state of so much unbelief as were your brethren; I trust that ye are not lifted up in the pride of your hearts; yea, I trust*

54. Dorie Reents-Budet, *Painting the Maya Universe: Royal Ceramics of the Classic Period* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 38, 316.

*that ye have not set your hearts upon riches and the vain things of the world; yea, I trust that you do not worship idols, but that ye do worship the true and the living God, and that ye look forward for the remission of your sins, with an everlasting faith, which is to come*" (Alma 7:6). The people of Gideon were not in apostasy (as were their "brethren" at Zarahemla). They had not set their hearts upon riches (one of the standard traits of Nephite apostasy). They did not worship idols (implying that their "brethren" did). The final result was that the people of Gideon "worship[ped] the true and the living God . . . [who] *is to come.*" The people of Gideon had not altered their religion by supplanting the future God for a present idol. Although Alma<sub>2</sub>'s statement does not specifically mention the Mesoamerican king, it does highlight all the points of similarity upon which the adoption of such a king eventually replaced the "true and the living God . . . [who] *is to come*" with the person of the king enacting ritual before them.

The refocusing of apostate Nephite belief from atoning Messiah to Mesoamerican divine king plausibly hinged on the fulcrum of similarities in God's sacred blood. Faithful Nephites "believe[d] that salvation was, and is, and is to come, in and through the atoning blood of Christ, the Lord Omnipotent" (Mosiah 3:18). The Mesoamerican king's blood was similarly highly significant and culturally potent. Importantly, it was also a voluntary sacrifice. The Maya kings voluntarily shed their blood as an offering on behalf of their people. They used thorns, stingray spines, and obsidian blades to draw blood from their tongues and genitals. The blood was sometimes dripped onto bark paper and burned, and the smoke was considered both an offering to the gods and a medium for the gods to manifest themselves to the living. The voluntary self-sacrifice was turned from physical blood into divine substance through its ritual transformation as sacrifice.

The conceptual distance between the voluntary blood sacrifice of the king and the voluntary bloody sacrifice of the future Messiah was short. In fact, it appears likely that many Nephites had already made that substitution. Perhaps we are seeing clues to the process of apostasy when Amulek is teaching Zoramite outcasts and specifically defines Christ's sacrifice by what it was *not*: "it shall not be a human sacrifice" (Alma 34:10). Amulek explains (as did Benjamin) in contrast to an accepted belief: "There is *not any man* that can *sacrifice his own blood* which will atone for the sins of another. . . .Therefore, it is expedient that there should be a great and last sacrifice, and then shall there be, or it is expedient there should be, a stop to the shedding of blood; then shall the law of Moses be fulfilled; yea, it shall be all fulfilled, every jot and tittle, and none shall have passed away" (Alma 34:11, 13).<sup>55</sup>

As a point of coincidence by which syncretic tendencies could form, the presence of a king on earth enacting the role of a heavenly king who shed blood for his people was not only an available theological conduit, but one that came with powerful cultural and social overtones. In addition to the ritual presence of the king, there was the daily presence of the culture he represented, with all of the economic benefits and desired social stratification that he embodied.

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55. Although all blood was considered sacred by the Maya, the blood of kings was believed to be the most potent. While some scholars have argued that there may be evidence that human sacrifice among the Aztec served an expiatory function (Michel Graulich, "Aztec Human Sacrifice as Expiation," *History of Religions* 39/4 [2000]: 352–71), there is currently no archaeological evidence that bloodletting by ancient Mesoamerican rulers was done to atone for the sins of their people. Bloodletting was associated with agricultural fertility, which is linked to the cycle of death and rebirth, not with an expiatory sacrifice believed to atone for the sins of a ruler's people. The Nephites, living among the larger Mesoamerican culture, would surely have been aware of the sacred nature of royal blood and the power it had to bring new life.

Nephite apostasy was much more than a change in the way God was perceived. Not a simple change of religion, it could foment a violent disruption:

And it came to pass that the voice of the people came against Amlici, that he was not made king over the people. Now this did cause much joy in the hearts of those who were against him; but Amlici did stir up those who were in his favor to anger against those who were not in his favor. And it came to pass that they gathered themselves together, and did consecrate Amlici to be their king. Now when Amlici was made king over them he commanded them that they should take up arms against their brethren; and this he did that he might subject them to him. Now the people of Amlici were distinguished by the name of Amlici, being called Amlicites; and the remainder were called Nephites, or the people of God. (Alma 2:7–11)

Even when the apostates did not specifically raise arms, they were important factors in a violent disruption. Alma 51:13 informs us: “And it came to pass that when the men who were called king-men had heard that the Lamanites were coming down to battle against them, they were glad in their hearts; and they refused to take up arms, for they were so wroth with the chief judge, and also with the people of liberty, that they would not take up arms to defend their country.”

Why was a religious apostasy so socially disruptive? The splintering of the restored church after the Prophet Joseph Smith’s martyrdom certainly resulted in different religious bodies, but not in civil war. The difference is explained by the ability of the modern world to separate religion from politics and culture. For the Nephites, religious apostasy included an alteration of the social order. When the pressures for the new type of king became strong enough, the matter was not only



religious and political—it also included a desire to transform society. As the apostate religion syncretized religious ideas, its adherents longed for the social prestige, wealth, and privilege associated with those religious ideas in surrounding cities and cultures.

The fascinating similarities in multiple Nephite apostasies at different times and in different locations are best explained by the continued presence of a religious and cultural model to which they were adapted.<sup>56</sup> Not only does the Mesoamerican context provide the cultural background that explains why

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56. Kitahara, “Formal Model of Syncretism in Scales,” 121–22, provides five points that allow for syncretism. They are listed here with an explanation of how the Book of Mormon case fits the examples:

- (1) “Two different cultures must be involved. Members of one culture are exposed to the [culture] of the other, and the two . . . traditions merge.” The best reconstruction of Nephite culture places them in Mesoamerica as initially a smaller population inside the larger, more dominant culture. This circumstance inevitably led to the culture clash that created the possibility of (and the desire for) syncretism. That process certainly began with the adoption of Mesoamerican material culture and eventually moved to the adoption of ideology.
- (2) “The process itself is based on ‘associationism’. . . . One may fairly safely assume that a concept rooted in one culture will be associated with a different concept in another culture, whenever syncretism takes place.” We should not expect Nephite religion to demonstrate overt adoption of Mesoamerican deities nor, conversely, Mesoamerican religions to adopt Nephite religion. The general direction of cultural transfer should be from dominant to less dominant. Both the historical information of Mesoamerica and a close reading of the Book of Mormon indicate that the Nephites were not in the dominant position. Nevertheless, there were concepts that might have been associated and that thus could have provided the pathways for syncretic creation.
- (3) “Syncretism results from two sets of conceptual configurations, rather than two single concepts.” Nephite and Mesoamerican religions were clearly different and operated on different principles. The differences preclude wholesale adoption. The similarities allowed for syncretism.
- (4) “The two conceptual configurations must be sufficiently similar to, as well as significantly different from, each other.” As noted in this paper, there were a number of areas where commonality might be found. None of these suggest or depend upon an ideological loan from one culture to the other. They began in completely separate worlds, but the perceived parallels allowed for the conceptual paths along which a synthesis could have emerged.

Nephite apostasy took the particular form it did, it also helps us understand some of the specific references Nephite prophets used when combating that apostasy.

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(5) “The end result of syncretism must contain recognizable features of both configurations.” We certainly recognize the remnants of Israelite religion in Nephite apostasy. Understanding the specific nature of that apostasy requires a cultural background that has previously been unavailable to LDS researchers.





