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## The Nature of Book of Mormon Society

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## The Nature of Book of Mormon Society

The long summary at the end of this chapter tells what it is about. It is a general picture of Nephite culture, which turns out to be a very different sort of thing from what is commonly imagined. The Nephites were a small party of migrants laden with a very heavy and complete cultural baggage. Theirs was a mixed culture. In America they continued their nomadic ways and lived always close to the wilderness, while at the same time building cities and cultivating the soil. Along with much local migration attending their colonization of the new lands, these people were involved in a major population drift towards the north. Their society was organized along hierarchical lines, expressed in every phase of their social activity.

### An Unfamiliar Picture

Most of the disagreement and controversy about evidence for the Book of Mormon springs from a complete unawareness of the true nature of Nephite life. If the Book of Mormon merely reflected, in however imaginative a form, the experience and learning of an American of the 1820s, the sociological problem of the book would be a simple one indeed. But the ways of the Nephites and Jaredites are in many things peculiar, and it can be shown now, though it was not known in Joseph Smith's day, that those peculiar ways are historic realities among many ancient peoples.

### Transplanted Cultures

In the first place, both the Jaredites and Lehi's people were *small* migrating societies laden with a very heavy and

complete cultural baggage. History, surprisingly enough, is full of such groups, of which we have already mentioned the Phoenician and Greek colonizers of Lehi's day. The flight of the Parsees to India presents many parallels to the story of Lehi's people. In American history we have many parallels: the Pilgrim Fathers brought with them a whole civilization in one small boat; Elizabethan gentlemen brought their vigorous and advanced civilization to the wilderness of Virginia, where it perished with them; the Huguenots transplanted a very rich and sophisticated brand of European civilization to the wilds of Prussia and the Carolinas; Mormon pioneers to the Virgin River country brought a bit of New England complete and intact into a region more barren and fantastic than the Gobi Desert. But for that matter small groups of Buddhist monks long ago established islands of a rich and ancient culture in the Gobi itself, just as Christian monks at the other end of the world brought the learning and the ways of Egypt and Syria to the bleak shores and islands of the North Atlantic.

Contrary to what one might expect, small groups that carry cultures to remote and lonely places do not revert to primitive and simple ways, but become fiercely and increasingly loyal to their original culture, leaning over backwards to achieve a maximum of sophistication and smartness. Hence this cultural uprooting and transplanting often leads to a surprising efflorescence of the old culture in the new home, where it often shows astonishing energy and originality.

As we have seen, the cultural baggage of our Book of Mormon emigrants was a mixed heritage in which more than one linguistic, racial, and cultural tradition is apparent from the first. Among other things they brought with them and continued to foster the typically Near Eastern combination of urban, agrarian, and hunting life. Keenly aware of their isolation, they did all they could in the way of education and record keeping to remind themselves of the

Old Country, as cultural “wanderers in a strange land” (Alma 13:23) are wont to do. The people who settled Greenland in the Middle Ages continued in complete isolation (for ships soon ceased to visit them from Europe) on the fringe of the New World to cling tenaciously to the pitifully impractical fashions of dress and architecture that prevailed in Europe at the time of their settlement.<sup>1</sup> So it was with the Nephites, whose cultural equipment, even had they not been determined at all cost to preserve it, was in itself of such an ancient, tested, and stable nature that it has endured in some parts of the world to this day.

### The Desert Tradition

First there is the desert or steppe tradition. Lehi’s whole party had been steeped in it for at least eight years before they set foot in America, where they forthwith continued it. The grumbling brothers who refused to help Nephi build a ship out of pure laziness (1 Nephi 17:18) continued to grumble all the way across the water, and had barely landed in the New World before they resumed operations true to form. They took their tents and their people and continued to hunt and rob their brethren in the old accepted fashion of the East, and their descendants after them never gave up that exceedingly attractive way of life (Alma 18:6; 22:28). Theirs was the Bedouin creed: “As long as we live we shall plunder and raid.” “*It was the practice of these Lamanites,*” according to Alma, “to stand by the waters of Sebus [an oasis] to scatter the flocks of the people, that thereby they might drive away many that were scattered unto their own land, it being a practice of plunder among them” (Alma 18:7).

But the Nephites as well as the Lamanites continued their desert ways. Shortly after landing in America Nephi himself took his tents and all who would follow him and continued his wanderings in the new land as in the old

(2 Nephi 5:5). The great man in his old age still speaks the language of the desert, as we have already seen.<sup>2</sup>

Among the Nephites even after cities were built, uncomfortable or insecure minorities could always flee into the wilderness with their tents as Nephi had done in the beginning (e.g., Omni 1:12, 27; Mosiah 10:13-16). Not only individuals like Nephi the son of Helaman or Samuel the Lamanite, but entire populations would depart into the wilderness and disappear (Mosiah 22:2). These people always seem to have tents at hand, and indeed they were required to, for at the great national assembly every man was expected not to build a booth of green boughs or of rugs or blankets, as the later Jews did for the great *Hag* at the temple of Jerusalem, but to come with his tent, and to pitch his tent near the temple and live in it during the conference (Mosiah 2:6). In one and the same Nephite community we find the people dwelling "in tents, *and* in houses of cement" (Helaman 3:9). This sounds like a makeshift sort of pioneer community, and strongly reminds one of the strange combination of tents and buildings in the oldest cities of the Near East. When Alma's people were fleeing from the oppressive Amulon, at the end of the first day's march, they "pitched their tents in a valley, and they called the valley Alma, because he led their way in the wilderness" (Mosiah 24:20). In spite of the danger of their position, Alma had some difficulty getting them to move again, for an Arab's first camp, we are told, is always a long affair (Mosiah 24:21-23). We seem to be right back in the desert again with Lehi! Again, we seem to be reading from a typical old Arabic inscription when Zeniff (cf. Arabic ZNB or Zainab) reports that "after many days' wandering in the wilderness we pitched our tents in the place where our brethren were slain" (Mosiah 9:4). The fact, often noted above, that the Nephites insisted on thinking of themselves throughout their history as wanderers in a strange land can only mean they *were* wanderers, and that they did feel themselves lost

in a land which was far more sparsely populated than their original home.

### **The Proximity of the Wilderness**

And even more conspicuously than in the old country, these people always had the wilderness right next door. Amulek, calling upon the people to remember to pray to the Lord in every activity and department of daily life, gives us a revealing summing-up of the normal scenes of Nephite existence, just as Homer, in describing the shield of Achilles, gives us a thumbnail sketch of Mycenaean society. "Cry unto him," Amulek admonishes his fellows, "in your fields, . . . over all your flocks, . . . in your houses, . . . in your closets, and your secret places, and in your wilderness" (Alma 34:20-26).

Incidentally, the mention of "closets and secret places" is a clear reference to the recently discovered custom of the ancient Hebrew of having special shrines or prayer-rooms in their houses: "when we could show that this was a private chapel and that the ordinary householder of the time [Abraham's time] had a special room in his house set apart for domestic worship," writes Woolley of his discovery, "we had really learnt something about him which, as a matter of fact, literature did not tell us and we should never have guessed."<sup>3</sup> Yet the Book of Mormon tells us about it not only in this passage but in the story of Nephi, who had a private tower resembling the public towers of some religious sects of the Nephites (Alma 31:13-21; Helaman 7:10), and put it to the same purpose in a private capacity: "I have got upon my tower that I might pour out my soul unto my God" (Helaman 7:10, 14).<sup>4</sup>

But what we wish especially to notice here is that "your wilderness" is a normal and natural part of the Nephite scene, with people going into the wilderness on regular business, where they are admonished to pray as in other places. It was in fact considered vital to the welfare of a

community to have an adjacent wilderness, "that they might have a country whither they might flee, according to their desires" (Alma 22:34). When we read that not only dogs but "the wild beasts of the wilderness" as well mangled the remains of the inhabitants of the great city of Ammonihah before those remains had time to decay, it is apparent that the city and the wilderness were next door to each other, just as in the Old World.

### Open Country

And as in the Old World the "wilderness" in question was not jungle, for when Gideon chased the wicked king to the top of the tower, the two could see from there that "the army of the Lamanites were within the borders of the land" (Mosiah 19:6), which means that the invading host had only the poorest sort of cover. There were forests, indeed, but they were scattered woodlands, for while Limhi "had discovered them from the tower . . . all their preparations for war," he and his people were more clever and "laid wait for them in the fields and in the forests" (Mosiah 20:8). But such advantageous visibility from a tower could only mean that the land and especially the wilderness on the borders were largely open country. Alma's hideout at the waters of Mormon was in open country, as we have seen: "a fountain of pure water, . . . a thicket of small trees, where he did hide himself in the daytime," and where he baptized "in the forest that was near the waters" (Mosiah 18:5, 30). Streams in arid countries, as we all know, are usually bordered by extensive "thickets of small trees," like willows or mesquite, that provide excellent concealment. The Jordan itself is a classic illustration, and who in Utah has not camped in the green seclusion of the willow and cottonwood groves along our streams?

One would expect a land called "Bountiful" to be an agricultural paradise, yet late in Nephite history Bountiful was still a wilderness, so named because it was "filled with

all manner of wild animals of every kind" (Alma 22:31). Plainly these people never ceased thinking in terms of hunting as well as farming and trading, similar to their relatives in the Old World.

### **Wilderness Everywhere**

A surprising part of the Book of Mormon history takes place in the wilderness. Of the first generation we have already said enough. In the second generation we find the righteous Enos hearing the words of the Lord as he "went to hunt beasts in the forests" (Enos 1:3). Centuries later King Mosiah sent an expedition "up to the land of Lehi-Nephi, to inquire concerning their brethren," and this group, having no idea which way to go, wandered forty days in the wilderness (Mosiah 7:2-4). At the same time King Limhi's expedition of forty-three people "were lost in the wilderness for the space of many days, yet they were diligent, and found not the land of Zarahemla but returned to this land, having traveled in a land among many waters, having . . . discovered a land which had been peopled with a people who were as numerous as the hosts of Israel" (Mosiah 8:8). In their wars with the Lamanites at this time Nephite forces would lurk in the wilderness (Mosiah 9:1), and one army going forth from Zarahemla "to inherit the land of our fathers" was "smitten with famine and sore afflictions" in the wilderness (Mosiah 9:3), from which it is amply clear that though they had not yet contacted the Lamanites they were a great distance indeed from Zarahemla; it was not until "after many days' wandering in the wilderness we pitched our tents in the place where our brethren were slain," that being their objective (Mosiah 9:4). This is not a case of getting lost, for a large number of survivors from the earlier expedition certainly knew the way; this party knew exactly where they were going—it was the immense length of the journey that made it so time-consuming and exhausting.



After all that wilderness the party finally came to a city with a king in it, who allowed them to settle in the land, where they repaired the walls of the city of Lehi-Nephi and occupied the land of the same name (Mosiah 9:4-9). Meantime, in another region the people of Limhi were put under constant guard "that they might not depart into the wilderness" (Mosiah 19:28), which was obviously not far off and constantly invited flight. Limhi's people actually made their getaway and "did depart by night into the wilderness with their flocks and their herds" (Mosiah 22:11-12). Though a Lamanite army immediately gave chase, "after they had pursued them two days, they could no longer follow their tracks; therefore they were lost in the wilderness" (Mosiah 22:16). Now elephants or gorillas, we are told in travel books, can be very easily tracked through the densest tropical jungle—and the denser the better, since they are best trailed by broken twigs, branches and other wreckage. But a large host of humans driving flocks and herds (of all things) with them would leave a far more obvious trail. Whence it is plain, as it also is from the enormous distances involved, that our story does not take place in the jungles of Central America. How could their tracks have become lost to the swift and clever Lamanite trackers right behind them? Very easily in arid country, by winds laden with sand and dust, which have rendered many an army invisible and effaced its tracks. But never in a jungle.

In these few connected instances, as all through the Book of Mormon, the picture is one of widely dispersed settlements in oasis-like tracts of farm and woodlands, with a central city as a strong point for defense and administrative headquarters, that almost invariably bears the same name as the "land." Such suggests strongly a colonial type of expansion, and we see how it operates in the case of Alma's society, which fled eight days into the wilderness and came to "a very beautiful and pleasant land, a land of pure water," and quite unoccupied, where "they pitched

their tents, and began to till the ground, and began to build buildings" (Mosiah 23:1-5).

The Lamanite armies that have pursued Limhi's people in the episode mentioned above ended up getting "lost in the wilderness for many days" (Mosiah 23:30), and the same armies after joining up with another lost company, a band of refugee priests under Amulon, finally came upon Alma's people and begged them to "show them the way which led to the land of Nephi" (Mosiah 23:36). Such ignorance of the country by whole "armies" that had been moving about in it for a long time can only mean that the Lamanites' own stamping grounds were far, far away. The Lamanites forced Alma's community to accept Amulon, Alma's bitter rival, as their chief, and so there was nothing to do but make another break. Accordingly they spent the whole night gathering their flocks together, and while the Lord drugged their oppressors with sleep "Alma and his people departed into the wilderness" (Mosiah 24:18-20). After one day's journey they felt they were safe, which means they must have put considerable distance between themselves and the enemy; yet Alma induced them to hasten on and after twelve more days they got to the land of Zarahemla (Mosiah 24:23-25). From city to city, farmland to farmland, it was wilderness all the way.

And it was dry wilderness for the most part: During fourteen years of missionary labors among the Lamanites, the sons of Mosiah "in their journeyings . . . did suffer much, both in body and in mind, such as hunger, thirst and fatigue" (Alma 17:5). Men who journey carry water with them, and if thirst was one of their main afflictions it can only have been because these men were journeying in very dry regions indeed. For they were well provided for long journeys, taking with them every type of weapon "that they might provide food for themselves while in the wilderness" (Alma 17:7). To contact the Lamanites after leaving Zarahemla "they journeyed many days in the wilderness"

(Alma 17:9). When they at last got to Lamanite country, Ammon, their leader, got a job tending the flocks of King Lamoni. This included driving the beasts to the water of Sebus, "and *all* the Lamanites drive their flocks hither, that they may have water" (Alma 17:26). One watering place for a whole nation, even if it were a long river or lake, as Sebus apparently was not, certainly implies a very dry country.

### **Migrations in the Wilderness**

We have already mentioned some of the migrations in the Book of Mormon. Some were local, as when the Gad-ianton robbers would fall back "into the mountains, and into the wilderness and secret places, . . . receiving daily an addition to their numbers" (Helaman 11:25), or when the people of Ammon evacuated the land of Jershon so as to leave a zone of open country for purposes of mobile military defense, the evacuated area later being occupied by an influx from the land of Jershon (Alma 35:13-14). When the Amalekites, being frustrated in their attacks on the Nephites, tried to take out their wrath on the people of Anti-Nephi-Lehi, the latter "gathered together all their people, . . . all their flocks and herds, and . . . came into the wilderness" under the leadership of Ammon (Alma 27:14). Years later, the people of Morianton, fearing reprisals for certain acts of violence committed by them in a territorial dispute, decided to "flee to the land which was northward, which was covered with large bodies of water," a project which Moroni was able to defeat by a short and prompt counter-march (Alma 50:25-35).

### **The Great Migration**

It is quite another case with the *great* northern migration, a massive drift of population, Nephite and Lamanite alike (Helaman 6:6), to lands far to the north. In the same year in which Hagoth sent off his first great ship to the north

(Alma 63:5-6), a company of "5,400 men, with their wives and their children, departed out of the land of Zarahemla into the land which was northward" (Alma 63:4). This was but the beginning of a continuing trend of large-scale migration into the north countries. Because of troubles and dissension a really great movement took place a few years later when "an exceedingly great many . . . went forth unto the land northward to inherit the land. And they did travel to an exceedingly great distance, insomuch that they came to large bodies of water and many rivers" (Helaman 3:3-4). This is obviously not to be confused with the northern land of lakes from which Moroni barred access to the people of Morianton in a relatively small-scale military action (Alma 50:25-35). When distance is described as "exceedingly great" by a people to whom long marches and strenuous campaigns in the wilderness were the established rule, we can be sure that it was at least the equivalent of the migrations of some of our Indian tribes in modern times, which sometimes ran to thousands of miles. Once the Book of Mormon people break out of the land of Zarahemla, there is no telling how far they go: since they have all the time in the world we have no right to limit their wanderings and settlements by our own standards of foot-travel.

### **Artificial Desolation**

One of the most significant advances in modern study is the rather sudden realization that the great barren stretches of the Near East and even of the Sahara may have been in no small measure the result of human depletions—deforestation and overgrazing.<sup>5</sup> Dustbowls of enormous extent we now know can be formed very rapidly, and such ruin need not be the work of large populations. Some western states with very small populations are already dangerously overgrazed, while resources described but a generation ago as "inexhaustible" have suddenly shown signs of running out.<sup>6</sup> The disastrous effect of human

erosion, now noticed on every side, is the discovery of our own day, and yet it is clearly set forth in the Book of Mormon. In the great northern migration the people "did spread forth into all parts of the land, into whatever parts it had not been rendered desolate and without timber, because of the many inhabitants who had before inherited the land" (Helaman 3:5-10). The Book of Mormon instructs us not to underestimate the importance of artificial desolation both in the Book of Mormon terrain and in the land today.

### Sudden Cities

The most significant fact about both Jaredite and Nephite cities is not that they were great or fortified or rich or proud, but that they were *built*. A city would be planned and built all at one time, like a house. Cities were not the product of a slow gradual accretion from hamlet to village to town to city to metropolis as Fustel de Coulanges and the other evolutionists once had everybody believing; but if we believe the Book of Mormon, they were built up all at once. Thus we read that "the Nephites began the foundation of a city, and they called the name of the city Moroni; . . . and they also began a foundation for a city between the city of Moroni and the city of Aaron; . . . and they called the name of the city, or *the land*, Nephihah (Alma 50:13-14). The Book of Mormon method is the correct one historically. The German evolutionary school brushed aside all the accounts and legends of the founding of ancient cities everywhere as hopelessly unscientific, since cities had to evolve, like everything else.<sup>7</sup> But now we know they were wrong, and countless cases may be supplied of cities that were actually founded in ancient times (over a hundred Alexandrias alone!).

"And they also began in that same year to build many cities on the north, one in a particular manner which they called Lehi" (Alma 50:15). That one city deserves mention

because it was built "in a particular manner" certainly implies that the normal city was built according to a conventional plan, like Greek colonial and later Hellenistic cities. During a time of revival and boom "there were many cities built anew," in a mass operation, "and there were many old cities repaired. And there were many highways cast up, and many roads made, which led from city to city, and from land to land, and from place to place" (3 Nephi 6:7-8). Again there is definite indication of a regular system and something like a planned network of roads. The clearest picture of city life in the Book of Mormon is a little candid camera shot by Helaman, in which we see a tower in a garden by a highway which leads to the chief market, which is in the capital city of Zarahemla (Helaman 7:10). As in the Old World, the city was the market center, the surrounding land bore the name of the city, and all was bound together by a system of roads.<sup>8</sup> The first settlers in a land would begin their occupation by building a city; and city, land and people would have the same name, which was usually that of the founder. Such is the established order in both hemispheres. Bear in mind that we described Lehi at the beginning of this book as a typical colonist of his time, fully acquainted with the methods of the Old World, which we everywhere find faithfully carried out in the New.

### **Building Materials**

The Nephites vastly preferred wood to any other building material, and only worked in cement when they were forced to by shortage of timber. Indeed, they refused to settle otherwise good lands in the north if timber for building was lacking (Helaman 3:5). Where they reluctantly settled in unforested areas they continued to "dwell in tents, and in houses of cement," while they patiently waited for the trees to grow (Helaman 3:9). Since cement must be made of limestone, there was no lack of stone for building in the north. Why then did they not simply build of stone and

forget about the cement and wood? Because, surprising as it may seem, ancient people almost never built of stone.<sup>9</sup> Even when the magnificent “king Noah built many elegant and spacious buildings,” their splendor was that of carved wood and precious metal, like the palace of any great lord of Europe or Asia, with no mention of stone (Mosiah 11:8-9). The Book of Mormon boom cities went up rapidly (Mosiah 23:5; 27:6), while the builders were living in tents. And these were not stone cities: Nephite society was even more dependent on forests than is our own.

### **A Convincing Picture**

Let us summarize what has been said so far as to the peacetime nature of Nephite society. First, there is evidence in the Book of Mormon that we are dealing with a rather small population (this will be made especially clear in the next lesson), with a rich cultural heritage which they are anxious to foster and preserve in their new land. Their activities are spread over a vast geographical area, in which they preserve the semi-nomadic traditions of their homeland as hunters, warriors, and cattle-raisers. To contact each others' settlements the Book of Mormon people must often move through large tracts of wilderness in which even armies get lost. This wilderness is not all jungle or forest but seems to be for the most part open country and rather dry. At the same time the Nephites were city builders and farmers as well as hunters and stock raisers. One of the significant discoveries of our time is the realization that these seemingly conflicting economies not only can but normally do exist side by side in ancient times, as depicted in the Book of Mormon.

Each geographic area bore the name of its central city, a fortified market and administration center which in most cases came into being not gradually but as a deliberate act of founding, being often named after its founder. Such cities sprang up quickly, and were built of wood along accepted

and conventional architectural lines. We have seen that Lehi started out as a colonizer, and the Nephite system plainly is the projection of the colonial system in operation in the Old World in Lehi's day. The various lands were knit into economic and political units by planned road systems.

Everywhere the organization of society followed a hierarchical principle. For example, the capital city of each region had daughter cities depending on it, as in the Near East;<sup>10</sup> in time of war from local strong places one could flee to fortified towns, and from them to more important fortified cities, and so on, until in the case of a national emergency the entire society would take refuge in the main center of the land. In peacetime the system was reflected in local, regional and national assemblies; politically we find a corresponding hierarchy of judges, from the local petty judges (who made so much trouble) on up to "the chief judge over all the land"; in religion such a hierarchy runs from local priests to the chief high priest over all the land, and even in the sects and churches Alma and Moroni appointed various priests to function under them at various levels. In this world of "island" societies, isolated from each other often by immense stretches of wilderness, we find the same system everywhere faithfully reproduced, and it is identical with that which was flourishing in the Near East in the time that Lehi left Jerusalem.

Just as the normal movement of American population throughout our own history has been a massive and gradual drift from east to west, drawing off the crowded populations of the Atlantic seaboard into the relatively empty spaces inland, so throughout Nephite history we find a constant population drift from the crowded lands of the south to the empty regions of the north. There are thus two main areas and settings for Book of Mormon history, the land of Zarahemla, and the land northward, and it is important not to confuse them.

The whole picture of Nephite society convinces us the



more we study it (1) that we are dealing with real people and institutions, and (2) that we have here a faithful mirror of Near Eastern society and institutions of the time of Lehi.

## Questions

1. Why did the Nephites not forget their old cultures and revert to primitive ways in the wilderness of the New World? Would that not have been natural?
2. Are there any other instances in history in which small bodies of people have transplanted advanced cultures in wild and distant places? Permanently?
3. What is the three-fold cultural heritage of Lehi's people?
4. What important aspects of Nephite society distinguish it from modern society?
5. Describe a Nephite city.
6. What are the indications in the Book of Mormon of small populations?
7. What are the indications that Book of Mormon history takes place over a vast area?
8. What are the indications that much of Book of Mormon history takes place in relatively dry country?
9. What are the indications of a hierarchical organization of Nephite society—economic, political, religious?
10. What important considerations arise from the evidence that the Nephites built almost exclusively of wood?