

# A Study in Seven

## Hebrew Numerology in the Book of Mormon

*Corbin Volluz*

*Behind the wall, the gods play;  
They play with numbers, of which the universe is made up.<sup>1</sup>*

The subject of Hebrew numerology in the Book of Mormon has been identified as a promising field of study still open to fruitful exploration. Meaning is found in many ways, and one way is in the symbolism of numbers. Significant uses of the numbers ten, twenty-four, and fifty in the Book of Mormon have been discussed previously, beginning with explanations of the symbolic importance of such numbers in ancient literatures, and then pointing out similar usages in the Nephite record.<sup>2</sup> This article adds to those discussions by drawing attention to the number seven and things that occur seven times in the narratives in the Book of Mormon. As will be seen, seven is an important number in the Book of Mormon, just as it was in the biblical world and also among Mesoamerican peoples who traced their origins to seven tribes.<sup>3</sup>

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1. Le Corbusier, quoted in Annemarie Schimmel, “Numbers: An Overview,” *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2d ed., ed. Lindsay Jones, 15 vols. (Detroit, Mich.: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005), 10:6751.

2. John W. Welch, “Counting to Ten,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 12, no. 2 (2003): 42–57; John W. Welch, “Number 24,” in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1992), 272–74.

3. See Diane E. Wirth, “Revisiting the Seven Lineages of the Book of Mormon and the Seven Tribes of Mesoamerica,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 52, no. 4 (2013): 77–88.

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My Bible studies over the years have brought to my attention the pervasive influence of ancient Hebrew numerology in both the Old and New Testaments and how the use of culturally significant numbers serves to structure the text in many instances. This led to my wondering whether the Book of Mormon, which claims to derive from the same Old World influences, would show similar characteristics. This paper is the result.



Not only does the Book of Mormon contain numerous examples of such ancient Hebrew numerology, but viewing the Nephite record through this lens helps resolve a number of “wrinkles” in the text. For example, why does the Book of Mormon insist on numbering the Lehite tribes as seven, when the text itself demonstrates there were actually eight? Sam’s descendants are combined with those of Nephi in an apparent effort to modify the historical number of Lehite tribes to a symbolically significant number of tribes.

This textual anomaly may be explained by the use of numerology or, in other words, the practice of commemorating an important event by use of a symbolically significant number. This type of instance is, to my mind, the most persuasive evidence that the person or persons who authored and compiled the Book of Mormon used numerology to structure the text; that is, the recasting of real-world information into a number with symbolic power. The Book of Mormon provides several such examples.

This study has percolated for many years. I would like to thank Don Bradley for his encouragement and keen insights from its inception in 2008. I would also like to thank John Welch for his enthusiastic reception of early drafts, as well as his numerous important contributions to the final product. Last but by no means least, I wish to acknowledge the unflagging inspiration of my wife, Dee.

## Methodological Observations

This study is immediately confronted with a number of methodological difficulties, which I willingly recognize before proceeding.

This paper will employ a comparative approach to identify and unpack meaning from occurrences of the number seven, or of series containing seven elements, in the Book of Mormon. Since the symbolic use of the number seven was prevalent among the ancient Hebrews, as reflected in the Old Testament, it will be assumed that the Nephites brought this religious and cultural predilection with them from the Old World as part of their scriptural and cultural heritage.

As used in this paper, numerology refers to a literary device common among ancient Hebrews (as well as later Jewish and other cultures) in which significant events or textual features were emphasized by presenting them a symbolic number of times. Such numerology should not be confused with attempts to divine by mystical means the influence of numbers on a person's character or to suggest optimum future choices in a manner similar to astrology.

Though imbuing numbers with symbolic significance has little import in modern society, it will be seen that the Book of Mormon shows signs of being written by one or more authors familiar with numerology as practiced by the ancient Hebrews, specifically the repeated usage of the emblematic number seven and its multiples, and that such numerology is used to emphasize significant events among the Nephites. I proceed by taking the English text of the Book of Mormon at face value. While evidence exists that the translation dictated by Joseph Smith was tightly controlled, we do not have access to the book in its source language, so the resultant text is what we have to work with. The more often these numerical repetitions appear in that text, the more reasonably, I will assume, one may conclude that these patterns may be in some way significant.

I take encouragement from the fact that the significance of numerology is universally recognized in the pages of the Old and New Testaments, although one must always be careful not to impose numerological significance to every countable feature of a text. Whereas the usage and symbolism of Hebrew numerology is well established, there is always the potential of ascribing too much purposeful meaning or intentional structure to cases that may be simple coincidence. Any list must contain a certain number of elements, and any period of time must contain a certain number of hours, days, weeks, and years. The application of Hebrew numerology is flexible by its very nature, and it is likely some

tallies will reach a number with symbolic meaning, even if no such meaning was originally intended by the author. One must always be careful not to ascribe too much weight to such numbers unless the text indicates significant usage.

While any such exercise has a high degree of subjectivity built into it, reasons can often be advanced to explain these occurrences and increase the plausibility that they were more than incidental. With this caveat in mind, one should still probably not shy away from at least mentioning some numerically significant instances simply because they could be coincidental, especially since an aggregate of solid examples lends strength to any theory.

Additionally, any such study must necessarily focus on those numbers with relevance to the matter being explored, leaving instances of other numbers for later examination. Thus, the intent of this paper is to proceed cautiously, setting forth the evidence for invocations of numerical significance in the text of the Book of Mormon, and allowing the readers to draw their own conclusions and assign whatever weight they feel appropriate to the evidence adduced.

### **Significance of the Number Seven**

Many numbers are imbued with significance in cultures of the ancient world, including the Hebrew culture. “The symbolic significance of numbers (gematria) is important in much Jewish writing.”<sup>4</sup> Not least of these is the highly symbolic number seven. As Gordon McConville has recognized: “The use of seven (and multiples) in religious texts is a feature not only of the [Old Testament] . . . but also of the ancient world. In the literature of Ugarit epic events often occur in seven-day cycles, with the climax on the seventh day. . . . The literary and theological character of the account means that no firm answer can be given to the question as to what actually happened. Yet it is by no means impossible that an actual event, remarkable in some way, might have come to be memorialized in this particular way.”<sup>5</sup>

According to Udo Becker, “7 is a particularly important number in Judaism. In the Bible, 7 often appears, in positive as well as negative

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4. J. K. Elliott, “Early Christian Literature,” in *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, ed. John Barton and John Muddiman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1312–13.

5. Gordon McConville, “Joshua,” in *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, 163–64.

portents, yet also as an expression of totality.”<sup>6</sup> And Didier Colin observes that the ancient “Jews and the first authors of the Bible felt [that the number seven] symbolized a sense of perfection and completeness in the holy Scriptures.”<sup>7</sup>

Though the origins of this view are shrouded in the past, it is believed that one prime reason the number seven gained this particular symbolism of “perfection and completeness” is that it combines the number three and the number four. The number three symbolized heaven (or the masculine) and the number four represented the earth (or the feminine). As is commonly explained, “Seven symbolizes wholeness in many cultures, being the union of the divinity (three) and the material earth (four).”<sup>8</sup> Seven was regarded as “a holy number yielded by adding the basic number of the masculine, 3, and the basic number of the feminine, 4.”<sup>9</sup> “Because the number seven (the septenary) combines the ternary and quaternary—heaven or divinity and earth or humanity—it unifies the macrocosm and microcosm and signifies cosmic order.”<sup>10</sup>

It appears that the association of the number four with the earth in early Judaism came about because “it was thought that the world rested on four pillars, four columns, four sacred trees supporting the temple of the manifest world. It goes without saying that the four so-called bases of the world can also be compared to the four cardinal points.”<sup>11</sup> These connections of the number four with the earth, together “with the four seasons” became “a manifestation of Mother Earth.”<sup>12</sup>

Instances of the emblematic usage of the number seven abound in the Old Testament, and so firmly engrained was the practice in ancient Hebrew culture that it survived into the New Testament. Many of these instances are well known. To name just a few: God rested and sanctified

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6. Udo Becker, *The Continuum Encyclopedia of Symbols*, trans. Lance W. Garmer (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1994), 266.

7. Didier Colin, *Dictionary of Symbols, Myths and Legends* (London: Hatchette Livre, 2000), 382.

8. Kathryn Wilkinson, ed., *Signs & Symbols: An Illustrated Guide to Their Origins and Meanings* (New York: DK Publishing, 2008), 295.

9. Becker, *Continuum Encyclopedia of Symbols*, 266.

10. Clare Gibson, *Signs and Symbols: An Illustrated Guide to Their Meaning* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2001), 87.

11. Colin, *Dictionary of Symbols, Myths and Legends*, 372.

12. Becker, *Continuum Encyclopedia of Symbols*, 122. The connection between the sky as masculine and the earth as feminine may be reflected in the ancient Greek creation myth. As Hesiod tells it in the *Theogony*, Uranus (the sky) came every night to mate with Gaia (the earth).

the seventh day after the Creation (Gen. 2:3). The Sabbatical year is every seventh year (Lev. 25:4). Jacob served Laban seven years for Leah, his first wife, whom he thought was Rachel, and then another seven years for Rachel (Gen. 29:18, 30). Joseph prophesied seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine (Gen. 41:26–30). God commanded Moses to displace the seven nations of the land of Canaan (Deut. 7:1). The Israelites took Jericho by circling the walls seven times on the seventh day, the ark being led by seven priests bearing seven ram's horns (Josh. 6:1–16). Elisha commanded Namaan to wash (or dip) himself seven times in the Jordan River to be cured of his leprosy (2 Kgs. 5:10–14). In the New Testament, seven baskets of surplus food were taken up after Jesus's miraculous multiplication of the loaves (Matt. 15:32–37); and the book of Revelation abounds with sevens, including seven churches (Rev. 1:4), seven golden candlesticks (1:12), seven stars (1:20), seven lamps of fire (4:5), seven seals (5:5), seven angels with seven trumpets (8:6), seven thunders (10:3), seven last plagues (15:1), and seven vials (17:1).

The significance of the number seven (or any other number) can be stressed by doubling or multiplying.<sup>13</sup> Thus, Passover is held on the fourteenth day of the first month of each year (Lev. 23:5). In general, “the higher the number, the more complex its significance, because the addition or multiplication of primary numbers incorporates and intensifies their original meaning.”<sup>14</sup> Reflecting this, “multiples of seven are common [in the Bible]. Seven is doubled for good measure (Gen. 46:22; Lev. 12:5; Num. 29:13; 1 Kings 8:65; Tob.<sup>15</sup> 8:19),” and 14, 49, and 70 take on cumulative or exponentially increased emphasis. As J. H. Sorenson has said, “The number 7 is especially significant as indicating a complete cycle or series, and multiples of 7 emphasize the extent of the series [Gen. 4:15, 24; Prov. 24:16; Matt. 18:21–22; Mark 16:9].... In general, as a number of perfection (3 plus 4), seven and its multiples, and even its half [Luke 4:25] . . . , occur frequently as symbolic numbers.”<sup>16</sup> For example,

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13. Jay A. Parry and Donald W. Parry, *Understanding the Book of Revelation* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1998), 46, give the example of doubling the number 12 to arrive at 24 elders surrounding God's throne in the book of Revelation. Multiplying 12 by itself (and then again by 1,000) yields the 144,000 high priests.

14. Gibson, *Signs and Symbols*, 87.

15. The book of Tobit, or Tobias in the Vulgate, is a book of scripture included in the Catholic and Orthodox biblical canon.

16. J. H. Sorenson, “Numerology (in the Bible),” in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2d ed., ed. Berard L. Marthaler, 15 vols. (Farmington Hills, Mich.: Thomson-Gale, 2003), 10:477.

whereas God promised to avenge Cain's murderer seven times, Lamech believed he would be avenged "seventy and sevenfold" (Gen. 4:24), and Jesus instructed Peter to forgive "seventy times seven" (Matt. 18:22).

Some scriptural authors go to great lengths to compose textual structures that accord with the number seven. Famously, Matthew's genealogy of Jesus "stresses the numerological significance of Jesus's ancestry. From Abraham to David, Israel's greatest king, there were fourteen generations; from David to the destruction of Judah by the Babylonians, Israel's greatest disaster, there were fourteen generations; and from the Babylonian disaster to the birth of Jesus, fourteen generations (1:17). Fourteen, fourteen, and fourteen—it is almost as if God had planned it this way. In fact, for Matthew, he had. After every fourteen generations, an enormously significant event occurs. This must mean that Jesus—the fourteenth generation—is someone of very great importance to God."<sup>17</sup> Likewise, it has fascinated some exegetes that the Gospel of John can be read as containing "seven miracles, seven discourses, seven similes used by Jesus, seven titles in chapter I, seven days in chapters I-II," and so on, although one must be cautious not to impose too much exegetical ingenuity onto such texts.<sup>18</sup>

The neat division of time between Abraham and Christ into three periods of fourteen generations as stated in Matthew 1:17 has been described as "clearly artificial,"<sup>19</sup> but this artificiality may signal all the more its intentionality. For, in Matthew's third set of "fourteen," there are actually only thirteen names listed (it is Matthew who insists that there are fourteen); and additionally, Matthew's genealogy does not match the Old Testament. Indeed,

it turns out that Matthew left out some names in the fourteen generations from David to the Babylonian disaster. In 1:8 he indicates that Joram is the father of Uzziah. But we know from 1 Chronicles 3:10–12 that Joram was not Uzziah's father, but his great-great-grandfather. In other words, Matthew has dropped three generations from the genealogy. Why? The answer should be obvious. If he included *all* the

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17. Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus, Interrupted* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009), 57–58.

18. Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John, I–XII*, 2 vols., Anchor Bible Series 29 (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1966), 1:cxlii.

19. M. H. Pope, "Seven, Seventh, Seventy," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick, John Knox, Herbert Gordon May, Samuel Terrien, and Emory Stevens Bucke, 4 vols. (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), 4:294.

generations, he would not be able to claim that something significant happened at every fourteenth generation.

But why does he stress the number fourteen in particular? Why not seventeen, or eleven? Scholars have given several explanations over the years. Some have pointed out that in the Bible seven is the perfect number. If so, then what is fourteen? Twice seven. This could be a “doubly perfect” genealogy.<sup>20</sup>

Additionally, some ancients structured their seven-based narratives in such a way as to break it down into its component parts of four and three. This may have been a literary flourish reminding the reader that seven is composed of a four (representing the earth) and a three (representing the heavens), thereby emphasizing the fullness and completeness of their total. Examples of this abound in the book of Revelation. “The first (of the seven) seals are linked together into a unified group of four (four seals, four horses, four horsemen, four statements from four beasts), while the final three seals belong to a second group. This pattern of one group of four and one group of three parallels that pattern set forth for the seven trumpets (Rev. 8–9) and the seven vials (Rev. 16).”<sup>21</sup>

Having reviewed the symbolic meaning of the number seven, together with its component parts of four and three, as well as the strengthening effect of its symbolic power by doubling it to fourteen, we are prepared to examine the Book of Mormon through this particular lens of ancient Judaism. It will be seen that a similar literary and numerological technique is observable at several locations in the Book of Mormon, and especially so in the book of Alma.

### Seven Rebellions in the Wilderness in 1 Nephi

Heptads, or units of seven, are sometimes latent in the text, spread out over long stretches of narrative. These depend on the reader to detect and understand their significance.

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20. Pope, “Seven, Seventh, Seventy,” 4:294. It should also be noted that, whereas the author of Luke departs from Matthew in the ordering of Jesus’s genealogy, he nevertheless makes Jesus the seventy-seventh generation in a direct line back to God (Luke 3:23–38).

21. Parry and Parry, *Understanding the Book of Revelation*, 76. This combination of three and four may lie behind the familiar Old Testament curse of God upon those that hate him “unto the third and fourth generation” (see Exodus 20:5; 34:7; Numbers 14:18; Deut. 5:9).

Besides the numerous explicit heptads in the OT and the NT, there are also many latent cases where one may count several items—e.g., the seven characteristics of the Lord’s spirit in man (Isa. 11:2); the seven petitions of Solomon’s prayer (1 Kings 8:29–53) and the Lord’s prayer (Matt 6:9–13); the seven parables of Matt. 13; the seven woes of Matt. 23; the seven utterances of Christ on the cross; a postresurrection appearance to seven disciples (John 21:2); seven afflictions (Rom. 8:35) and seven gifts (Rom. 12:6–8); seven qualities of heavenly wisdom (Jas. 3:17); seven virtues that supplement faith (II Peter 1:5–8).<sup>22</sup>

Instances of “latent heptads” may also be seen in the Book of Mormon.

First Nephi recounts seven episodes of rebellious conflict by Laman and Lemuel against Nephi. The responses to those murmurings are different each time and seem to grow in severity.

1. Laman and Lemuel will not hearken to Nephi’s words, and Nephi cries unto the Lord for them (2:18). In response, the Lord speaks consoling words to Nephi (2:19–24).
2. After the first unsuccessful attempt to get the brass plates from Laban, Laman and Lemuel are about to abandon the mission and turn back to the Valley of Lemuel (3:14). In response, Nephi speaks encouraging words to them (3:21).
3. After the second unsuccessful attempt to get the brass plates, Laman and Lemuel beat Nephi with a rod (3:28). In response, an angel appears, upbraids Laman and Lemuel, and promises them success on their third attempt (3:29).
4. While returning with Ishmael, Laman and Lemuel (together with members of Ishmael’s family) rebel against Nephi (7:6). In response, Nephi speaks to them, reminds them of the angel and so forth, but nothing resolves the rebellion until Ishmael’s daughters and wife plead with Laman and Lemuel (7:19–20).
5. Ishmael’s death provokes a new rebellion by Laman, Lemuel, and others (16:35). In response, God himself speaks to them (16:39).
6. When Nephi attempts to build a ship, Laman and Lemuel murmur against Nephi (17:18). In response, after preaching a sermon, Nephi touches them and “shakes” them by the power of God (17:53–54).
7. On the voyage, Laman and Lemuel exhibit much “rudeness” and tie up Nephi (18:9). In response, a storm drives them back for four days and threatens to drown them (18:20).

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22. Pope, “Seven, Seventh, Seventy,” 4:294–95.

## Seven Tribes throughout the Book of Mormon

Early on in the Book of Mormon, the Lehite tribes are numbered at seven, consisting of the “Nephites, Jacobites, Josephites, Zoramites, Lamanites, Lemuelites, and Ishmaelites” (Jacob 1:13), as has been frequently noted.<sup>23</sup> The fact that the descendants of Sam are not included in this list evinces an authorial intent to make the number of tribes equal seven, presumably because of a preexisting significance in the mind of the author attached to the number seven.

Lehi’s blessing indicates Sam did, in fact, have descendants.

A Blessed art thou,  
 B and thy seed;  
 C for thou shalt inherit the land like unto thy brother Nephi.  
 D And thy seed  
 E shall be numbered  
 D' with his seed  
 C' and thou shalt be even like unto thy brother,  
 B' and thy seed like unto his seed;  
 A' and thou shalt be blessed in all thy days. (2 Ne. 4:11)

The focal point of this chiastic blessing is on the phrase “numbered with,” meaning that Sam’s seed shall be joined with Nephi’s seed. Hugh Nibley long ago noted that *Sam* is an authentic ancient Egyptian name, likening it to Sam Tawi (or Taui), it being a name title taken by Tehutimose III after his accession, and translated as “Uniter of the two worlds.”<sup>24</sup> The name Sam can also be translated as “united,” for “he (Amon) has united (sam) the countries (taui) of all the gods in this my name, THUTMES SAM-TA.”<sup>25</sup> Virtually the only information given us in the Book of Mormon about Sam is that his seed will be “numbered with” or “united to” Nephi’s seed. Thus, it is possible to see here an intentional

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23. John L. Sorenson, John A. Tvedtnes, and John W. Welch, *Seven Tribes: An Aspect of Lehi’s Legacy*, in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, ed. and comp. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1992), ch. 24; see also Ross T. Christensen, “The Seven Lineages of Lehi,” *New Era* 5, no. 5 (1975): 50–51.

24. Hugh W. Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert/The World of the Jaredites/There Were Jaredites*, The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley, vol. 5 (Salt Lake City: Desert Book; Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1988), 42.

25. Heinrich Brugsch-Bey, *Egypt under the Pharaohs: History Derived Entirely from the Monuments*, cond. and rev. M. Brodrick (1902; repr., UK: Bracken Books, 1996), 1:425, emphasis in original.

word play on the Egyptian name *Sam*, and by numbering or uniting Sam's posterity with that of Nephi, Lehi arrived at a desired number of seven for the tribal total.<sup>26</sup>

Such a move is not without precedent. Something similar occurs in the Old Testament with the twelve tribes of Israel. (Whereas the number seven gained its significance by adding 3 and 4, the number twelve may have risen to prominence through multiplying 3 and 4). Jacob had twelve sons, and each son had a tribe, making twelve tribes. But the numbering became more difficult when Joseph had two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, both of whom were given tribal land shares in Canaan, thus effectively raising the total number of tribes from twelve to thirteen (omitting Joseph from the total and substituting his two sons). In order to maintain the number of tribes at the symbolically significant tally of twelve, however, the tribe of Levi was excluded when Ephraim and Manasseh were mentioned as separate tribes (see Num. 1:32–34; Josh. 17:14–17; 1 Chr. 7:20). This was justified by the fact that Levi's descendants did not receive a land inheritance because they served at the temple as the priestly tribe. It appears the Old Testament modifies the figure of thirteen tribes to twelve in order to maintain this important number, and the Book of Mormon similarly modifies the figure of eight tribes to seven, omitting the tribe of Sam, which the Book of Mormon goes out of its way to draw special attention to by pointing out that Sam's seed is being numbered with Nephi's.

This tribal division seems to have endured (or if ceased, later resumed) over a period of hundreds of years, inasmuch as the same seven tribes are listed after the visitation of the resurrected Savior among the Nephites.<sup>27</sup> “Therefore the true believers in Christ, and the true worshipers of Christ, (among whom were the three disciples of Jesus who should tarry) were called Nephites, and Jacobites, and Josephites, and

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26. It has also been suggested that Lehi puts Sam and Nephi together so that Nephi gets a “double blessing” to balance out Laman, who, as the oldest son, would have been entitled to the double portion under the Law of Moses in Deuteronomy. John W. Welch, “Lehi’s Last Will and Testament: A Legal Approach,” in *The Book of Mormon: Second Nephi, The Doctrinal Structure*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, 1989), 61–82.

27. Especially during the nearly two hundred years after the Savior’s appearance, there had certainly been much intermarriage among the descendants of the original tribes, so this later tribal delineation may have divided the people in more of a symbolic than a literal way.

Zoramites. And it came to pass that they who rejected the gospel were called Lamanites, and Lemuelites, and Ishmaelites" (4 Ne. 1:37, 38). Here, the seven tribes are divided into their component parts of four and three; with four tribes on the side of Christ and three tribes opposed.

The same seven tribes, with the same divisions of four and three, are mentioned at the end of the Nephite record as well, reflecting a threefold iteration of the seven Lehite tribes (Morm. 1:8–9).<sup>28</sup>

### Seven Churches and Seven Groups of Converted Lamanites

In addition to tribal numbers, it is widely known that Mosiah 25:23 explicitly notes the existence of "seven churches in the land of Zarahemla." This may call to mind the seven-candlesticked menorah of the Apocalypse, denoting the seven churches to whom the letters mentioned at the beginning of this revelation were written (Rev. 1:20).

Less obvious, and unnoticed by most readers, the cities and lands of the Lamanites converted through the mission of the sons of Mosiah listed in Alma 23 happen also to total seven:

For they became a righteous people; they did lay down the weapons of their rebellion, that they did not fight against God any more, neither against any of their brethren. Now, these are they who were converted unto the Lord: The people of the Lamanites who were in [1] the land of Ishmael; and also of the people of the Lamanites who were in [2] the land of Middoni; and also of the people of the Lamanites who were in [3] the city of Nephi; and also of the people of the Lamanites who were in [4] the land of Shilom, and who were in [5] the land of Shemlon, and in [6] the city of Lemuel, and in [7] the city of Shimnilom. And these are the names of the cities of the Lamanites which were converted unto the Lord; and these are they that laid down the weapons of their rebellion, yea, all their weapons of war; and they were all Lamanites. (Alma 23:7–13)

The fact that Mormon lists Lamanite cities and lands together in order to arrive at the number seven suggests a numerically based authorial intent.

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28. Attaching significance to the number of tribes calls to mind the seven nations God commanded Moses to displace from the land of Canaan (Deut. 7:1). The threefold iteration is similar to the three sets of seven plagues in Revelation associated with the seven seals, trumpets, and vials, as well as Matthew's genealogy of Jesus, which repeats three times the doubled number of seven, or fourteen.

As with the seven Lehite tribes, the seven converted Lamanite locations are divided into a group of four and a group of three, this being accomplished in more than one way. The first four cities or lands (Ishmael, Middoni, Nephi, and Shilom) are introduced with the repeated clause “the people of the Lamanites who were in . . .” The last three cities or lands (Shemlon, Lemuel, and Shimnilom) are lumped together as a group without the introductory clause, thereby setting the final three apart from the first four. Additionally, four of the geographical locations of converted Lamanites are denominated “lands” (Ishmael, Middoni, Shilom, and Shemlon), while three others are denominated “cities” (Nephi, Lemuel, and Shimnilom).

It appears that not only was the total number of seven important to the author, but also that the reader should understand that the component parts of this number were four and three, as in the division of the seven Lehite tribes into four aligned with Nephi and three with Laman (see 2 Ne. 5:6; Jacob 1:13–14). This may reflect not only a repeated recognition of the symbolic significance of the number seven, but also of its component parts of four (representing the earth) and three (representing the heavens), with the total number seven representing a fullness of things in heaven and earth.<sup>29</sup>

The juxtaposition of the seven churches of the Nephites in Zarahemla with the seven cities or lands of converted Lamanites may be intended to suggest a parity between the Nephites and Lamanites, and that once converted, all are equally acceptable with God, the number seven symbolizing perfection and fullness. Additionally, adding the seven Nephite churches to the seven Lamanite cities or lands totals fourteen such convert clusters, emphasizing and reinforcing their symbolic significance.

### **The Nephite Monetary System in Alma 11**

One of the most intriguing manifestations of the number seven is in Alma 11, which shows one way in which the number seven was used on a daily basis in Nephite culture during the days of Alma. The narrative of Alma and Amulek’s troubles in the city of Ammonihah is inexplicably

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29. Making the numeric symbolism more complex is the fact that, after the seven Lamanite tribes are listed, the author writes “these are the names of the cities of the Lamanites” (23:13), and shortly thereafter writes again, “we have named all the cities of the Lamanites in which they . . . were converted” (23:15). This otherwise needless repetition may be due to the author’s desire to emphasize this significant number three times—another significant number.

interrupted in Alma 11 to give the reader a rather in-depth introduction to the Nephite monetary system. This system, based on the number seven, converted both gold and silver into grain and other measures.<sup>30</sup>

The Nephite gold standard was based on the senine as the primary unit. A seon of gold was twice the value of a senine; a shum of gold twice that of a seon; and a limnah of gold was the value of all three combined. The first thing to note is that the largest “denomination” in the Nephite gold system, the limnah, equals seven senines.

The Nephite silver standard follows the same order as the gold standard, using different names for the units. In the silver standard, the basic unit of value is a senum (which is pegged at the same value as the basic gold unit, the senine). A senum (1) is doubled to arrive at an amnor (2); the amnor is doubled to arrive at an ezrom (4); and all three are totaled to arrive at an onti ( $1 + 2 + 4 = 7$ ). Here, we have the seven-based gold standard duplicated in silver. The largest value of the gold standard is the limnah (equaling seven senines), while the largest value of the silver standard is the onti (equaling seven senums). Once more we seem to have an intentional tally not only of seven for the largest unit within each standard, but doubled in the text for a total of fourteen.

Unlike the gold standard, the silver standard sets forth the lesser units of reckoning, which constitute three subgroups of the one-unit senum, each of which are half the preceding unit. Half a senum of silver is a shiblon; half a shiblon is a shiblum; and half a shiblum is the smallest unit, a leah. The silver standard thus made use of seven measures, divided into a group of three small measures (the shiblon, shiblum, and leah) and a group of the four major measures (the senum, amnor, ezrom, and onti).<sup>31</sup> This may once more set forth seven as a number of fullness and completeness, arrived at by adding the number of the earth (4) with the number of the heavens (3).

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30. See Robert F. Smith, “Weights and Measure in the Time of Mosiah II” (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1983), 1–14, available in L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah; for a useful diagram of this monetary system, see John W. Welch and J. Gregory Welch, “50 Questions of Alma 5,” *Charting the Book of Mormon* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1999), chart 110.

31. The gold standard includes one additional unit, the antion (Alma 11:19), which is equal to three shiblons of silver, or one and one-half senines or senums, bringing the total of gold pieces to five.

## Seven Killed by Ammon at the Waters of Sebus in Alma 17

Other than two symbolic uses of seven in Isaiah, speaking of “seven women taking hold of one man” (2 Ne. 14:1, quoting Isa. 4:1) and the Lord smiting the sea into “seven streams” (2 Ne. 21:15), the number seven appears only three other places in the Book of Mormon. One of these comes in the account of the fourteen-year<sup>32</sup> mission of Mosiah’s four sons among the Lamanites, when one of those sons, Ammon, defends the Lamanite king’s flocks at the waters of Sebus. According to the text he slew seven marauders: “Now six of them had fallen by the sling, but he slew none save it were their leader with his sword; and he smote off as many of their arms as were lifted against him, and they were not a few” (Alma 17:38). Going out of its way to be specific on this detail, the narrative first points out that he had killed “a certain number of them” with the sling, which caused them to “be astonished” (Alma 17:36). Two verses later, the reader learns that the certain number was six, the number of bad luck or wickedness; added to this was one more, their leader, who was killed by the sword, for a phenomenal total of seven. Ammon himself, when approached by the king, numbers those whom he slew: “I defended thy servants and thy flocks, and slew seven of their brethren with the sling and with the sword” (Alma 18:16).

## Seven Prophetic Witnesses of Christ

Elsewhere in the Book of Mormon, lists of seven occur, and this number seems to be intentional. For example, in Helaman 8:13–20, Nephi, the son of Helaman, identifies seven witnesses who spoke “concerning the coming of the Messiah”: Moses, Abraham, Zenos, Zenock, Ezias, Isaiah, and Jeremiah. These seven witnesses are drawn from the brass plates, a closed record to the Nephites, and constitute a discrete set. It should be noted, however, that many other prophets might have been mentioned, including Joseph in Egypt, David in the Psalms, and several others, suggesting that the list of seven was designed to represent symbolically what the Nephite records elsewhere stated clearly, namely that “all the holy prophets which were before us” had known of Christ (Jacob 4:4) and that “so many have spoken concerning him” (Jacob 6:8).

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32. Alma 17:4, “they had been teaching the word of God for the space of fourteen years.” This is the only place in the Book of Mormon where the number fourteen is used, except when counting “the fourteenth year” in Alma 16 and 3 Nephi 2.

Moreover, a few verses later, Lehi and Nephi are also mentioned as witnesses (Hel. 8:22). These additional two named witnesses are separated from the previous seven not only by a couple of verses, but also by the fact that the words of Nephi and Lehi are not found on the brass plates brought with the Nephites from the Old World, are in the separate record of the Nephites, and may also be seen as having special personal meaning for Helaman's son Nephi, who, along with his brother Lehi, had been named after the original founders of the Lehite colony in the promised land (Hel. 5:6–7).

### **The Seven-Year Food Supply in 3 Nephi**

Another explicit mention of the number seven is found in the early chapters of 3 Nephi when the Gadianton robbers became so dire a threat that the Nephites and Lamanites joined forces and gathered themselves together in one location in order to protect themselves, “having reserved for themselves provisions, and horses and cattle, and flocks of every kind, that they might subsist for the space of seven years” (3 Ne. 4:4). This plan may have been adopted consciously to follow the pattern of the grain stored by the Egyptians at Joseph’s direction during seven years of plenty in preparation for the coming seven years of famine (Gen. 41:36).

Of special interest is the fact that, though the text informs us the provisions were to last for seven years, they lasted longer. In 3 Nephi 3:22, we read that the gathering together in one body occurred in the “latter end” of the “seventeenth year,” but 3 Nephi 6:1 informs us that the Nephites did not return to their own lands until “the twenty and sixth year.” This means they were gathered together, living off their provisions, for eight to nine years, and even then they still “had not eaten up all their provisions” (3 Ne. 6:2).

Numerous possibilities could account for this anomaly, such as a miscalculation on the Nephites’ part of how much they would need by way of provisions, or perhaps a higher death rate among them than they imagined, requiring less food for the remaining Nephites; or possibly the reproductive rate of the animals they gathered for food was greater than expected.

One possibility, however, that should not be overlooked is a clash in the text between the symbolic number of seven, which would denote a fullness of provisions to sustain the Nephites during the time of their self-imposed siege, and the literal chronological number of years they

were actually sustained by the provisions, being between eight and nine years according to the historical record, with provisions to spare.

In other words, both accounts may be seen as correct, but the former is accurate symbolically in the context of a command to gather a fullness of provisions, and the latter is accurate chronologically. It is just such a contradiction in the text that may indicate the intentional symbolic usage of the number seven. This and other possible examples<sup>33</sup> of information being adjusted to arrive at a number of symbolic significance evince authorial intent to manipulate real-world information to portray incidents of importance in terms of numerological consequence.

### Seven-Year Time Gaps in 4 Nephi

Brant Gardner has noted a three-fold repetition of a seven-year gap of time in 4 Nephi, verses 6 and 14. “This repeating pattern occurs 3 times in 4 Nephi and never anywhere else in the Book of Mormon. The triple repetition confirms that it is not random information and not associated with Mormon’s source. Mormon is telling us something. . . . He has moved from ‘real time’ into ‘symbolic time,’ or from history into story. The repetition of seven-year gaps (42–49, 52–59, 72–79) suggests that he is deliberately using the spacing symbolically, likely to mark a ‘week of years.’”<sup>34</sup> Applying the tools of ancient Jewish numerology, and remembering the adage that no news is good news, it is also possible to see this as a heavenly (3) dispensation of a fullness (7) of peace among the Nephites, the single theme for which 4 Nephi is most famous.

### Sevens in the Macrostructure of the Book of Alma

Perhaps most interestingly, the book of Alma appears to be structured around the number seven and, more specifically, around double the number of seven. This may be particularly appropriate in the book named for

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33. A similar adjustment of the total number of years in Nephite history may be at work behind the naming of the six hundred years from the time of Lehi until the birth of Christ and then the four hundred years from the coming of Christ until the dwindling of the people in unbelief, rounding to multiples of 4 and 6 to obtain the desired overall number of 1,000, or  $10 \times 10 \times 10$ , the dimensions of the Holy of Holies in the Temple of Solomon.

34. Brant Gardner, “Mormon’s Editorial Message and Meta-Message,” FAIR Conference Address, 2008, <http://www.fairlds.org/fair-conferences/2008-fair-conference/2008-mormons-editorial-method-and-meta-message>.

Alma, the high priest in the land of Zarahemla, for seven is featured prominently in aspects of the law of Moses with which Alma would have been intimately acquainted (see Alma 30:3). The priestly manual contained in the book of Leviticus is replete with instances of the number seven and its multiples, calling for seven sprinklings or anointings (Lev. 4:6, 17; 8:11; 14:51) and marking off heptadic periods of times of impurity (Lev. 12:2; 13:5, 31), of purification or consecration (Lev. 8:33; 15:19; 16:14, 19), or of sacred time. The spring grain harvest began on the Wave Sheaf Day and continued for seven weeks until the Feast of Weeks (Lev. 23:15–21). The first day of the seventh month (Tishri) commenced the ancient Jewish New Year and was a holy day celebrated by the blowing of trumpets. The Feast of Tabernacles was celebrated for seven days (Lev. 23:34). Leviticus 25 describes two yearlong observances: the seventh or sabbatical year in verses 2–7, and the jubilee year in verses 8–25. The later Jewish book of Jubilees reconstructs world history based on a recurring cycle of jubilees of forty-nine years, showing that the “fiftieth year” might have been counted inclusively (including both the starting and finishing years in the calculation).<sup>35</sup> Elsewhere, the Jubilee year is described as the “final year in a cycle of fifty years, consisting of seven sabbatical year periods, or forty-nine years, plus this fiftieth year.” The number seven has a “manifestly basic role . . . in this reckoning of years.”<sup>36</sup>

Here it may be worthy of note that Alma gave his first high priestly sermon and call to repentance (Alma 5) after stepping down from his joint position as chief judge in the commencement of the ninth year of the reign of judges (Alma 4:20), which was the beginning of the forty-second year, or sixth sabbatical year, after King Benjamin’s speech,<sup>37</sup> Mosiah having reigned for thirty-three full years (Mosiah 29:46) and

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35. Lester L. Grabbe, *Leviticus*, in *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, 92, 105–7.

36. J. Morgenstern, “Jubilee, Year of,” in Buttrick and others, *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, 3:1001–2.

37. A relatable structural case has been made that King Benjamin’s speech divides into seven segments, the beginnings of which are “demarcated either by intervening ceremony or by abrupt shifts in subject matter.” Those sections are structurally configured as seven chiastically related sections. John W. Welch, “Parallelism and Chiasmus in Benjamin’s Speech,” in *King Benjamin’s Speech: That Ye May Learn Wisdom*, ed. John W. Welch and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1998), 325. Such seven-part chiastic structures have been spoken of as following a “menorah pattern,” echoing the seven-lamped menorah in the Temple of Solomon. See Duane L. Christensen, *The Unity of the Bible: Exploring the Beauty and Structure of the Bible* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist, 2003), identifying numerous menorah patterns throughout the Bible.

Alma eight more. It may be more than happenstance that Alma then used about fifty questions—a perfect sabbatical number—in this call for rebirth and renewal,<sup>38</sup> given the fact that with this speech he first turned his public attention exclusively to his role as high priest (Alma 5:18), drawing perhaps on his familiarity with the numerical rhythms of the priestly law.<sup>39</sup> Carrying on with this high priestly orientation, the entire book of Alma, covering the times of Alma and Helaman (Alma's oldest son, Helaman, successor as high priest), often features seven-part lists or structures.

*Sevenfold Structure of the Whole Book of Alma.* It has been observed by Grant Hardy that the book of Alma “divides fairly neatly into seven sections: the Amlicite Rebellion (Alma 2:1–3:19), the Nephite Reformation (4:6–16:21), the Missionary Journeys of the Sons of Mosiah (17:5–27:15), the Mission to the Zoramites (31:1–35:14), Alma’s Testimony to His Sons (35:15–42:31), the Zoramite War (43:1–44:24), and the Amalickiahite Wars (46:1–62:41).”<sup>40</sup> Within this sevenfold architecture, additional seven-based structures may be seen.

*Alma the Younger’s Fourteen-Year Nephite Reformation.* The book of Alma begins with the first year of the reign of the judges. Alma has just assumed the offices of both chief judge and high priest (Mosiah 29:42), while the four sons of Mosiah have headed off to preach the gospel to the Lamanites (Mosiah 28:9). The first part of the book of Alma (Alma 1–16) is devoted to the fourteen-year ministry of Alma the Younger (with a brief interruption for the Amlicite rebellion).

*The Concurrent Fourteen-Year Mission of the Sons of Mosiah.* At the end of Alma’s fourteen-year ministry, he happens to encounter the sons of Mosiah, at which point the text specifically notes the fourteen-year duration of their mission: “And [the sons of Mosiah] had been teaching the word of God for the space of fourteen years among the Lamanites” (Alma 17:4). Immediately after their meeting, the narrative backtracks to

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38. Welch and Welch, “50 Questions of Alma 5,” *Charting the Book of Mormon*, charts 61–65.

39. In a similar vein, Duane L. Christensen has proposed numerous “menorah patterns” in the pages of the Old and New Testaments, consisting primarily of various stories told in structured, chiastic segments of seven with the emphasis on the middle (or fourth) element. Although Christensen sees these throughout the Bible, a number of them deal with the Levitical law, as well. See generally, Christensen, *Unity of the Bible*.

40. Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon* (Oxford, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2010), 106.

the point when the sons of Mosiah left Zarahemla to preach to the Lamanites and recounts their exploits during the same fourteen-year period, concluding with the same meeting with Alma (Alma 17:5–27:16).<sup>41</sup> In this way, the text portrays these two concurrent fourteen-year periods of significance—the first being Alma’s ministry and reformation and the second being this same period of fourteen years spent by the sons of Mosiah among the Lamanites.

*The War Chapters in the Second Part of Alma.* The book of Alma concludes with an account of a protracted period of war between the Nephites and the Lamanites. This period begins in “the commencement of the eighteenth year” of the reign of the judges (Alma 43:4) and continues through to the end of “the thirty and first year of the reign of the judges” (Alma 62:39), making a total of fourteen years. Although several battles are described, Hugh Nibley saw this period as a unit, “fourteen years of gory war.”<sup>42</sup> John Welch divided the conflicts during this fourteen-year period into three campaigns: (1) the Zoramite War (Alma 43–44), (2) the First Amalickiahite War (Alma 46:1–50:11), and (3) the Second Amalickiahite War (Alma 51–62), referring to this last as a “Seven Years’ War,” running from the twenty-fifth through the thirty-first year of the reign of judges.<sup>43</sup>

And so it appears that the book of Alma is structured around three sets of fourteen years: (1) Alma’s fourteen-year ministry among the Nephites (Alma 1–17:4), (2) the concurrent fourteen-year ministry of the sons of Mosiah among the Lamanites (Alma 17:5–27:16), and (3) the fourteen years of war between the Nephites and the Lamanites (Alma 43:4–62:39). These main blocks of text are separated only by a brief but crucial three-year interval, from the fifteenth (Alma 28:9) to the eighteenth year (Alma 43:4), explaining how the Ammonites were given the land of Jershon, how the Zoramites dissented to the land of Antionum, and how Alma tried to prevent the Zoramites from forming an alliance with the Lamanites, which would eventually happen, with the Zoramite

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41. The seven cities or lands of converted Lamanites mentioned above (Alma 23:7–13) are the direct result of the fourteen-year mission of the sons of Mosiah.

42. Hugh W. Nibley, *Teachings of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1993), 2:453.

43. John W. Welch, “Why Study Warfare in the Book of Mormon?” in *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, ed. William J. Hamblin (Provo, Utah : FARMS, 1989), 9–11.

warriors, Amalickiah and Ammoron, leading the attack. In the middle of the book of Alma, two years of peace are briefly but notably mentioned: “the people did have no disturbance in all the sixteenth year,” and in the seventeenth year “there was continual peace” (Alma 30:4–5). In these years “they were strict in observing the ordinances of God, according to the law of Moses” (Alma 30:3), and those seventeenth and eighteenth years of the reign of the judges were the forty-ninth and fiftieth years from the year of King Benjamin’s speech, perhaps marking some jubilee significance.

*Alma’s Seven Companions to the Zoramites.* The accounts of ministry and warfare in the book of Alma are further laden with instances of the number seven. When Alma goes to preach the word of the Lord to the Zoramites in Alma 31, he takes with him seven companions:

Therefore he took [1] Ammon, and [2] Aaron, and [3] Omner; and Himni he did leave in the church in Zarahemla; but the former three he took with him, and also [4] Amulek and [5] Zeezrom, who were at Melek; and he also took two of his sons. Now the eldest of his sons he took not with him, and his name was Helaman; but the names of those whom he took with him were [6] Shiblon and [7] Corianton; and these are the names of those who went with him among the Zoramites, to preach unto them the word. (Alma 31:6–7)

Individuals the reader might expect to be taken along but whose addition would surpass the number of seven (Himni and Helaman) are duly noted and their absence from the company explained.

*Realignment of Tribal Affiliations.* At the beginning of the fourteen years of war, the book of Alma designates the tribal affiliation of the opposing armies and does so by once again listing seven tribes, though not the same listing of seven tribes of the Lehites discussed above: “And the people of Ammon did give unto the Nephites a large portion of their substance to support their armies; and thus [1] the Nephites were compelled, alone, to withstand against the Lamanites, who were a compound of [2] Laman and [3] Lemuel, and the [4] sons of Ishmael, and all those who had dissented from the Nephites, who were [5] Amalekites and [6] Zoramites, and the [7] descendants of the priests of Noah” (Alma 43:13).

Once more the text manipulates the tribes in order to come up with the number seven. We know the Nephites originally consisted of Nephites, Jacobites, Josephites, and Zoramites, and by this time there were “Mulekites” as well; those who supported and identified themselves as Nephites were all lumped together as one, with the apparent intent

of arriving at the number seven.<sup>44</sup> The result emphasizes the contrast between the original ideal of Nephite unity and the ensuing disunity among the Lamanites, six being numerologically associated with evil, incompleteness, and deficiency. The author breaks down the Lamanites into two halves of three each: three of their traditional tribes (Lamanites, Lemuelites, and Ishmaelites), with the dissenters also configured into three groups (Amalekites, Zoramites,<sup>45</sup> and priests of Noah), further making this schematic seem to have been deliberate.

*Seven Nephite Cities Taken by the Lamanites.* During the course of the fourteen-year war, the Amalickiah-led Lamanite army takes a series of seven Nephite cities along the east coast—Moroni, Nephihah, Lehi, Morianton, Omner, Gid, and Mulek.

And it came to pass that the Nephites were not sufficiently strong in the city of Moroni; therefore Amalickiah did drive them, slaying many. And it came to pass that Amalickiah took possession of [1] the city [of Moroni], yea, possession of all their fortifications. And those who fled out of the city of Moroni came to the city of Nephihah; and also the people of the city of Lehi gathered themselves together, and made preparations and were ready to receive the Lamanites to battle. But it came to pass that Amalickiah would not suffer the Lamanites to go against the city of Nephihah to battle, but kept them down by the seashore, leaving men in every city to maintain and defend it. And thus he went on, taking possession of many cities, [2] the city of Nephihah, and [3] the city of Lehi, and [4] the city of Morianton, and [5] the city of Omner, and [6] the city of Gid, and [7] the city of Mulek, all of which were on the east borders by the seashore. (Alma 51:23–26)

It is possible the author's desire to arrive at the number of seven cities in this passage accounts for the anomalous textual feature that Amalickiah will not allow his Lamanites to go against the city of Nephihah in verse 25 but nevertheless does so in the very next verse without

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44. Never are the “Mulekites” added into this mix. In fact, the Book of Mormon makes a point of never referring to the people of Zarahemla as “Mulekites,” a designation so obvious that generations of Latter-day Saints have supplied it by tradition.

45. The original Zoramites, descendants of Laban's servant Zoram, a group Jacob identified as part of the broader classification Nephites (Jacob 1:13–14), should not be confused with these later Zoramites who separated themselves from the Nephites at the time of Alma. This group consisted of followers of a man named Zoram (Alma 30:59) and became dissenters who joined with the Lamanites (Alma 43:4).

any explanation as to why he changed his mind. Indeed, the city of Nephihah was not actually captured by the Lamanites until five years later when Ammoron, brother of Amalickiah, sent his armies against the city (Alma 59:5–12).<sup>46</sup> We might ask why the author would include in this list of conquered cities a seventh that was not taken for a number of years unless there was some overriding authorial intent to make the total number seven.

*Seven Costly Sins.* Mormon, the abridger of the Nephite record, ultimately lays the reason for the wars at the feet of the Nephites, and does so by blaming their troubles on seven specific sins: “And we see that these promises have been verified to the people of Nephi; for it has been [1] their quarrelings and [2] their contentions, yea, [3] their murderings, and [4] their plunderings, [5] their idolatry, [6] their whoredoms, and [7] their abominations, which were among themselves, which brought upon them their wars and their destructions” (Alma 50:21).<sup>47</sup>

### Sevens at the Verbal Level in Embedded Book of Mormon Texts

Not only may certain things (such as tribes, years, and rebellions, as seen above) be repeated in ancient Hebrew texts a symbolically significant number of times, but this type of ancient authorial practice is also sometimes extended into the number of words or phrases used in a particular passage. For instance, “In the creation story of Gen. 1 the clauses ‘and God said,’ ‘and God saw,’ ‘and God blessed,’ occur ten, seven, and three times respectively, and it seems unlikely that this is pure accident.”<sup>48</sup> Although one cannot be sure in all such cases, it is possible a similar type of symbolic word counting is at play in the Book of Mormon as well. Sensitized readers may notice the repetition of certain key words appearing in various documents embedded in the Book of Mormon and wonder if the number of these occurrences might have been intended to signal some meaning often associated with that number.

*Lehi’s Blessing to Joseph in 2 Nephi 3.* Perhaps setting a precedent for subsequent Nephite speech, Lehi’s blessing in 2 Nephi 3 to his youngest son, Joseph, repeats the word “loins” twenty-one times, three times

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46. As noted in Grant Hardy, *The Book of Mormon: A Reader’s Edition* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 399 n. 26.

47. See John W. Welch, *The Legal Cases in the Book of Mormon* (Provo, Utah: BYU Press, 2008), 149 n. 15.

48. M. H. Pope, “Number, Numbering, Numbers,” in Buttrick and others, *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, 3:566.

seven. Lehi found the phrase “fruit of [my, thy, the, his] loins” nineteen times in the prophecies of Joseph of old, a phrase used only one other time in the Book of Mormon or Bible.<sup>49</sup> To those nineteen, Lehi added two more instances (“fruit of my/his loins,” 2 Ne. 3:4, 5) to total twenty-one: 2 Nephi 3:4, 5, 6, 7 (3 times), 11 (2 times), 12 (5 times), 14, 18 (4 times), 19 (2 times), and 21. The number seven representing the number of a complete cycle, its appearance here might signify the complete fulfillment of the promise of the Lord given to Joseph of old that the Lord’s promises would be fulfilled and his covenant remembered (2 Ne. 3:5). The multiplier three in the schema of Lehi’s blessing could accommodate the three Josephs involved here: Joseph the son of Jacob, Joseph the son of Lehi, and Joseph the Seer in the latter days.

*Uses of Wo and O by Jacob and Nephi in 2 Nephi.* A sermon by Nephi’s brother Jacob is recorded in chapter 9 of 2 Nephi. As has been previously noted, Jacob emphatically lists ten uses of the word *wo* in 2 Nephi 9:27–38, a perfect number, mirroring the Ten Commandments and reflecting the “broad preexilic and general Israelite sense of tenfold testing,” as well as consecration and supplication to God.<sup>50</sup> To this observation may be added the fact that Jacob also uses the word *O* fourteen times in this chapter (2 Ne. 9:8, 10, 13, 17, 19, 20, 28 [2 times], 39, 40, 41, 44, 45, and 46). Six of these exclamations come before the ten woes, and six of them come after, with two being found in verse 28 in the midst of those woes, which associate these curses with “the cunning plan of the evil one” and “the vainness and frailties, and the foolishness of men,” the root causes of those woes. Jacob thereby increases the textual complexity of his sermon by framing and overlaying his ten instances of *wo* with these fourteen cries of *O*, which deal at first with the completeness of the wisdom, goodness, plan, justice, mercy, and holiness of God (2 Ne. 9:8, 10, 13, 17,

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49. Jacob 2:25 is the only other Book of Mormon reference to “fruit of loins.” The only appearance of this phrase in the King James Bible is Acts 2:30, “*karpou tēs osphuos*,” quoting Psalms 132:11 “the fruit of thy body will I set upon my throne” (KJV, following the Hebrew for body). However, LXX reads *koilias*, belly or reproductive organs; in Acts 2:30, Luke used the synonym *osphuos* (loins, used frequently elsewhere in the LXX referring to the place of one’s seed).

50. Welch, “Counting to Ten,” 42–57. Beyond the scope of this paper are the numerous instances of significant words and phrases being used ten times in discrete Book of Mormon passages, but one such would include the tenfold use of the word “faith” in the book of Enos, a short and compact narrative structured around Enos’s increasing development of faith (Enos 1:8 [2 times], 11, 12, 14, 15, 16, 18 [2 times], and 20).

19, 20) and with his five merciful pleadings (“O, my beloved brethren,” 9:39, 40, 41, 44, 45), punctuated by his finishing exclamation, “Holy, holy are thy judgments, O Lord God Almighty” (9:46).

Additionally, when Nephi in 2 Nephi 28 echoes Jacob’s ten imprecations of woe, he does so with seven uses of the word *wo* instead of Jacob’s ten (2 Ne. 28:24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29 and 32). These reappearing patterns seem to be something more than accident.<sup>51</sup>

*Swords and Stains in King Anti-Nephi-Lehi’s Covenant Text in Alma 24.* King Anti-Nephi-Lehi gave a brief but poignant address to his people (Alma 24:7–16), in which he dwelt upon the theme of burying their swords in order to take away the staining blood-guilt that came from having committed so many murders. In so doing, this new king uses the word *stain* or its variants seven times and the term *our swords* seven times (*stain*—24:11, 12, 13; *stained*—24:13, 15; *stains*—24:12, 15; *our swords*—24:12 [2 times], 13 [2 times], 15 [2 times], 16). Because this speech led directly to the people being assembled, their making a covenant with God to retain their purity, and as a testimony burying their swords deep in the earth (24:17), this text must be understood in a ceremonial context. The sevenfold repetition of these words in these five verses invokes the memory of the sevenfold blood sacrifices, dippings, and sprinklings that accompanied purification and cleansing rituals and covenants under the law of Moses, which these Ammonites were especially careful to keep as they looked forward to the coming of Christ (Alma 25:15).

*The Sevenfold Joy of Alma in Alma 29.* The devotion of these Ammonites, who had covenanted by oath never to take up the sword again, became the cause of the death of many thousands of Nephites who defended them as they deserted the land of Nephi and took refuge in the land of Zarahemla (Alma 28:1–11). Paralleling the great sorrow that Alma felt over this death and destruction, he also found equally great cause to rejoice “because of the light of Christ unto life” (Alma 28:12). His famous psalm of atoning jubilation, which begins with “O that I were an angel,” mentions several words twice (namely *wish*, *angel*, *speak*, *allotted*, *called*, *wisdom*), or four times (*repent* or *repentance*, *good from evil*, *brethren*, *soul*, *grant* or *granteth*, *remember*, *deliver* or *delivered*, *success*), or six

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51. See also Nephi’s use of the words *Lord* and *O* ten times each in his “exquisitely phrased psalm” in 2 Nephi 4, and the ten-fold “O Lord” petition by Nephi, the son of Helaman, in Helaman 11:4, 10–16, discussed in Welch, “Counting to Ten,” 50–51, 54–55.

times (*I know, desire* or *desires*), but only one word appears seven times. That word emphatically is *joy* (Alma 29:5, 9, 10, 13, 14 [2 times], and 16). At this time of deepest sorrow caused by this Ammonite conversion and migration, Alma's sevenfold rejoicing answers their sevenfold covenant to overcoming their blood stains. He rejoices in God's gift of joy or remorse depending on our desires (29:5), in the joy of bringing souls to repentance (29:9–10), of God working through him to establish the church (29:13–14), but even more so in the success of his brethren in bringing these Ammonite converts to Zarahemla (29:14–16).

*Amulek's Injunction to "Cry" unto the Lord in Alma 34.* As a final example—and there may be many more—Amulek enjoins the Zoramites to “cry” unto the Lord with seven consecutive imperatives: “Cry unto him for mercy, . . . cry unto him when ye are in your fields, . . . cry unto him in your houses, . . . cry unto him against the power of your enemies, . . . cry unto him against the devil, . . . cry unto him over the crops of your fields, . . . cry over the flocks of your fields” (Alma 34:18–25). The use of the word *cry* in describing prayer to the Lord is a significant and persistent theme throughout the Book of Mormon,<sup>52</sup> constituting one of the main parts of the priestly and religious practices of the Nephites, making the number seven once again appropriate and significant here. With these seven injunctions, Amulek wants the Zoramite poor to know especially that they have the complete right to pray unto God over their salvation and well-being, without needing to pray on the Rameumptom in Antionum. This overriding point would have been conveyed by the commonly understood sense of completion that was symbolically associated with the number seven.

## Conclusion

The number seven held religious symbolic meaning in many ancient cultures, not least among Israelites and Jews, and was frequently incorporated into the text of the Hebrew Bible, adding emphasis, structure, and meaning for those in their culture who understood the symbolism. Deriving from this same culture, the ancient Nephites appear to have taken this numerical symbolism with them on their journey to the promised land and incorporated the number seven and its multiples over the years into the warp and woof of their own set of scriptures.

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52. Corbin T. Volluz, “Cry Redemption: The Plan of Redemption as Taught in the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 3, no. 1 (1994), 148–69.

Applying the tools of ancient Hebrew numerology to the Book of Mormon in general and the book of Alma in particular reveals frequently occurring but rarely noticed seven-based architectural elements in the text that shape and mold many parts of this narrative. In various ways, Nephite writers, including Nephi, Jacob, Benjamin, Alma, King Anti-Lehi-Nephi, Amulek, Nephi the son of Helaman, Mormon, and probably others, made effectively meaningful use of the symbolism of the number seven. Seeing this increases modern readers' appreciation for the beauty and complexity of the Nephite record and allows them to identify passages and words of special importance and symbolic significance to its authors.

Four hundred years ago, Edmund Spencer wrote of "wise words taught in numbers,"<sup>53</sup> an appellation that more and more may be seen as applicable to the Book of Mormon.

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53. Justin Kaplan, ed., *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1992), 154, citing *The Ruines of Time* by Edmund Spencer (1591).