

After Whose Order? Kingship and Priesthood in the Book of Mormon

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The Book of Mormon represents itself as a strand of Israelite and Judahite religious tradition that flourished somewhere in the New World. Its acceptance by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as scripture means that the Book of Mormon forms part of the essential worldview of the Church. It certainly informs practice and liturgy in the Church, as the adoption of the sacrament prayers from Moroni 3 and 4 as the regular sacrament prayers for the Church indicates.¹ The interpretive road is not one-way, however. Just as the Book of Mormon informs and undergirds much of the teachings of the Church, so also do the Church's current teachings and practices inform how Latter-day Saints read and understand the Book of Mormon.

Because of this, the Book of Mormon is often read against Latter-day Saint ecclesiology and priesthood, such that the Nephite church is understood in connection to Latter-day Saint notions of church. In some cases, there are connections to be made.² In other cases, this can potentially cause

1. On this point see Scott H. Faulring, “The Book of Mormon: A Blueprint for Organizing the Church,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 7, no. 1 (1998): 60–69, 7; John W. Welch, “The Book of Mormon as the Keystone of Church Administration,” in *A Firm Foundation: Church Organization and Administration*, ed. David J. Whittaker and Arnold K. Garr (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011), 15–57. For Oliver Cowdery’s specific looking toward the Book of Mormon for Church organization and liturgy, see Faulring, “An Examination of the 1829 ‘Articles of the Church of Christ’ in Relation to Section 20 of the Doctrine and Covenants,” in *Oliver Cowdery: Scribe, Elder, Witness*, ed. John W. Welch and Larry E. Morris (Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute, 2006), 155–95.

2. As noted, the modern use of the Nephite sacrament prayer is probably the most obvious place where there is an explicit connection. See also RoseAnn Benson, “The

a misreading of what is going on within the thought-world presented by the Book of Mormon. This is particularly evident in the oft-repeated claim by Latter-day Saints that the Nephites held only the Melchizedek Priesthood and did not hold the Aaronic Priesthood.³ This does not really match the evidence of the Book of Mormon itself, which does not seem to think in the latter-day terms of Aaronic and Melchizedek orders. There are priesthood orders in the Book of Mormon, but they do not map neatly to modern Latter-day Saint notions of priesthood and church.⁴

This article illustrates the Nephite notions of priesthood and church in order to show that the Book of Mormon conception of priesthood is based on Judahite notions of kingly priesthood and ideas firmly rooted in the biblical law of Moses and the Sinai Covenant.⁵ This is the underlying idea behind Alma₂'s discussion of Melchizedek in Alma 13. In this article, I first look at "priest" in the biblical record and tradition. I follow this with a discussion of Book of Mormon "priesthood" notions up to Alma₁ and Alma₂ (including the interaction with Nehor). Finally, I examine the conflict between Alma₂ and the Nehorite people of Ammonihah, where Alma₂ draws on a narrative expansion of the Melchizedek

Book of Mormon: A Primer for Priesthood Leadership," *Religious Educator* 4, no. 2 (2003): 57–67; John W. Welch, "From Presence to Practice: Jesus, the Sacrament Prayers, the Priesthood, and Church Discipline in 3 Nephi 18 and Moroni 2–6," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 5, no. 1 (1996): 119–39.

3. See, for example, Paul Hoskisson, "By What Authority Did Lehi, a Non-Levite Priest, Offer Sacrifices?" *Ensign* 24, no. 3 (March 1994): 54; Robert L. Millet, "Holy Order of God," in *The Book of Mormon: Alma, the Testimony of the Word*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, 1992), 61–88; Joseph Fielding McConkie, "Priesthood among the Nephites," in *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, ed. Dennis L. Largey (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 656.

4. There are similar discussions about the relationship between the Hebrew Bible and Old Testament notions of the priesthood and the church in the New Testament, especially in the Epistle to the Hebrews. The argument in the New Testament has intriguing continuity and discontinuity with the process in the Book of Mormon, especially in the intersection of Psalm 95, Psalm 100, and kingly priesthood. An in-depth discussion of this is outside the scope of the present study, however.

5. The staff at the website Book of Mormon Central have made schematic arguments similar to the argument of this paper, but they are not laid out in detail, nor are they supported in the broader history of Nephite priesthood. See "Why Did Alma Talk about Melchizedek?" Book of Mormon Central, accessed March 4, 2019, <https://knowwhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/knowwhy/why-did-alma-talk-about-melchizedek>.

In another KnoWhy, the staff at Book of Mormon Central assumes that the Nephites had the Melchizedek Priesthood as generally understood by modern Latter-day Saints: "What Did the Book of Mormon Teach Early Church Leaders about the Order and Offices of the Priesthood?" Book of Mormon Central, accessed March 4, 2019, <https://knowwhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/knowwhy/what-did-the-book-of-mormon-teach-early-church-leaders-about-the-order-and-offices-of-the>.

tradition in Genesis 14 to make his point about his priesthood order and its superiority to the order of Nehor.

Priesthood in the Church and Book of Mormon

The word “priesthood” appears only eight times in the Book of Mormon, with seven of those references appearing in Alma 13.⁶ “Priest” appears much more often, with a count of 107, of which 90 appear in Alma and Mosiah. This suggests that the Book of Mormon authors are more concerned with individuals functioning in priestly roles than they are with the priesthood itself as a concept. The preferred term in the Book of Mormon for discussing authority in preaching and governance (concepts modern Latter-day Saints refer to as priesthood) is the “holy order of God.”⁷ Alma₂ nuances this concept by adding the notion that the “order of God” is also the order of the Son of God.⁸ Most of the uses of both “holy order” and “priesthood” are centered on Alma₂ and the Nephite Reformation,⁹ suggesting that ecclesiology was a topic of some concern for this period. This is supported by the reference to the “order of Nehor” in several places, hinting at other similar rival priesthood orders and claims.¹⁰

The Hebrew Bible uses “priest” many, many more times than the Book of Mormon does. *Kohen*, the standard Hebrew for “priest,” appears 750 times, with almost 200 of those appearances in the biblical book of Leviticus.¹¹ Under the biblical system, “priest” refers to a class of cultic

6. These are in Alma 13:6, 7, 8, 10, 14, 18. The reference that is not part of Alma’s sermon in Alma 13 is in Alma 4:20.

7. See Jacob 6:2; introduction to the book of Alma; Alma 5:54; 6:1; 7:22; 13:1, 6, 11, 18; 49:30; Helaman 8:18; and Ether 12:10. The term *the holy order of God* shows up about thirteen times.

8. See Alma 13:1, 2, 7, 9, 16; Helaman 8:18. See also Doctrine and Covenants 76:57 and 107:1–4 for an example of a similar usage in other scriptures of the Restoration. Note that most of these examples are in Alma’s discourse at Ammonihah.

9. I take this phrase from Grant Hardy. He uses it to describe Alma₂’s preaching journey after he resigns as chief judge in order to better be able to put in order the Church in the Nephite cities he visits, as seen in Alma 4–15. See Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader’s Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 115.

10. See John W. Welch, *The Legal Cases in the Book of Mormon* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press and Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2008), 211–18; Rex C. Reeve Jr., “Dealing with Opposition to the Church,” in *The Book of Mormon: Alma, the Testimony of the Word*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, 1992), 15–25.

11. It appears a few more times in the King James Version of the Old Testament—785 to the Hebrew Bible’s 750. This comes from translating other related words as “priest,” such as *komer*.

officers who performed a variety of functions within the religious and ritual world of ancient Israel.¹² They were experts in sacrificial law and, by some biblical accounts, the only ones permitted to officiate at the altar.¹³ They performed divinations through the oracular tools of the Urim and Thummim.¹⁴ They taught the law of Moses, including its ethical and ritual components,¹⁵ and served as judges when the law was transgressed.¹⁶ In short, the priests were heavily embedded in the civil and religious systems of ancient Israel. It would be a mistake to relegate the priests in ancient Israel and Judah to a merely “religious role.”

The KJV also contains the notion of a “priesthood.” This word appears only nine times in the Old Testament, translated from a Hebrew term *kehunnah*.¹⁷ In Exodus 40:15, Jehovah promises that the anointing of Aaron’s sons will be an “everlasting priesthood [*kehunnat ‘olam*] throughout their generations.” Contextually, this refers to the ritual and social privileges and responsibilities that were exercised by the priests. The book of Joshua, in describing the tribal divisions after the invasion of Canaan, notes that the tribe of Levi (discussed in more depth below) has no land inheritance, because “the priesthood [*kehunnah*] of Jehovah is their inheritance” (Joshua 18:7, author’s own translation). This passage makes it clear that these obligations were associated in some ways with the rituals provided by the authority of Jehovah, the God of Israel. It should be noted, however, that the Old Testament and Hebrew Bible, although using “priesthood” to refer to the dignity and responsibilities of a priest, do not use it in the modern sense of the power and authority of God. Its relative rarity in the Bible is also worth observing.

12. The Hebrew word *kohen* is of uncertain derivation and etymology. See יְהֹוָה, in F. Brown, S. Driver, and C. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (1906; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishing, 2008), 463 (hereafter cited as *BDB*); Aelred Cody, *A History of the Old Testament Priesthood* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1969), 26–29; Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Study Edition, 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 461–62.

13. See Leviticus 3:1–6.

14. See Numbers 27:19–21 and Deuteronomy 33:8–11. How this worked on the ground can be seen in 1 Samuel 23:9–12 when David asks the priest Abiathar to enquire whether he will be betrayed. For further discussion on the oracular role of priests in the Hebrew Bible, see Ann Jeffers, *Magic and Divination in Ancient Palestine and Syria* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 52–57. She discusses the Urim and Thummim on pages 209–15.

15. Leviticus 10:10–11.

16. Deuteronomy 17:8–13.

17. See יְהֹוָה, in *BDB*, 464.

Closely associated with the priests, although not identical, are the Levites.¹⁸ According to the narrative world laid out by Genesis, the Levites descended from Levi, Jacob's son. The Levites are not given an inheritance of land during the allotment of the tribes, instead being assigned the tabernacle, or temple, and the cult¹⁹ as their inheritance.²⁰ The Bible is not consistent on the roles of the Levites, but they are closely associated with priesthood, either as the priestly clan or in subordinate roles.²¹

This last point is key to understanding modern Latter-day Saint readings that claim that the Nephites had only the Melchizedek Priesthood. Within much of the Bible, Levites are framed as the only ones who ought to function as priests.²² This point of view is well expressed in a narrative in 1 Kings 12. After Jeroboam I rebelled against Rehoboam and became king over Israel, he also set up in Dan and Bethel national shrines to rival the temple in Jerusalem. To the horror of the author of 1 Kings 12:31, Jeroboam "made priests from the whole of the people, including those who were not from the children of Levi."²³

18. Mark Leuchter, *The Levites and the Boundaries of Israelite Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Risto Nurmela, *The Levites: Their Emergence as a Second-Class Priesthood* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998).

19. Although "cult" is often used as a term for a distrusted religion, a usage that Latter-day Saints are very sensitive to, it can also mean the rituals and ceremonies of a temple. The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives one of the definitions of "cult" as "a particular form or system of religious worship or veneration, esp. as expressed in ceremony or ritual directed towards a specified figure or object." *Oxford English Dictionary*, online edition, s.v. "cult," <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/45709?rskey=x8gXfU&result=1#eid>. This meaning is the sense of the original Latin word *cultus*, and it is the sense in which it is used here.

20. Cody, *Old Testament Priesthood*, 29–38; Nurmela, *Levites*, 1–2.

21. Leuchter, "The Levites in the Hebrew Bible," *Religion Compass* 11 (2017): 1–12; Gary N. Knoppers, "Hierodules, Priests, or Janitors? The Levites in Chronicles and the History of the Israelite Priesthood," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 118, no. 1 (1999): 49–72.

22. Raymond Abba, "Priests and Levites in Deuteronomy," *Vetus Testamentum* 27 (1977): 257–67; J. A. Emerton, "Priests and Levites in Deuteronomy," *Vetus Testamentum* 12 (1962): 129–38.

23. Author's own translation. See the discussion in Leuchter, *Levites and Boundaries*, 128–29. It is worth noting that there are figures, such as Samuel, who function as priests but are not specifically called out as being of Levitical descent. Leuchter notes, "It is noteworthy that the Samuel narratives do not explicitly refer to him as a Levite" ("The Levites in the Hebrew Bible"). Leuchter sees the Levitical genealogy which the Chronicler gives to Samuel as an example of tradition that "had long existed by" the Chronicler's day. See Leuchter, "Levites," 3. The nonspecification of Samuel's lineage in 1 Samuel (the phrase "Ephrathite" is ambiguous, referring to a city in Judah or someone from the tribe of Ephraim) means that Samuel is illustrating that the biblical insistence in Levites as priests is not ironclad.

It is at this point that the Book of Mormon narrative intersects the discussion. According to the account of the Book of Mormon, the Lehites were not Levites. Nephi claims that his father found out that he was a descendent of Joseph (1 Ne. 5:14), which is later specified to be specifically through the biblical tribe of Manasseh (Alma 10:3).

Yet one of the very first things we see Lehi doing in the Book of Mormon is officiating at an altar and offering animal sacrifice (1 Ne. 2:7).²⁴ As the Book of Mormon progresses, numerous individuals perform functions that the Bible generally reserves for the priesthood. Nephi builds a temple (2 Ne. 5:16) and ordains his brother a priest (2 Ne. 6:2). It is this conundrum that previous commentators have tried to solve by an appeal to Latter-day Saint notions of priesthood.

According to Doctrine and Covenants 107:1–5, the modern Church recognizes two orders of priesthood, the Aaronic Priesthood and the Melchizedek Priesthood.²⁵ As the logic goes, since the Aaronic Priesthood is associated with the Levites, and the Lehites are not Levites, then the Lehites cannot have had the Aaronic Priesthood. Since they exercise priesthood functions, they must have had another body of priesthood authority, the Melchizedek Priesthood, which can officiate in Aaronic environments.²⁶

The problem with this solution is that it does not really accord with the evidence of the Book of Mormon.²⁷ As noted above, the Book of Mormon never talks about either the Melchizedek or Aaronic Priesthood, and it certainly does not contrast the two. Lehite discourse on priesthood does not seem to mention the Melchizedek and Aaronic divide that informs much of Latter-day Saint discourse on priesthood.

Priests and Kings Up to Alma

The Nephite position on priesthood derives from concerns related to the Judahite monarchy, especially the close association between the king and the priesthood, meaning those functioning as priests. The ancient

24. On this point, see David Rolph Seely, “Lehi’s Altar and Sacrifice in the Wilderness,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 10, no. 1 (2001): 62–69, 80. Seely argues that Lehi’s sacrifice is not specifically against the centralized cult laid out in Deuteronomy 12.

25. Steven C. Harper, *Making Sense of the Doctrine and Covenants: A Guided Tour through Modern Revelations* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book), 396.

26. This line of argument is cogently laid out in Millet, “Holy Order.”

27. Unsurprisingly, these arguments derive from distinctive elements of Latter-day Saint doctrine and discourse as they have developed in the modern Church of Jesus Christ. There is no inherent problem with this, of course, but the purpose of the present study is to clarify the distinctive Book of Mormon usage.

Israelite and Judahite king was the head of the temple organization and priesthood.²⁸ In connection with this, biblical scholar Lester L. Grabbe argues that the king “seems to have been the chief religious figure in Israel.”²⁹ Roland de Vaux notes, “The fact remains that the king, sanctified by his anointing and adopted by Yahweh, is a sacred person and seems thereby to be empowered to perform religious functions.”³⁰ For instance, Solomon, David, and numerous other kings officiated at the sacrificial altar.³¹ Solomon himself, when he built the temple, offered up the dedicatory prayer.³² Even the postmonarchic book of Chronicles has David and Hezekiah at the head of the Jerusalem priestly cult, with authority to make changes.³³ Before the Babylonian Exile, the Judahite kings were an integral part of the priesthood and the cult and possessed sacral functions.³⁴

Although Nephi is not the same as a Davidic king, and disdained to be identified as a king, he inherits the close association between kingship and priesthood he had experienced living in Jerusalem. Nephi builds a temple and ordains and consecrates his brothers as priests. When ordained a priest, Jacob states, “I, Jacob, having been called of God, and ordained after the manner of his holy order, and having been consecrated by my brother Nephi, unto whom ye look as a king or a protector” (2 Ne. 6:2). Note here that Jacob does not appeal to Nephi’s role as a prophet to explain his consecration to the priesthood, but instead notes that the people look to Nephi “as a king or a protector.” It is Nephi’s

28. Debora W. Rooke, “Kingship as Priesthood: The Relationship between the High Priesthood and the Monarchy,” in *King and Messiah in Israel and the Ancient Near East: Proceedings of the Oxford Old Testament Seminar*, ed. John Day (Sheffield, Eng.: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 187–208; Lester L. Grabbe, *Priests, Prophets, Diviners, Sages: A Socio-historical Study of Religious Specialists in Ancient Israel* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1995), 20–29, 35–40, 181–82. See also Aubrey R. Johnson, *Sacral Kingship in Ancient Israel* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1967).

29. Grabbe, *Priests, Prophets, Diviners, Sages*, 181.

30. Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1997), 113. See the whole discussion at 113–14.

31. David and Solomon get by without much ire from the biblical authors. Ahaz offers sacrifice on an altar built after a Damascene pattern in 2 Kings 16:10–16. The post-monarchal book of Chronicles, however, has a story where Uzziah is punished with leprosy for exercising priestly privileges (2 Chr. 26:16–21). This likely reflects the Chronicler’s perspective on kingship and priesthood in the post-Exilic period. Uzziah and Ahaz are discussed in Grabbe, *Priests, Prophets, Diviners, Sages*, 25.

32. 1 Kings 8.

33. Grabbe, *Priests, Prophets, Diviners, Sages*, 40.

34. Leuchter, *Levites and Boundaries*, 104–7.

kingship that provides the ritual authority to build and regulate the temple, including the ordination of priests.³⁵

As priests at a shrine that is “after the manner of the temple of Solomon” (2 Ne. 5:16), Jacob and Joseph would have been responsible for the various offerings required under the law of Moses. They would have functioned similarly to those Levitical priests who officiated in the temple in Jerusalem. It is likely not appropriate to call them Levitical priests because of their apparent non-Levitical ancestry, but because they officiated in the temple under the law of Moses, it is appropriate to call them Mosaic priests.³⁶ They officiate and sacrifice under the law and operate within a Mosaic shrine. Although Jacob does not specify what he means by “holy order” in its everyday application his priesthood functions within biblical parameters—he is a priest in a Mosaic order, officiating in a Mosaic shrine and functioning under the ultimate oversight of the king, who is a “sacred person.”

The relationship between kings and priests continues under the various kings who follow Nephi. Benjamin, Mosiah₂, Zeniff, and even Noah all ordain and consecrate priests.³⁷ Unlike the biblical record, the Book of Mormon makes no narrative claims about priests and their qualifications, including the assumption that kings are to be excluded from the priesthood. Even Noah, the archetypical “bad king” in the Book of Mormon, is not punished for exercising priesthood functions.³⁸ The

35. Even Nephi’s ordaining members of his own family has precedent in Judahite kingship. A list of David’s officers in 2 Samuel 8:18 notes, “David’s sons were priests.” KJV has “chief rulers,” but the underlying Hebrew of this verse clearly reads *kohanim*, or priests. See Grabbe, *Priests, Prophets, Diviners, Sages*, 23; and Rooke, “Kingship as Priesthood,” 190 n. 10.

36. “Mosaic priest” is a term of convenience. Although there is strong evidence in the Hebrew Bible and Old Testament of a priesthood that claimed both literal and ideological roots from Moses (for example, Moses is identified as a priest along with Aaron in Psalm 99:6), this does not seem to be informing Nephite notions of priesthood. The term *Mosaic* is used in the present study only as a term for priests who functioned under the Mosaic law and covenant but did not have Levitical or Aaronite descent, without claim to a specific model from Moses. In scholarship, the general term for priests descended from Moses is *Mushite priesthood*. The idea of a Mushite priesthood has been argued since Julius Wellhausen in the nineteenth century. See the discussion in Leuchter, “The Fightin’ Mushites,” *Vetus Testamentum* 62 (2012): 479–500. This is further explored in Leuchter, *Levites and Boundaries*, 59–93.

37. Daniel C. Peterson, “Priesthood in Mosiah,” in *The Book of Mormon: Mosiah, Salvation Only through Jesus Christ*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, 1991), 187–210.

38. This is in contradistinction to Uzziah (2 Chr. 26:16–21) or even Saul (1 Sam. 15:10–24), but it is similar to David or Solomon.

ordinary situation in the Book of Mormon, up until Mosiah₂, is that Mosaic priests function as sacrificial officers in and around the shrines, appointed by and serving at the behest of the king, who is head of the temple and its cult.³⁹

It is King Noah who ends the close association between the kingship and the priesthood.⁴⁰ Noah appoints priests, but significantly he does so after “put[ting] down all the priests that had been consecrated by his father” (Mosiah 11:5). Noah’s clean sweep points to his desire to have a priesthood that would support him in his chosen lifestyle. According to the Book of Mormon narrative, this leads to condemnation by a prophet.⁴¹ Abinadi’s denunciation of Noah and his priests’ misunderstanding of the law of Moses is persuasive to Alma₁, who after pleading for Abinadi’s life is required to flee from the king’s anger. This event proves to be decisive in Nephite development of priesthood.

According to Mosiah 18, Alma₁ begins to teach Abinadi’s words privately (18:1). As people begin to believe his preaching, Alma₁ organizes them into a church. This is the first time a “church,” as such, has been organized among the Nephites.⁴² According to Mosiah 18:18, Alma₁, “having authority from God, ordained priests.”⁴³ It is, in many ways, the ordination of these priests that creates the new church, because Alma here creates a body, with priests ordained by him, who are not connected to the king’s authority.⁴⁴ According to Mormon, the functions of these priests are slightly different as well, because Alma₁ ordains these priests “to preach unto them, and to teach them concerning the things pertaining to the kingdom of God” (Mosiah 18:18). These are priests who

39. Peterson, “Priesthood in Mosiah,” 194.

40. When dissolving the monarchy, Mosiah cites Noah as one of the primary arguments for moving away from kings. See Mosiah 28:18–21.

41. The unpleasant job of speaking truth to the king was, of course, one of the primary jobs of a prophet in the ancient Israelite conception. See J. Blake Couey, “Amos vii 10–17 and Royal Attitudes toward Prophecy in the Ancient Near East,” *Vetus Testamentum* 58 (2008): 300–14.

42. Kerry Hull, “Two Case Studies on the Development of the Concept of Religion: The New Testament and the Book of Mormon,” *Religious Educator* 17 (2016): 41–63.

43. As here, Mormon notes in a number of places that Alma received authority from God. This suggests that Mormon was uncomfortable with Alma’s authority coming exclusively from his ordination as a priest by Noah.

44. Peterson, “Priesthood in Mosiah,” 201. It is worth noting that even in the Church of Jesus Christ today, the Lord recognizes the legal authority of priesthood officers, even if they are marred by personal unrighteousness. If a man in the Church today is ordained to an office by someone who is secretly having an affair, that does not invalidate the ordination.

seem to be intended to function primarily as teachers, rather than as sacrificial officers.⁴⁵

Eventually this church, with its freshly ordained priesthood, has to flee from Noah's concern that Alma₁ was "stirring up the people to rebellion against him," a legitimate worry, given Alma₁'s assumption of the kingly prerogative of ordaining priests (Mosiah 18:33). After a variety of difficulties, Alma₁ and his church end up in Zarahemla.

The Church in Zarahemla

It is in Zarahemla that the real test of Alma₁'s priestly order finds expression in the relationship between King Mosiah₂ and Alma₁. The Church had been established in rebellion to the king and priestly order in the land of Lehi-Nephi. In Zarahemla, "king Mosiah granted unto Alma that he might establish churches throughout all the land of Zarahemla; and gave him power to ordain priests and teachers over every church" (Mosiah 25:19). Mosiah₂ is the one who gives Alma₁ authority over priestly ordination among the Nephites at Zarahemla. The Book of Mormon narrative shows that Alma₁'s church and priesthood do *not* replace the temple and its priesthood.⁴⁶ Although it is unusual for us to think about the temple and the church being separate organizations, there is continuity with the Church today, where the temples are outside of the regular hierarchy.⁴⁷

There are two elements in the narrative in the end of Mosiah that point to this idea. According to the Book of Mormon, Alma₁ is not sure what to do with people who are members of the new Church but are breaking commandments, because "not any such thing happened before in the church" (Mosiah 26:10). This is unsurprising, of course, since the church set up by Alma₁ is new. Alma₁ sends these people to Mosiah₂, who sends them back, saying, "Behold, I judge them not; therefore I deliver them into thy hands" (Mosiah 26:12). By giving Alma₁ this

45. John W. Welch, "The Melchizedek Material in Alma 13:13–19," in *By Study and Also by Faith*, vol. 2, ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1990), 238–72.

46. Most of our evidence for this point is circumstantial. One argument, which is unfortunately from silence, is the lack of reference to temple notions like sacrifice. In addition, Alma₂ travels and preaches—something that would have been difficult to do if he were high priest of a stationary shrine.

47. See the discussion in Barbara Morgan Gardner, *The Priesthood Power of Women: In the Temple, Church, and Family* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2019), 21–23. Gardner's entire study is a valuable tool for thinking about how priesthood works among God's people.

authority, Mosiah₂ essentially ratifies the independence of the church, including its priestly organization.⁴⁸

The other move that Mosiah₂ makes comes because of the difficulties that this new religious group faces. According to Mosiah 27:1, people outside the church begin to persecute people in the church, leading Mosiah to consult with his priests. These priests are not part of Alma₁'s church but are part of that same priestly order and organization that Mosiah₂'s father, Benjamin, appointed at the beginning of Mosiah's reign (Mosiah 6:3).⁴⁹ After this consultation, Mosiah₂ forbids persecution. This action has profound implications for the Nephite understanding of priesthood.

Allowing the church to exist as a protected organization, with a separate order of priesthood, provides space for other organizations to exist and even to flourish.⁵⁰ Alma₁ describes the rise of a man by the name of Nehor. Nehor preaches a message that priests and teachers do not need to work but should be supported by the people. This is against the system in Alma₁'s church, which does not have its clergy supported by the people, presumably because of the abuses of the priests of Noah (Mosiah 18:26). It should be noted that the teachings of Nehor more closely reflect the situation of priests under the law of Moses. Under that law, priests are supported by the tithes of the people. Versions of this particular regulation are found in both Deuteronomic-type (Deut. 14:21–29) and Priestly-type (Num. 18:20–24) traditions. Nehor's order, which is—like Alma₁'s church—a separate priesthood order from Mosiah's temple priesthood, requires its priests to be supported similar to the requirements under the law of Moses.

However, Alma₂ does not accept the legitimacy of Nehor's priesthood order. Nehor gets into an argument with a member of Alma's church, Gideon, and kills him. This allows for the legal prosecution of Nehor, since he killed someone, which is punishable under the law of Moses.⁵¹ Alma₂, as chief judge, rejects Nehor's defensive arguments, stating, "Behold, this

48. Peterson, "Priesthood in Mosiah," 203. Peterson seems to think, however, that the church's priesthood became the dominant priesthood among the Nephites. This does not seem to be the case, because Alma's church does not appear to be over the temple and its sacrifices.

49. John W. Welch briefly alludes to this, along with the legal space it creates, in *Legal Cases*, 214–15.

50. Peterson, "Priesthood in Mosiah," 204 n. 10.

51. See Exodus 20:13 and Alma 1:18; see also the discussion in Welch, *Legal Cases*, 226–28.

is the first time that priestcraft has been introduced among this people" (*Alma* 1:12). From the perspective of *Alma*₂ (who is high priest of the church in addition to being chief judge), the priesthood order claimed by Nehor and his followers is in some way illegitimate. *Alma*₂'s claim that "this is the first time that priestcraft has been introduced among" the Nephites makes sense, because it is only after the founding of *Alma*₁'s church that there is space for an independent religious body. Although Nehor is executed for killing Gideon, his organization continues. After all, the rebel Amlici is "after the order of the man that slew Gideon by the sword" (*Alma* 2:1).⁵²

Alma at Ammonihah

We have seen how Nephite notions of priesthood are fundamentally Mosaic, with power and authority centered on the king. Although the Nephite temple is like the temple of Solomon, with priests performing ordinances according to the law of Moses, there is no reference to the biblical individuals of Aaron or Levi, or the families or priesthood orders named after them, in the Book of Mormon.⁵³ There is also no reference to the figure of Melchizedek until *Alma*₂ comes to Ammonihah. In many ways, the various threads about kingship and priesthood, and *Alma*₂'s and Nehor's competing priestly claims, come to a head in the city of Ammonihah.

The chief judge and many of those in power in Ammonihah are "after the order and faith of Nehor" (*Alma* 14:16). Indeed, when they cast *Alma*₂ out initially, they claim that he cannot preach to them because they are not part of his church (*Alma* 8:11). *Alma*'s position as high priest of the church is not only not persuasive; it serves as a negative argument.

Connected to this is an attack on *Alma*₂'s authority in general. When *Alma*₂ comes back to Ammonihah, the people ask him, "Who is God, that sendeth no more authority than one man among this people, to declare unto them the truth of such great and marvelous things?" (*Alma* 9:6). This question on *Alma*₂'s authority is the other thread that feeds into his discussion about priesthoods and orders.⁵⁴

52. Amlici's rebellion probably exacerbated relations between the organizations founded by *Alma*₁ and Nehor.

53. The possible exception to this is Mosiah₂'s son Aaron, but even with that there is no specific reference to priesthood or Moses's brother.

54. Thanks to Brian Holdaway for suggesting this to me.

In the latter part of Alma 12, Alma₂ cites Psalm 95, which speaks about the children of Israel not being allowed to enter into the land of Canaan, called the “rest” of the Lord in Psalm 95.⁵⁵ Because Psalm 95 is centered on the Exodus, Alma₂’s admonishment to “cite your minds forward to the time when the Lord God gave these commandments unto his children” (Alma 13:1) suggests that “these commandments” refers to the giving of the law at Mount Sinai.⁵⁶ The priests Alma₂ discusses in connection with these commandments would then be those priests who taught and officiated in the law of Moses.⁵⁷

Alma₂’s claims that these priests were Mosaic⁵⁸ is central to his argument to the people of Ammonihah. According to Alma₂, at the same time that God gave the law he “ordained priests, after his holy order, which was after the order of his Son” (Alma 13:1). These priests were the biblical priests and Levites whose duties are spelled out in the law of Moses. Alma₂ suggests that the calling to this priesthood was connected to both the foreknowledge of God and their own personal keeping of the commandments (Alma 13:3–4).⁵⁹ He ends this by reminding his hearers that this calling was after the order of the Son (Alma 13:9). Alma₂ finishes this discussion with an amen, and there is a chapter break here in the first edition of the Book of Mormon. The continuation of Alma 13:10 and what follows represents a different strand of thinking on Alma₂’s part.

55. For a chiastic analysis that suggests that the central idea in Alma 13:1–9 is the notion of rest coming out of Psalm 95, see James T. Duke, “The Literary and Doctrinal Significance of Alma 13:1–9,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 5, no. 1 (1996): 103–18. Biblical scholars identify Psalm 95 as an enthronement Psalm, placing its discussion in the realm of kingship. See Johnson, *Sacral Kingship*, 68–70. The royal context of this psalm may be behind its connection to kingship and priesthood here in Alma 13.

56. A. Keith Thompson, “Were We Foreordained to the Priesthood, or Was the Standard of Worthiness Foreordained? Alma 13 Reconsidered,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 21 (2016): 249–74.

57. It is common to connect this entire passage to Latter-day Saint notions of pre-mortality and foreordination. This is done explicitly in LeGrand L. Baker and Stephen D. Ricks, *Who Shall Ascend into the Hill of the Lord? The Psalms in Israel’s Temple Worship in the Old Testament and in the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Eborn Books, 2011), 573–82. However, it is not necessary to read it this way, and there is evidence that it should not be read this way. See the discussion in Kimberly M. Berkey, “Untangling Alma 13:3,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 23 (2014): 187–91. See also Thompson, “Were We Foreordained to the Priesthood,” 265–67. Although Thompson pushes against reading Alma 13 as speaking about foreordination, he operates under the assumption that Nephites conceived of their priesthood as the “Melchizedek Priesthood.”

58. See note 31.

59. As noted above, God’s foreknowledge does not need to imply that the Nephites had the same beliefs about foreordination as modern Latter-day Saints.

In 13:10–12, he reminds his hearers that these former high priests achieved their status through “faith and repentance.” For Alma₂, entrance to the priesthood order is based on repentance and choosing righteousness. This is, in many ways, the rhetorical point of his teaching about these high priests. In 13:13, he tells his hearers at Ammonihah that he wants them to repent and enter into the rest of the Lord. It is at this point that Alma₂ brings Melchizedek into his instruction.

Alma₂’s use of Melchizedek is intriguing and builds extensively on the biblical narrative. The only narrative about Melchizedek in the Hebrew Bible is extremely vague. He appears in the narrative only in Genesis 14:17–20, where after Abraham’s victory over Chedorlaomor, Melchizedek, king of Salem and priest of El-Elyon (“most high God” in KJV), brings bread and wine (14:18). Melchizedek then blesses Abraham, and Abraham pays tithes to Melchizedek.⁶⁰ Alma 13 expands on this narrative significantly, adding information like the fact that the people Melchizedek ruled over “had waxed strong in iniquity and abomination; yea, they had all gone astray; they were full of all manner of wickedness” (Alma 13:17).⁶¹

60. Melchizedek generated a lot of discussion in ancient Jewish and Christian biblical interpretation, as well as in Latter-day Saint readings of scripture. See J. Reiling, “Melchizedek,” in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, 2nd ed., ed. Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter W. van der Horst (Leiden: Brill; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1999): 560–62; Moshe Reiss, “The Melchizedek Traditions,” *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 26 (2012): 259–65; Ioan Chirila, Stelian Pasca-Tusa, and Elena Onetiu, “Reconstruction of Melchizedek’s History in Rabbinic and Christian Traditions,” *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* 48 (2017): 3–15; Ann N. Madsen, “Melchizedek at Qumran and Nag Hammadi,” in *Apocryphal Writings and the Latter-day Saints*, ed. C. Wilfred Griggs (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, 1986), 285–95; Welch, “Melchizedek Material,” 247–54. For a discussion of the Latter-day Saint reading of the person of Melchizedek, especially in connection with Enoch and Zion, see Frank F. Judd Jr., “Melchizedek: Seeking After the Zion of Enoch,” in *Sperry Symposium Classics: The Old Testament*, ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book 2005), 69–82. Judd draws on Alma 13 for his analysis and connects Melchizedek with Latter-day Saint notions of priesthood.

61. The source for Alma₂’s larger Melchizedek narrative is not made clear in the text of the Book of Mormon. It certainly contains material that is not found in the Genesis account. The only clue that Alma₂ gives is his statement, “Now, there were many before him, and also there were many afterwards, but none were greater; therefore, of him they have more particularly made mention” (Alma 13:19). Again, Alma₂ does not specify who “they” are, but his immediately following assertion that “the scriptures are before you” (13:20) suggests that this is coming from a tradition that he sees as scriptural. Joseph Smith’s New Translation contains a lengthy addition about Melchizedek, which has some continuity with the account in Alma 13 and some differences. JST Genesis 14:26–30 talks about how Melchizedek performed miracles in his childhood and was an

The narrative expansion and description of Melchizedek's people is not a sideline to Alma₂'s point. On the contrary, it is entirely the point he wants to make. Alma₂ does not say that the people of Ammonihah should be priests like Melchizedek. Instead, he says, "Humble yourselves even as the people in the days of Melchizedek" (Alma 13:14). Alma₂'s point in this part of the sermon is that his people should be like the *people* in Melchizedek's day.

In fact, unlike the discussion in the latter part of Alma 12 and the first nine verses of chapter 13, the discussion in 13:10–19 does not seem to be primarily about high priests as such. Melchizedek is identified as a high priest, but this identification is placed in the discussion of the repentance of the people of Ammonihah. After talking about the wickedness of the people, Alma₂ makes this statement: "But Melchizedek having exercised mighty faith, and received the office of the high priesthood according to the holy order of God, did preach repentance unto his people. And behold, they did repent; and Melchizedek did establish peace in the land in his days" (Alma 13:18). This is another narrative expansion building off Genesis 14. In Alma₂'s view, not only is Melchizedek a priest and king, but he is also a successful preacher of repentance.

Alma₂'s point that Melchizedek preached repentance to the people, who believed him and repented, so that Melchizedek was able to "establish peace in the land in his days," is key to the rhetorical point that Alma₂ is making about the function and role of his priestly order. Alma₂ is himself a high priest preaching repentance. In Alma 13:14, he explicitly connects his hearers to the people of Melchizedek, and here he implicitly connects himself to Melchizedek. Alma₂ is rhetorically looking for history to repeat itself here, with himself as the Melchizedek figure and the people of Ammonihah as the potentially penitent people of Salem.

There is another side to Alma₂ using Melchizedek as his model high priest. I have already shown that Alma₂'s conception of priesthood, even in Alma 12 and 13, is fundamentally Mosaic. In addition to Melchizedek's role as a successful preacher of repentance, Melchizedek is significant because he was both a king⁶² and a priest, but not a Mosaic priest, making him a key figure for understanding priestly orders in a non-Mosaic light.

exemplary high priest. See Judd, "Melchizedek," 69–72; and Welch, "Melchizedek Material," 263–64.

62. Indeed, his name in Hebrew means "king of righteousness." See the discussion on Melchizedek in relationship to kingship and priesthood in Rooke, "Kingship as Priesthood," 188–89.

Melchizedek is, therefore, a powerful symbol of kingly priesthood.⁶³ By connecting himself to Melchizedek, Alma₂ is linking into the traditions of kingly priesthood.⁶⁴ By means of joining his own priestly work to that of Melchizedek, the priest-king *par excellence*, Alma₂ argues that his own priestly order is the legitimate inheritor of the kingly priesthood established by Nephi, and not that of Nehor.

Melchizedek's status as king and non-Mosaic priest are both meaningful to the competing claims of the order of Nehor and Alma's priesthood order. These orders are not Mosaic in the sense of being associated with the shrine and officiating the ritual law of Moses. Alma₂'s citation of a Melchizedek tradition and his implicit claim to be like Melchizedek in his preaching of repentance illustrates how he conceives of his priestly mission. According to Alma 1:3, Nehor preaches a universal salvation without the need for redemption. By showing that Melchizedek was a successful preacher of repentance, Alma₂ underscores the claims of his own priesthood order, showing that it is the heir of a legitimate non-Mosaic priestly tradition connected to the preaching of repentance.

Alma₂'s discussion of the high priesthood and Melchizedek in Alma 13 represents a legitimate response to the inquiries made by the people of Ammonihah about Alma₂'s authority and his relationship to the law set up by King Mosiah. Alma₂ is suggesting that the church, with its attendant priesthood, inherited some of the authority of the kingship, and that he as high priest is a kingly priest, who could preach repentance among his people just like Melchizedek.

Conclusion

The discussions of the priesthood in the Book of Mormon derive from concepts coming from the broader Judahite religious world. The Nephite priests were fundamentally associated with the rituals and organization of the temple and the law of Moses. Additionally, from Nephi to Alma₁ founding a church in rebellion to King Noah, the king was at the head of

63. Psalm 110:5. See the brief discussion in Baker and Ricks, *Who Shall Ascend*, 584.

64. There seems to have been some flux around this ideological notion when Mosiah₂ dissolved the monarchy in favor of judges. As the first chief judge, Alma₂ took over some of the legal functions of the Nephite king. He does not seem to have taken over the priestly functions of the king. This is visible in the Book of Mormon text in the story of Amlici and his attempt to reinstitute a monarchy. The worry of the church was that he would "deprive them of their rights and privileges of the church" (Alma 2:4). This suggests that should Amlici have become king, he would have resumed regulatory power over priesthood matters among the Nephites.

the Nephite priestly organization. When Alma₁'s church came to Zarahemla, Mosiah₂ gave the church space to grow and thrive, also giving rise to Nehor's competing claims. It is only in the context of these competing claims that Alma₂ brought up Melchizedek. Nephite priesthood was centered on kingship and temple, including Mosaic sacrifices.

This provides a reason for why there is no mention in the Book of Mormon of either the Melchizedek or the Aaronic priesthoods. Alma₂'s citation of Melchizedek was not to show that the priests among the Nephites were all Melchizedek high priests in the sense the term is used in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, because it is clear from Alma 12 and 13 that Alma₂ is thinking of those whom God called when he gave the law of Moses. The priests Alma had in mind were temple priests under the law of Moses. Melchizedek was not a Mosaic priest, but instead of talking about an entirely different priesthood, Alma is using Melchizedek primarily to explain his own preaching mission, not just to teach about priesthood doctrine. Although the Nephites may have functioned in the priestly order that modern Latter-day Saints call the Melchizedek Priesthood, it cannot be shown from the Book of Mormon, which presents priesthood through a lens of ancient temples and kingship.

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