



---

NEAL A. MAXWELL INSTITUTE  
FOR RELIGIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

---

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY • PROVO, UTAH

**Title** The Covenant of the Chosen People: The Spiritual Foundations of Ethnic Identity in the Book of Mormon

**Author(s)** Steven L. Olsen

**Reference** *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 21/2 (2012): 14-29.

**ISSN** 1948-7487 (print), 2167-7565 (online)

**Abstract** The literary sophistication of the Book of Mormon is manifest at all levels of the text: vocabulary, rhetoric, narrative, and structure. A prime example of this craftsmanship is the concept of ethnicity, that is, how different social groups are defined and distinguished in the record. Nephi defines ethnicity by four complementary concepts: *nation* (traditional homeland), *kindred* (descent group), *tongue* (language group), and *people* (covenant community). While all four concepts are relevant to the Nephite record, *people* predominates. The term *people* is by far the most frequently used noun in the Book of Mormon and is the basis of a distinctive covenant identity given by God to Nephi. Following God's law was the essential condition of this covenant and the basis of most of the sermons, exhortations, commentary, and other spiritual pleas of this sacred record. The covenant of the chosen people accounts for much of what befalls the Nephites and Lamanites, positive and negative, in this history. Mormon and Moroni follow Nephi's covenant-based definition of ethnicity in their respective abridgments of the large plates of Nephi and the plates of Ether.

# THE COVENANT OF THE CHOSEN PEOPLE: The Spiritual Foundations of Ethnic Identity in the Book of Mormon

---

STEVEN L. OLSEN

---

By far, *people* is the most frequently used noun in the Book of Mormon, appearing nearly 1,800 times in the sacred text.<sup>1</sup> The term pervades the record's historical narrative, social and political commentaries, revelations and prophecies, doctrinal discourses, and moral instructions. The present study accounts for this widespread and strategic usage in terms of the following thesis:

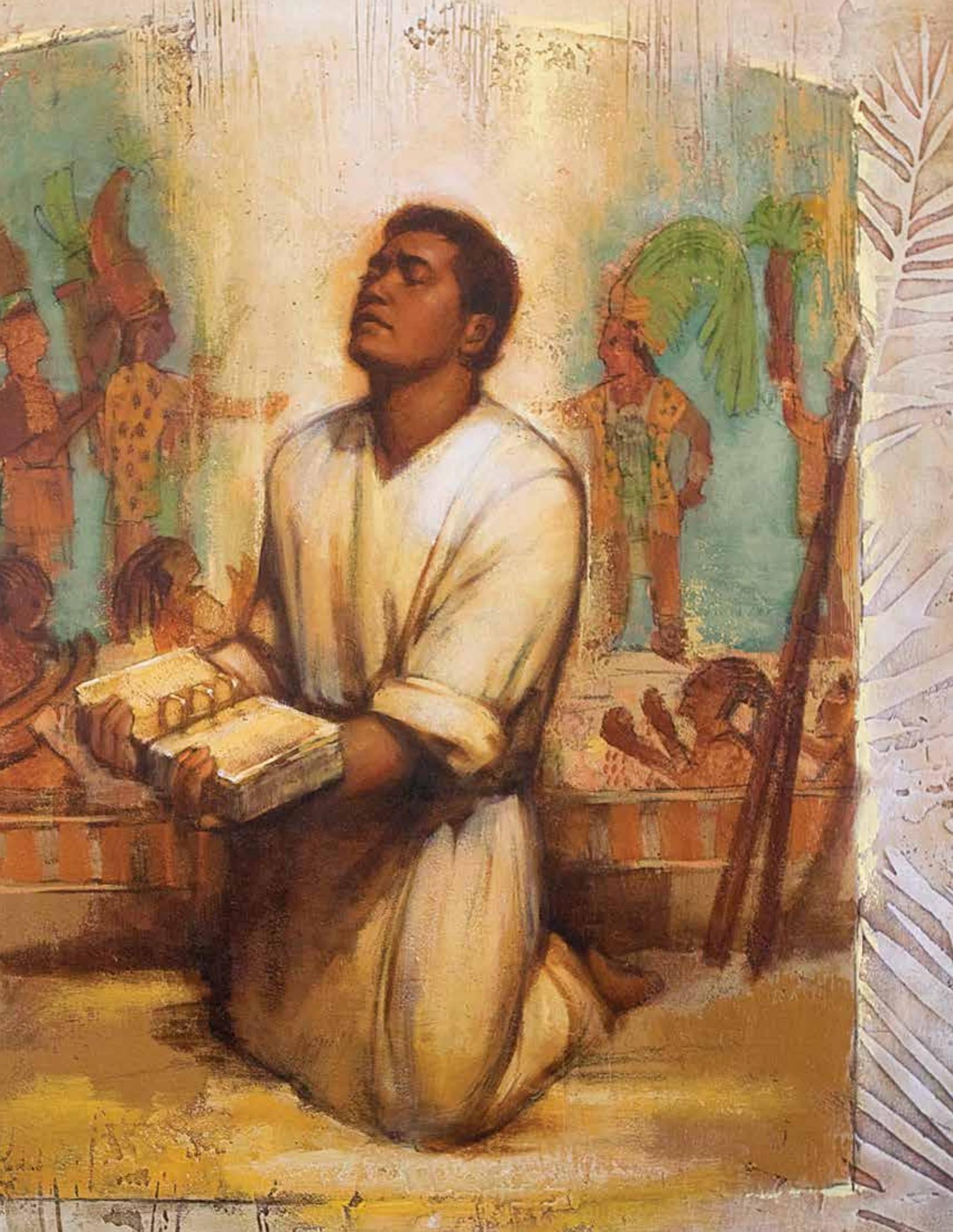
1. Nephi defines a covenant-based concept of people that gives considerable meaning to his small plates record.
2. Mormon and Moroni apply Nephi's concept of people as a central organizing principle of their respective abridgments.<sup>2</sup>

*Abridging the Plates.* © 2012 Annie Henrie. Used by permission.

## FROM THE EDITOR:

A well-written essay is usually constructed around a central theme. In this article Steven L. Olsen demonstrates that the concept of "people" was given a significant nuance early on in the Book of Mormon. That nuance then was used by Mormon and Moroni as a central theme in their writings. Indeed, Steven Olsen's article demonstrates once again that the Book of Mormon is not a fabulous collection of fables but is rather a sophisticated and well-organized literary masterpiece.





### Chosen People in Nephi's Small Plates

Although Nephi consistently refers to immediate family members by common kinship terms—for example, *mother*, *father*, *brother*, *sister*, and *family*<sup>3</sup>—he introduces broader markers of ethnic identity in relation to his extended family.<sup>4</sup> For example, in Nephi's first detailed spiritual experience, the generic descent term *seed* defines his and his siblings' posterities in covenant-based terms:

And inasmuch as thou shalt keep my commandments, thou shalt be made a ruler and a teacher over thy brethren. For behold, in that day that they shall rebel against me, I will curse them even with a sore curse, and they shall have no power over thy seed except they shall rebel against me also. And if it so be that they rebel against me, they shall be a scourge unto thy seed, to stir them up in the ways of remembrance. (1 Nephi 2:22–24)

As with many ancient covenants, binary contrasts characterize this one, which is called in this study the covenant of the chosen people.<sup>5</sup> God as the divine sovereign establishes an enduring relationship with Nephi as his earthly servant and fixes its scope, terms, and conditions. While descent (“seed”) is an important marker of the groups affected by

Nephi defines . . . ethnicity in terms of four complementary dimensions: . . . *nation* refers to a traditional homeland, *kindred* refers to a lineage or descent group, *tongue* refers to a language group, and *people* refers to a group bound by moral law.

this covenant, God specifies moral uprightness and spiritual allegiance (“keep my commandments”) as defining characteristics of the chosen people. The covenant contrasts the respective roles of the two groups. As long as the initial terms of the covenant remain in effect, Nephi's seed will enjoy moral supremacy (“be made a ruler and a teacher”) over his “brethren,”<sup>6</sup> and the Lamanites will be in a position of moral inferiority (“I will curse them even with a sore curse”). Nephites will also realize political and military supremacy over the Lamanites (“they shall have no power over thy seed”). If the Nephites ever

reject or compromise the covenant (“except they shall rebel against me also”), the Lamanites will gain power over (“be a scourge unto”) the Nephites to compel them to renew their covenant with God (“to stir them up in the ways of remembrance”).<sup>7</sup> As will be seen, the covenant of the chosen people is a defining principle of the Book of Mormon text. It helps to integrate its sociology, historiography, theology, and eschatology into a narrative of great spiritual, even scriptural, significance.

In his record, Nephi defines a general concept of ethnicity in terms of four complementary dimensions: “nations, kindreds, tongues, and people” (1 Nephi 5:18; 14:11; 19:17; 22:28), where *nation* refers to a traditional homeland, *kindred* refers to a lineage or descent group, *tongue* refers to a language group, and *people* refers to a group bound by moral law.<sup>8</sup> Nephi applies this multifaceted concept of ethnicity to craft a record based on his covenant with God.

*Nation.* In an effort to embolden Nephi to slay Laban so that he can obtain the brass plates, the Spirit justifies that dire act with the observation “Behold the Lord slayeth the wicked to bring forth his righteous purposes. It is better that one man should perish than that a nation should dwindle and perish in unbelief” (1 Nephi 4:13). On this occasion, Nephi learns that God intends to transform his family into a nation. In this and many similar instances, the term carries covenantal connotations comparable to the way that Abraham, Moses, and Joshua had used the term anciently (Genesis 17:4; Numbers 14:12; and Deuteronomy 9:14).<sup>9</sup> Although Lehi's family does not achieve nation status within the scope of his record, it does obtain the land of promise, which serves as the territorial foundation of the Nephite nation.<sup>10</sup> More broadly, Nephi uses the term *nation(s)* throughout his record to relate particular social groups to their traditional homelands and to foretell the future of the covenant people among the nations of the earth.<sup>11</sup>

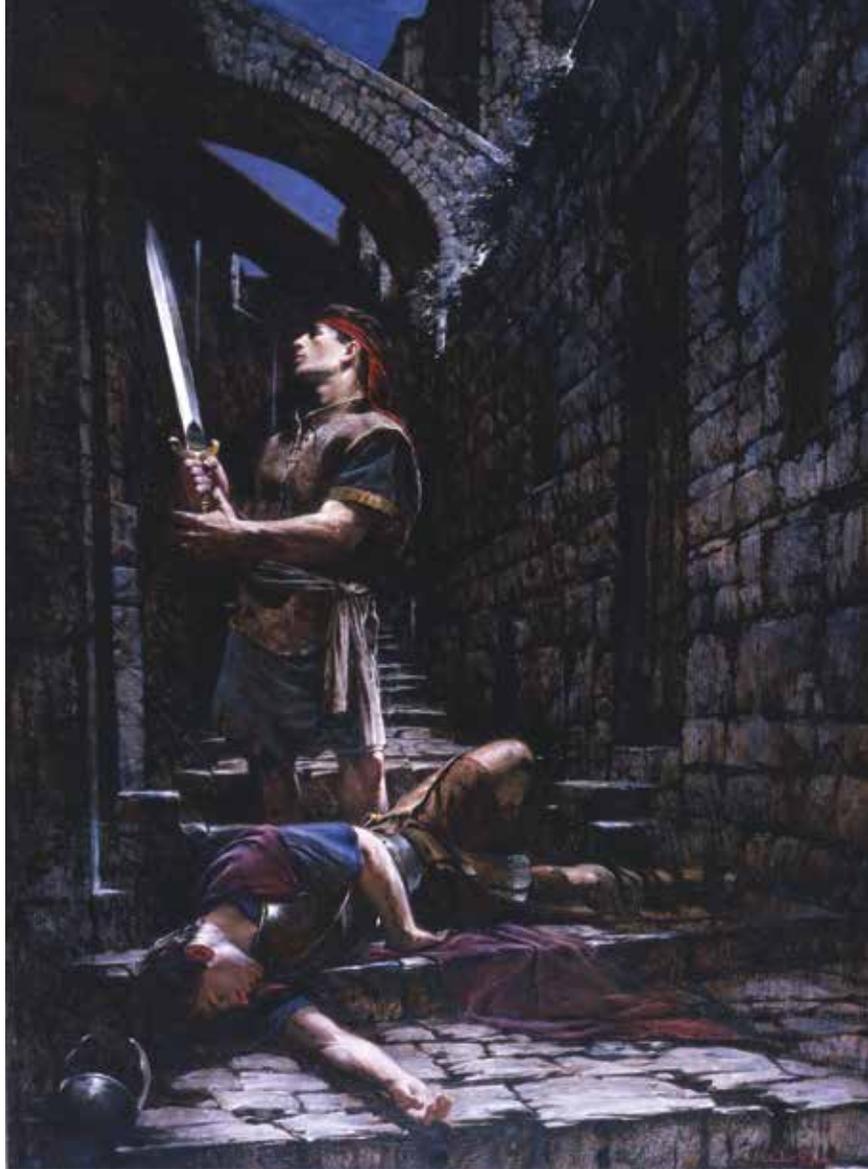
*Kindred.* Descent is a second marker of Nephi's concept of ethnic identity. In addition to *kindred(s)*, Nephi uses the term *seed* to refer to descent groups. *Seed* initially appears in the formal expression of the covenant of the chosen people and is repeated throughout his record.<sup>12</sup> Tracing Nephi's descent group forward in time, his record reveals that his seed will eventually be annihilated because they reject their covenants with God; nevertheless, some will be

mixed in with the seed of his brethren (1 Nephi 12-13, 15; 2 Nephi 9:53; 29:2; 30:3-4). Thus while the ethnic group called Nephites will not continue forever, his literal descent line will not be completely destroyed.

Tracing his kindred backward in time, Nephi observes that the brass plates identify Lehi as a descendant of Abraham through his great-grandson Joseph. While his father's record details "a genealogy of his fathers" from Abraham, Nephi is content simply to declare that he descends from Abraham through Joseph (1 Nephi 5:14-16; 6:1-6).<sup>13</sup> He neither details nor dwells upon his family's specific ancestral links.

*Tongue.* A third marker of ethnic identity in Nephi's record is language. Introducing his own record, Nephi twice mentions the importance of language: "I make a record in the language of my father, which consists of the learning of the Jews and the language of the Egyptians" (1 Nephi 1:2). Nephi justifies his mission to obtain the brass plates partly in terms of language preservation: "And behold, it is wisdom in God that we should obtain these records, that we may preserve unto our children the language of our fathers" (1 Nephi 3:19). By implication, Nephi keeps his own record in part for a similar purpose. In fact, he comes to understand that after his people are annihilated, his record will be the principal evidence of their temporal existence and of their spiritual worth (1 Nephi 13:34-37).<sup>14</sup> Nephi also recognizes that God communicates with different groups in their own language, making language a primary vehicle to receive, understand, and preserve the word of God and to unify thereby a body of believers (2 Nephi 31:3). Language is thus a means of perpetuating not only a group's solidarity and civilization but also its spiritual identity.

*People.* Nephi's fourth marker of ethnicity distinguishes social groups bound by a common moral law. The "people of Nephi" are bound together by the law of Moses and the gospel of Jesus Christ (2 Nephi 5:8-10; 25:23-27). While Nephi recognizes the value of all four markers of ethnic identity, he gives particular emphasis to people. The term *people* appears 183 times in Nephi's writings, far more than the other specific markers of ethnicity.<sup>15</sup> In his initial statement of purpose, Nephi identifies spiritual, not temporal, criteria for being chosen by God: "But behold, I, Nephi, will show unto you that the tender mercies of the Lord are over all those whom he hath chosen, *because of their faith*, to make them mighty



*I Did Obey the Voice of the Spirit*, by Walter Rane. Courtesy Museum of Church History and Art.

even unto the power of deliverance" (1 Nephi 1:20). The equation of moral law with people is strengthened during Nephi's mission to obtain the brass plates. Immediately after he repeats the covenant of the promised land in response to the Spirit's promise of his family's becoming a nation, Nephi observes, "Yea, and I also thought that they could not keep the commandments of the Lord according to the law of Moses, save they should have the law. And I also knew that the law was engraven upon the plates of brass" (1 Nephi 4:15-16; cf. 1 Nephi 2:22). In short, having the law of God is a prerequisite to keeping it, and keeping God's law is essential for being chosen of the Lord.

In addition, Nephi recognizes that being chosen of God requires that obedience to God's law occur in the context of divine covenants, particularly the ancient covenant God made with Abraham. In his first extended editorial comment, Nephi indicates



*Lehi Studying the Brass Plates. Illustration by Joseph Brickey.*

that worship of the God of Abraham by all humankind is the prime purpose of his writing: “the fulness of mine [literary] intent is that I may persuade men to come unto the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, and be saved” (1 Nephi 6:4).<sup>16</sup> While all humankind has the potential to be blessed by the Abrahamic covenant, only those who keep God’s law will realize their potential. Nephi’s persistent emphasis on keeping God’s commandments and obeying the voice of his Spirit is understood in relation to the Abrahamic covenant that binds chosen peoples to one another and to God and effects their hope for salvation.<sup>17</sup> To this end, Nephi asserts that he and his father have been faithful in keeping God’s law and have realized its ultimate blessing (1 Nephi 5:20; 2 Nephi 1:15; 33:6).

While Nephi’s historical narrative focuses primarily on his own people, he does not identify them as the only or even the most favored people of God. Rather, he recognizes that allegiance to God’s law can distinguish any group as a chosen people and that, in turn, any people can forfeit their special status by turning from their covenant. To this point, he counters his brothers’ insistence on the inherent righteousness of the Jews at Jerusalem with the following reasoning:

Do ye suppose that our fathers would have been more choice than [the Egyptians] if they had been righteous? I say unto you, Nay.

Behold, the Lord esteemeth all flesh in one; he that is righteous is favored of God. . . .

Behold, the Lord hath created the earth that it should be inhabited; and he hath created his children that they should possess it.

And he raiseth up a righteous nation, and destroyeth the nations of the wicked.

And he leadeth away the righteous into precious lands, and the wicked he destroyeth, and curseth the land unto them for their sakes. . . .

And he loveth those who will have him to be their God. Behold, he loved our fathers, and he covenanted with them, yea, even Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; and he remembereth the covenants which he had made; wherefore, he did bring them out of the land of Egypt. (1 Nephi 17:34–40; cf. v. 22)<sup>18</sup>

At the end of his record, Nephi makes an even more impassioned declaration of this point.

[God] doeth not anything save it be for the benefit of the world; for he loveth the world, even that he layeth down his own life that he may draw all men unto him. Wherefore, he commandeth none that they should not partake of his salvation. . . .

Behold, hath the Lord commanded any that they should not partake of his goodness? Behold, I say unto you, Nay; but all men are privileged the one like unto the other, and none are forbidden. . . .

[H]e inviteth them all to come unto him and partake of his goodness; and he denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female; and he remembereth the heathen; and all are alike unto God, both Jew and Gentile. (2 Nephi 26:24–33)

Nephi recognizes that despite the fact that all humankind has the potential to be chosen by God, relatively few groups achieve the status of a covenant people. Nephi gives the term *Gentile* to all of humanity who are *not* bound to God by covenant. In his record, *Gentile* is a residual, undistinguished, undifferentiated category of humankind. Thus while Nephi acknowledges nations, multitudes, and kingdoms among the Gentiles, he never refers to Gentiles as a people, and he never specifically names any Gentile subgroup, as he frequently does with covenant peoples (1 Nephi 13–14; 22:6–9; 2 Nephi 10:8–18; 27:1). Nevertheless, Nephi recognizes that Gentiles who eventually accept the Messiah and live God’s law will be “numbered among” the covenant people and receive the blessings of the covenant as though they had been born into it.<sup>19</sup>

Nephi specifically names God’s covenant people as the house of Israel, Israel, or Jews.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, their chosen status is conditional upon their con-

tinuing to accept and live God's law. Nephi's record recognizes that when the Jews keep the covenant, they are "gathered" to their homelands and are divinely "blessed," "prospered," and "delivered." By contrast, when they compromise the covenant, they are "scattered," "smitten," and "destroyed" by the Gentiles.<sup>21</sup>

Nephi recognizes that the Jews at Jerusalem in his day had compromised their covenants (1 Nephi 10:11; 2 Nephi 1:4; 25:2-9; Jacob 4:14).<sup>22</sup> Thus his record regularly condemns them while focusing instead on the house of Israel in their latter-day role of helping to fulfill the promises of the ancient covenant with Abraham. According to his record, in the last days God will perform a "marvelous work and a wonder" (2 Nephi 27:26) to gather Israel together once again as a covenant people. To this end, he will "bring forth" the record of the Nephites in its purity and simplicity (2 Nephi 3:15; 27:6, 14; 29:7). Containing the fulness of the "gospel of the Lamb of God" (1 Nephi 13:26-34), the record of the Nephites (Book of Mormon) will correct errors in the record of the Jews (Old Testament) and in the record of the apostles of the Lamb (New Testament). God will also establish the "true church and fold of God" once more upon the earth (2 Nephi 9:2). The church of the Lamb will deliver the fulness of the gospel to the Gentiles and the Jews and will be the means of destroying the "great and abominable church" of the devil.<sup>23</sup> Even though the numbers and dominions of the church of the Lamb of God are small in the latter days because of widespread wickedness in the earth, all of humankind, both Jews and Gentiles, who accept and live the gospel will be "numbered among" (1 Nephi 14:2; 2 Nephi 10:18) the house of Israel and receive the blessings of the Abrahamic covenant, including eternal life, "the greatest of all the gifts of God" (1 Nephi 15:36). Thus in Nephi's record, obedience to God's law distinguishes the house of Israel from all other human groups. Membership in the house of Israel is ultimately determined by faithfulness to the covenant with Abraham, including keeping its commandments and receiving its blessings.<sup>24</sup>

As legitimate heirs of the covenant with Abraham in their day, Lehi's family is the primary focus of Nephi's historical narrative. In accordance with his own covenant with God, Nephi segments those who keep the covenant from those who do not. Although the terms *Nephite* and *Lamanite* also refer to specific descent groups, their principal connotation

is as a *people* in the covenantal sense. Hence, the term *Nephite* refers primarily to those who accept Nephi's leadership and *Lamanite* to those who oppose it, regardless of their literal descent group.<sup>25</sup>

Following the physical separation of the "people of Nephi" (2 Nephi 5:9) from the Lamanites, their covenant-based distinctions become clear. Throughout 2 Nephi 5:19-26, Nephi invokes the terms of the covenant to describe the separation: "the words of the Lord had been fulfilled unto my brethren . . . that I should be their leader and teacher." "Because of their iniquity," the Lamanites receive the curse of the covenant, which is manifest in terms of their culture ("hardened . . . hearts") and physical appearance ("skin of blackness"). Accordingly, the Nephites come to perceive the Lamanites as "loathsome . . . idle people, full of mischief and subtlety," and savage. The Lamanites also become "a scourge unto [Nephi's] seed, to stir them up in remembrance of [the Lord] . . . even unto destruction." Consistent with the Nephites' role as ruler and teacher, Nephi consecrates his younger brothers, Jacob and Joseph, to be "priests and teachers over the land of my people" (cf. 1 Nephi 2:22; 3:29; 2 Nephi 1:25-27).<sup>26</sup> Thus the Nephites become a people in the covenantal sense: united by common adherence to moral law

As Nephi's younger brother and successor in keeping the sacred record, Jacob recognizes kindreds among Lehi's and Ishmael's descendants but reinforces Nephi's primary focus on people.

and spatially and culturally distinguished from and spiritually and militarily superior to the Lamanites. In turn, the Lamanites became the cultural antithesis and perpetual nemesis of the Nephites.

Subsequent writers in the small plates expand and refine this covenant-based contrast. As Nephi's younger brother and successor in keeping the sacred record, Jacob recognizes kindreds among Lehi's and Ishmael's descendants but reinforces Nephi's primary focus on people.

Now the people which were not Lamanites were Nephites; nevertheless, they were called Nephites, Jacobites, Josephites, Zoramites, Lamanites, Lemuelites,

and Ishmaelites. But I, Jacob, shall not hereafter distinguish them by these names, but I shall call them Lamanites that seek to destroy the people of Nephi, and those who are friendly to Nephi I shall call Nephites, or the people of Nephi, according to the reigns of the kings. (Jacob 1:13-14)

Jacob's son Enos receives from God the promise that the sacred record of his people will be preserved forever, even if the Nephites are eventually destroyed as a people, in order to save the Lamanites in the latter days. Nevertheless, in his day, he recognizes that the Lamanites and Nephites live categorically different lifestyles.

The Lamanites . . . were led by their evil nature that they became wild, and ferocious, and a blood-thirsty people, full of idolatry and filthiness; feeding upon beasts of prey; dwelling in tents, and wandering about in the wilderness with a short skin girdle about their loins and their heads shaven; and their skill was in the bow, and in the cimeter, and the ax. And many of them did eat nothing save it was raw meat; and they were continually seeking to destroy us. . . . The people of Nephi did till the land, and raise all manner of grain, and of fruit, and flocks of herds, and flocks of all manner of cattle of every kind, and goats, and wild goats, and also many horses. (Enos 1:20-21)

Enos's son Jarom heightens this contrast, observing that the Lamanites "loved murder and would drink the blood of beasts" and in their hatred wage war continually with the Nephites. The Nephites,

The small plates demonstrate how a covenant-oriented account enables Nephi to keep a divinely mandated record that is at once faithful to his earthly ministry and foundational to God's eternal purposes of redeeming humankind.

in turn, "observed to keep the law of Moses and the Sabbath day holy unto the Lord. And they profaned not; neither did they blaspheme." In terms of the covenant, the Nephites regularly defeat the Lamanites in battle because their kings and leaders "were mighty men in the faith of the Lord; and they taught the people the ways of the Lord." In addition, the "prophets, and the priests, and the teachers, did labor diligently" to preserve the Nephites in righteousness (Jarom 1:5-11).

One of the persistent contrasts between the Nephites and Lamanites concerns physical appearance. While Nephites are described as "fair," "white," and "delightful," Lamanites are described as being "black," "dark," and "loathsome" (1 Nephi 12:23; 13:15; 2 Nephi 5:21-22). While these descriptors may be understood in an empirical sense (i.e., describing the physical appearance of their bodies), the Book of Mormon also allows for a metaphorical interpretation (i.e., symbolizing the spiritual condition of their souls).

Nephi's own account introduces the possibility of a metaphorical interpretation. In the same context as his reference to the curse of a "skin of blackness," Nephi uses human anatomy in a metaphorical sense to further describe the Lamanites' wicked condition: "because of their iniquity . . . they had hardened their hearts . . . that they had become like unto a flint" (2 Nephi 5:21). Elsewhere, Nephi describes the spiritual transformation of Lehi's latter-day descendants in terms of another anatomical metaphor. "And then they shall rejoice; for they shall know that it is a blessing unto them from the hand of God; and their scales of darkness shall begin to fall from their eyes; and many generations shall not pass away among them, save they shall be a pure and a delightful people" (2 Nephi 30:6).

Likewise, Jacob encourages the Nephites of his day not to persecute their brethren "because of the darkness of their skins" (Jacob 3:9). In the same passage, Jacob uses the term *filthiness* to refer to the Lamanites. It is clear from the passage that the term *filthiness* is meant metaphorically rather than literally (i.e., "morally impure" rather than "unwashed") because Jacob applies the term equally to the Nephites ("remember your own filthiness") and accounts for the filthiness of the Lamanites in cultural terms ("their filthiness came because of their fathers"). Because body parts and other descriptors are used metaphorically in these passages, it is possible that Nephi and Jacob use allusions to skin color also in a metaphorical sense.<sup>27</sup>

A figural reading of such phrases is consistent with literary conventions of biblical writers. In his seminal study of the Pentateuch, for example, Robert Alter observes that specific references to the human body are often intended to be understood as figures of speech, not empirical descriptions.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, in his classic study of poetics in the Hebrew Bible, Meir Sternberg acknowledges that references to physical

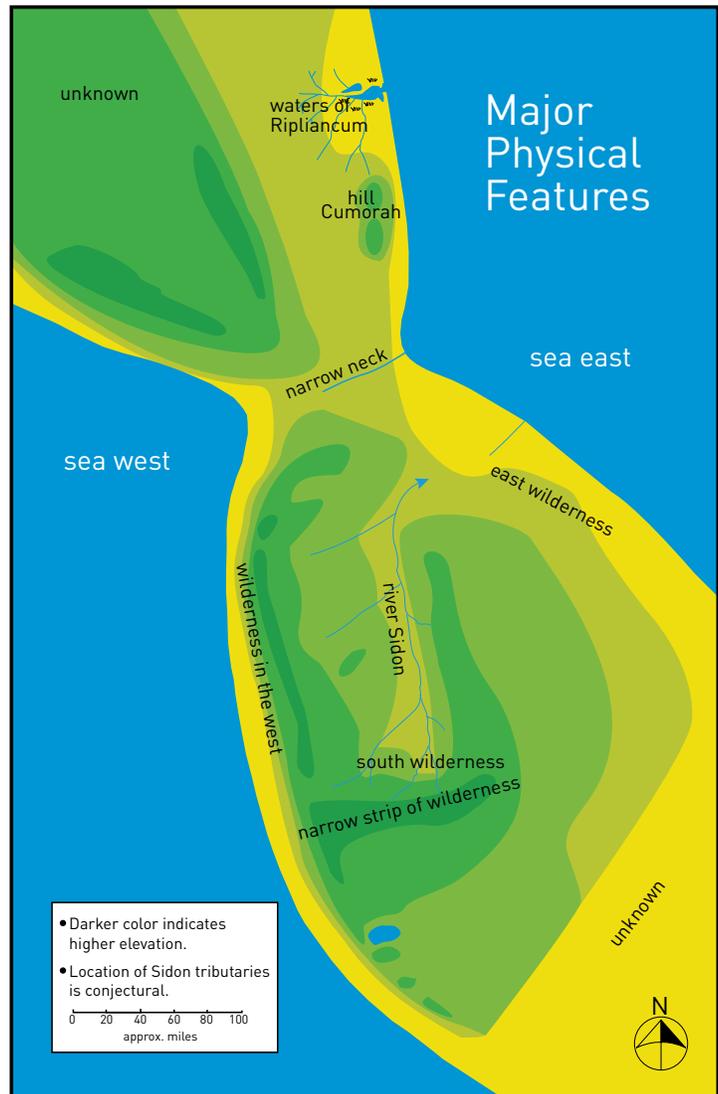
characteristics such as age and beauty are often made metonymically.<sup>29</sup>

The foregoing analysis shows that Nephi’s concept of ethnicity is comprehended by a covenantal framework consisting of four complementary markers: nation, kindred, tongue, and people. In addition, he develops the concept of people in terms that precisely imitate those of his initial covenant with God: law, leader, power, curse, and salvation. Although Nephi recognizes empirical dimensions of ethnic identity, he emphasizes its covenant basis. The small plates demonstrate how a covenant-oriented account enables Nephi to keep a divinely mandated record that is at once faithful to his earthly ministry and foundational to God’s eternal purposes of redeeming humankind.<sup>30</sup> The rest of this study demonstrates the extent to which Mormon and Moroni focus their respective records on Nephi’s covenant of the chosen people.

### Chosen People in Mormon’s Abridgment

The covenant of the chosen people is a defining feature of Mormon’s abridgment of the large plates of Nephi (Mosiah 1–Mormon 7). Like Nephi before him, Mormon repeats the phrase “nations, kindreds, tongues, and people” in prophetic contexts.<sup>31</sup> His primary use of the phrase defines the scope of influence in the last days of God’s covenant with Abraham. Mormon also uses these terms separately to focus and flavor his official account of the Nephite past. Mormon’s abridgment is largely a cyclical account of the Nephites serving as rulers and teachers over the people of the promised land and being scourged by the Lamanites in the ways of remembrance, depending on their obedience to the covenant.

*Nation.* The traditional homeland of the Nephites is a major theme of Mormon’s abridgment. Although Mormon rarely uses the term *nation(s)*, *land(s)* is one of his most frequently used nouns, and he uses it consistently in a covenantal sense.<sup>32</sup> In his narrative, he contrasts land(s) not with water but with wilderness. That is, land in the Book of Mormon, particularly promised land or land of promise, connotes not terra firma but rather “the place where covenant people prosper.” Therefore, Nephite lands are identified with specific names, permanent settlements, a stable moral order, and spiritual significance. Correspondingly, the explicit justification for Nephite military action consists largely of covenant obligations and core gospel



Generic map of Book of Mormon lands not intended to pinpoint specific locations. John L. Sorenson, *Mormon’s Map* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2000), back inside cover.

values (Alma 46). Because lands are defined in terms of the covenant, not vice versa, the Nephite capital can be relocated from one land to another—for example, from Nephi to Zarahemla to Bountiful—without major social disruption.

From a covenant perspective, Nephite society can be viewed as a loose confederation of city-states, organized hierarchically in terms of centers of worship.<sup>33</sup> The confederation is loose and its solidarity fragile because although the covenant is strong and sure while in effect, it is easily fractured by wickedness, rebellion, apostasy, and even pervasive apathy.

These evils weaken the social fabric and empower the Lamanites in their covenant-defined role of scourge.

*Kindred.* The importance of descent as a marker of ethnicity is manifest primarily in the inheritance of the offices that designate a ruler and teacher in Nephite society. For example, kingship is an inherited office for nearly five hundred years, with the descendants of Nephi traditionally occupying the royal throne. At the same time, descendants of Nephi's brother Jacob inherit the role of chief record keeper. When the Nephites abandon kingship and adopt instead a polity of nominally elected judges, the church becomes a leading social institution, and the chief priest becomes an inherited office for nearly four centuries from the time of Alma, who is identified as a descendant of Nephi (Mosiah 17:1-2). Ammaron, the last of Alma's descendants to hold the position, chooses Mormon, also a "pure descendant" of both Lehi and Nephi, to care for the sacred records in his stead (3 Nephi 5:20; Mormon 1:5; 8:13).

While the Bible says virtually nothing about how its records were kept, . . . the processes, purposes, and persons of record keeping in the Book of Mormon are central to and ever present in the story.

Following Nephi's lead, Mormon uses the term *seed* to connote literal descent. Seldom, however, does he use the term to refer to individuals and their descendants, both of whom play active roles in the historical narrative (Alma 3:8-17; 25:4-9; Helaman 7:14; 8:21). Rather, Mormon uses the term primarily in a prophetic context to refer to the latter-day descendants of Lehi and the house of Israel.<sup>34</sup> Mormon also occasionally uses the companion term *kindred* to refer to extended blood relatives.<sup>35</sup>

While genetics generally determine descent among the Nephites, it is not the sole criterion. A practice similar to adoption is also recognized. For example, the children of the priests of King Noah are so ashamed of their fathers' wickedness that they repudiate their ancestry and begin to call themselves after and trace their descent from Alma, who had spiritually liberated them (Mosiah 25:12). Similarly, Lamanites who convert to the gospel of Jesus Christ

by the teachings of the sons of Mosiah adopt the complementary self-identifiers "anti-Nephi-Lehi" and "people of Ammon" (Alma 23:16-17; 24:1-2). Other Lamanite converts are also called by these terms (Alma 25:13). Mormon recognizes kindreds as an essential part of the Nephite social fabric; however, when disobedient kindreds begin to dominate or define the social order, Nephite society is on the verge of collapse (3 Nephi 6-7). Thus while Mormon recognizes descent as a marker of personal and group identity, he also qualifies its significance in terms of the covenant of the chosen people, as Nephi and Jacob had done before him.

*Tongue.* Following Nephi, Mormon emphasizes keeping sacred records as the primary means of preserving language. The Nephites recognize their supreme spiritual leader—whether prophet, king, high priest, or general—as the principal steward of their sacred records at any particular time.<sup>36</sup> Hence there is hardly a more important spiritual responsibility among the Nephites than preserving sacred records. Accordingly, the succession of the records' stewards occurs at times of great importance in Nephite history and is accompanied by high pageantry and formal seriousness.<sup>37</sup> For example, King Benjamin's valedictory address is given on the occasion of the official transfer to his son Mosiah of power over the kingdom and of stewardship of the records (Mosiah 1-5). Similarly, Alma the Younger officially transfers authority over the church and stewardship of the records to his son Helaman at the end of his own life. These auspicious occasions, interestingly, include further detail on Nephi's four markers of ethnic identity: (1) Nation. The covenant of the promised land is often repeated in whole or in part during the formal transmission of records.<sup>38</sup> (2) Kindred. Records are usually passed from generation to generation within the same spiritually significant descent group.<sup>39</sup> (3) Tongue. The need to preserve Nephite language and sacred traditions is reinforced on these occasions (Mosiah 1:2-4). (4) People. These occasions reinforce the idea that a central purpose of records is to preserve the moral order of society. In short, Nephite records are not simply of documentary value. Instead, they are essential to ground the society on eternal spiritual truths.<sup>40</sup>

In this regard, the Book of Mormon stands in stark contrast to the Hebrew Bible.<sup>41</sup> While the Bible

says virtually nothing about how its records were kept and transmitted and while its narrators hardly ever play even a minor role within the narrative itself, the processes, purposes, and persons of record keeping in the Book of Mormon are central to and ever present in the story. Nephi and Mormon are at the same time the major record keepers and the two central human characters in the narrative. Their respective records also contain numerous asides in which they reflect upon their literary purposes and the nature of the record they attempt to create.<sup>42</sup> Even Christ takes time during his brief ministry to correct and complete the Nephite record and to be sure that his followers understand earth's mortal history by means of their recorded scriptures (3 Nephi 23:6-14; 24:1; 26:1-3).

Indeed, while inspired record keeping continues throughout Nephite history, the records themselves are hidden from the population when the covenant is compromised. While the transfer of records is part of a formalized set of succession rituals during much of Nephite history, as the society begins its final decline sacred records come to be cached in caves away from population centers, and knowledge of their whereabouts is restricted from all but the entrusted record keepers (Mormon 1:3; 2:17; 6:6; 8:4).

It is possible, in short, to define the Nephites in terms of their loyalty to and defense of sacred records. By contrast, the destruction of records, whether by wicked Nephites or Lamanites, is seen as a great sacrilege (Alma 14:8-14). The self-consciousness and intentionality with which the Nephite records are kept and the seriousness with which they are preserved—that is, the explicit and central role that record keeping plays in the Nephite record itself—are functions of the importance of records in preserving Nephite sacred history and covenant identity.

*People.* As important as Nephi's fourfold definition of ethnic identity is for Mormon's abridgment, the concept of people occupies the primary focus of his record. Mormon also follows Nephi's framework in the relative frequency and strategic placement of the term *people*<sup>43</sup> and the conditions of the covenant of the chosen people: law, ruler, power, curse, and salvation (1 Nephi 2:22-24).

In the first place, Mormon's record emphasizes that the Nephites are governed by divine law, whether the law of Moses or the gospel of Christ. Religious discourses and spiritual ministries constitute

a key segment of the abridgment.<sup>44</sup> The necessity of obedience pervades the discourses of Nephite leaders, and increasing the righteousness of the people is the principal objective of their ministries.<sup>45</sup> Nephite wickedness, by contrast, is Mormon's chief lament (Helaman 12). On the rare but welcome occasions that righteousness thoroughly defines the Nephite social order, the people are no longer distinguished by any particular ethnic ("-ite") designation. Rather they come to be identified simply as "the children of Christ" because they have fulfilled the terms of the covenant and have become his spiritual heirs (Mosiah 5:7).<sup>46</sup>

When Nephite subgroups reject the rule of divine law, they often adopt "priestcrafts"—that is, perversions of the covenant that are motivated by the quest for power, wealth, fame, or other secular objectives (Alma 1-4; 9-14; 30-34; Helaman 7-16; 3 Nephi 1-7). Widespread rejection of the covenant brings Nephite society nearly to its knees. As a sign of this awful situation, the terms of the covenant are temporarily reversed: converted Lamanites try to reclaim the nearly universally wicked Nephites (Helaman 4-9). In particular, Samuel, the Lamanite prophet, predicts dire destructions if the Nephites do not turn from their wicked ways (Helaman 13-15).<sup>47</sup>

In Mormon's abridgment the Lamanites are governed for the most part not by divine law but by the "traditions of their fathers," which are preserved by

In an ironic twist to this practice, dissident Nephites occasionally accuse Nephite religious leaders of believing in incorrect traditions in order to justify their own apostate beliefs and practices.

oral transmission rather than by sacred records. As a result, Mormon labels their religious beliefs and practices as "incorrect," "false," "foolish," "wicked," "silly," and "abominable."<sup>48</sup> Replacing Lamanite tradition with divine law is one of the principal objectives of Nephite missionary initiatives.<sup>49</sup> In an ironic twist to this practice, dissident Nephites occasionally accuse Nephite religious leaders of believing in incorrect traditions in order to justify their own apostate beliefs and practices (Alma 9:8; 30:14-31; 31:16, 22).

The group that Mormon recognizes as being responsible for the eventual total destruction of the Nephites is one that is driven by neither secular

While Nephite kindreds sometimes call themselves after a founding ancestor, social subgroups more often name themselves after a distinguished leader, whether that leader is good or bad.

ideals nor cultural traditions. Instead, the followers of Gadianton embrace the evil purposes of Satan, even to the extent of becoming one of his “secret combinations.” Rather than being bound by the sacred covenants of God, they are bound by the ancient oaths of Satan, becoming the enemy of all that is good. As a result, the Nephites never try to reconvert them to the gospel of Christ or to negotiate a

truce with them as they do periodically with the Lamanites.<sup>50</sup> Instead, the Nephites and Lamanites must join forces to destroy them or face subordination or destruction. Because of this categorical opposition, Mormon never identifies them as a people, as he does other Nephite subgroups. He simply refers to them as the “society,” “band,” or “robbers” of Gadianton (Helaman 2, 6, 11; 3 Nephi 1–3).

Second, spiritual rulers and teachers of the Nephites are clearly the principal protagonists of Mormon’s record. The narrative largely revolves around the actions and counsel of Nephite kings (Benjamin and Mosiah), prophets (Abinadi and Samuel), missionaries (Amulek and the sons of Mosiah), chief priests (Alma, Helaman, and Nephi), and generals (Moroni and Mormon). Other Nephite leaders play minor but supportive roles in the overall story, whether they hold political, military, or religious offices. While Nephite kindreds sometimes call themselves after a founding ancestor, social subgroups more often name themselves after a distinguished



Minerva Teichert (1888–1976), *Gadianton's Band*, 1949–1951, oil on board, 36 x 48 inches. Brigham Young University Museum of Art, 1969.

leader, whether that leader is good (Ammon) or bad (Nehor, Ammonihah, Zoram, Morianton, and Gadianton).<sup>51</sup>

Mormon's abridgment indicates that this condition of the covenant can remain effective regardless of the particular form of the Nephite polity, as long as the leader—whether king, judge, priest, or general—is righteous. Nevertheless, perverse or ineffective leadership occasionally becomes a stimulus for changing the polity—for example, from kingship to judgeship (Mosiah 29). Nephites who aspire to be leaders but lack the essential spiritual qualification—for example, Zeniff, Nehor, Amlici, and Korihor—eventually experience disappointment or destruction (Mosiah 9-22; Alma 1-2; 30). An unexpected and ironic realization of this condition occurs when wicked Nephite dissenters—for example, Amalickiah, Ammoron, Jacob the Zoramite, and Coriantumr—become the political or military leaders of the Lamanites by fraud, deceit, aggression, or violence, even though they did not qualify to lead the Nephites before their defection (Alma 46-62, *passim*; Helaman 1; 3 Nephi 7).

When Nephites reject their righteous leaders, the society disintegrates in a variety of ways.

- Groups adopt alternate religions. If these groups foment social discord, they either are defeated or defect and become Lamanites (Alma 1-4; 30-34).
- The government is seriously weakened so that the military must restore the social order by force (Alma 61-62; Helaman 1).
- Dissenting Nephites and Lamanites gain control of traditional Nephite lands (Helaman 4).
- Gadianton robbers threaten the future of the Nephite nation (Helaman 2, 6-7; 3 Nephi 1-3).
- Disparate clans and lineages assume control of the Nephite polity (3 Nephi 6-7).
- The government falls completely apart, and the society collapses as the Nephites totally reject the covenant. As a result, they are destroyed as a people (Mormon 1-7).

The third condition of the covenant of the chosen people concerns the balance of power between the Nephites and Lamanites. Mormon consistently accounts for their conflicts in terms of Nephi's covenant model. When Nephites are righteous, Lamanites have no power over them, and they enjoy relative peace and prosperity.<sup>52</sup> By contrast,

the Lamanites consistently play the role of scourge when the Nephites

- Separate themselves physically from the main body and come under the control of a corrupt leader such as King Noah (Mosiah 9-22);
- Reject Nephite religious and political authority, as did the city of Ammonihah (Alma 8-16);
- Undermine Nephite central government, for example, the "king-men" (Alma 51, 60);
- Repeatedly assassinate duly appointed Nephite leaders (Helaman 1); and
- Reject inspired spiritual warnings, even from a Lamanite prophet (Helaman 4, 13-15).

When the Nephites are successfully scourged in the ways of remembrance, they reassert their traditional power over the Lamanites through missionary service, stratagem, negotiation, or direct military conquest.<sup>53</sup> When the Nephites completely reject their covenant, they adopt many of the traditional traits of the Lamanites—aggression, savagery, godlessness, disrespect for life, and many other evils—and suffer destruction as a people, the covenant's ultimate curse (Mormon 1-7).

Mormon incorporates the proximate curse of the covenant of the chosen people into his historical narrative. In so doing, he follows Nephi's lead in prioritizing distinctions of character over those of physical appearance.

Fourth, Mormon incorporates the proximate curse of the covenant of the chosen people into his historical narrative. In so doing, he follows Nephi's lead in prioritizing distinctions of character over those of physical appearance. Mormon consistently describes the Lamanites in terms that mimic Nephi's defining characterizations: *idle, indolent, wicked, warlike, uncivilized, and evil*. Likewise, he regularly describes the Nephites in contrasting terms: *obedient, industrious, stable, peace-loving, humble, and happy*.<sup>54</sup> However, when their respective relationships to the covenant reverse, Mormon reverses the resulting characterizations. Lamanites who convert to the gospel of Jesus Christ are characterized as having

more faith in God than most Nephites, and dissident Nephites are described as being more persistently wicked and savage than many Lamanites.<sup>55</sup>

## The covenant systematically and consistently explains different dimensions of group identity, cultural practice, and ideological distinction through the final five centuries of Nephite history.

On rare occasions, Mormon contrasts the Nephites and Lamanites in terms of physical appearance. Following Nephi's lead, Mormon describes the Lamanites as dark, naked, filthy, and loathsome and the Nephites as pure, clean, delightful, and white.<sup>56</sup> For the following reasons, Mormon's references to physical appearance can be understood metaphorically, as in the small plates:

- While Mormon's narrative describes Nephites becoming Lamanites and Lamanites becoming Nephites with relative frequency, it hardly ever mentions a corresponding change in physical appearance.
- On the few occasions that physical appearance is mentioned, the terms themselves are often used metaphorically—that is, *filthy* does not mean “unwashed” and *loathsome* does not mean “ugly.” Hence the terms *dark* and *white* may not necessarily refer to actual skin color, but rather to the relative purity of their souls.
- On at least one occasion Nephite defectors place a red mark on their foreheads “after the manner of the Lamanites” in order to distinguish themselves from their former compatriots (Alma 3:4). This symbolic marking would not be necessary if ethnic identity were determined by racial (genetic) more than cultural (behavioral and value-based) criteria.
- While the savage stereotypes of the Lamanites persist among the Nephites, Mormon's account of the mission of the sons of Mosiah shows that a key segment of Lamanite society is quite similar to traditional Nephite society: ordered, settled, relatively stable, and subject to spiritual conversion. The main differences that the

missionaries find during their fourteen-year mission are cultural, not racial. Nevertheless, converted Lamanites still have to leave their traditional homelands. As they join with the Nephites, they are collectively distinguished by a new name and homeland (Alma 23:16-17; 24:1-2; 27).<sup>57</sup>

These distinctions between the Nephites and Lamanites suggest that the boundary between the two groups is defined by moral values, not genetics, and that the curse of the covenant is manifest primarily in spiritual and behavioral, not physical, terms.

Fifth, while the Lamanites are seen largely as uncivilized and spiritually deficient, they are nevertheless identified as a people who are promised eventual salvation. Mormon uses covenant ideology to reinforce and expand Nephi's concept of salvation. In Mormon's abridgment,

- Abraham is linked with the worship of Jehovah (Jesus Christ), as the “father” of an eternal covenant with God, and as the human paragon of righteousness.<sup>58</sup>
- God's covenant with Abraham is considered a principal means of availing the blessings of salvation to all humankind.<sup>59</sup>
- The house of Israel is the social metaphor of salvation. Nephites, Lamanites, and other “remnants of Israel” scattered throughout the earth also belong to the house of Israel and are governed by the covenant.<sup>60</sup>
- Gentiles are God's children who live outside of the covenant with Abraham. Eventually, they will have the opportunity to accept the covenant, embrace the worship of Jehovah, and live the gospel of Jesus Christ.<sup>61</sup>
- As they do so, the Gentiles will become “numbered among” the house of Israel and qualify for comparable blessings of salvation.<sup>62</sup>
- The united coalition of faithful Jews and converted Gentiles will construct the New Jerusalem in preparation for the return to earth of the Messiah (Jesus Christ) and the establishment of the millennial kingdom of God on the earth.<sup>63</sup>

Mormon's exposition of the doctrine of salvation in terms of the covenant of the chosen people focuses on his account of Christ's ministry to the Nephites.

In fact, the terms *Gentile(s)*, *Israel*, and *Jew(s)* hardly appear in Mormon's abridgment prior to his account of Christ's ministry. Afterwards, Mormon uses them primarily in prophecies and pleas regarding the covenant of the chosen people in the latter days.<sup>64</sup>

Throughout Mormon's record, the covenant of the chosen people accounts for details of the narrative that define the spiritual foundations of ethnic identity. The covenant systematically and consistently explains different dimensions of group identity, cultural practice, and ideological distinction through the final five centuries of Nephite history. Mormon's use of the covenant demonstrates the extent to which historical, sociological, theological, eschatological, and other dimensions of the Nephite past and future can be integrated into a coherent and compelling narrative. By adopting Nephi's covenant-based framework, Mormon creates a masterful account of the spiritual significance of the experiences of his people.

### Chosen People in Moroni's Abridgment

The record of the Jaredites, abridged by Moroni as the book of Ether, is placed anachronistically at the end of the text as a second witness to the eternal veracity of the Nephite record, including its covenant basis. The Jaredite story, as retold by Moroni, mirrors that of the Nephites: God promises to preserve, protect, and distinguish a people if they obey his commandments; if they do not, dissolution and destruction await them. The book of Ether traces the role of the covenant of the chosen people in the lives of the Jaredites, even though their founders predate Abraham, implying that the covenant may be as old as God's relationship with humankind. As with the story of the Nephites, Nephi's four markers of ethnic identity pervade the story of the Jaredites. (1) Nation. They occupy a promised land as a nation in the biblical sense (Ether 2, 6). (2) Kindred. Their lineage is preserved across twenty-seven recorded generations (Ether 1). (3) Tongue. They keep a sacred record throughout, which preserves their language and religion. (4) People. Their moral order is based on the gospel of Jesus Christ, as revealed to the brother of Jared, one of the society's founders. Salvation will eventually come to the house of Israel—that is, God's chosen people, those who keep his covenant (Ether 3, 12-13).

During periods of righteousness, the society remains strong, unified, and intact (Ether 7, 10). During times of wickedness the government falters,

internal discord prevails, and the society fragments into chaos (Ether 8-9, 11). Because of wickedness, the Jaredite society eventually collapses and the people are totally annihilated (Ether 13:13-15:34). This account mirrors that of the Nephites and serves as a dire cautionary tale for all covenant peoples.

### Conclusion

The covenant of the chosen people accounts not only for all peoples mentioned in the Book of Mormon, including their roles and fates, but it accounts as well for peoples who are *not* specifically mentioned in the story. For example, the Nephites and Lamanites were hardly alone in the promised land, but Mormon's and Moroni's abridgments make it appear as though they were. If their accounts were strictly a documentary history, the absence of a broader social context for the story would be considered a serious lapse. However, being a covenant history, there is no need to acknowledge the presence of noncovenant peoples because their role and fate are not essential to the authors' central purpose. Thus, except for Jaredites and Mulekites, who illustrate distinctive aspects of the covenant of the chosen people, no other peoples actually appear in the thousand-year story besides Lamanites and Nephites.

The contents and structure of this sacred story show the extent to which its authors were influenced by covenant ideology. They compile a record in which covenants govern . . . civilization for a thousand years.

In addition, details of governance, linguistics, social interaction, and morality are all expressed in Mormon's record in terms of a covenant-based ethnic identity. In fact, every aspect of Nephite society in the Book of Mormon is grounded in a covenant perspective and is best explained in covenant ideology. The following assessment of biblical language could just as easily apply to the Book of Mormon: "the prophets—and their hearers—thought in categories derived from the covenant and expressed themselves in language drawn from it."<sup>65</sup> The contents and structure of this sacred story show the extent to which its authors were influenced by covenant ideology. They compile a

record in which covenants govern essential aspects of the individual and collective lives of a civilization for a thousand years. The covenant of the chosen people helps to define the identities and roles of these people and to determine their enduring value for others. In summary, ethnicity is seen in the Book of Mormon as the symbol of a set of spiritual, covenant-based truths that are far more central to the record and its enduring significance than empirical facts alone. ■



**Steven L. Olsen** (PhD, University of Chicago) is senior curator of the LDS Church History Department. His professional career includes exhibit development, historic sites restoration, and public history administration at the LDS Church History Department. Olsen has published extensively in Mormon studies and museum studies.

## NOTES

1. R. Gary Shapiro, comp., *An Exhaustive Concordance of the Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price* (Salt Lake City: Hawkes, 1977), s.v. “people.”
2. I have developed these complementary theses in the following recent publications: Steven L. Olsen, “Prophecy and History: Structuring the Abridgment of the Nephite Records,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 15/1 (2006): 18–29; Olsen, “The Centrality of Nephi’s Vision,” *Religious Educator* 11/2 (2010): 51–65; Olsen, “Prospering in the Land of Promise,” *FARMS Review* 22/1 (2010): 229–45; and Olsen, “The Covenant of the Promised Land: Territorial Symbolism in the Book of Mormon,” *FARMS Review* 22/2 (2010): 137–54.
3. Shapiro, *Exhaustive Concordance*, s.v. “father,” “mother,” “brother,” “sister,” “family,” and “families.” On only two occasions does Nephi apply the term “family” to the entire human race (2 Nephi 2:20; 9:21).
4. Social scientists use the terms *ethnic* and *ethnicity* to refer to social groups that are distinguished by certain markers of identity such as common parentage, shared culture, and traditional homeland. Like the related analytical terms *culture* and *race*, *ethnic* and *ethnicity* do not enjoy a consensus definition in the scholarly literature. Nevertheless, most scholars recognize that it is useful to identify groups that share a distinct cultural identity and self-consciously distinguish themselves from other groups by sustainable

- criteria. Major social scientific statements of ethnicity include Fredrik Barth, ed., *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1970); Daniel Patrick Moynihan and Nathan Glazer, eds., *Ethnicity: Theory and Experience* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975); and *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, ed. David L. Sills and Robert K. Merton (New York: Macmillan, 1968), s.v. “ethnicity.” It is in this general analytical sense that the words *ethnic* and *ethnicity* are used in this study. I also follow the established anthropological practice of adopting the particular conception of identity of the group being studied. Hence, I consider how the authors of the Book of Mormon define Nephite identity and solidarity in relation to their narrative.
5. Delbert R. Hillers, *Covenant: The History of a Biblical Idea* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1969) is a classic introduction to the biblical concept of covenant. I adopt his model of ancient covenants in this study, in particular their binary nature, as manifest in the sovereign-suzerain relationship and the blessing-curse contrast, and their pervasiveness in defining the identities and worldview of the ancient peoples governed thereby.
  6. As an application of this role, Nephi places his account of obtaining the brass plates in the context of the covenant of the chosen people by citing the angel’s rebuke of Nephi’s rebellious brothers in terms of

- Nephi’s covenant-based identity, “Know ye not that the Lord hath chosen him to be a ruler over you, and this because of your iniquities?” (1 Nephi 3:29).
7. On the concept of remembrance in the Book of Mormon, see Steven L. Olsen, “Memory and Identity in the Book of Mormon.”
  8. I use the term *law* in this paper in the general sense of the law of Moses, which encompasses commandments, rituals, ceremonies, and beliefs and not simply legal strictures.
  9. See Alexander Cruden, *Cruden’s Complete Concordance to the Old and New Testaments*, ed. A. D. Adams, C. H. Irwin, S. A. Waters (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1968), s.v. “nation(s).”
  10. Throughout the Book of Mormon, *land(s)* is consistently used in a covenant sense; see Olsen, “Covenant of the Promised Land.”
  11. Shapiro, *Exhaustive Concordance*, s.v. “nation(s).” While the term *homeland* does not appear in Nephi’s record, *land(s)* is one of the most frequently used nouns in the small plates, appearing more than 200 times in the small plates, 164 times in 1 and 2 Nephi alone; see Shapiro, *Exhaustive Concordance*, s.v. “land(s),” “nations.” Clearly, this ancient use of *nation* differs considerably from the modern connotations of the term *nation-state*.
  12. Shapiro, *Exhaustive Concordance*, s.v. “kindred(s),” “seed.”
  13. See Alma 10:3, which further specifies Lehi’s descent through Joseph’s son Manasseh.
  14. See also Steven L. Olsen, “Nephi’s Literary Endeavor,” *Religious Educator* 4/3 (2003): 133–41.

15. By comparison, Nephi uses *nation(s)* 78 times, *kindred(s)* 12 times, *seed* 95 times, *tongue(s)* 17 times, and *language(s)* 11 times; see Shapiro, *Exhaustive Concordance*.
16. 1 Nephi 15:18 aligns this purpose with the promise of God's covenant with Abraham.
17. See 1 Nephi 6:4; 15:18; 17:40; 19:10; 22:9; 2 Nephi 8:2; 29:14.
18. Nephi makes specific mention of the prophesied destruction of Jerusalem in 1 Nephi 17:43.
19. See 1 Nephi 14:1-2; 15:13; 22:8-9; 2 Nephi 10:8-11, 18; 26:12-13; 30:2.
20. "Jew" has three complementary connotations in Nephi's record: "resident of Jerusalem," "member of the tribe of Judah," and generically "any member of the house of Israel" (see 1 Nephi 1:19-20; 13:23-26, 42; 15:17-20; 2 Nephi 25:1-18; 29:4-13; 30:2-7; 33:8).
21. See 1 Nephi 10:12-14; 13:14-19, 30-34; 15:13-16; 19:14-18; 22:3-12; 2 Nephi 9:11-13; 21:12; 25:15-19; 29:14.
22. From this perspective, Nephi's account of the death of Laban can be seen as God's transferring responsibility for the covenant to Lehi's family, see Steven L. Olsen, "The Death of Laban: A Literary Interpretation," *FARMS Review* 21/1 (2009): 179-95.
23. See 1 Nephi 13:6-8, 26-28; 14:3, 9, 15-17; 22:13-14; 2 Nephi 6:12; 28:18.
24. On the latter-day role of Israel in Nephi's writings, see 1 Nephi 10:12-14; 13:23, 33-34; 14:2-8; 15:12-20, 36; 19:10-24; 22:6-11; 2 Nephi 3:5; 6:5; 10:18; 28:2; 29:1-2, 12-14; 33:13.
25. This definition is implicit in the initial separation of those who follow Nephi and those who seek to destroy him (2 Nephi 5:1-9).
26. Laman and Lemuel regularly reject Nephi's covenant-based role as their ruler and teacher (1 Nephi 16:37-38; 18:10; 2 Nephi 5:3).
27. Other anatomical metaphors used to make spiritual points in Nephi's small plates include "stiff" necks, "blind" eyes, "deaf" ears, "high" heads, and "past feeling" (see 1 Nephi 2:11; 7:8; 13:27; 17:30, 45; 2 Nephi 9:31-32; 25:28; 27:29; 28:14; 32:7; Jacob 2:13; 4:14; 6:4; Enos 1:22; Jarom 1:3-4; Omni 1:28).
28. Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: Norton, 2004), xiv-xxiii.
29. Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 349-64.
30. See Olsen, "Nephi's Literary Endeavor," 133-41.
31. See Mosiah 3:20; 15:28; 16:1; 27:25; Alma 9:20; 45:16; 3 Nephi 28:29.
32. Mormon's use of the term *nation(s)* is, like Nephi's, generally used in a prophetic context and often in the four-part definition of ethnicity; see Shapiro, *Exhaustive Concordance*, s.v. "nation(s)." A fuller treatment of the covenant basis of land(s) in the Book of Mormon can be found in Olsen, "Covenant of the Promised Land."
33. See Steven L. Olsen, "Cosmic Urban Symbolism in the Book of Mormon," *BYU Studies* 23/1 (1983): 79-92.
34. See Alma 46; 3 Nephi 5:21-24; 10:16-17; 20:25-27; 21:4-7; Mormon 5, 7.
35. See Alma 10:4, 7, 11; 15:16; 28:5, 11-12; 3 Nephi 10:2, 8.
36. See Olsen, "Memory and Identity."
37. See, for example, Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 3rd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 295-306; Stephen D. Ricks, "King, Coronation, and Covenant in Mosiah 1-6," in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1991), 209-19.
38. See Omni 1:6-8; Mosiah 1:7, 16; Alma 36:1, 30; 37:13; 38:1.
39. See Jacob 1:3; 7:27; Jarom 1:1, 15; Omni 1:1-12; Mosiah 1:16.
40. See Jacob 1:3-8; Omni 1:25-26; Mosiah 1:5-6; Alma 36; 37:4-10, 15-19, 33-35.
41. Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 58-83; Terryl Givens, *The Book of Mormon: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 5-12; Richard Dilworth Rust, *Feasting on the Word: The Literary Testimony of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997), 19-46.
42. See 1 Nephi 6; 9; 13:35-42; 19:1-7; 2 Nephi 5:29-33; Jacob 1:1-4; 3:13-14; 4:1-3; Words of Mormon; Mosiah 8:12-13; Helaman 3:13-15; 3 Nephi 5:10-18; Mormon 8.
43. The term *people* appears more than 1,300 times in Mormon's record (Words of Mormon, Mosiah 1-Mormon 7), far more than the other terms denoting ethnic identity: *nation(s)* (26 times), *land(s)* (955 times), *kindred(s)* (28 times), *tongue(s)* (20 times), and *language(s)* (20 times); see Shapiro, *Exhaustive Concordance*.
44. Rust, *Feasting on the Word*, 101-43.
45. See Mosiah 2-5, 12-13, 16; Alma 5-7, 9-10, 12-13, 32, 34, 36-42; Helaman 13-15.
46. In fact, the people of Zarahemla do not officially become Nephites until a generation later (Mosiah 25:4-13). Even so, all who are baptized into the newly organized churches of Christ are designated as the "children of Christ" or "people of God" (Mosiah 5:7; 25:24).
47. Helaman 15 details Samuel's prophesied disasters in the terms of the covenant of the chosen people.
48. See Alma 8:11; 21:8; 23:3; 24:7; 30:14, 23, 27, 31; Helaman 15:4, 7; 16:20.
49. See Alma 3:8-11; 9:8, 16-17; 17:9, 15; 18:5; 37:9; 60:32; Helaman 5:19, 51; 15:4-15; 16:20.
50. By contrast, Helaman 6:37 indicates that righteous Lamanites "did preach the word of God" among the more wicked part "of the robbers of Gadianton" until they were "utterly destroyed" from among them.
51. See Alma 1-2; 8:6-8; 30:59; 35:8-13; 50.
52. See Mosiah 1-7; 25-29; Alma 1:28-7:6; 62; Helaman 3:23-36; 6:7-14; 11:21-22; 4 Nephi 1:1-20.
53. See Mosiah 22-24; Alma 17-26; 43, 49; Helaman 1; 3 Nephi 2.
54. See Alma 3:6-19; 5:24; 13:12; 17:15; 23:17-18; 3 Nephi 2:14-16; 4 Nephi 1:10; Mormon 5:15; 9:6; Moroni 9:12.
55. See Alma 24:28-30; 25:14-17; 26:3-6; 30:20; 47:36.
56. See Alma 3:6; 5:24; 3 Nephi 2:14-16; Mormon 5:15; 9:6. "Black" and "blackness" do not appear in Mormon's abridgment as descriptors of Lamanite skin color, and "dark" and "darkness" are used only twice in this way; see Shapiro, *Exhaustive Concordance*, s.v. "black," "blackness," "dark," and "darkness."
57. Similarly, reconverted Zoramites were compelled to move from their traditional communities (see Alma 35:6).
58. See Mosiah 7:19; 23:23; Alma 5:24; 7:25; 29:11; 36:2; Helaman 3:30; 8:16-19; 3 Nephi 4:30; Mormon 5:20.
59. See 3 Nephi 16:4-20; 20:25-27.
60. See 3 Nephi 10:4-7; 20:10-42; 21:1-23; 29:1-9.
61. See 3 Nephi 15:22-23; 16:4-13; 20:15-27; 21:2-14; 23:2-4.
62. See 3 Nephi 16:13; 21:6; 30:2.
63. See 3 Nephi 20:22; 21:22-25.
64. See Shapiro, *Exhaustive Concordance*, s.v. "Gentile(s)," "Israel," "Jew(s)."
65. Hillers, *Covenant*, 140.