



# BOOK OF MORMON CENTRAL

<http://bookofmormoncentral.com/>

---

## Government

Source: *Images of Ancient America: Visualizing Book of Mormon Life*

Author(s): John L. Sorenson

Published by: Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998

Page(s): 108-123

---

## Government

### Overview

Government in ancient times resembled very little what modern people experience under that heading. Most activities involved in administering civil authority and law took place at the community level. The people involved there were all rather familiar with each other, at least culturally if not personally. There was little in the way of an apparatus or bureaucracy of officials, and what officers there were did not act as impersonally as modern bureaucrats must.

Rudimentary executive offices developed in some situations to facilitate decision-making and enforcement, but most political or administrative mechanisms—a legislature, a police force, a professional civil service—had not yet been invented in this civilization. Most often the strength of government lay in charisma—the awe or charm induced in subjects by the personality of the leader.

The ruler in ancient societies was the linchpin that held government together. He was supposed to exemplify the cultural virtues and moral values. The sacred sphere of the culture, represented publicly by priests and their rituals, validated the ruler's power and vouched for his fitness to rule. But were he to challenge prevailing cultural beliefs, myths, or moral standards by too much, or should he lose the affection or respect of his people, his rule could be on shaky ground; he might even be slain.

The Aztecs provide our best-documented Mesoamerican example of how government operated, although the governments of other peoples varied significantly in some of their ways. When the Spaniards arrived, the Aztec state directly administered perhaps a million people in and near the valley of Mexico. The dominant tribe among the ethnic mixture involved called themselves the Mexica (pronounced meh-shee-kah); the term *Aztec* refers more comprehensively to the state and the culture. Perhaps a million or more other inhabitants of vassal kingdoms beyond the actual Aztec state were controlled by the Aztec rulers through a system of tribute payments and threats.

Governing was partly aided by the use of written records, but literate people were in short supply, thus the extensive record

keeping on individuals that is so vital to modern governments was impossible. Oral communication via messenger was common. Full, consistent control of peoples distant from the political center, particularly across geographical, cultural, and language barriers, was such a problem that it was rarely even attempted.

Ultimately, coercive force was relied upon to keep troublesome groups under control. The lack of a systematic information system that routinely reported to the ruler at the capital meant that issues of control might not be picked up on until they had become sizable. When some group's disobedience finally became evident, then the ruler's fist in the form of an armed expedition would smite them. The temple in the defeated community would be looted and set afire, whereupon both sides usually accepted that the game was over and the rebels would surrender. Another local ruler was then appointed who promised to toe the mark better.



### VISUALIZING BOOK OF MORMON LIFE

The same system prevailed in the ancient Near East, where the level of civilizational development was roughly the same as in Mesoamerica. The Babylonians, for example, put a puppet ruler, Zedekiah (the father of Mulek of the Book of Mormon), on the throne of Judah in Nephi's day when his predecessor failed to measure up to the Babylonian standard of loyalty. But it was beyond the overlords' power or desire to maintain hands-on rule over a distant, minor place like the kingdom of Judah in the same way they could within their close-knit Babylonian heartland. So when Zedekiah in turn refused to follow the rules laid down by the administration of Nebuchadnezzar, another army was sent to punish the renewed impertinence. Jerusalem was besieged again, and upon its fall and destruction in 586 B.C., stubborn Zedekiah had his eyes put out and was carried to Babylon a prisoner (see 2 Kings 24–5). Book of Mormon governments operated similarly. For example, note Lamanite expeditions against rebellious subject Zeniffite rulers (see Mosiah 19:6–29; chapters 20 and 21) and Moroni's subjection of the insurgent kingmen who were "hewn down" (Alma 51:19) or forced to "hoist the title of liberty [flag] upon their towers" (Alma 51:20; see 51:17–9).

This magnificent monument from the lowland Maya area (dating about A.D. 700) captures the essence of Mesoamerican power relationships. A priest (functioning as a virtual lawyer) delivers prisoners to a superior who will act as a de facto judge of the captives.





Oaths were major mechanisms for constructing loyalty networks. Their force stemmed from drawing sacred power into the political realm. This striking scene is from the Alvarado area in the southern Veracruz state, only a few miles from the probable final battleground of the Nephites, their hill Cumorah. Dating to about the first century B.C., the scene shows a lord apparently giving an oath to a pleading prisoner (compare Alma 44:15).

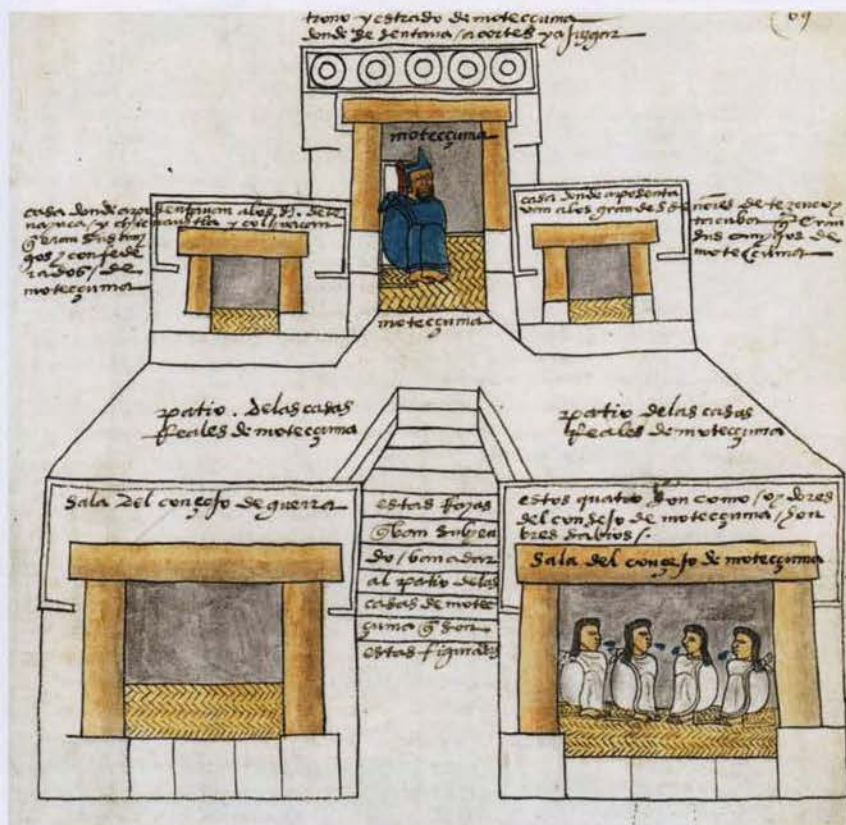
## Rulers and Their Methods

Most Mesoamerican societies operated at the chiefdom level of rule much of the time.<sup>77</sup> Tribal chiefs had to walk a careful line. They lacked sure control over effective instruments of coercion, so they had to play on persuasion in order to fend off rivals. Adroit speech-making helped cement a leader's position. It also helped for him to be of a descent group that had supplied rulers in the past. Close connections with and approval from the priests of course supported his power. Another way for a leader to bolster his position was to gain supporters by dealing out privileges, ranging from making special luxury goods accessible, to assigning friends to subordinate positions yielding their own payoffs (i.e., tribute payments), and even to furnishing noble wives.

Still, rulers were vulnerable to loss of support and eventual overthrow. A revolution could be couched in the name of the gods. A king who was cowardly or inept, or who taxed excessively, or who too flagrantly lived contrary to traditional morals could be defined as abandoned by the

gods and thus become subject to assassination or whatever other course of drastic replacement was necessary. A dramatic example was the case of the Aztec ruler Montezuma (Motecuzoma II). At first he impressed Cortez as an absolute ruler, but before long he was being jeered and stoned by his own subjects as his weakness in handling the Spaniards became evident to the Mexica people.

Periodically in Mesoamerica in the Pre-Classic period, as populations grew or control was exercised over wider territories, attempts were made to firm up governance to the level of a state. That more sophisticated pattern of government provided more mechanisms for control of the people by broadening the government's right and ability to use force. Early Mesoamerican attempts to operate at the state level usually failed, not only because the necessary economic and administrative tools were undeveloped, but also because local ways were too divisive for stable government—the potential citizenry of the state would not pay the price in discipline and wealth. Governmental forms in Mesoamerica never reached the sophistication or stability that came to be commonplace much earlier in the central Old World area or in China.



A sketch of Montezuma's palace (in the Codex Mendoza) emphasizes the public view of his dominance. This is shown by his quarters being on the highest level at the center of the complex. But all around him were other powerful people and kin—counselors, judges, military leaders—whom he was obliged to involve in decisions.



Maya and other rulers made a big show of their sanctity and power by sitting on ornate thrones like that shown with this Late Classic figurine. However, the newly deciphered inscriptions make clear that their power constantly had to be justified in the eyes of the public.



An artist's portrayal conveys the delicate problem of an "absolute" ruler. Aztec monarch Montezuma was rejected by his people when they concluded that he had acted foolishly in giving in to Cortez and his Spaniards.

Among the Lamanites, when Lamoni's father, king over all the Lamanites, wished to know why his son, the local subking over the land of Ishmael, had failed to show up for an appointed festival in the capital, he did not send a functionary to find out but had to come personally, illustrating the limitations on the very form of his government. Eventually his apparatus of rule proved incapable of dealing with the problems of control once he renounced militarism (see Alma 24–5).

This is not to say that there were no secondary roles or institutions for administration. Limhi, king of the Zeniffite group, had "guards" (Mosiah 7:7), and later there were "many lawyers, and many officers" (3 Nephi 6:11) involved at the central headquarters of the short-lived Nephite state. But the tools of government that they had were too limited to govern an extensive territory or diverse peoples. In a real emergency, captain Moroni, could only get authority to deal with the recalcitrant king-men by the awkward process of sending out for community or regional or lineage leaders to ratify his proposal (see Alma 51:14–20). He later felt that the Nephite political system was almost incapable of functioning effectively (see Alma 60).

Kings, or their successors in the case of the Nephites, the judges (who also "reigned"), exercised rule mainly by charisma or force of personality. Note King Benjamin's careful language in Mosiah 2:9–19 about his noncoercive relationship to his people, Limhi's being made king "by the voice of the people" in Mosiah 7:9, and the flattery mechanism necessary according to Alma 20:4. Fear could also be involved in a ruler's power, as shown by Lamoni's arbitrary executions (see Alma 18:6, 13, 21; 19:20); Moroni, also invoked fear in trying to control the Nephites (see Alma 60:27–31 and 51:22). How people viewed their ruler was the chief component in successful governance (note Alma 50:12). The role of ruler was set apart by customs intended to elevate



### VISUALIZING BOOK OF MORMON LIFE

The Book of Mormon reports instance after instance that fit with what we know about ancient rulership in general and Mesoamerican patterns specifically. For instance, the failure of central government to maintain itself against secession and defiance by local and special groups is repeatedly manifested. Amlici got control over an entire rebellious region not far from the Nephite capital apparently before the governing officers got wind of it, and then they could only snuff it out by armed violence (see Alma 2:1–10). The situation was repeated in the case of the king-men (see Alma 51:1–8, 13–20). The Nephite government could not keep the secessionist Zoramites within the Nephite nation (see Alma 31:1–5; 43:4).



him above day-to-day issues (for example, see Alma 18:12–4; 22:2–3; 26:4–12); being above the fray meant that, ideally, he reserved his full power to judge matters that he considered crucial.

A ruler collected tribute, that is, taxes, yet cultural standards inhibited him from using official resources merely according to his whims. He indeed had a higher standard of living than his people. Lamoni, a lesser king, had only a “house,” which could still accommodate quite a crowd in it, but his father, the king over the entire land, dwelt in a “palace” (Alma 22:2; see 19:18 and 22:1). If he was charismatic enough, the ruler could somewhat stretch the rules governing his role, but eventually he was subject to what his people felt about him; note the strong condemnation voiced in the Zeniffite record about King Noah for going too far past the norm (see Mosiah 11:1–15). The Lamanite king discussed in Alma 24 and his son, Anti-Nephi-Lehi, lost the respect, and thus the support, of a majority of their people by displeasing them. Alma 47:2–7 reports another revolt against a Lamanite king. Clearly, a successful

leader had to want what the cultural definition of his role allowed him legitimately to want. Meanwhile, rebellions too were built around attractive, charismatic leaders, as in the cases of Amlici, Nehor, and Amalickiah.

A ruler’s position was defined and supported by religion. He himself was likely some type of priest, at least in name, and he was sustained by a circle of official priests (consider Mosiah and his priests in Mosiah 27:1). In fact, government and religion ran together so fully that they were not considered to be distinct categories of thought or behavior (see Alma 43:47).

Given this background, it is apparent how difficult—and ultimately how temporary—was the enlightened concept of governing through democratically chosen judges, which King Mosiah<sub>2</sub> got the Nephites to adopt. The rise of a whole string of dissidents shows that the old pattern of putting public problems on the shoulders of a single ruler remained a strong current in Nephite thinking.

Nothing about any of these situations is surprising in ancient Mesoamerican terms.

At modern-day Zinacantan, a Tzotzil Maya community in highland Chiapas, elder leaders, who function as judges and constitute the village’s decision-making body, sit before the civic center. Except for a few elements of the costumes and minor customs of Spanish origin, this scene might have been repeated in a sizable village a millennium or two ago.

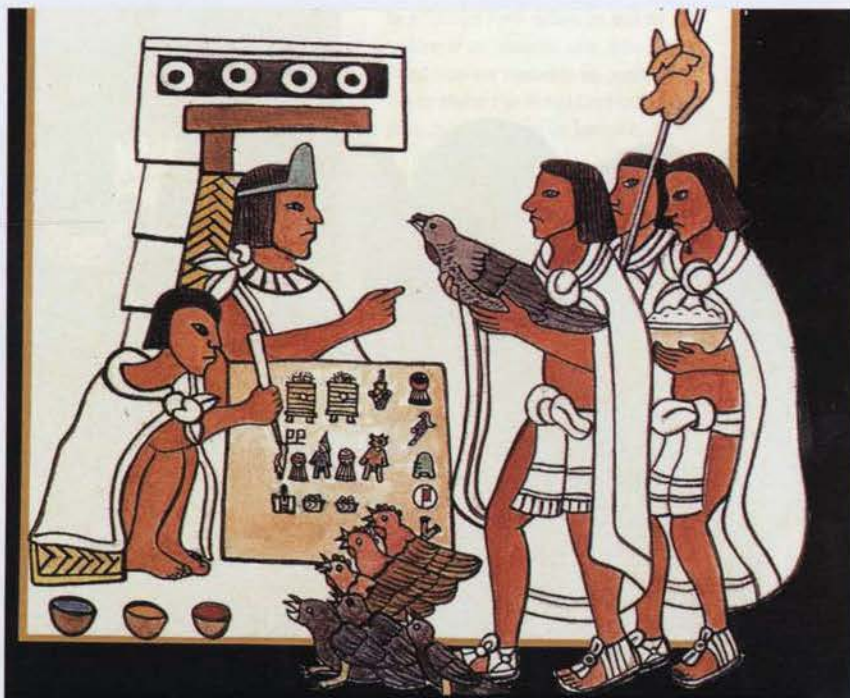
## Taxes and Tribute

**A**nciently there was no meaningful distinction between taxes and tribute. The men in charge of any unit of governance have always received resources from their subjects to provide for their needs. At a very local level, the measure of prestige derived from public service may have been sufficient compensation for the modest commitment of time and expense incurred by purely local leaders, who served at their own expense. In fact, the actual costs of serving in grass-roots government probably took more from those who occupied office than they gained from that service, even if they collected some payments.

The larger the political unit, however, the costlier the process. Rulers over a region served full-time or nearly so, and they might have to support aides. With population growth and resulting political elaboration, there had to be a stronger system of support. That was usually phrased in terms of tribute, which could take many forms. A ruling family, for example, might have the cultivation of its lands taken care of by "voluntary" community labor assessed from each kin group. Certain privileges might also be granted a ruler, like a proportion of booty taken in war. Annual contributions of precious materials or clothing or fuel, nominally for the public glorification of the community, could also enter the picture. Supplies for military forces and the construction of public structures also had to be produced by a version of tribute.

A major codex (native book), the Mendoza, written immediately after the Conquest, gives detailed data on the vast quantities of all sorts of materials—both common and precious—that were collected to fund and fuel Aztec government. Thousands of people were supported out of the tribute—clerks, archivists, priests, architects, engineers, military leaders, servants for the lords, and so on.

Assessments were levied according to



each region's ability to produce—gold dust from some areas, cotton from the warmer agricultural territories where it was grown, and liquor from where the agave plant flourished. Local and then regional authorities had to obtain from the people and send up the tribute chain whatever the central seat of government demanded, in addition to a percentage taken to support the local apparatus of rule. The tax collector was no doubt as dreaded then as now, especially by the common people on whom the final burden of payment rested.

The *Matricula de Tributos*, another Aztec list, illustrates the political symbolism involved in the ritualized payment of tribute. Every item ticked off signaled submission to superior power, just as must have been the case when the Zeniffites turned over their tribute to the Lamanite king.



Keith Henderson's drawing that shows the arrival of Aztec tax collectors on the Gulf Coast catches both the deference that had to be shown to them and the fear of incurring their displeasure.



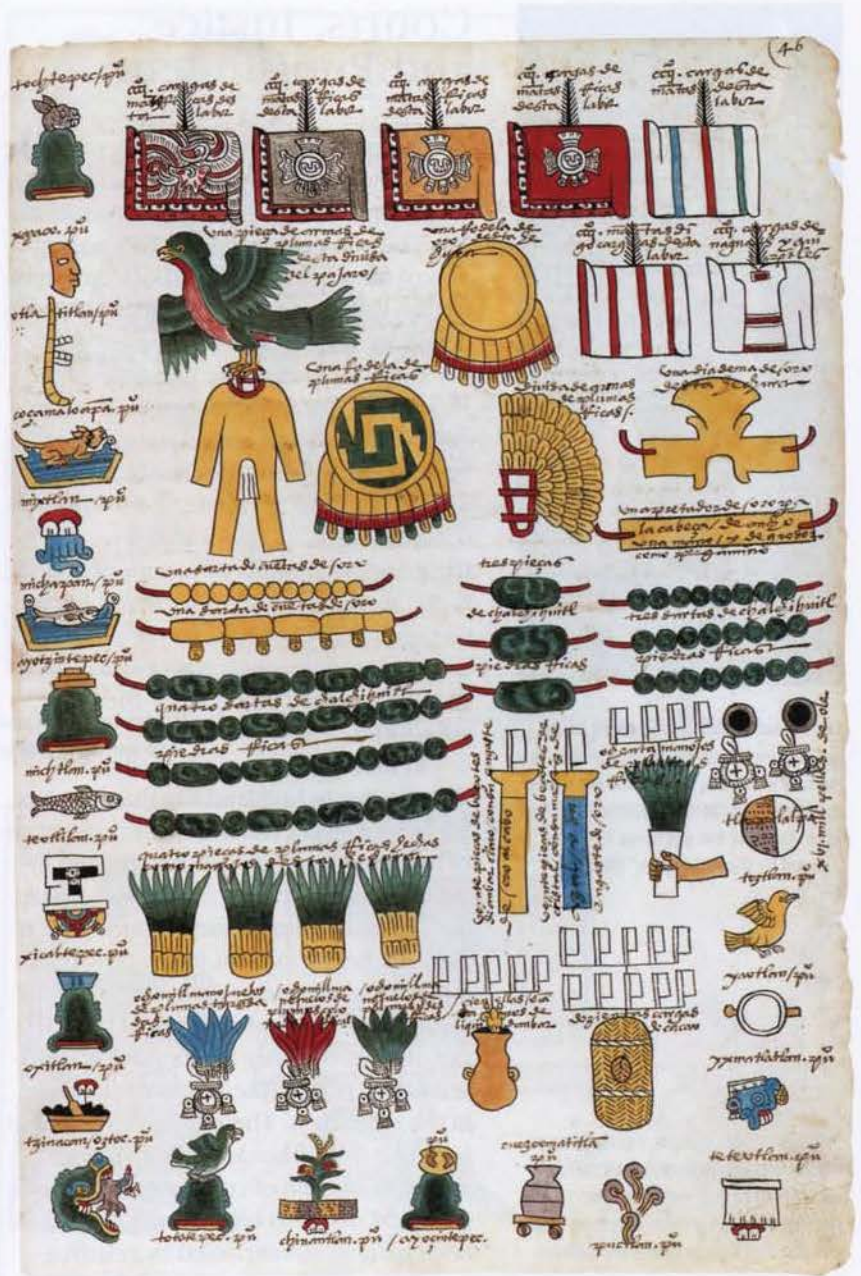


**VISUALIZING BOOK OF MORMON LIFE**

The Book of Mormon speaks of a similar system of payments. Mosiah 19:15 (see also 19:22) describes the Lamanite overlords demanding of the Zeniffites “one half of all they possessed, one half of their gold, and their silver, and all their precious things” as “tribute to the king of the Lamanites from year to year.” Their own king, Noah, had already put a heavy tax on his own people to support himself and his courtiers and priests, and to build “many elegant and spacious buildings” (Mosiah 11:8; see 11:6–7). Mosiah 22:7 and 10 mention paying a regular tribute of wine, plus an extra amount as a present to the Lamanite garrison outside the city of Lehi-Nephi at the time when Limhi and his people escaped. Note too King Benjamin’s emphasis that in his kingly role he had not taxed his people, implying that he was not like typical kings in that regard.

Nephite rulers were thought to have “possessed” (see Alma 8:7) their villages and cities, and no doubt the same concept prevailed among the Lamanites. King Benjamin’s concept was that the Lord had given his people to him (see Mosiah 1:10). Surely the possessor would be justified in being reimbursed for his costs from those given to him by deity. Such taxes would have been used to support, at one point in time, the “thousands of those, yea, and tens of thousands, who do . . . sit in idleness” at the center of government at Zarahemla (Alma 60:22), according to the charge by Captain Moroni. Giddianhi, the head of the Gadianton secret society, was blunt about wanting a piece of the action, as modern parlance would put it. He wrote to the Nephite ruler, Lachoneus, that “I hope that ye will deliver up your lands and your possessions, without the shedding of blood, that . . . my people may recover their rights and government” (3 Nephi 3:10). Those rights obviously included control of the possessions mentioned and involved the receipt of tribute.<sup>78</sup>

When the Spaniards conquered the Aztecs, as far as commoners were concerned little changed politically. Collectors still extracted goods from the producers and those materials disappeared upward in the governmental pyramid. The only difference was that Cortez now sat on the throne. This scene shows the Tlaxcalan lineage heads greeting and submitting to the conqueror, an act confirmed by the material goods offered.



Types and amounts of tribute are listed in this tabulation from the Codex Mendoza. One province, for example, had to submit annually to the capital 12,800 cloaks, 1600 loin cloths, 1600 women’s tunics, 32,000 bundles of paper, 8000 bowls, and four bins of maize and beans.





This unusual method of confinement among the Maya could recall the situation of Abinadi, the Book of Mormon prophet who was slain by burning. Perhaps he was restrained like this when "they took him and bound him, and scourged his skin with faggots" (Mosiah 17:13).

Jail in Zinacantan, Chiapas, a generation ago had not changed significantly from sixteenth century practice as shown in the Aztec representation. Larger prison structures were probably used in large centers of population.

## Courts, Justice, and Punishment

One of the primary duties of a ruler was to settle disputes among his people. Sometimes that could be done by him personally, but in a population of much size, he would not have time to deal with every conflict. Judges were delegated to carry out that duty.

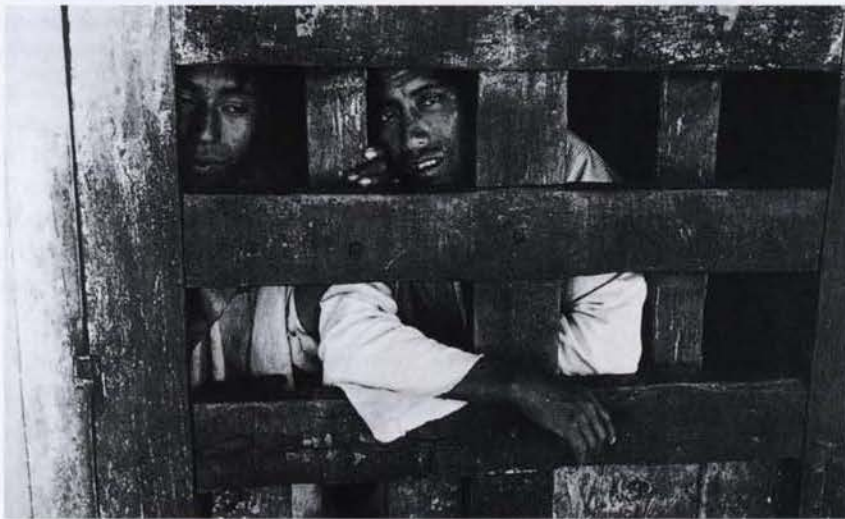
Cortez, for example, described the situation at the great market in the Aztec capital: "There is in this square a very large building, like a Court of Justice, where there are always ten or twelve persons, sitting as judges, and delivering their decisions upon all cases which arise in the markets."<sup>79</sup> In public assemblies, the Spaniards observed native police officers with pine cudgels who enforced order if required to do so by the authorities.

In modern times, at Zinacantan, a Maya center in highland Chiapas that has been extensively studied and where much of the ancient pattern of thought and living continues, a rather similar judicial pattern prevails. Four judges sit during each day on a bench in front of the civic building making themselves available to plaintiffs, who arrive bearing a gift of rum. If the officials consider a plea worthy, they send their police (the *mayores*) to bring in the defendant. There follows a trial that goes like this: "The defendant appears, also with a bottle of rum, bows to the officials, and presents his defense. Usually, both parties, accompanied by relatives

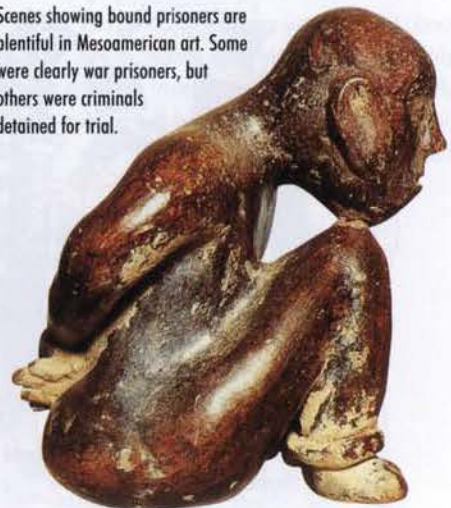
that are known to be 'good talkers' who serve as 'lawyers,' all talk at once and one wonders how in the ensuing pandemonium a judgment is ever reached."<sup>80</sup>

The task of judges in Mesoamerican communities was and is, if possible, to restore harmony to the community.<sup>81</sup> In clear-cut cases, repayment of damages to the injured party might be a sufficient solution. The punishment turns out to be a social, not just an individual, matter, for any fine would actually be paid by the offender's kin group and would be distributed to the kin of the plaintiff. If the judges could not reach a decision, they might resort to exhortation or verbal chastisement to both parties in an effort to calm the situation down. A variety of harsher punishments, ranging from jail to execution (in pre-Spanish days) were also available. Moral crimes as well as civil offenses were dealt with. Adultery, for example, called for the death penalty in certain cases or a fine under other conditions.

It is not clear whether there were professional lawyers in ancient times. The Spaniards did not let the native courts continue, so little is known about their actual operations. But judges very likely were appointed for given terms, not for life, so they must have relied upon some sorts of legal experts who might be thought of as lawyers.



Scenes showing bound prisoners are plentiful in Mesoamerican art. Some were clearly war prisoners, but others were criminals detained for trial.

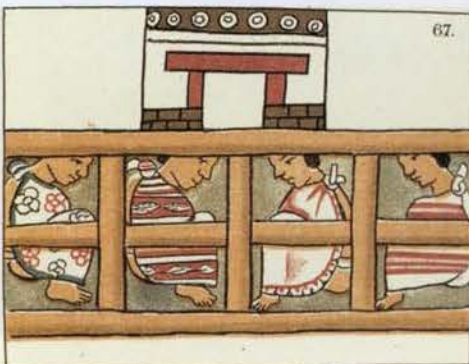




### VISUALIZING BOOK OF MORMON LIFE

Judges were, of course, preeminent figures in Nephite government. The aim of Nephite jurisprudence was more often to produce renewed harmony than to execute vengeance, which is similar to what we know of Mesoamerican cultures. In the disputes that are described in detail, the authority figure could offer to accept a compromise by which punishment could be avoided (see, for instance, Mosiah 7:10–1). In policy disagreements, the same desire for compromise is shown more often than not (consider the Morianton-Lehi conflict in Alma 50:25–36). Book of Mormon discussions of trials are incomplete, but correspondences to Jewish legal thinking and procedures are displayed.<sup>82</sup> Religion, as we might expect, played more of a role than in modern, secular jurisprudence. (See, for example, Mosiah 17–8; Alma 1:10–5; 10:13–6.)

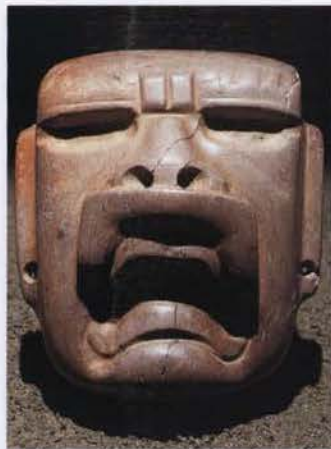
Prisons and prisoners (both civil and military) are mentioned (for example, see Alma 14:17 and 3 Nephi 5:4). Routine executions were carried out by unspecified means (see, for example, Alma 2:1; 62:9), but ritual executions were done in bizarre ways: (1) on top of a hill “between the heavens and the earth” (Alma 1:15); (2) by burning malefactors (see, for example, Alma 14:8; 17:13; 25:5); (3) by hanging from the top of a tree, whereupon the tree was cut down (see 3 Nephi 4:28); and (4) by casting into wild animal dens (see 4 Nephi 1:33).



Aztec punishments included stoning, a form of public participatory execution called for in the law of Moses, said to be followed by the Nephites.



In an Aztec court a panel of four judges is shown observing different modes of execution, as seen in sketches made by Father Sahagun's informants.



Masks like this from the south coast of the Mexican state of Guerrero have been interpreted by some as evidence for a jaguar cult, or perhaps a military order with the jaguar as guardian spirit. In Olmec times, corresponding with the Jaredite period of the Book of Mormon, the power of the jaguar was widely admired, yet feared. The imagery continued to Aztec times. Cecilia Klein has observed, "Most Aztec masks must be understood as advertisements of and tools to maintain and augment the material advantages of the ruling classes."<sup>84</sup>

## Secret Groups

Historical sources indicate that secret organizations have existed in many parts of the world. They have taken many forms, but their shared intent has been to provide participants with assistance in undertakings at odds with public norms of conduct. Mesoamerica had its share.

The internal social structure of long-distance merchants among the Aztecs at the time of the Spanish Conquest provides an example. They had their own deities and rites to comfort and support them on the road; they mutually protected their economic secrets and contacts, in the fashion of the medieval guilds of Europe; and they passed secret intelligence to each other about exotic lands that they penetrated and to a degree shared the same with the Aztec war machine.

Military orders were another type of quasi-secret society; their members—dedicated super-warriors, so to speak—fought together as a unit in battle but in peace supported each others' ambitions for power and influence. There is also evidence for the existence of little-known secret cults associated with the night, perhaps jaguars, and caves or lairs in isolated wilderness spots. In central Mexico the god Tezcatlipoca, the arch-sorcerer who was

associated with darkness, the night, and the jaguar, may have had a particular link to culturally subversive groups. The pattern seems to go back a very long time. Some of these elements in society were manifest in colonial times and right up until recently, but by their clandestine nature it is now impossible to learn much about them.<sup>85</sup>



## VISUALIZING BOOK OF MORMON LIFE

Nephites and Lamanites went through periods when secret groups were powerful and subversive of the regular political order (see Helaman 7:4). Their prototype was a secret order among the Jaredites that dated as far back as the second millennium B.C. and claimed Near Eastern inspiration. From soon after the Christian era, for example, the Nephite account quotes a communication from the chief "capo" of "the secret society of Gadianton" who claimed that his "society and the works thereof I know to be good; and they are of ancient date and they have been handed down unto us" (3 Nephi 3:9). At the very end of Nephite history, this revived secret order, called the robbers of Gadianton, became so influential that they occupied their own lands and mounted their own armies on a par with those of the Nephites and Lamanites (see 4 Nephi 1:46; Mormon 2:8, 28).



A remarkable photographic record of underground cultic activity in modern Yucatan was made a generation ago. This picture hints at some of the ritual long ago practiced in secret or sacred cave sites. Underground was associated with the jaguar in pre-Hispanic times.



Bandits would seek out for their bases inaccessible locations where they could be free from control measures by conventional society. The relation is illustrated in this picture from hills at the northerly end of the Central Depression of Chiapas. Major settlements lie in the river valley seen in the middle distance.

Secrecy was heavily ingrained in Mesoamerican life. Witchcraft and sorcery were, and still are, common ingredients in the social and ritual life of certain groups. The remarkable piece of ceramic sculpture shown here dates to the Maya Late Classic. It recalls Mormon 1:19, written in the fourth century A.D.: "There were sorceries, and witchcrafts, and magics . . . upon all the face of the land."



## Foreign Relations

Rarely were there extensive political structures in Mesoamerica that could justifiably be called empires or even geographically extensive kingdoms. A city-state dominating its region was the more frequent political arrangement. With competing polities in close proximity, what we think of as foreign relations were frequent concerns.

Even large political blocs like the Aztec so-called empire actually was composed of distinct political systems that had once existed as independent governments. When subsidiary units were conquered, the overlords simply left the existing government in place, after obtaining a pledge of subservience from the top local chief. Thus such imperial government as there was consisted of the central city dealing with lesser kingdoms in a sort of foreign relations mode.

Where two societies were formally independent of each other (no matter that one might be dramatically bigger than the other), relationships were governed by two considerations—war or the threat of war,

and trade access. The Tlaxcalans, located only a few miles east of the Aztec heartland, successfully defended their autonomy for centuries against their formidable rivals. The two dealt only in terms of current or potential warfare. (It was Cortez's ability to tap into that old rivalry that availed him of the native Tlaxcalan manpower and cultural knowledge that allowed him ultimately to defeat Montezuma's Aztecs.)

Treaties, alliances, truces, ambassadors, spies, and appointments for war were all known cultural forms for relations between societies. In some cases, marriages were consummated between ruling families in separate societies to help cement peaceful relations.

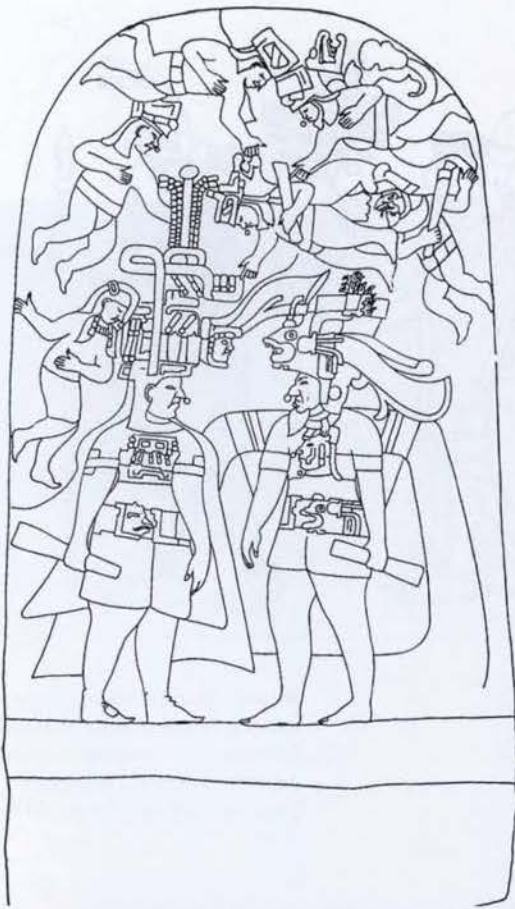
Typically, societies were happy to leave their neighbors alone politically and militarily so long as they could count on not being attacked and so long as their merchants had freedom to circulate across boundaries.

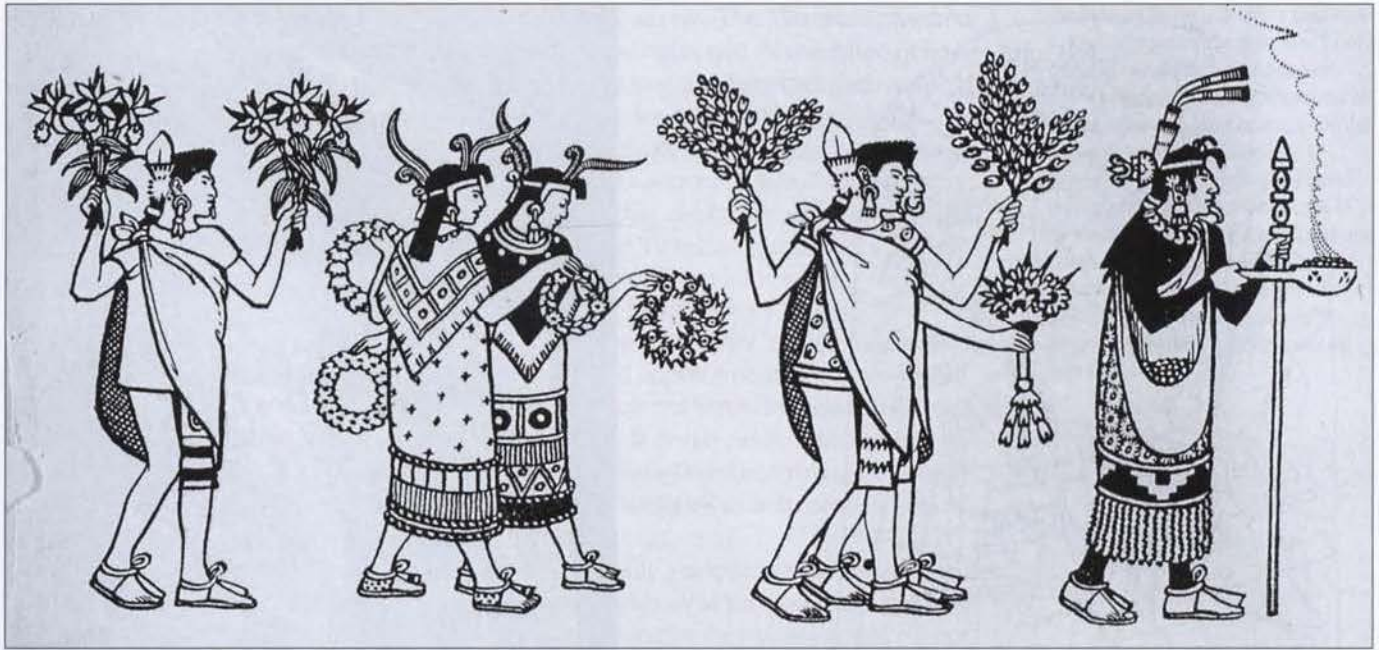
Sometimes, nevertheless, ambition for greater tribute payments would combine with the sheer desire to exercise dominance and lead to wars of conquest. Ethnic prejudice also contributed.

The sketch on the left is an artist's speculation as to what the scene on La Venta Stela 3 may have shown originally. Persons from two distinct ethnic groups are seen in some sort of ceremonial meeting. Some have supposed that the Jewish-looking man on the right represents a people who had gained control over the other folk. The date of the stela, in the vicinity of 600 B.C., makes some Latter-day Saints wonder if this representation involves the arrival of Mulek from the land of Israel (see Omni 1:15–6 and Helaman 6:10; compare the faces on the Alvarado stela on page 110).

Rulers or their representatives regularly made diplomatic visits, during which terms of dominance, subservience, or cooperation were negotiated. These visits usually involved a fair amount of ritual, and presents were often given. Maya vases, like this one from Nebaj, Guatemala, dating to the Late Classic period, sometimes picture these visits.





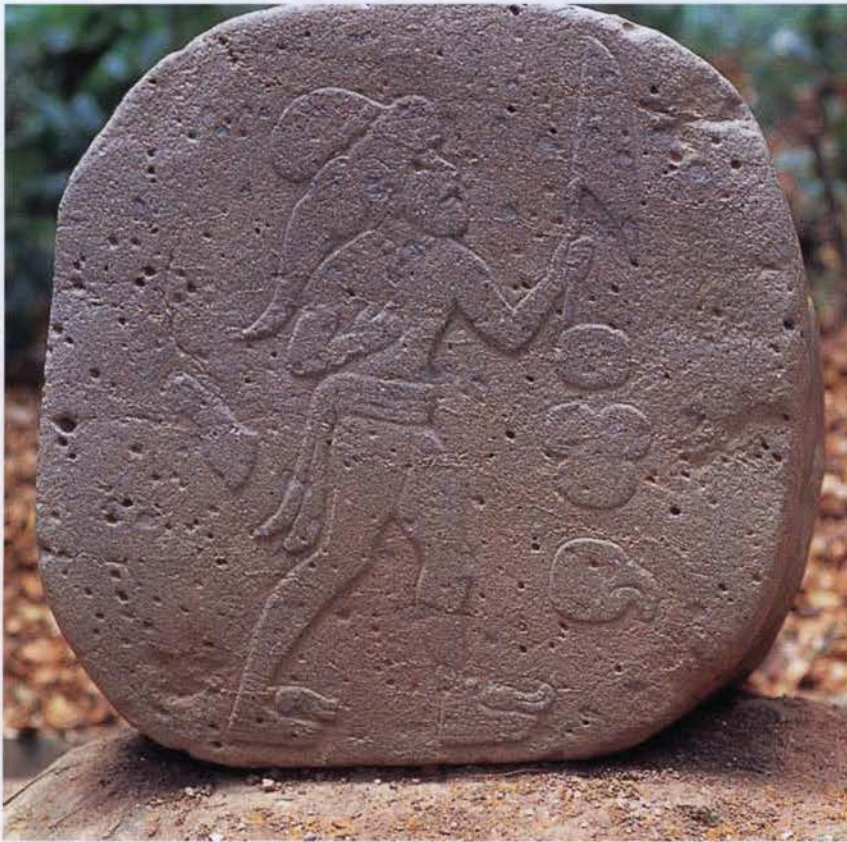


This artist's drawing of Totonac representatives welcoming Cortez as he arrived on the Gulf Coast conveys how even strange or unknown dignitaries were treated if they appeared strong—with a measure of respect and signs of peace.



A failure of the usual foreign policy of negotiation could, of course, result in harsh measures against a rival ruler. That may be what is shown on this monument from Izapa, on the Mexico-Guatemala border; it dates to the first century B.C. (Or it might represent some event in an ancient tale; note Ether 8:11-2.)

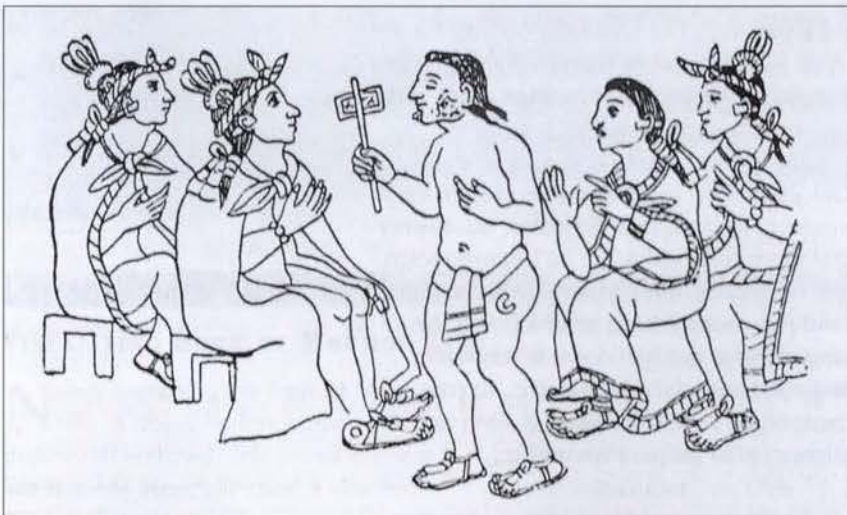




### VISUALIZING BOOK OF MORMON LIFE

In the Book of Mormon, relationships among the Lamanite kings are varied and instructive. What is said is compatible with Mesoamerican patterns. The head king of the Lamanites sent “a proclamation throughout all the land, amongst all his people who were in all his land,” (Alma 22:27) consisting of many subordinate kingdoms, that Nephite missionaries could go where they wished and not be harmed nor hindered (see Alma 28:1–2). In a direct encounter with his son Lamoni, king in the land of Ishmael, the great king first commanded his son to slay Ammon, Lamoni’s Nephite mentor, but later, when forced to it, he granted that his son be completely independent (see Alma 20:14, 26). When Lamoni had to deal with the king of the land of Middoni, another subordinate kingdom, his approach was flattery on the one hand (see Alma 20:4) and pleading on the other (see Alma 20:7). Obviously there were a number of patterned possibilities in dealings between kingdoms.

Between Lamanites and their long-term rivals, the Nephites, several diplomatic mechanisms are seen. Oaths were considered binding across the boundaries of societies (see Mosiah 20:14; Alma 44:8). Activities of ambassadors and negotiations are pictured in the Book of Mormon account (for example, see Alma 52:20). Treaties were also made (see Mosiah 7:21; Mormon 2:28). Appointment for battle is illustrated in Mormon 6:2–3. Intermarriage as a possible instrument of statesmanship is illustrated in Alma 17:24 and 47:35. Conquerors might also slay an opposing leader and ravage his city (see Helaman 1:20–2; Alma 47:33, note “spare the people of the city”).



A codex shows a native ambassador sent by Cortez to meet with Tlaxcalan lords as his conquering army advances toward the Aztec capital. Above, an Olmec monument from La Venta that is 2000 years older suggests a similar concept, in the judgment of some observers.