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The “Mulekites”

John L. Sorenson

The “people of Zarahemla” referred to in the Nephite record remain enigmatic to Latter-day Saint readers. Although they were more populous than the Nephites-by-descent, only a handful of statements in the scripture give explicit information about them. No one has attempted to combine these into a systematic picture of who these people were and what their role in Nephite history was. This article redresses that lack.

THEIR ORIGIN: ZEDEKIAH

Omni 1:15 and 18 provide our earliest information on this people’s origin: “The people of Zarahemla came out from Jerusalem at the time that Zedekiah, king of Judah, was carried away captive into Babylon,” and Zarahemla, the leader of the group when they were first contacted by the Nephites, “gave a genealogy of his fathers, according to his memory.” (The recalled genealogy was written but is not in the record we have). According to Mosiah 25:2, Zarahemla asserted his descent from Zedekiah through Mulek, and that linkage is supported by Helaman 8:21: “Will ye say that the sons of Zedekiah were not slain, all except it were Mulek? Yea, and do ye not behold that the seed of Zedekiah are with us?” We must understand Zedekiah’s background in order to picture the origin of Mulek’s group.¹

In the decade before Nephi’s account opens, the small kingdom of Judah and her kings were tossed about by the winds and currents of politics and war among her three major neighbors, Egypt, Assyria, and Babylonia. The first two were allied against the newly resurgent Babylonians. Jehoiakim became king of Judah at age twenty-five in the fall of 609 B.C. (2 Kgs. 23:36) at just about the time when Assyrian power was destroyed. In 606 and 605 B.C. the Egyptian army alone faced the Babylonians and in the latter year

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suffered a disastrous defeat at Carchemish in northern Syria on the Euphrates River. Subsequently (through 601 B.C.) the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar II (Nebuchadnezzar in the Old Testament) battled the Egyptians in Palestine and Egypt without decisive results, while maintaining dominance over Judah. Jehoiakim rebelled against Babylon in 598 B.C. (2 Kgs. 24:1). A Babylonian army soon besieged Jerusalem, from December until 16 March 597 B.C., when they captured the city. Jehoiakim was slain during the siege and was succeeded by his son Jehoiachin, who reigned only about three months before being exiled by Nebuchadnezzar. On 22 April 597 B.C., the Babylonians replaced him with his father's brother, Zedekiah (earlier called Mattaniah—2 Kgs. 24:17), who was then twenty-one years of age.² Zedekiah eventually threw in his lot with the Egyptians under Apries/Hophra, contrary to warnings by Jeremiah (see, for example, Jer. 21; 28). As a result, Nebuchadnezzar's army besieged Jerusalem from 15 January 588 to 7 January 587 B.C., when the approach of an Egyptian army caused the Babylonians to withdraw temporarily. But they returned on 29 April. Finally, the walls of Jerusalem were breached on 19 July 586 B.C. (2 Kgs. 25:3; Jer. 52:6–7). Massive looting followed and most of the population was deported to Babylonia. The temple was destroyed in mid-August (2 Kgs. 25:8–9).

During the fall of the city or soon afterward, some Jews escaped (2 Kgs. 25:4, 26), particularly to Egypt (Jeremiah was among the refugees—Jer. 40:2–5; 43:7–8; 44:1), while others reached nearby Moab, Ammon, and Edom (Jer. 40:11). Zedekiah attempted to escape but was captured, and before Nebuchadnezzar, he saw his sons slain and then had his eyes put out before being taken to Babylon to captivity for the rest of his life (2 Kgs. 25:7).

The books of 2 Kings and Jeremiah picture Zedekiah as a second-rate king. First, he was a puppet imposed by the hated Babylonians. His eleven-year reign proved a time of general disaster for the nation, despite the fact that some people of the upper strata of society prospered temporarily. He was indecisive and two-faced in his dealings with Jeremiah and other prophets (for example, Jer. 37:17–21). Jeremiah implies that he was an adulterer (Jer. 29:22–23). Overall he was adjudged an evil doer in the eyes of the Lord (Jer. 52:2).

His own descendants may have put a positive face on his deeds, but the Nephites might have had access to enough of Jeremiah's opinions (Lehi probably knew him personally—compare the easy reference to him in 1 Ne. 7:14) or through his writings (1 Ne. 5:13) to know that Zedekiah was under a moral cloud. To be his descendant, as Mulek was, may not have been considered commendable

among either his descendants or the Nephites. That belief could have been a contributing reason why chief Zarahemla acceded to the appointment of Mosiah as ruler when the latter showed up among the people of Zarahemla.

THEIR ORIGIN: MULEK

Mulek appears as *Muloch* in the printer's manuscript of the Book of Mormon and as *Mulok* in printed editions from 1830 to 1852, then became *Mulek*.³ However it was pronounced, the name comes to us of course as Nephite ears heard it from the people of Zarahemla, and their pronunciation could have changed somewhat from the Old World Hebrew familiar to us. What is clear throughout these variations in the spelling of the name is that we have here a reflex of the Hebrew root *mlk*, as in Hebrew *melek*, "king."

Nowhere in the Bible are the children of Zedekiah enumerated, let alone named, although we are told that he had daughters as well as sons (Jer. 43:6; 52:10). He was twenty-one on his accession to the throne. Being a noble, he already had the economic resources to have possessed a wife and child(ren) at that time. After his accession, he took multiple wives in the manner of the kings of Judah before him (Jeremiah, in 38:22–23, refers to Zedekiah's "wives") so that when he was captured at age thirty-two, he might have had a considerable progeny. Robert F. Smith has mustered evidence⁴ that a son of Zedekiah with a name recalling *Mulek* may actually be referred to in the Bible. Jeremiah 38:6 in the King James translation speaks of Jeremiah's being cast into "the dungeon [literally, "pit"] of Malchiah the son of Hammelech." The last five words should be rendered, "Malkîyahû, the son of the king." This personal name could have been abbreviated to something like *Mulek*. Thus Jeremiah might have been put into "the [very] dungeon of Mulek[?], the son of the king [Zedekiah]" referred to in the Hebrew text of Jeremiah 38:6. If Mulek was Zedekiah's eldest son, he could have been as old as fifteen at the time Jerusalem fell and as a prince may have had his own house, wherein there could have been a dungeon (Jer. 37:15–16 mentions one in a private house).

On the other hand, we do not know that Mulek was more than an infant. The younger he was, the greater the likelihood that he could have escaped the notice of the Babylonians and subsequent slaughter at their hands. Whatever his age, he may have been secreted away to Egypt by family retainers and close associates of the king along with "the king's daughters" (Jer. 43:6–7).⁵ At least it is obvious that in order to leave by sea for America, he would have had to reach a port. Since the Babylonians controlled the ports of

Israel and Phoenicia at the time, going south to Egypt (among his father’s allies) would be about the only possibility.⁶

THEIR HISTORY: JOURNEY TO THE NEW WORLD

Nothing is said about how much time intervened between the flight from Jerusalem of the party that included Mulek, which must have occurred at the time of the fall of the city, and their arrival in America. They are said to have “journeyed in the wilderness” before crossing the ocean (Omni 1:16), but that journey may not have been more than weeks in length, say between Judah and Egypt. They had probably landed in the New World by 575 B.C.

The premier sailors of that era were the Phoenicians, who frequented Egyptian ports and were familiar with the waters of the entire Mediterranean. Since they possessed the finest seafaring vessels and the widest knowledge of sailing conditions, it is reasonable for us to suppose that one or more of their vessels became the means (termed “the hand of the Lord” in Omni 1:16) by which Mulek and those with him were “brought . . . across the great waters.” (Israel had only a minor seafaring tradition of its own, and there is no hint that the Mulek party received divine guidance in constructing a ship of their own as Nephi did.) Or “the hand of the Lord” could have meant his guiding them by means of the Urim and Thummim which they brought from the temple in Jerusalem.⁷

If we suppose that Phoenician or other experienced voyagers were involved, we can inquire why such sailors would be willing to sail off into “the unknown.” In the first place, as professional seamen, they would normally be willing to undertake whatever voyage promised them sufficient compensation (Mulek’s party of refugees from the royal court could well have had substantial wealth with them). Furthermore, the Phoenicians had confidence in their nautical abilities; where they were told they should sail may not have seemed as dauntingly “unknown” to them as the term implies to us. Herodotus tells that a few years earlier Necho II, Egypt’s pharaoh in Mulek’s day, had sent an expedition of Phoenicians by ship from Ezion-Geber on the Red Sea completely around the continent of Africa.⁸ A hint of Phoenician influence among Book of Mormon peoples might be seen in two place names—those of the promised land’s dominant river, the Sidon, and of the land of Sidom; the latter was plausibly on the river (in addition to the name congruence, compare Alma 15:14 and its implication of a riverine location, “they did flock in from all the region round about Sidom, and were baptized”).⁹

The route followed by Mulek’s vessel would rather obviously have gone west through the Mediterranean and past the “pillars of

Hercules” (strait of Gibraltar), an area familiar to Phoenician sailors. From there the prevailing winds and current almost inexorably bear simple craft (for example, Columbus’s ships, Thor Heyerdahl’s *Ra II* raft, and many others) past the Canaries to the Caribbean. Significant cultural, historical, and physical evidence for ancient one-way crossings exists, even though it is generally ignored by conventional scholars.¹⁰

There remains a slight possibility that they could have come via the Pacific, since neither a route nor a coastal landing point is specified in the Book of Mormon. But textual indications argue strongly for the Atlantic. First, the immigrant group’s discovery of the last Jaredite survivor could only have been near the east sea (Ether 9:3 puts the position of the final battleground near that sea). Second, the “city of Mulek” was located only a few miles from the east sea (Alma 51:26), and we may suppose that this was where the newcomers settled first (compare Alma 8:7). Third, the Sidon River probably enters the east sea no great distance from this city of Mulek,¹¹ suggesting a plausible route along which the ancestors of Zarahemla and his people “came . . . up into the south wilderness” (Alma 22:31) to their city on the upper river where the Nephites later found them. To this evidence may be added two historico-geographical facts external to the scripture—the distance from Palestine to the American narrow-neck promised land was shorter via the Atlantic than the Pacific, and the expertise of Mediterranean mariners was oriented westward, not eastward into the Indian and Pacific Oceans. In my view, that they traveled via the Atlantic is certain.

The size of the party accompanying Mulek is not even hinted at. However, we are justified in making some fairly firm inferences. Even if only a single vessel made the trip—and there might have been more than one—a substantial crew would have been involved (Phoenician ships could be large as those used by Columbus). The number would likely have been more than twenty. A ship with a predominantly Israelite crew probably could not have been found; the people of Judah were largely landlubbers, with minor exceptions. In terms of culture, ethnicity, and language, the crew would likely have been a heterogeneous, mixed-Mediterranean lot, for *Phoenician* often did not signify an ethnically uniform group. And since we know nothing of who might have been passengers (Mulek was one, though clearly he must have had attendants along, in view of his relative youth), we cannot tell if women were brought. There could have been some, but the common crewmen would have been single. Their genes would have continued only by their finding native women in the new land. Nibley saw Greek names in the Nephite record;¹² it would not be surprising for certain Greek (or

Egyptian, for that matter) influences to have reached America via men in the crew of Mulek's ship.

If a Phoenician vessel was used, those aboard it quite surely would have been socially and culturally diverse. In the first place, those surrounding Mulek would have been from Zedekiah's court, the very crowd whom the Lord, speaking through Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Lehi, frequently attacked as wayward, disobedient, and semipagan. Many of the elite of Jerusalem were worshippers of alien gods, as shown for example by the condemnation heaped on their heretical rites in Jeremiah 7 (compare 2 Kgs. 23). Likely no Levitical priests were among them, "and they had brought no records with them; and they denied the being of their Creator" (Omni 1:17). We can suppose that beliefs and ways of worship contrary to the words of the prophets and the law of Moses brought along by any sample of Judahites from Zedekiah's circle who managed to get away would contribute to their heretical condition. There could have been even more divergent practices among the crew of the vessel.

After arriving, descendants of the group "had many wars and serious contentions, and had fallen by the sword from time to time" (Omni 1:17). The members of the original party would have had mixed motives in making the voyage in the first place—some would simply have been doing a nautical job, after which they hoped (vainly it appears) to return home. Some may simply have been adventurous. Certain ones may have been merely political and economic refugees from the Babylonians. A few, perhaps, had a sense of divine mission although the Book of Mormon gives us no hint of it. Upon landing, these differing agendas could have led to conflict, perhaps not least over the limited number of women, if any.

"Their language had become corrupted" (Omni 1:17), as Mosiah saw things. To me this plausibly had to do with the voyaging group's speaking more than one tongue to begin with, rather than their having a single original language, the Hebrew of Mulek, as the Nephites seem to have thought. Based on what historical linguists know about language change, it is highly unlikely that if Hebrew had been the exclusive tongue of Mulek's party, their idiom would have changed in three hundred years so as to be unintelligible to Mosiah. (By the time of their meeting with the people of Zarahemla, Mosiah and his people may have come to know a second tongue from their centuries of dwelling in the land of Nephi.)

Also relevant to the language question is the scientifically established probability that other peoples already inhabited virtually every area in the New World near a narrow neck where Mulek could have arrived. I suppose, as virtually all LDS scholars of the

subject do, that the land in question was in Mesoamerica (southern Mexico and northern Central America). Still, we do not know how numerous the inhabitants might have been in the early sixth century B.C. when Mulek and company arrived. The “Olmec culture” known from archaeology, which plausibly constituted or involved the Jaredites, for the most part disintegrated dramatically around 600–550 B.C., although population fragments clearly continued on bearing basic elements of the old culture to future generations.¹³ In Book of Mormon terms it is extremely unlikely that the entire Jaredite population without exception showed up to be exterminated at the hill Ramah, as Latter-day Saints sometimes have inferred from the words of Ether. All in the organized armies may have done so, but inevitably there would have been survivors in remote byways at least. I presume that the Mulek party came ashore under war-disintegrated social conditions in which after a time they met and amalgamated with (perhaps even dominating) local fragments of the earlier society which they encountered at the margin of the central arena of the “final” battles. In the course of amalgamation, the newcomers probably adopted the local tongue (likely a version of an early Mixe-Zoquean language). The subsequent wars among the immigrants reported in Omni 1:17 could well have been complicated by historical quarrels among the local survivors with whom they had become involved.

The geographical correlation of Book of Mormon and American landscape features that I follow tentatively places the city of Mulek at the site of La Venta in the southern Mexican state of Tabasco.¹⁴ Most of this spectacular ruined place dates to Olmec times, but evidence also exists of later (re)inhabitation.¹⁵ One of the most interesting items found there is Stela 3, a huge carved basalt slab. It is not clear when the piece was executed, but likely it was at the very end of the Olmec era or very soon after the site was abandoned not long after 600 B.C.¹⁶ Some see it as a new style more than a continuation of the old “Olmec” one.¹⁷ Stela 3 has carved on it a scene in which a person of evident high status, whose facial features find parallels in surviving people in the area as well as in Olmec art, is shown facing another prominent man who looks to a number of art historians like “a Jew.” His striking beard and beaked nose are so prominent that he has been dubbed “Uncle Sam” by some observers. This scene has been viewed as a formal encounter between the leaders of two sharply different ethnic groups, one seemingly “Semitic.”¹⁸ Although a long shot, it is possible that we are viewing a Mulekite leader (even Mulek) together with a local chief from a group of folk survivors after the Jaredite debacle.¹⁹

**“MULEKITE” HISTORY FROM ARRIVAL
TO DISCOVERY BY MOSIAH**

We are informed in Alma 22:30–31 (confirmed in Hel. 6:10) that the Mulek party touched first in the land northward before going south to where the Nephites found them. The reason for their not settling in the north is unclear in the scripture. A Mexican tradition reports such a group arriving by sea (when is unclear) guided by a stone through which their deity spoke to them.²⁰ They were said to be seeking a destination that had been revealed to them. They first touched the coast on the northern Gulf of Mexico but did not settle until reaching a place south of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. Whether this tradition refers to the Mulek group or not, the Mexican party followed a remarkably similar set of movements, from landfall north of an isthmus, past that neck, then to a coastal zone in the land to the south, finally ending up inland.

The experience of the Mulek group in the land northward was presumably brief, yet it raises the question of interaction with the Jaredites. The eastern lowlands of the land northward had long been a stronghold of that people, and their very final battles took place there (Ether 9:3, 9; 10:20; 14:12; 15:8, 15). The chances are reasonable (though not certain) that the seaborne newcomers touching in the land northward would have encountered some Jaredites, if the latter were still engaged in their normal lifeways at the moment when the Judahite/Phoenician party arrived. It is possible, of course, that the newcomers did detect signs of population in the land northward and that this was why they chose to move on, but the scripture gives us no indication of that. Or perhaps the Jaredites were not oriented to life upon this stretch of coast and the new party did not explore inland. Thus the two peoples might at first have missed each other by sheer accident.

I consider it likely that the Jaredites at the moment of the “Mulekite” arrival were in the throes of civil war, unable to pay attention to what was happening along their coast involving the appearance of a small band of strangers (if they were seen at all). A long period of overlap between the two groups strikes me as highly unlikely; the Jaredite civilization, involving millions of people (Ether 15:2), would surely have come to the attention of the Mulek group had the latter lived only around a hundred miles away for decades, let alone centuries as some have supposed. Yet had the “Mulekites” arrived significantly prior to the struggle at Ramah, they would have become aware of or fatally involved in the extermination instead of fulfilling Ether’s prophecy about Coriantumr (Ether 13:20–21). After all, the land Desolation, where

the Nephites saw abundant evidence of the Jaredite final wars, abutted on the small land Bountiful, which in turn was only a few miles from the city of Mulek (Alma 22:29–31; 51:26, 32; 52:15–17, 22–23).

The newcomers are said to have discovered Coriantumr, not vice versa. Where might that contact have taken place? He could not have been a young man (note Ether 13:16–17), he had been very severely wounded in the final battle (Ether 15:1, 28–32), and he had earlier suffered at least one serious injury in war (Ether 15:1) as well as probably others. With such physical limitations as these scriptures imply, it would be remarkable if he had made more than a partial recovery from his near death at Ramah. Ether's prophecy to the king had indicated only that he would "receive a burial" by the new people. This statement, together with the fact that he lived only nine lunar months with the new group before passing away (Omni 1:21), can be seen as supporting the view that he was infirm when found.²¹ Thus he is not likely to have traveled far on his own from the hill Ramah. Yet he would surely have moved some distance, for the effects of the carnage in the final battle area would have been unbearable for him.

It seems to me most likely that, at whatever point Coriantumr was found between the hill Ramah and, probably, the city of Mulek, his discoverers transported him to their settlement base, and that there is where he executed the engraving on the "large stone" which eventually came into Mosiah's hands. (One wonders what ever happened to it at Zarahemla; it is mentioned only the once.) Several scenarios are possible to account for where and when he might have been discovered by the new group, but we have inadequate information to evaluate their relative likelihood.²²

Nothing is said about how much time passed before the immigrants left their landfall to move "up into the south wilderness" (Alma 22:31), perhaps along the river Sidon, for they settled beside it. They may not have stayed long near the sea, where it could be oppressively hot and humid (as in Alma 51:33) compared with their Old World source area. Or the wars said to have occurred among themselves (Omni 1:17) could have driven part of them inland. However, it could have taken decades if not centuries for sufficient population to grow and organize to permit a level of conflict deserving the name war. It seems to me likely that there was no substantial movement of Mulek's descendants to the uplands for a considerable period.

The Book of Mormon conveys nothing contrary to the view that Zarahemla's group had coalesced as a political unit only within his lifetime, and shortly before Mosiah's arrival among them. If

Zarahemla had had a long, strong tradition of rulership behind him, Mosiah likely would not have gained the king role over the combined society as readily as he seems to have done. Zarahemla is not said to have borne the title of king, though he ruled his group; given no title for his role, something like "chief" seems suitably descriptive considering the small scale of his polity, which may have numbered only a few thousand. (To Mosiah's group, they seemed "exceedingly numerous," but that expression is relative, for the Nephites were themselves probably an exceedingly small group.)

Nowhere do we get a hint that the descendants of the people on the ship(s) that brought Mulek constituted a single political/ethnic unit prior to Zarahemla's day. No comprehensive term such as *Mulekite* is used to embrace them, suggesting that not all of those descended from those immigrants recognized Zedekiah's son as their head, nor perhaps any other one person. There may have been differences among the group over authority from the first, resulting ultimately in political fragmentation, with Zarahemla's group just one tribelet among a number tied chiefly by economic links.

An interesting bit of evidence that there may have been varying traditions about what had happened among the Mulek group, and thus more than one social entity involved, comes from the account of Ammon. In Mosiah 7 we learn of his leading a party to locate "their brethren," the Zeniffites (even though Ammon was a "descendant of Zarahemla" [Mosiah 7:3, 13]),²³ who had earlier gone up to the land of Nephi in order to reoccupy the cities of Lehi-Nephi and Shilom. When King Limhi reported to Ammon that he had sent out an exploring party which had discovered ruins and gold plates on a battleground to the distant north, one would think that Ammon would say something like, "Oh, yes, that would be the people who were destroyed, except for this one old man who lived among my ancestors, the descendants of Mulek." But Ammon gives no hint of making any such mental connection, either to the Coriantumr tradition or to Mulek. Perhaps he belonged to an element of Zarahemla's people who had simply never heard about Coriantumr's survival. Nor had Limhi any previous knowledge of the Jaredites, it appears, even though his grandfather had dwelt at Zarahemla when Coriantumr's stela had been brought there and read by Mosiah I.

When the forefathers of Zarahemla's people reached the area that would become the land of Zarahemla, they likely had left others of their tradition behind in the lowlands where they originated. But at least by the time the stone of Coriantumr was fetched (Omni 1:20), these folks on the upper river must have had peaceful relations with those others, for a party would have had to make a

lengthy trip back down by the east sea to obtain the artifact and bring it to Mosiah to be read (Zarahemla was many days from the city of Mulek where the stone probably was worked—compare, for example, Alma 52:15–18).

Even with the addition of Mosiah I's contingent of Nephites to Zarahemla's people, the combined body was still not very numerous nor widespread. When King Benjamin assembled them all a generation later, it was possible for all to gather at the city's temple on one day's notice (Mosiah 1:10) and for the planners to anticipate that the combined body would be able to hear the aged king's voice (Mosiah 2:1–8).²⁴

RELATIONS WITH THE NEPHITES

It is difficult to interpret the extremely brief and one-sided account we have in Omni 1:13–19 of the joining of Mosiah's group with the people of Zarahemla. The story from the Nephite side represents the event as not only peaceful but enthusiastically welcomed by the locals. From the point of view of some of the resident people, however, the transition may not have seemed so pleasant. The key reason why they "rejoiced" is said to be that Mosiah brought sacred records when they had none. The impressive fact of literacy itself could indeed have combined with possession of the mysterious sacred relics in Mosiah's possession—the plates of Nephi, the brass plates, Laban's sword, the Liahona—to confer an almost magical aura on Mosiah that validated his deserving the kingship. Besides, he may well have had the right of kingship by descent from the royal "Nephi" line among the original Nephites (Jacob 1:11); I doubt that he would have presumed to accept the kingship in Zarahemla—he was a sober man, not an opportunist—unless he qualified for the king role as a (the senior?) direct descendant of Nephi. Without a strong leadership mantle of such a sort, the people in his party might well not have accompanied him out of Nephi, nor would he have had possession of the large plates, the official history of the kings. In terms of the Old World tradition of the Judahite fathers of the "Mulekites," while Mosiah was not of the preferred royal line through Judah, at least he had major appurtenances of kingship that Zarahemla lacked. Zarahemla had only two qualifications, his current chiefly role and descent from Mulek, who, though of Judah and a descendant of David, was never actually king of Judah. Those qualifications apparently were not enough to prevail against Mosiah's strengths. (Since nothing more is heard about Zarahemla after Omni 1:18, he may have been less than vigorous by then and perhaps died soon after.)

Political amalgamation did not erase the ethnic distinction between the two groups. Mosiah 25:4 reports that in the time of Mosiah II, the people of Zarahemla were numbered separately from "the children of Nephi," that is, "those who were descendants of Nephi." In their political assembly, the two groups were separated "in two bodies." Obviously they spoke different everyday languages, although they also, no doubt, came to share one. Given those evidences of separateness, they probably also lived in different sectors in the city and land of Zarahemla (the mass arrival of the Nephites could hardly have been accompanied by their simply settling haphazardly among those already present).²⁵ How subsequently they may have come to interrelate through marriage is not indicated.

It is plausible that later "contentions" and "dissensions" in Nephite society were in part led by unhappy descendants of Zarahemla who considered that they were not given their due when Mosiah became king. At least one man who "was a descendant of Zarahemla," the Coriantumr of Helaman 1:15, "was a dissenter from among the Nephites" and came close to conquering the Nephites.²⁶ (Although if there were such unhappy descendants of Mulek who claimed special status because of "the blood of nobility" [Alma 51:21], they were less likely to have been the instigators of the "king-men" movement of later times than descendants of Mosiah I, Benjamin, or Mosiah II, whose claims would have been much more immediate and documentable than in the case of descent through Zarahemla—compare Mosiah 29:7–9.)

A fascination with the extinct Jaredites was manifest among the Nephites from time to time, as in Mosiah 28:12. Mosiah translated the twenty-four gold plates of the Jaredites "because of the great anxiety of his people; for they were desirous beyond measure to know concerning those people who had been destroyed." Nibley identifies a number of names used among the Nephites that were clearly derived from the Jaredites and notes, "Five out of the six whose names are definitely Jaredite betray strong anti-Nephite leanings."²⁷ This permanent cultural impression on the Nephites he believes was made through the Mulek group. This unacknowledged influence from the Jaredites may have come via cultural syncretism between members of the Mulek group and local survivors from the Jaredite tradition. That process could have been so subtle (in the absence of written records) that generations later the descendants either did not recognize that they were related to the extinct civilization and were curious about the mysterious ruins and artifacts left or else suspected that they were related and wished to know more.

The initial political amalgamation reported in Omni seemingly did not lead to genuine cultural integration but masked a diversity in lifeways that sometimes came forth as conflict in beliefs and behavior. Non-Nephite ways seem to have kept bubbling up from beneath the ideal social and cultural surface depicted by the Nephite elite record keepers. After all, the descendants of the people of Zarahemla probably always constituted a majority of “the folk” (“the people of the Nephites” in the record?).²⁸

There are other evidences of this underlying influence. For example, the younger Alma, apparently like his cronies the sons of Mosiah,²⁹ “became a very wicked and an idolatrous man” and also “was a man of many words, and did speak much flattery to the people” (Mosiah 27:8). This phrasing describes not just one personality but a distinct tradition of belief and rites. The study of cultural history teaches us that one man or even one generation is most unlikely to independently originate a systematized pattern of belief and behavior involving idolatry but rather that such a pattern draws on and incorporates past tradition.

The continuation of this cult might be seen a few years later in Alma 1:32, for many among the Nephites engaged “in sorceries, and in idolatry or idleness, and in babblings, . . . wearing costly apparel; being lifted up in the pride of their own eyes . . . and all manner of wickedness.” By the time of Mosiah 26:4–6, we learn that a sizable group constituted “a separate people as to their faith.” Again it is plausible that they followed a preexisting tradition likely to have been related to the idolatrous beliefs mentioned earlier which ultimately came from the people of Zarahemla. Three generations later “the more part of [the Nephites] had turned out of the way of righteousness, and . . . did turn unto *their own ways*, and did build up unto themselves idols of their gold and their silver” (Hel. 6:31, italics added). It seems probable to me that “their own ways” which involved idolatrous rites had a historical background most logically tied to the old cult of Zarahemla’s people. As an anthropologist, I suspect that this pattern stayed on beneath the surface piety directed to Jehovah/Jesus Christ. The periodic reemergence to public view of the “old-time religion” with strong “Mulekite” elements in it may have constituted a large measure of the “falling away” so often lamented by the Book of Mormon leaders.³⁰

THE “MULEKITES” IN LATER BOOK OF MORMON AND POST-CUMORAH TIMES

The last reference to this people (as “the seed of Zedekiah”) occurs in Helaman 8:21. But they are not distinguished in any way in 3 Nephi or 4 Nephi, nor do the books of Mormon or Moroni refer

to them. The revived division of Book of Mormon society into seven tribes reported in 4 Nephi 1:37–38 omits any indication of these people. I presume that they had become so amalgamated with the more prestigious Nephites (in the narrow sense) that they no longer had a separate status worth mentioning.

Doctrine and Covenants 19:27 refers to the word of God going in modern times “to the Jew, of whom the Lamanites are a remnant.” Orson Pratt’s note in the former edition of the scripture at that point cites Omni 1:14–19. Pratt and subsequent commentators assume that descendants of Mulek are to be found today indistinguishably mixed among “the Lamanites.” Doctrine and Covenants 3:17–18 prophesies that the Book of Mormon will go forth to the Nephites, Jacobites, Josephites, Zoramites, Lamanites, Lemuelites, and Ishmaelites, making no distinction of Mulek’s descendants.

While little is explicitly stated in the Book of Mormon about Mulek and those who came to America with him, what there is provides leads that permit constructing a broadened characterization of the group. It is clear that simply accepting the version of ethnic history written for us by the prophets in Nephi’s line obscures significant aspects of the role of those people whose ancestors were in Mulek’s party.

Since ferreting out the details of what the Book of Mormon tells us about this particular “minor” group proves enlightening, we should also consider every detail told or implied about each other “minor” people. Doing so we can more fully appreciate their roles in that great history. Only by minute and informed scrutiny of the scriptural text on *every* subject can we prepare ourselves to grasp and appreciate new information that revelation may provide for us in the future.

NOTES

¹Robert F. Smith summarizes the chronological and historical background in “Book of Mormon Event Structure: Ancient Near East,” Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) Study Aid SMI-84 (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1985). Extensive references to standard popular and scholarly sources are given there. See also John W. Welch, “They Came from Jerusalem: Some Old World Perspectives on the Book of Mormon,” *Ensign* 6 (September 1976): 27–30.

²Zedekiah was not officially crowned until at least 6 October or perhaps 1 April 596 B.C. Thus, as with other kings of that era in Judah, there were two overlapping “first years,” and we cannot be sure which one Nephi referred to in 1 Nephi 1:4. All we know for certain is that his account opens sometime between about May 597 and April 596 B.C. See Smith, “Event Structure,” 14–15; Jay H. Huber, “Lehi’s 600 Year Prophecy and the Birth of Christ,” FARMS, Preliminary Report HUB-82, (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1983), 2–4; in particular Richard A. Parker and Waldo H. Dubberstein, *Babylonian Chronology 626 B.C.–A.D. 45*, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946).

The “about B.C. 600” which has appeared for years as a chronological footnote to 1 Nephi in the Book of Mormon has proven to be in error, according to scholarship on Near Eastern history. The error

was continued in the 1981 edition, despite the fact that the 1979 LDS Bible Dictionary, which obviously followed later but still outdated scholarly sources (as shown in the BD entry on Chronology by comments under the "External History" column between 772 and 609 B.C.), inconsistently lists Zedekiah's reign as beginning in 598.

³*Book of Mormon Critical Text: A Tool for Scholarly Reference, Vol. 2: Mosiah-Alma*. 1st ed. (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1986), 483.

⁴Smith, "Event Structure," 16–17, where citations to the scholarly literature are given. Also, *FARMS Update*, February 1984, "New Information about Mulek, Son of the King." Nibley includes speculation about Mulek in his unique interpretation of the Lachish letters ostraca: *The Prophetic Book of Mormon*, vol. 8 of *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (Salt Lake City and Provo, Utah: Deseret Book Co. and FARMS, 1989), 397–400.

⁵See again Smith, "Event Structure," for literature citations. He notes on page 18 that Benjamin Urrutia believes there is textual evidence that not necessarily every one of the king's sons was slain. For example, in 2 Kings 25:1–10 the Hebrew includes the word *all* five times (*all his host, all the houses*, etc.), yet when speaking of the princes, verse 7 says only that "the sons" of Zedekiah were slain, not *all* the sons.

Ariel Crowley, "The Escape of Mulek," in his *About the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1961), 86–90, contains additional data and suggestions. According to a Jewish tradition (cited as Ginzberg, *Legends* IV:293; VI:382–83), Zedekiah had ten sons slain by Nebuchadrezzar. Also, examples cited from the Old Testament demonstrate that *little ones*, including male offspring, were consistently distinguished from *sons*, hence survival of an infant Mulek would not conflict with the statement in 2 Kings 25:7 about the slaying of the king's "sons." Examples are also given from the Old Testament where statements about the extermination of a descent line represents hyperbole, not fact (for example, see 2 Kgs. 11:1–3), so even a statement about *all* being slain could only be considered an approximation.

⁶Perhaps travel through the desert to reach Egypt constituted the journeying "in the wilderness" spoken of in Omni 1:16 (evidently prior to the voyage), or perhaps a longer, more arduous trip was required to reach Carthage or other Phoenician cities of the western Mediterranean from which the actual voyage may have departed for America.

⁷The history of what has been called *Urim and Thummim* is not clear. The Brother of Jared received one such device and brought it to America; it ended up in Moroni's hands, then it passed to Joseph Smith along with the plates of Nephi (D&C 17:1). Abraham had a different one (Abr. 3:1, 4), which could have been passed down to his descendants, although we are nowhere told what happened to it. Exodus 28:15–21 and other scriptures through 1 Samuel 28:6 witness that a different version of Urim and Thummim was constructed by Moses and used by him, Aaron, and subsequent priests. It was remembered but not possessed by the Jews under Ezra following the Babylonian exile (Ezra 2:63; Neh. 7:65).

Mosiah II had an interpreter device (Mosiah 8:13), which earlier may have been in the hands of his grandfather, the first king Mosiah, who perhaps used it to translate Coriantumr's engravings (Omni 1:20). We cannot be certain this was the Jaredite instrument, although it seems likely on the basis of Mosiah 8:12–15 (especially, "prepared from the beginning" and "who should possess this land") and Mosiah 28:11–17. Limhi's explorers could conceivably have found the interpreters which had been left by Ether with his plates (Ether 15:33). But that could not be if Mosiah I and II already had the interpreters; Ammon in Mosiah 8:13 indicates that the latter king did have the instrument, and his grandfather had apparently used it to read Coriantumr's engraving (see Omni 1:20). Mosiah 8:12–14 makes it quite clear in any case that Limhi had been given no such instrument by his search party when they got Ether's plates. Perhaps "Mulekite" explorers had found the Jaredite interpreters on the battlefield near the hill Ramah (while missing the twenty-four gold plates?). There was some early exploration because they found Coriantumr.

Another possibility is that Mosiah might have received the Urim and Thummim that originated with Moses from the people of Zarahemla, who had retained it as a sacred relic since Mulek's time without being able to make it work. Perhaps someone in Mulek's party had been inspired to carry it from the temple in Jerusalem immediately before that structure was destroyed by the Babylonians. ("T. W. B." in the *Millennial Star* [76:552–57]), speculated that Mulek's party took the Urim and Thummim from the temple and brought it to America.) If the Mexican tradition cited below refers to Mulek's group, then the "oracle" mentioned there might be from Jerusalem.

Other explanations are possible. For example, might the Liahona have served as an interim interpreter for Mosiah I and II, with the interpreters from Ether actually being with the twenty-four gold plates but its nature unrecognized by either Ammon or Limhi?

⁸Herodotus, *The History*, trans. David Grene (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), IV:42. This Greek historian/geographer described the crew's observations on the sun as they completed the voyage around the continent, observations which now can be seen as demonstrating that the voyage was accurately recorded but which Herodotus thought were outright errors. See Smith, "Event Structure," 13, or the discussion by Cyrus H. Gordon in *Before Columbus: Links between the Old World and Ancient America* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1971).

⁹Janet Jensen in "Variations between Copies of the First Edition of the Book of Mormon," *BYU Studies* 13 (Winter 1973): 214–22, observed that Sidon, the river, appears as Sidom once in the first (1830) edition (on p. 226, line 5, now Alma 2:17). *Book of Mormon Critical Text* 2:526, observes that this spelling instance appeared both in the printer's manuscript and the 1830 edition, then was changed in 1837 to Sidon.

In Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City and Provo, Utah: Deseret Book Co. and FARMS, 1985), 205, I discuss Sidom and note that at the time of the Spanish conquest, a name given by nearby Indians to the key site in the area I consider probably Sidom was *zactan*, “white lime,” while the Semitic name Sidon, in Phoenicia, may be derived from “lime.”

¹⁰Constance Irwin’s *Fair Gods and Stone Faces: Ancient Seafarers and the World’s Most Intriguing Riddle* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1963) contains surprisingly substantial evidence, considering that it is a popular book, for her proposal that Phoenicians influenced early Mesoamerica. But the scholarly work of Spanish archaeologist José Alcina Franch has the most impressive range of data. See particularly his three works: *Las “Pintaderas” Mejicanas y sus Relaciones* (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, Instituto “Gonzalo Fernandez de Oviedo,” 1958); “Origen Trasatlántico de la Cultura Indígena de América,” *Revista Española de Antropología Americana* 4 (1969): 9–64 [Madrid]; and *Pre-Columbian Art* (New York: Abrams, 1983).

For Phoenician nautical technology as well as for a valuable summary of further provocative data supporting a connection to Mesoamerica, see a monograph by one of the participants in Heyerdahl’s *Ra II* raft project, anthropologist Santiago Genovés T.: *Ra, una Balsa de Papyrus a través del Atlántico*, Cuadernos: Serie Antropológica 25 (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas, 1972).

¹¹Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting*, 25, 27.

¹²Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, vol. 6 of *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (Salt Lake City and Provo, Utah: Deseret Book Co. and FARMS, 1987), 290.

¹³Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting*, 108–21, 249–51. Compare Philip Drucker and Robert F. Heizer, “Commentary on W. R. Coe and Robert Stuckenrath’s Review of Excavations at La Venta, Tabasco, 1955,” *Kroeber Anthropological Society, Papers*, no. 33 (Fall 1965): 52–53, and the comment by Paddock, *Dumbarton Oaks Conference on the Olmec, October 28th and 29th, 1967*, ed. Elizabeth P. Benson (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library Collection, 1968), 39.

¹⁴Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting*, 120, 249–50. See also map 5, opposite page 36, and map 12, opposite page 240.

¹⁵Philip Drucker, Robert F. Heizer, and Robert J. Squier, *Excavations at La Venta, Tabasco, 1955*, Smithsonian Institution, Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 170, (Washington D.C., 1959), 215ff. Robert F. Heizer, “New Observations on La Venta,” *Dumbarton Oaks Conference on the Olmec, October 28th and 29th, 1967*, ed. Elizabeth P. Benson (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1968), 32–36.

¹⁶Elizabeth P. Benson, “Some Olmec Objects in the Robert Woods Bliss Collection at Dumbarton Oaks,” in *The Olmec and Their Neighbors: Essays in Memory of Matthew W. Stirling*, ed. Elizabeth P. Benson (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1981), 97–98; John F. Scott, “El Mesón, Veracruz, and its Monolithic Reliefs,” *Baessler-Archiv* 25 (1977):103, citing in support literature by Pelliza, Bernal, Coe, Clewlow, Proskouriakoff, and Smith.

¹⁷Tatiana Proskouriakoff, “Olmec and Maya Art: Problems of Their Stylistic Relation,” in *Dumbarton Oaks Conference on the Olmec, October 28th and 29th, 1967*, ed. Elizabeth P. Benson (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1968), 121, says: “The [three late] stelae of [La Venta] represent a radical innovation in the mode of sculpture, and in the character of its themes.” One of the altars, showing the presentation of a baby by an adult male could represent child-sacrifice (a prominent feature in Phoenician religion), or perhaps it represents an infant ancestor (Mulek?).

¹⁸Philip Drucker, “On the Nature of Olmec Polity,” in *The Olmec and Their Neighbors: Essays in Memory of Matthew W. Stirling*, ed. Elizabeth P. Benson (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1981), 44, mentions “he of the Uncle Sam chin-whiskers.” Compare John F. Scott, “Post-Olmec Mesoamerica as Revealed in Its Art,” *Actas, XLI Congreso Internacional de Americanistas, Mexico; 2–7 Sept., 1973*, vol. 2 (México, 1975), 385: A carving from El Mesón, Veracruz, and another from near there now moved to Alvarado, “show men in tall headdresses reminding one of the so-called Semitic type on late La Venta reliefs.”

¹⁹Proskouriakoff, “Olmec and Maya Art,” 122–23 also considers that “two racially distinct groups of people” are shown on Stela 3, and that “the group of the bearded stranger ultimately gained ascendancy,” hence “the culture of La Venta contained a strong foreign component.”

²⁰John L. Sorenson, “The Twig of the Cedar,” *Improvement Era* 60 (May 1957): 330–31, 338, 341–42. Reprinted as “Bible Prophecies of the Mulekites,” in *A Book of Mormon Treasury* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1959), 229–37. For more information on traditions, see John L. Sorenson, “Some Mesoamerican Traditions of Immigration by Sea,” *El México Antiguo* 8 (1955): 425–37 [México], available as FARMS Reprint SOR–55.

²¹Coriantumr was probably infirm despite the unique argument by Anthony W. Ivins in “Are the Jaredites an Extinct People?” *Improvement Era* 6 (November 1902): 43–44, that Coriantumr may have sired offspring while among the “Mulekites.”

²²Coriantumr might have been discovered by the Mulek group on or near the battleground during an exploratory probe inland as they paused briefly while coasting southward toward their final destination; in that case Coriantumr made his final move via their vessel to a landing probably near “the city of Mulek.” Other possibilities come to mind, however. One is that Coriantumr did travel by himself toward a location where he thought he might find some remnant population to give him succor. The site of the city of Mulek

in my geographical correlation, La Venta, was or had been one of the major centers of Jaredite-era settlement at this time, yet it was in a peripheral position in relation to most of the Olmec (Jaredite?) areas to the north of it. At La Venta a person like Coriantumr might hope to find people not totally caught up in the final struggle. If Coriantumr actually reached the place on his own (I estimate the distance at ninety beeline miles from Ramah but at least double that on the ground), the Mulek party could have found him almost where they abandoned their ship. It is no more than barely possible that La Venta Stela 3 was intended to picture the meeting of Mulek and Coriantumr.

Another possibility is that Mulek's group, within a few years after settling on land, set out to search through the space separating them from the final battlefield, drawn onward by the fascinatingly fresh ruins of the just-dead civilization, only to find the single survivor. Finally, it is also possible that the "Mulekites," having happened to miss seeing signs of the Jaredites on the inhospitable coastal strip of dunes and estuaries in the north—which was all they saw of the land northward—settled down in the land southward for a decade or so of intensely localized pioneering concern, essentially ignorant of the old culture, before sending out an exploring party which then happened to come across the king. (I suppose that other survivors existed, as mentioned above, but not within the disrupted, depressing area of the last wars where thousands of bodies/skeletons lay about. I think that zone must have been empty for a number of years.)

Also, the "large stone" needs to be considered in relation to this geographical puzzle. The farther south the point where Coriantumr worked that stone in his last months, the more reasonable that it could have been carried from that point to Mosiah up in Zarahemla.

²³It is not clear what is implied in descent and kinship terms by the fact that Ammon counted himself descended from Zarahemla while also considering Zeniff among his "brethren" who had gone to inherit the "land of our [Zeniff's] fathers' first inheritance" in Lehi-Nephi (Mosiah 9:1). This combination seems to imply some sort of descent for Ammon both from the Nephite ancestors and from Zarahemla. If intermarriage between Nephite and Zarahemla-descended lines was involved, however, he would hardly have counted both as signifying patriarchal descent.

²⁴See Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting*, 155–57, for a discussion of the population and size of the land at this time.

²⁵Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting*, 155–57, describes a bimodal settlement pattern which could reflect this distinction and which was found at the site of Santa Rosa, Chiapas, Mexico, which I consider the best candidate for Zarahemla; see also pages 190–91 and 315–16, on further settlement and social distinctions within the city.

Social anthropologist Meyer Fortes describes an interesting parallel to the social setting, from a modern scene, among the Tallensi in Africa:

"We were from the beginning confronted with the basic division between the Namoos, who claim to be immigrant Mamprussi by origin and have exclusive hereditary rights in an office generally glossed as the chiefship, on the one hand [compare Mosiah's Nephites], and the 'real Tallensi,' Talis as they called themselves, on the other, who claim to be the autochthonous inhabitants of the country with exclusive rights to the office of Tendaana or 'Custodian of the Earth' [compare the people of Zarahemla]. It did not take long to discover that, totally identical as were the ways of life of these two sections of the tribe, and intimately interconnected as they were by kinship, marriage, and residence, the division was deep and fundamental" ("An Anthropologist's Apprenticeship," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 7 [1978]: 8, 14–15).

²⁶Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting*, 161–65, discusses "dissensions." See also pages 195–97 on the Amlicites, whom I suggest to have been of the people of Zarahemla.

²⁷Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert, The World of the Jaredites, There Were Jaredites*, vol. 5 of *Collected Works of Hugh Nibley*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City and Provo, Utah: Deseret Book Co. and FARMS, 1988), 245. See also John A. Tvedtnes, "A Phonemic Analysis of Nephite and Jaredite Proper Names," *Society for Early Historic Archaeology, Newsletter and Proceedings* 141 (December 1977): 1–8, reprinted as FARMS Reprint TVE-77.

²⁸A careful study needs to be made to detect differences in usage in the text of the Book of Mormon among the expressions "Nephites," "people of Nephi," "people of the Nephites," and "children of Nephi." Note the puzzling use of terms in Helaman 1:1.

²⁹The name of one of the close associates of the sons of Mosiah in this business, Muloki (Alma 20:2), could mean "from Mulok (Mulek?)" or *Mulekite* in Hebrew. Meanwhile, Alma had two sons with Jaredite ("Mulekite?") names, Shiblón and Coriantón.

³⁰The seemingly anomalous Zoramite worship was actually "the virtual counterpart" to a Jewish prayer rite (*Book of Mormon Critical Text*, 2:639–40), suggesting that other religious activities that seemed scandalous to the orthodox Nephite prophets might have a similar source. Compare Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting*, 216–19.