Putting Down the Priests: A Note on Royal Evaluations, *(wĕ)hišbît,* and Priestly Purges in 2 Kings 23:5 and Mosiah 11:5

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Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are most familiar with the Hebrew root *š-b-t* in its nominal form, "Sabbath."[1] The verbal form of this root, *šābat*, means to "cease, stop,"[2] or more precisely as John H. Walton states, "it refers to the completion of a certain activity with which one has been occupied,"[3] as when God came to the end of his creative activity on the seventh day in Genesis 2:2–3. This verb in its causative (Hiphil) stem literally means "to cause to cease" — that is, "to put an end to, bring to conclusion," or "to remove, put away"[4] including in the sense of to "put down" (KJV), purge, or depose an individual from a position.

It is in this last sense that the Deuteronomistic author of 2 Kings uses a causative form of *š-b-t* in detailing King Josiah's reformation of the

priesthood in Judah as part of his sweeping cultic reform program: "**And he put down** [*wĕhišbît*] the idolatrous priests, whom the kings of Judah had ordained to burn incense in the high places" (2 Kings 23:5; emphasis in all scriptural citations is mine). In this short note, I propose that Mormon (perhaps following his source) uses the same (or a very similar) idiom in Mosiah 11:5 in precisely the sense that the Deuteronomistic writer uses it in 2 Kings 23:5 where he uses it to describe the ousting of priests ordained, sanctioned, and supported by the ascendant king's predecessor. Although a seemingly small historiographic and narratological feature of Mormon's presentation of King Noah's reign, Mormon's description of King Noah's purge using the same key verb and similar terminology as the Deuteronomistic description of King Josiah's reform appears to draw a deliberate comparison and contrast.[5] Mormon presents Noah as a negative reflection of other Nephite kings (e.g., Mosiah I, Benjamin, and Mosiah II) but also as a striking contrast to Josiah, whom the author of 2 Kings 23 lauds, "And like unto him was there no king before him, that turned to the Lord with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses; neither after him arose there any like him" (2 Kings 23:25).

In the cases of both Josiah's and Noah's accessions we see the political and organizational phenomenon of "clearing the deck" or "sweeping the room," which commonly occurs when a new leader comes to power and deposes his predecessor's advisors and middle managers. Although proceeding from evidently very different moral centers, King Josiah and King Noah both removed their respective fathers' priests in order to install priests that would be loyal to them and the programs they intended to pursue, rather than to their deceased fathers whose ways they did not intend to follow.

"He Put Down the Idolatrous Priests": King Josiah's Cult Reform

Ezekiel, a contemporary of Lehi and Nephi, uses the causative form of *š-b-t* in its most basic semantic sense when he prophesied that the Lord would destroy Egyptian cult images in Memphis: "Thus saith the Lord God; I will also destroy the idols, **and I will cause** their images **to cease** [*wĕhišbîtî*] out of Noph [Memphis]; and there shall be no more a prince of the land of Egypt: and I will put a fear in the land of Egypt" (Ezekiel 30:13). Evidence from elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible attests the use of the same verb with people as the object, where it has the sense of "remove, put away" (e.g., Amos 8:4; Psalms 8:2 [MT 3]).[6] In one of these

passages, this verb describes the removal, putting away — i.e., putting down or purging of priests by a king.

The Deuteronomistic writer who recounted Josiah's reign and reform used a verb form from the same root and stem to describe the latter's removal of priests, whom Amon, Josiah's father, and Manasseh, Josiah's grandfather, had appointed: "**And he put down** [*wĕhišbît*] **the idolatrous priests** [*ʾet-hakkĕmārîm*], whom the kings of Judah had ordained to burn incense in the high places in the cities of Judah, and in the places round about Jerusalem; them also that burned incense unto Baal, to the sun, and to the moon, and to the planets, and to all the host of heaven" (2 Kings 23:5).

The KJV's inclusion of the qualifying adjective "idolatrous" here appears to be drawn from the ritual activities of the *kĕmārîm* described later in the verse. From an etymological perspective, nothing in the Hebrew word translated "idolatrous priests" in the KJV — *kōmer* — itself suggests that it denoted the performance of idolatrous rites, though it later acquired such a connotation.[7] In Aramaic, the cognate noun *kûmrāʾ* constituted the main word for "priest."[8] Attested only three times in the Hebrew Bible, the evidence regarding the meaning of *kōmer* is scant. Hosea indicates that the *kōmer*-priest existed in the northern kingdom of Israel during the 8th century BCE: "The inhabitants of Samaria shall fear because of the calves of Beth-aven: for the people thereof shall mourn over it, and **the priests thereof** [*ûkĕmārâw* or *ûkĕmārāyw*] that rejoiced on it, for the glory thereof, because it is departed from it" (Hosea 10:5). Although the worship involving the calf images at Dan and Bethel (the latter dysphemized[9] as Beth-aven, "house of disaster/deception/nothingness/sorcery")[10] was regarded as illicit, it would have constituted a form of the worship of Jehovah (cf. Exodus 32:4, 8).[11] Those *kĕmārîm* who had been "ordained to burn incense in the high places of Judah" would have been burning incense to Jehovah, the national God. In fact, Zephaniah, whose prophetic ministry ran contemporaneously with King Josiah's reign and reform, condemns both the *kĕmārîm* and *kōhănîm* at once for their cultic practices: "I will also stretch out mine hand upon Judah, and upon all the inhabitants of Jerusalem; and I will cut off the remnant of Baal from this place, and the name of the Chemarims with the priests" (Zephaniah 1:4). Stephen Ricks and John Tvedtnes have suggested that "the term *kômer* was simply used to denote a priest who was not of the tribe of Levi, while *kôhēn* in all cases refers to a Levitical priest."[12] While they overstate the case that *kôhēn* exclusively refers to a Levitical priest (cf. Melchizedek,[13] Poti-phera,[14] Jethro,[15] etc.), they are

probably correct that *kōmer* did not originally constitute a pejorative term.

Whatever the precise meaning and referent of *kōmer/kĕmārîm,* we can firmly conclude that this term represented a type of priest, that Josiah had the royal authority to either ordain or remove such priests, and that the Deuteronomistic writer who detailed Josiah's "put[ting] down," "suppression," or "purging" (*wĕhišbît*) considered it laudable. To some it might seem a small detail that the Book of Mormon also describes a purge of priests by a new king upon his ascension to the throne. However, Mormon's use of the identical (or nearly identical) idiom to describe that purge, together with his use of the same formulaic language found in the Deuteronomistic royal evaluations of the kings of Israel and Judah, strongly suggests that Mormon was attempting to compare and contrast King Noah, not only to earlier Nephite kings, but to King Josiah in particular.

"For He Put Down All the Priests That Had Been Consecrated by His Father": King Noah's Purge

When Mormon narrates the ascension of Mosiah II to the throne in Zarahemla, he employs a formula Deuteronomistic writers and later chroniclers frequently used in ancient Israel for evaluating kings and their kingships: "And it came to pass that king Mosiah **did walk in the ways of the Lord**, and did observe his judgments and his statutes, and did keep his commandments in all things whatsoever he commanded him" (Mosiah 6:6).[16] As a formula, "walked in the way[s] of X"/"did not walk in the way[s] of X" (*wayyēlek bĕderek* X/[*lōʾ*] *hālak bĕderek* X) occurs in variations in passages such as 1 Kings 15:26, 34; 16:2, 26; 22:43, 52 [MT 53]; 2 Kings 8:18, 27; 16:3; 21:21–22; 2 Chronicles 11:17; 20:32; 21:6, 13, 22; 22:3; 28:2; 34:2 (cf. 1 Samuel 8:3; Ezekiel 23:13). In other words, Mormon appears to use this formula to evaluate kings in using the same historiographic convention as other ancient Israelite/Judahite writers. Other expressions, like "walked in all the sins of X" (1 Kings 15:3; 2 Kings 17:22) constitute iterations of the same essential formula.

When Mormon transitions from his full length quotation of Zeniff's autobiography to an abridged narrative of his son Noah's reign, he resorts to the royal evaluative formula again: "And now it came to pass that Zeniff conferred the kingdom upon Noah, one of his sons; therefore Noah began to reign in his stead; and **he did not walk in the ways of his father**" (Mosiah 11:1). The statement that Noah "did not walk in the ways of his father" levies an immediate and distinctly negative evaluation of

him as a king and of his kingship. In fact, the rest of Mormon's King Noah narrative and every mention of him thereafter can be seen, more or less, as a fleshing out of this statement. Mormon continues to use this evaluation formula in detailing the Nephite post-monarchic "reigns" or administrations with reference to some of the chief judges (Mosiah 29:43; Helaman 3:37) and even groups of people (cf. Alma 25:14), and Moroni uses it in Ether 10:2 to evaluate Shez as a righteous king. Moroni writes: "And it came to pass that Shez did remember the destruction of his fathers, and he did build up a righteous kingdom; for he remembered what the Lord had done in bringing Jared and his brother across the deep; **and he did walk in the ways of the Lord;** and he begat sons and daughters". Moroni calls Shez a "descendant of Heth," rather than his immediate son (Ether 10:1). As the sole survivor of Heth's royal household left to "build up a broken people," Shez's succession was atypical. Moroni's use of the formula leaves out Heth and his failings, instead focusing on Shez's righteousness and devotion to the Lord as a new beginning. Given these later recurrences of the formula in the Book of Mormon, it seems plausible, if not likely, that Mormon used it to evaluate earlier Nephite kings in that portion of his record that is now lost to us.

One of the features of King Noah's kingship, in view of which Mormon levies his strongly negative evaluation against him, is the purge of the priests that had been ordained or installed by his father, Zeniff, a righteous king: "Thus he had changed the affairs of the kingdom. For **he put down** [cf. Hebrew (*wĕ)hišbît*] **all the priests** [Hebrew *kol-hakkōhănîm*] that had been consecrated by his father, and consecrated new ones in their stead, such as were lifted up in the pride of their hearts. Yea, and **thus they were supported in their laziness, and in their idolatry,** and in their whoredoms, by the taxes which king Noah had put upon his people; **thus did the people labor exceedingly to support iniquity.** Yea, and they also became idolatrous … " (Mosiah 11:4–7). King Noah (King Rest) "rested" ("put down," *hišbît*) his father's priests and gave his own priests a "breastwork … **that they might rest** [*wayyannîḥû, causative of nwḥ] their bodies and their arms upon while they should speak lying and vain words to his people" (Mosiah 11:11).[17]

Mormon appears to compare and contrast King Noah's purge in Mosiah 11:5 with that of King Josiah who initiated his reform during the lifetime of Lehi. Josiah "put down" the priests whom his unrighteous father and grandfather had "ordained" (2 Kings 23:5) in an effort to suppress idolatry in Judah, and Noah "put down" the priests whom his righteous father had "consecrated" (or ordained) and consecrated his

own priests who were guilty of "idolatry" and numerous other sins. Although the final form of the book of 2 Kings (as part of a unified "Deuteronomistic History"),[18] certainly did not come about until after Judah's exile to Babylon, Mormon almost certainly had access to royal annals and other historical/chronological material on the Brass Plates of Laban, such as became a part of the biblical history. Any comparison or contrast of Josiah and Noah would have necessarily drawn on this material.

Conclusion

The Deuteronomistic Judahite historian who wrote 2 Kings 23:5 and Mormon, the Nephite historian who wrote Mosiah 11:5 both used identical — or nearly identical — verbs (and additional like terminology) to describe the purges of the priests their fathers ordained — purges that came to define their kingships. The Deuteronomistic writer used this language to positively evaluate Josiah's kingship ("And he put down [*wĕhišbît*] the idolatrous priests whom the kings of Judah had ordained"), whereas Mormon levies a negative evaluation against Noah ("for he put down [cf. Hebrew *hišbît*] all the priests that had been consecrated by his father"). Mormon's adaption and use of ancient Israelite historiographic conventions is evident in his reliance on the royal "walk/not walk in the ways of X" formula (*wayyēlek bĕderek* X/[*lōʾ*] *hālak bĕderek* X). Thus, Mormon appears to have drawn a deliberate historical contrast (or comparison) between kings Josiah and Noah. All of the foregoing data recommends Mosiah 11:11 as a significant, rather than a small historical and narratological detail in the Book of Mormon. The foregoing much more likely reflects the tendencies and concerns of ancient authors having an Israelite religious and cultural heritage who were attempting to write history, than it does the imaginative genius of a young man living in 19th century rural New York. We can thus see these historical and narrative details as additional evidence for the Book of Mormon's antiquity and authenticity.

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University of America in Washington, DC, and is currently an associate professor in religious education at Brigham Young University-Hawaii. He is also the author of Name as Key-Word: Collected Essays on Onomastic Wordplay *and* The Temple in Mormon Scripture *(Salt Lake City: Interpreter Foundation and Eborn Books, 2018). With Aaron P. Schade, he is the coauthor of* The Book of Moses: From the Ancient of Days to the Latter Days *(Provo, UT; Salt Lake City: Religious Studies Center and Deseret Book, 2021). He and his wife (the former Suzanne Blattberg) are the parents of three children: Zachariah, Nathan, and Adele.*

Endnotes

1   On "Sabbath" and other such familiar Hebrew terms, see Dana M. Pike, "Biblical Hebrew Words You Already Know and Why They Are Important," *Religious Educator* 7, no. 3 (2006): 97–114, https://rsc.byu.edu/sites/default/files/pub_content/pdf/Biblical_ Hebrew_Words_You_Already_Know_and_Why_They_Are_ Important_0.pdf.

2   Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2001), 1407. Hereafter cited as *HALOT*.

3   John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 72.

4   *HALOT*, 1408.

5   Here I would briefly note that no consensus exists among Latter-day Saint scholars on whether Josiah's cultic reforms were positive nor on whether they would have been considered positive by Lehi and Nephi and their successors. Some scholars, following the groundbreaking scholarship of Margaret Barker, view Josiah's reforms as representing something of a departure or apostasy from earlier, more pristine forms of the temple cult, to which Lehi and Nephi may have been opposed. See e.g., Kevin Christensen, "Paradigms Regained: A Survey of Margaret Barker's Scholarship and Its Significance for Mormon Studies," *FARMS Occasional Papers*, no. 2 (2001): 1–83, https://archive.bookofmormoncentral.org/content/ paradigms-regained-survey-margaret-barkers-scholarship-and-its- significance-mormon-studies; Kevin Christensen, "Prophets and

Kings in Lehi's Jerusalem and Margaret Barker's Temple Theology," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 4 (2013): 177–93, https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/prophets-and-kings-in-lehis-jerusalem-and-margaret-barkers-temple-theology/.

Other scholars see Josiah's reforms as positive, necessary corrections to corruptions that had infected the Jerusalem temple cult — reforms that Lehi, Nephi, and his successors would have viewed positively. See, e.g., William Hamblin, "Vindicating Josiah," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 4 (2013): 165–76, https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/vindicating-josiah/. Since Book of Mormon writers never explicitly mention Josiah or his reforms, Lehi's and Nephi's attitudes (and those of any of their successors) on these events must necessarily be inferred. Mormon's use of royal evaluative formulas from the brass plates similar to those Deuteronomistic writers used, and his use of the formulas in a manner similar to how the Deuteronomistic writers used them (I discuss such later in this paper) may constitute evidence that leans in favor of Lehi's and Nephi's successors regarding Josiah's reforms as positive. Nevertheless, as evidence of the latter, Mormon's use of these evaluative formulas would be far from conclusive and in any case, a more in-depth treatment of this subject is far beyond the scope of this short article. Jeffrey D. Lindsay (personal communication, 19 December 2021) raises the valid question: "[If] the annals that Mormon had regarding Josiah were not entirely written by Josiah's supporters, but from, say, sources who saw his 'putting down' of priests (and the removal of various relics from the temple) as a negative action, could it be that Mormon's apparent comparison to Josiah was not done in contrast but done to further impugn Noah's wicked actions?" If Mormon's sources were not entirely written by Josiah's supporters — uncertain, but possible — that would cast Mormon's intentions in this passage in a different light: Noah would not provide a point of contrast to Josiah, but one of direct comparison.

6   *HALOT*, 1408.

7   Mayer I. Gruber (*Hosea: A Textual Commentary* [London: Bloombury/T&T Clark, 2017], 415) writes: "Later, in both Jewish and Christian Aramaic, the noun in question [i.e., *kûmrāʾ*] came to be employed specifically to designate clergy of other religions of which the Jews

and Christians respectively did not regard as legitimate forms of the worship of the One God of Israel."

8 See, e.g., Michael Sokoloff, *A Syriac Lexicon: A Translation from the Latin, Correction, Expansion, and Update of C. Brockelmann's Lexicon Syriacum* (Winona Lake, IN; Piscataway, 2009), 608.

9 A *dysphemism* is a deliberate and sometimes systematic use of a negative name in place of — or as an alteration of — the original name. See, e.g., Marvin H. Pope, "Euphemism and Dysphemism in the Bible," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 1:720–25. For a useful analysis of this phenomenon from a Latter-day Saint perspective, see Paul Y. Hoskisson, "Dysphemisms," *Insights* 31, no. 2 (2011): 2, https://archive.bookofmormoncentral.org/content/insights-vol-31-no-2-2011. Gordon C. Thomasson ("What's in a Name? Book of Mormon Language, Names, and [Metonymic] Naming," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 3, no. 1 [1994]: 15-16, https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1029&context=jbms) shows how Zeezrom constitutes an example of this phenomenon. On the foregoing, see, "Book of Mormon Evidence: Wordplay on Zeezrom," Evidence Central (website), https://evidencecentral.org/evidence/wordplay-on-zeezrom.

10 See *HALOT*, 124. In addition to Hosea 10:5, see also Joshua 7:2; 18:12; 1 Samuel 13:5; 14:23; Hosea 4:15; 5:8. On the meaning of ʾāwen in bêt-ʾāwen, see *HALOT,* 22.

11 Cf. Paul Y. Hoskisson, "Aaron's Golden Calf," *FARMS Review* 18, no. 1 (2006): 375–85, https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1669&context=msr.

12 Stephen D. Ricks and John A. Tvedtnes, "The Hebrew Origin of Some Book of Mormon Place Names," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 6, no. 2 (1997): 257, https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1177&context=jbms.

13 Melchizedek is described as a *kōhēn* in Genesis 14:18 (cf. JST Genesis 14:17, 27; Hebrews 5:10; 7:1 [JST Hebrews 7:3]).

14 Joseph marries Asenath, daughter of Poti-phera, priest of On. See Genesis 41:45, 50; 46:20.

15 Jethro is described as "the priest of Midian" in Exodus 2:16; 3:1; 18:1 (cf. JST Exodus 18:1).

16 Book of Mormon citations will follow Royal Skousen, ed., *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

17 On the pejorative wordplay on the name *Noah* evident in Mosiah 11:5–6, 11, see Matthew L. Bowen, "'This Son Shall Comfort Us': An Onomastic Tale of Two Noahs," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 23 (2017): 279–82, https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/this-son-shall-comfort-us-an-onomastic-tale-of-two-noahs /.

18 See Martin Noth, *The Deuteronomistic History*, JSOTSup 15 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1981). German original: Martin Noth, *Uberlieferungsgeschichtliche Studien* (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1943).