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Nephite Trade Networks and the Dangers of a Class Society

14

Allen J. Christenson

The first century before the birth of Christ witnessed a turning point in ancient Nephite society. Remarkable social and economic changes took place which transformed the people's way of life. The book of Helaman and the first chapters of 3 Nephi describe it as a time in which pride and the desire for riches brought the Nephites to the very brink of disaster. One of the significant causes of this sad state of affairs was the establishment of elaborate trade networks with the express purpose of accumulating wealth and power. This in turn stimulated the rise of a class society and the desire among those of noble lineages to reinstitute kingship to control international trade. Many of the social and religious crises described in the Book of Mormon during this period were connected with the sudden increase in wealth made possible by these new long-distance trade relationships.

Nephite prophets opposed this emphasis on wealth among the newly-rich upper classes. As a result, the Church came under attack because of its opposition to the economic privileges of the wealthy. The Gadianton Society was founded about the same time and took advantage of these developments to usurp power and material gain. The profound danger inherent in these events was recognized by the prophet Mormon, who identified

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the Gadianton Robbers as the primary cause for the eventual overthrow of the Nephite people (Hel 2:13).

The Establishment of Trade Networks

Few communities are blessed with all the resources and skills necessary to be successful in isolation from their neighbors. Trade with other areas is therefore often necessary to obtain goods not available locally. Many valued resources, particularly rare and exotic ones, can be obtained often only over great distances, thus stimulating the creation of a network of communities in close economic cooperation. Communities participating in such trade networks are also presented with unprecedented opportunities for obtaining wealth.

There is nothing inherently wrong with international trade. During the two centuries of righteousness following the visit of the resurrected Jesus Christ to the Americas, the people once known as Nephites and Lamanites grew and prospered together, becoming “exceedingly rich, because of their prosperity in Christ” (4 Nephi 1:23). As outlined in the books of Helaman and 3 Nephi, the problem was not that the Nephites engaged in long-distance trade relationships, but that they used the profits to create a new elite class which placed itself above those with less wealth and sought to deprive them of their liberty (Hel 3:36; 6:17, 39; 3 Nephi 6:11–14).

The establishment of long-distance trade networks appeared among the Lamanites under the influence of such Nephite dissenters as Amulon, who encouraged the establishment of trade to increase his own prestige and wealth:

And thus the Lamanites began to increase in riches, and began to trade one with another and wax great, and began to be a cunning and a wise people, as to the wisdom of the world, yea, a very cunning people. (Mosiah 24:7)

The sixth chapter of the book of Helaman describes this same trend beginning among the Nephites as the trade networks grew to include both the Nephite and Lamanite nations:

And behold, there was peace in all the land, insomuch that the Nephites did go into whatsoever part of the land they would, whether among the Nephites or the Lamanites. And it came to pass that the Lamanites did also go withersoever they would, whether it were among the Lamanites or among the Nephites; and thus they did have free intercourse one with another, to buy and to sell, and to get gain, according to their desire. (Hel 6:7-8)

International trade on this scale requires that free trade alliances be set up, not only between communities engaged directly in the exchange system, but also with those which happen to occupy strategic positions along the trade routes. With trade routes opening up throughout Book of Mormon lands, the Nephites would have been under a tremendous amount of pressure to participate.

Such a complicated system of foreign trade involving large populations which had only recently been mortal enemies would also tend to stimulate the growth of a bureaucracy to negotiate alliances and administer laws governing the peaceful exchange of goods. Such a system is described by the Book of Mormon in the years just prior to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ: "For there were many merchants in the land, and also many lawyers, and many officers" (3 Nephi 6:11).

Development of a Socially Stratified Society

International trade requires an efficient organization to ensure the reliable flow of goods over long-distance trade routes. As a result, communities which participate in international trade tend to build comparatively large, centralized city-states with a bureaucracy of wealthy and powerful merchants and officials. Those who oversee these lucrative trade activities rapidly form a new elite class, and this leads to a gap in wealth between those who participate in the trade of expensive items and those who do not (Sanders and Price 131).

The majority of ancient trade agreements undoubtedly involved such necessary items as improved grains, regional foods, wood and other building materials, or specialized stone

for tools. Certain trade items called sumptuaries, however, were exchanged only between those in charge of the international exchange network. For the most part they were small objects of great value which were easily transportable over long distances (Price 240). Sumptuaries served as the elite person's reward for organizing and overseeing the exchange. In general, sumptuary goods such as gold, silver, jade, or fine cloth had little inherent use other than to emphasize the owner's high status and power. The exchange of status items contributed to the ever-increasing wealth and prestige of the elite merchants. Sumptuary goods are found almost exclusively in palace-type residences or royal tombs, places that are clearly elite. They are seldom, if ever, found within the simpler dwellings or graves of peasant farmers.

As is characteristic of ancient cultures, the accumulation of wealth through foreign trade within Nephite society also stimulated the rise of an elite class based on wealth:

And the people began to be distinguished by ranks, according to their riches and their chances for learning, yea, some were ignorant because of their poverty, and others did receive great learning, because of their riches. (3 Nephi 6:12)

This Nephite elite class may be compared to the later Aztec Indian *pochtecas*, or merchant nobles. Those *pochtecas* enjoyed the opportunity for similar special status within their communities, having exclusive control over valuable trade resources (Adams 34). Like members of the Nephite upper class, the children of the *pochtecas* were better educated, having their own private schools. Rulers and state-supported priests were chosen exclusively from the nobility and were allowed to worship in temples which were otherwise prohibited to the lower classes (Adams 40). Each noble rank in Aztec society carried with it certain items of dress and jewelry which outwardly displayed the rank's wealth and prestige. Sahagún, a priest serving in Mexico during the early sixteenth century, related the speech of one such Aztec merchant who listed the exclusive items of dress and adornment enjoyed by his fellow *pochtecas*:

And behold the property which we shall have merited . . . these amber lip plugs, and curved, green ear pendants with bells, and black staves, and crested guan feather fans. And behold our netted capes and our netted breech clouts, all our possessions, our goods, which will be witnesses of our valor. None . . . who did not suffer with us, may take them. It will be our exclusive privilege. (4)

The Institution of Monarchy

At the top of the social hierarchy in ancient societies was a king, or other titled ruler, who administered the movement of goods along trade networks. Investing power in a single individual greatly facilitated the operation of intergroup exchanges. Unless a state was ruled by an individual powerful enough to strictly control trade relationships, negotiate international economic and social alliances, and enforce impartial justice in the flow of goods from place to place, foreign merchants could not function effectively (McVicker 188).

To rule also implied the opportunity to obtain a degree of wealth inconceivable in a closed society without such international contacts. The rarest and most prized sumptuary goods were exchanged only between rulers as payment for their participation in the exchange network. The greater the extent of the network and the volume of goods traded, the greater the accumulation of valuable sumptuary goods in the hands of the king.

Considering the opportunity for wealth, it is not surprising that the traditional nobility of Nephite society would desire to control it so as to enhance their own prestige. The book of Helaman makes it clear that the position of head of government implied the opportunity to obtain “gain and glory of the world” (Hel 7:4–5). Therefore, at the very time that the trade networks began to spread in Nephite and Lamanite lands, there arose within the ranks of the nobility a strong desire to set up a king.

Those who supported the establishment of a king in Nephite lands called themselves “king-men” and repeatedly sought to bring down the system of judges in the land (Alma

51:5–8; Alma 61:8; Hel 7:4–5; 3 Nephi 3:10; 3 Nephi 6:30; 7:1, 12). The king-men claimed noble descent and thus elite privileges. They were eager to seize the government in order to control the lucrative trade system with other elite groups. As a result, they often sought alliances with the kingdom of the Lamanites, with whom they undoubtedly wished to establish profitable economic ties (Alma 35:2–11; 48:2; 61:8).

Contemporary New World Trade Systems

It is important to understand such developments in their proper historical context. Although it is not known where specific Book of Mormon events took place, it is profitable to study the cultures of ancient America which would have been contemporary with the Nephites and Lamanites to determine how similar trade networks developed and affected their societies.

Parallel to Book of Mormon history, the first century before Christ was a crucial time in the economic and social development of ancient American societies. During that century the relatively simple farming communities of Mexico and Central America began to develop new and powerful elite merchant classes which accumulated expensive luxury goods through a complicated system of long-distance trade networks. To control the delicate economic relationships among foreign powers effectively, these communities instituted the practice of kingship. This astonishingly sudden change in Mesoamerican society appeared almost simultaneously over a large area of thousands of square miles of territory, forming a vast network of developing states engaged in economic cooperation and competition on an unprecedented scale.

Kaminaljuyu, Guatemala

The importance of trade as the economic basis for these changes in Mesoamerican society can be seen in the dramatic

rise in the wealth and status of Kaminaljuyu, located in the highlands of Guatemala. In the period just prior to the birth of Christ, contemporary with the books of Alma and Helaman, Kaminaljuyu became for the first time a true regional power controlling a far-flung network of international trade relations. The relatively simple farming community which had previously occupied the site was displaced by increasingly wealthy elite groups. Most houses belonging to the lower classes were destroyed and rebuilt outside the central precinct to make room for the needs of the expanding upper class (Michels 151). These elite households were significantly richer in construction and were supported by low-lying platforms to artificially elevate them above the surrounding courts. The few lower class houses found in the city apparently belonged to servants and laborers of the wealthy.

The importance of Kaminaljuyu as a trade center may be explained both by its fortunate position at the cross-roads of several major trade routes and by its control of important local commodities. Many areas of southern Mesoamerica lack certain essential resources, such as hard stones and obsidian for making grinding and cutting tools, mineral salt, and fine clay for making pottery. These items were necessary to maintain the agricultural way of life led by most of the area's ancient inhabitants. As a result, they had to be obtained through trade, sometimes over great distances. Kaminaljuyu was blessed with plentiful sources of all these items and was situated in a commanding position to control the movement of goods from the Pacific Coast and other potential sources for desirable trade goods (Parsons 5).

The status and power of Kaminaljuyu's upper class was based on their control over the area's resources and trade contacts. All elite households were engaged in the production of sumptuary goods for trade during this period, whereas no non-elite dwelling was used for that purpose (Michels 151, 161, 163). Workshops have been identified which were engaged in the production of ritual and luxury pottery, jade, steatite, colorful mineral pigments, quartz crystal, mica sheets, and cacao

beans (chocolate). The exclusive nature of such valuable items emphasized the prestige of the elite household.

As mentioned above, a characteristic of developing international trade centers is the appearance of a powerful king to administer the complexities of foreign trade negotiations. At Kaminaljuyu the expansion of trade was accompanied by a corresponding rise in the power of its ruler. Carved stone monuments, called stelae, progressively emphasized a single standing king dressed in elaborate royal regalia which visually displayed his wealth and status (Parsons 96).

A good example of such a monument at Kaminaljuyu is Stela 11. This stone carving depicts a ruler standing beneath the image of a feathered serpent deity, the most important god of the Guatemalan highlands. The royal status of the individual is marked by his jade ear ornaments and by the tree growing from his headdress, representing the great "Tree of Life" which was believed to stand at the center of the cosmos (Schele and Miller 108-09). By wearing this tree, the ruler declared himself to be the axis around which the universe revolved. He also wears the head of the serpent-bird as a mask, indicating his power as representative of that god on earth.

The kings at Kaminaljuyu attained unprecedented levels of wealth and prestige during this period as demonstrated by their tombs. Structure 5 seems to have been the preferred royal burial site during the first century BC. It was the largest structure at Kaminaljuyu, originally measuring over 20 meters in height, and approximately 70 meters by 90 meters at its base. Its importance is evident not only by its tremendous size, but also by its position at the center of a cluster of smaller temples and elite platform dwellings (Michels 145).

The royal burial designated as Tomb 1 was dug into the top floor of this temple-pyramid in a series of terraces to form a rectangular chamber. The king buried within this tomb was surrounded by a wealth of offerings and gifts, including finely carved imported stone vessels. These were heaped all around the body and against the tomb walls until no further space was

available. The importance of the king's foreign trade contacts is evident in the numerous offering vessels which are of foreign origin or inspiration (Kidder, Jennings, and Shook 68–69). Also found within the chamber was the skeleton of an adult male, apparently sacrificed to attend the king on his long journey to the hereafter. The practice of human sacrifice further emphasized the ruler's prestigious status.

Lowland Maya

The Maya Indians of the lowland forest region of Guatemala and Belize were on the opposite end of this system of international trade. Their lands lacked such fundamentally important resources as stone for grinding grain, obsidian for making cutting tools and weapons, and mineral salt for preserving meat and fish. As a result, the inhabitants of the region were forced to obtain these necessary items from foreign sources through long-distance trade. The very survival of the expanding population of the lowland Maya area depended on an efficient system of obtaining these goods.

In the first century BC, when the international trade network was spreading at a rapid rate throughout Mesoamerica, the lowland Maya enthusiastically joined in. In fact, they may have been one of the principal groups which fostered its remarkable success, providing an outlet for the exportation of goods from such communities as Kaminaljuyu (Jones 11; see also Parsons 5). Emphasis on long-distance trade led to the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few merchants and rulers, and this soon led to the development of economically divided classes. Eighty-nine percent of elite burials in the central Maya area contained valuable imported goods, while only eighteen percent of commoner burials showed evidence of foreign items of any kind, none of which could be considered sumptuaries (Rathje, Gregory, and Wiseman 166). Because of the ritual nature of most elite items, their use was restricted to Maya royal families, as well as those members of the upper class which entered into a supportive, covenant relationship with the king.

Approximately a dozen kingdoms developed in the lowland Maya area in the first century before Christ. At each of these sites, simple village populations that had been stable for hundreds of years were moved into new lower class slum areas. The abandoned dwellings of the poor were then levelled and replaced with huge temple and palace structures. This massive building program transformed the economic and social fabric of the region for the next thousand years. As new kingdoms grew and proliferated, free territories either joined the growing network of economically-interconnected states or were swallowed up by it (Schele and Friedel 59–60).

These new kingdoms emphasized their power not only through the impressive size of their architecture, but also in the use of temple façades adorned with images of royal authority. Linda Schele and Mary Ellen Miller note: “These huge architectural projects and the strategies of political control they embody must have been created to defend an elite class in a ranked, complex social structure” (105). The royal symbols associated with the images decorating Maya temples appear to have been borrowed to some extent from Kaminaljuyu, an important trade partner (Parsons 5, 77). As at Kaminaljuyu, Maya art began to depict kings wearing clothing indicating their elite rank, wealth, and prestige. One of the earliest dated Maya monuments is the Hauberg Stela, portraying the accession of an early king. He stands beneath a huge serpent god, similar to the feathered-serpent deity depicted in the art of Kaminaljuyu. A symbolic tree arches from his right shoulder toward the ground, identifying the king as a manifestation of the sacred “Tree of Life,” the divine center of the cosmos.

Cerros, Belize

The Maya community of Cerros, located in northern Belize, was one of the first to join this growing network of Mesoamerican trade centers and to adopt a stratified society headed by a king. Cerros’ experiment in kingship and interna-

tional economic trade was brief, lasting perhaps only a century, from 50 BC to approximately AD 50. As a result, the effects of new wealth from international trade may be studied here without the imposition of later developments obscuring the archaeological record.

Prior to the first century BC, Cerros was a typical Maya fishing and farming community, consisting of a small group of simple adobe and thatch dwellings. Its location on the tip of a peninsula on Chetumal Bay made it an attractive site as an international trade center. It had ready access to coastal traffic from the Yucatan Peninsula to the north as well as other Maya coastal communities to the south. It also stood at the mouth of a major river leading inland to the Maya heartland. As the Mesoamerican trade network expanded, Cerros rapidly grew into an important way-station for the movement of goods by boat between the coast and the interior. One of the first constructions evident at the site was a docking facility (Weaver 146).

When Cerros began to rise to an important position within the international exchange network, its tiny rude huts were demolished to make room for a more impressive ceremonial and civic center. Peasant families moved away to rebuild their homes in an area ringing what had been the village center. David Freidel, who excavated the site, was impressed by the abrupt appearance of a class society during this phase:

The amount of wealth and rank a family possessed suddenly became strikingly apparent in the type of new home they could afford to construct. Some individuals were able to build their new houses on raised platforms of considerable size, while other families lived on small platforms, and still others had homes at ground level. (Schele and Friedel 119–20)

After the site was leveled, a layer of clean white earth mixed with imported jade jewelry, as well as offerings of water lilies and other flowers was spread over the ruins. A foundation of flat hard stones was then placed on the site to support an impressive new temple, Structure 5C-2nd, built in a style typical

of the period in other newly-founded Maya royal centers. The temple had a broad stairway leading to a small sanctuary on top supported by four wooden columns representing the World Trees which the Maya believed stood at the cardinal points of the universe, spanning the heavens (Schele and Friedel 107, 109). Flanking the stairway were four huge stucco masks which had identical royal ear ornaments as those adorning the feathered serpent deity on Altar 10 at Kaminaljuyu (Parsons 77). The masks to the left of the stairway represented the rising sun and Venus and those to the right the setting sun and Venus, both symbols of kingship in Maya theology. A platform was built on the stairway located between these masks where a ruler could stand or conduct public ceremonies surrounded by the celestial symbols of his divine rule. It was a dramatic visual declaration of the king's position as the overseer of cosmic order.

An even larger pyramid temple was built to the east of Structure 5C-2nd which supported a royal tomb chamber. No king was ever buried here, however. Soon after the tomb was constructed, the institution of kingship, class differentiation, and monumental architecture ceased at Cerros. Great fires were lit around the masks decorating the temples and layers of white clay were spread over the ashes. Valuable imported jade ornaments, undoubtedly belonging to the nobility, were smashed and mixed with the clay. The ceremonial center was then abandoned and its inhabitants resumed their lives as simple fishermen and farmers.

The failure of Cerros' kingship and class differentiation was apparently economic, just as was its inception. Not long after Cerros became a kingdom, the inland Maya trade centers began a campaign to dominate the overland trade routes to the north, thus bypassing the necessity of transporting goods upriver from its port (Weaver 147). As a result, the position of Cerros as an intermediate trade center came to an abrupt end. Without the need to administer the complexities of international trade and without access to the wealth it had briefly provided,

the elite hierarchy quickly collapsed. This dramatically demonstrates the link between the rise and fall of elite classes and long-distance trade profits.

Struggle for Power of Elite Classes Within Nephite Society

It is not known what the poorer classes of ancient America thought of these economic trends. Within Nephite society, however, prophets counselled against class-based societies, the institution of kingship, the establishment of priestcraft, and the accumulation of wealth. Consequently, the Church constituted a threat to the new economic order.

Religion and commerce were not independent concepts in ancient trading societies. Not only were the peasant classes denied access to lucrative foreign trade, they were also banned in most communities from participating in elite religious rituals and institutions. It has already been shown that in ancient America, temple precincts were established in central areas set aside for the exclusive use of the elite classes. This brings to mind the Zoramites, who discriminated against their poor forbidding them to worship on their temple towers:

Behold, what shall these my brethren do, for they are despised by all men because of their poverty, yea, and more especially by our priests; for they have cast us out of our synagogues which we have labored abundantly to build with our own hands; and they have cast us out because of our exceeding poverty; and we have no place to worship our God. (Alma 32:5)

The king-men under Amalickiah specifically attacked the Church as a threat to their plans for power (Alma 46:10). This situation only worsened with time. Shortly before the appearance of the resurrected Savior in the New World, apostate high priests attempted to set up a king in alliance with officials who were in a position to administer the government's economic policies (3 Nephi 6:27, 30). As a result, the Church as a moderating social influence was effectively destroyed:

And thus there became a great inequality in all the land, insomuch that the church began to be broken up; yea, insomuch that in the thirtieth year the church was broken up in all the land save it were among a few of the Lamanites who were converted unto the true faith. (3 Nephi 6:14)

Rise of Secret Societies

The establishment of international trade was not always a peaceful process. In addition to a system of mutually-cooperative trade alliances, a number of ancient American societies found it desirable to engage in plunder and warfare as an instrument of state economic policy. Trade served in many cases as a pretext to conquest. An example of such a warlike state in the first century BC was Monte Albán, a fortified mountain sanctuary in the state of Oaxaca, Mexico. In addition to far-reaching trade contacts, including Kaminaljuyu, Monte Albán practiced a systematic campaign of conquest to control its trade routes and ensure its economic strength through forced tribute collection.

Building J, constructed on the Main Plaza of Monte Albán, served as a monument to the city's military victories. It was decorated with over 50 carved stones depicting towns and villages defeated by its armies. From 100 BC to AD 100, Monte Albán was able to conquer an area of some 30,000 square kilometers (Marcus 137).

As described in the Book of Mormon, the formation of trade networks for the accumulation of wealth was also accompanied by the rise of violent groups such as the Gadianton Robbers who sought control for personal gain. The Gadianton Society was a far more powerful and complex group than their description as robbers implies. They often commanded huge armies capable of defying the armed forces of both the Nephite and Lamanite nations (Hel 11:32; 3 Nephi 2:11–13; 4:1). They laid entire cities to waste (3 Nephi 2:11). Despite a military alliance with the Lamanites, the Nephites were threatened with total destruction by Gadianton forces (3 Nephi 2:13).

The motivation of the Gadiantons was primarily economic and tied to the new-found wealth flowing into Nephite society through international trade. They therefore operated both among the Nephites and the Lamanite kingdoms to the south:

Therefore they began to set their hearts upon their riches; yea, they began to seek to get gain that they might be lifted up one above another; therefore they began to commit secret murders, and to rob and to plunder, that they might get gain. . . . And now it had come to pass that there were many, even among the Nephites, of Gadianton's band. But behold, they were more numerous among the more wicked part of the Lamanites. And they were called Gadianton's robbers and murderers. (Hel 6:17–18)

The establishment of an elitist society led by a powerful king is characteristic of ancient communities participating in foreign trade networks. Seizure of the reigns of government was thus an essential part of Gadianton strategy in controlling wealth (Hel 7:5). From the first appearance of the Gadianton Society in the Book of Mormon record, the chief aim of their founders, such as Gadianton and Kishkumen, was to obtain power and wealth by political control (Hel 1:9, 2:8; 6:15,18–19; 9:6). When they succeeded in usurping the leadership of the Nephite nation, they quickly moved to adopt a class-differentiated society based on wealth and priestcraft:

And thus they did obtain the sole management of the government, insomuch that they did trample under their feet and smite and rend and turn their backs upon the poor and the meek, and the humble followers of God. (Hel 6:39)

The Book of Mormon specifically describes the Gadiantons themselves as engaging in the trade networks so as to more directly control the source of obtaining power and riches:

And it came to pass that the robbers of Gadianton did spread over all the face of the land. . . . And gold and silver did they lay up in store in abundance, and did traffic in all manner of traffic. (4 Nephi 1:46)

So great was the appeal of this system of accumulating wealth that the majority of the Nephite people at various times chose

to participate in their system of trade, murder, and political intrigue (Hel 6:21, 38).

Conclusion

The century prior to the arrival of Jesus Christ in the New World was a time of great economic and social changes among the Nephites and Lamanites. One of the most significant motivating factors for these changes was the establishment of far-reaching international trade which provided the means of amassing an unprecedented amount of wealth. This desire for gain resulted in the progressive rise of new elite classes and a renewed interest in setting up kings to oversee the conduct of foreign trade. Although this trend was vigorously opposed by the prophets of the Church the opportunity for gain often proved too great a temptation for the Nephite nation. The rapid rise to prominence of "robber" societies such as the Gadiantons serves to emphasize the powerful lure of the profitable trade system. As a result, the Nephite people were under tremendous pressure to alter their society to conform with the new economic realities of their homeland, to abandon the economically inefficient system of rule by judges, and to allow the rise of an elite class enriched by the spoils of imported wealth. Only the destruction of the wicked prior to the visit of the resurrected Jesus Christ to the Americas ended this dangerous trend. His visit created a society which "had all things common among them; therefore there were not rich and poor, bond and free, but they were all made free, and partakers of the heavenly gift" (4 Nephi 1:3).

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