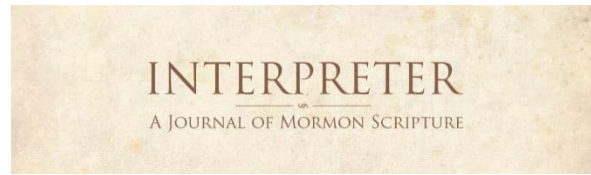




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Nephite Insights into Israelite Worship Practices before the Babylonian Captivity

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A. Keith Thompson

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NEPHITE INSIGHTS INTO ISRAELITE WORSHIP PRACTICES BEFORE THE BABYLONIAN CAPTIVITY

A. Keith Thompson

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Introduction

In his seminal historiographical review of American culture, David Hackett Fischer has observed that emigrants are often more loyal to the folkways of their motherland than those left behind.¹ By retaining their old speech ways, their building ways, their family ways, their marriage ways, their gender ways, their

1. D. H. Fischer, *Albion's Seed* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989). Brian Barry has also observed "that diasporas are liable to be culturally conservative, clinging to ways of behaving that have been abandoned in their countries of origin, Brian Barry, *Culture and Equality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 57.

sex ways, their child-rearing ways, their naming ways, their age ways, their death ways, their religious ways, and so forth,² those striking out in a new world retain their identity and sense of well being in part through loyalty to their home country culture. Indeed Fischer suggests that “the four large waves of English-speaking immigrants”³ who came to “the present area of the United States . . . from 1629 to 1775”⁴ in many respects preserved their cultural folkways more faithfully than those left behind. Certainly, their cultures were also changed,⁵ but in what became the United States, speech patterns,⁶ intellectual obsessions,⁷ and varieties of religious belief⁸ “persisted long after they had been forgotten in the mother country”⁹ and “long after England had moved beyond them.”¹⁰

Can Fischer’s new approach to historical research assist our understanding of Israelite worship practices before the Babylonian captivity? The questions about when synagogal worship began in Judaism are legend. Is it possible that the Nephite record can shed light upon that vexed question because the Nephites more faithfully preserved pre-exilic worship practices than did the captives in Babylon whose circumstances forced them to adapt more quickly and completely? Fischer says he has sought “a new answer to an old problem about the relationship between the past and the present.”¹¹ “[E]very period of the past, when understood in its own terms, is immediate to the present.”¹² His effort was to write a cultural history that braided

2. Fischer, *Albion’s Seed*, 8–9.

3. Fischer, *Albion’s Seed*, 6.

4. Fischer, *Albion’s Seed*.

5. For example, Fischer, *Albion’s Seed*, 262–63.

6. Fischer, *Albion’s Seed*, 259–60.

7. Fischer, *Albion’s Seed*, 803.

8. Fischer, *Albion’s Seed*, 117.

9. Fischer, *Albion’s Seed*, 803.

10. Fischer, *Albion’s Seed*.

11. Fischer, *Albion’s Seed*, x.

12. Fischer, *Albion’s Seed*.

together pure historical narrative and the cultural values and individual purposes which drove events in the past.¹³ Fischer is modest, but essentially he suggests that cultural historiography is what Thomas Kuhn and Michael Foucault might have called a thought revolution.¹⁴ It requires a paradigm shift to splice all manner of culture into traditional historical narrative. But the resulting picture is much more faithful to the reality than were the simpler purely narrative approaches to history in the past.

Origins of the Synagogue

General historical consensus acknowledges that synagogues originated before the destruction of the Second Temple in AD 70 and therefore during the Babylonian captivity when faithful Jews could no longer worship at their Temple in Jerusalem.¹⁵ However, archaeological remains of synagogues have been found in Egypt dating to the 3rd century BC and near Jericho during the Hasmonean era in the 1st century BC which means that it is possible that synagogues have a much earlier origin in Israelite history.

13. Fischer, *Albion's Seed*, xi.

14. Fischer, *Albion's Seed*, vii.

15. See for example, *Academon*, 13 March 2005, "Origins of the Synagogue", <http://www.academon.com/Essay-Origins-of-the-Synagogue/56613> where it is stated: "One tradition dates the origin of the synagogue to the Babylonian exile of the 6th century B.C., assuming that the returnees brought back the basic structure that was to be developed by the 1st century A.D. 'into a well-defined institution around which Jewish religious, intellectual, and communal life was to be centered from this earliest period into the present' (Synagogue Pp). Others believe that the synagogue originated after the Hasmonean revolt, 167–164 B.C., as a Pharisaic alternative to the Temple cult (Synagogue Pp)."

Runesson, Binder, and Olsson attribute the idea that the institution of the synagogue "had its beginnings in the Babylonian exile as a replacement for the lost temple cult" to Sigonius in the 16th century (Anders Runesson, Donald D. Binder, and Birger Olsson, *The Ancient Synagogue from its Origins to 200 C.E.* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 6.

During the last decade, Don Binder¹⁶ and Anders Runesson¹⁷ have collected and summarized the many theories which have been advanced to explain the origin of the synagogue. They agree that some of the older theories propose much earlier origins than are considered by recent theorists, but that is because most of the recent research has focused on the evolution of the later synagogue's unique Torah-reading liturgy.

Runesson opines that the Torah-reading liturgy was a product of the Persian colonial period,¹⁸ and that the Persian approach to stability in conquered provinces was to use or resurrect institutions that had been destroyed or suppressed by their Babylonian predecessors and to promote their new colonial legal system through those institutions.¹⁹ The existing Jewish custom of reading the law simply needed to be enhanced to achieve Persian purposes²⁰ but gradually hardened into a formal institution in the hands of the Rabbis. This understanding also explains why Cyrus famously allowed Ezra and Nehemiah to return from Babylon to Israel and rebuild the Temple²¹ and, eventually, Jerusalem's city walls.²² But it is arguable that this theory does not adequately recognize the idea which originated in the 19th century that Josiah's earlier reforms to centralize sacrificial worship in Jerusalem in the late 7th century were

16. Donald D. Binder, *Into the Temple Courts: The Place of the Synagogues in the Second Temple Period* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature), 1999.

17. Anders Runesson, *The Origins of the Synagogue: A Socio-Historical Study* (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell 2001).

18. Runesson, *Origins of the Synagogue*, 261–95.

19. Runesson, *Origins of the Synagogue*, 264–65, 271.

20. Runesson, *Origins of the Synagogue*, 274–75.

21. Runesson, *Origins of the Synagogue*, 271.

22. Runesson, *Origins of the Synagogue*, 278, where Runesson notes that although Artaxerxes initially stopped the reconstruction of the city walls, when he later wished to strengthen this province against an Egyptian rebellion, he “authoris[ed] the fortification of the city and the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem.”

ultimately successful and account for the abolition of sacrifice outside Jerusalem in what remained of Joshua's Israel.²³

Binder's focus, following and developing Levine's theory, has been to show that the synagogue grew out of the Jewish practice of conducting all business at the city gates.²⁴ Synagogues were public buildings that developed when city-gate architecture changed and as the cities and villages of Israel became affluent enough to afford the construction of monumental buildings.

There are many other theories of synagogue origins, but nearly all those which are the subject of current research are focused on identifying where the distinctive rabbinic liturgies practised in the later synagogue came from.²⁵ There are enduring conundrums surrounding whether synagogues ever included sacrifice in their rituals, and if they did, when and why that ceased;²⁶ whether synagogues were extensions of the Jerusalem temple or whether they were created by groups who opposed efforts to centralize sacrificial worship; whether pro-seuchai or prayer houses included sacrificial liturgies; whether they are properly seen as synagogues or whether they are an entirely different institution; and how and when the high places which were historically used for sacrificial worship were used after the construction of the First Temple and whether they resumed their functions after the First Temple was destroyed.

Deuteronomic Redaction

Synagogue origins research is complicated by the work of the so-called Deuteronomic redactors. Beginning in the 19th

23. Runesson, *Origins of the Synagogue*, 99–109 where Runesson explains this theory but does not believe that Josiah's reforms were successful (109, 260).

24. Binder, *Into the Temple Courts*, 204–26. Binder and Levine are not alone in proposing this theory. Runesson notes three other scholars of the same mind (Low, Silber, and Hoenig; Runesson, *Origins of the Synagogue*, 89).

25. Runesson, *Origins of the Synagogue*, 193–96.

26. Runesson, *Origins of the Synagogue*, 436–55.

century, Old Testament scholars have considered that the Old Testament books of Deuteronomy through Kings that have come down to us in the King James Bible and other translations, are not in original form. That insight is not new to Latter-day Saints who have always been taught that many plain and precious parts have been taken away from the Bible (1 Nephi 13:28) and accordingly that we only believe the Bible to be the word of God as far as it is translated correctly (Articles of Faith 8). But the scholarship surrounding Deuteronomistic redaction has become quite explicit. The most benign version of “the redaction theory” holds that the original chronicles now covered by our books of Deuteronomy through Kings are simply the result of earlier abridgment. Some theorists suggest there has been more than one abridgment. But most redaction theorists are agreed that the abridgments were not completely benign. That is, those who did the abridgments had agendas beyond providing posterity with a faithful historical record.

The Book of Mormon certainly contributes to this discussion since it is clear that the Nephites sought to comply with the Mosaic law, including the offering of sacrifices, until Christ taught them that He had fulfilled that law including its requirement of sacrifices (3 Nephi 9:17–22). The Book of Mormon also records that synagogues were built by the Nephites (Alma 16:13), the Lamanites (Alma 26:29), the Zoramites (Alma 31:12), and the Amalekites (Alma 21:4, 6), meaning perhaps that there were at least three different ways in which one civilization of people in Ancient America tried to live the law of Moses. It is also noteworthy that Lehi built an altar and offered sacrifice three days into his journey south from Jerusalem around 600 BC (1 Nephi 2:7), and that he again offered sacrifice after his sons returned successfully from their expedition to recover the brass plates (1 Nephi 5:9), and when they returned to Lehi’s camp with Ishmael’s family (1 Nephi 7:22). That raises interesting questions about the reasons for his departure within 40

years after Josiah's reforms, which are generally recognized to have outlawed sacrifice other than at the Temple in Jerusalem.²⁷

If there was no contact between the Old and New Worlds after Lehi left Jerusalem, so that the Book of Mormon provides a "time capsule" view of the synagogue in 600 BC, is there sufficient material in the Book of Mormon to enable us to identify the synagogue practice that Lehi and his party brought with them? Did the merger of the Nephite and Mulekite civilizations under Mosiah₁ around 150 BC change the previous synagogue practice of either group? Did the likely 12–15 year gap between the Nephite and Mulekite departures from Jerusalem, or the fact that the Nephites had records and the Mulekites did not, make any difference to their worship practices? Were the worship practices of the two groups the same, since Lehi may have purposely distanced himself from the orthodoxy of Zedekiah's court, which likely came with Mulek's group? Or did other differences evolve during the 400 plus years which passed before the two groups merged in the New World? Is the distinction between temples, sanctuaries, and synagogues in the Nephite record a distinction which has any reference points in the older theories about the origin of the synagogue? And is the apparent prohibition on sacrifice in synagogues a practice that is respected in the Nephite practice? If so, since we know from Benjamin's valedictory conference that the Nephites practised sacrifice at their temples (Mosiah 2:3), were there other places where sacrifices were performed by the Nephites or did they follow Josiah's orthodoxy and proscribe sacrifice elsewhere? Did the Nephites ever ritually read from their Torah-equivalent scriptures, or is the absence of this ritual among them proof that Torah-reading liturgies did evolve later as Runesson and others have proposed?

27. For further discussion of some of the reasons why Lehi may have been required to leave Jerusalem, see John W. Welch, David Rolf Seely, and Jo Ann H. Seely, eds., *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem* (Provo, UT: BYU and FARMS, 2004).

Pre-exilic Theories about the Origins of the Synagogue

Both Binder and Runesson acknowledge that there are theories that attribute the creation of the synagogue to Moses. Binder does little more than note this attribution in Philo and Josephus and infers that these Mosaic attributions are either the result of their undiscerning acceptance of authority claimed by the Deuteronomic redactors²⁸ or anachronistic attribution of ancient authority to the synagogal practice which Philo and Josephus observed in their own day.²⁹ But Runesson goes a lot farther and notes the reasons why some writers have found synagogal origins in patriarchal times.³⁰ He acknowledges the reasons why earlier theorists considered that synagogues may have grown out of the *beit ha-midrash*, the *beit ha-knesset*, the college or academy, or even the schools of the prophets to which Biesenthal refers.³¹ He also notes, despite all the redactive theory which swirls around the book of Deuteronomy, that “Moses was indissolubly connected to the reading of the Torah,”³² meaning that this understanding was not so much redactive as axiomatic. However he then says that since Vitrिंगa³³ refuted “the Moses theory” in the 17th century, no one has tried to resurrect it.

Vitrिंगa argued that the Tabernacle of the Congregation could not be a precursor to the synagogue because it was not set apart for either instruction or prayer;³⁴ Moses did not use that space when he needed answers to his prayers to solve prac-

28. Runesson, *Origins of the Synagogue*, 240.

29. Binder, *Into the Temple Courts*, 209.

30. Runesson, *Origins of the Synagogue*, 77, where Runesson notes from Leydekker and Biesenthal that Abraham’s daughter-in-law went to a place or building to seek answers to her prayers.

31. Runesson, *Origins of the Synagogue*, 74–77.

32. Runesson, *Origins of the Synagogue*, 78.

33. Campegius Vitrिंगa Sr, *De Synagoga Vetere Libri Tres* (Franeker, 1685; 2d ed. 1696).

34. Vitrिंगa, *De Synagoga Vetere*, 27.

tical problems;³⁵ the house of Israel could only worship in one place in Moses' time;³⁶ Abraham was similarly restricted to the one place of worship (Genesis 12:7; 13:4) where the Lord had appeared unto him; Jacob only ever prayed and sacrificed at Bethel (Genesis 28:16; 35:1–7);³⁷ and that David and Solomon similarly only ever worshipped at the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite, which was later developed as the site of the First Temple.³⁸

Other reasons he cited include the lack of a single precept or injunction to public prayer in the first five books of Moses;³⁹ the confinement of Levitical duties to the tabernacle and sacrifices there;⁴⁰ and the requirement to read the law every seven years rather than weekly on the Sabbath day.⁴¹

But all of these arguments have been discredited in more recent scholarship. For example, Vitrिंगa's assertion that the Tabernacle of the Congregation was never used for gathering is now discredited by the very definition of the word *synagogue*, which meant "a gathering of people" or "a congregation." Binder points out that *syn* plus *ago* meant "bring together" so that synagogue meant "'a bringing together,' or less awkwardly, 'a gathering.'"⁴²

While it is evident that the children of Israel could not all be contained within even the outer court, this space was provided so that representatives of the camp as a whole could witness the sacred ordinances performed on the altar, and so that they could witness the priests as they entered both the Holy

35. Vitrिंगa, *De Synagoga Vetere*, 27–28.

36. Vitrिंगa insisted that a "one place for worship" interpretation was the only conclusion that could be drawn when Exodus 20:24 and Deuteronomy 12:13, 14 were considered together.

37. Vitrिंगa, *De Synagoga Vetere*, 28–29.

38. Vitrिंगa, *De Synagoga Vetere*, 29.

39. Vitrिंगa, *De Synagoga Vetere*.

40. Vitrिंगa, *De Synagoga Vetere*.

41. Vitrिंगa, *De Synagoga Vetere*, 31.

42. Binder, *Into the Temple Courts*, 92.

Place and, once a year, the Holy of Holies, to perform their sacred intercessory duties. The dimensions of the outer court stand in contrast to the smaller dimensions of both the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies within the tent, which were completely encompassed by the outer court. While Vitringa is right that we do not have tangible evidence of how the Tabernacle of the Congregation was used in the time of Moses, that is also true in respect of “the Holy Place” and “the Holy of Holies,” yet we believe we know how these parts of the “Tent in the Desert” were used, though this usage is not set out in any detail in the Pentateuch.⁴³ Most scholars also accept that prayer accompanied every sacrifice in every Jewish mind from the earliest of times.⁴⁴ The congregation looked on and prayed while the priest performed the sacrifices and burnt the offerings. The smoke from those offerings ascended and was always a symbol of the prayers of the congregation.

Nor does it require archaeological evidence or excessive assumption and inference to work out that the reason Israel was instructed to build the portable Tabernacle, which they took with them after they left Sinai, was so that they could worship in sacred space wherever they went.

Vitringa’s dismissal of origins for the synagogue in the time of Moses is unjustified. While we can understand scholarly disinterest in such early origins when the search is only for the origin of the weekly Torah reading practice, the existence of synagogues and worship sanctuaries in the Book of Mormon, which must date back to pre-exilic times, means that there must have been synagogues and sanctuaries in Israel much earlier than most synagogue origins scholars have considered. This pa-

43. For example, the dimensions of the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies appear to confirm LDS understanding that the latter was only ever used by one occupant per year on the Day of Atonement.

44. For example, Roland De Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions* (Grand Rapids: MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 457–59.

per will now reconsider the case for earlier synagogal practice by reference to the seminal work of Roland de Vaux and the Old Testament itself—despite the problems which arise in getting an accurate picture of pre-exilic Israelite worship practice because of the likely propaganda of the Deuteronomic redactors. Since the Book of Mormon account makes a distinction between Temples, Synagogues, and Sanctuaries which must have originated in pre-exilic times, a review of the existing scholarship on pre-exilic worship practices is additionally useful since it may yield reciprocal understanding of the differences between these three different types of religious buildings—both among the descendants of Lehi and Mulek on the American continent, and in ancient Israel before both Lehi and Mulek departed Jerusalem.

Roland de Vaux on Early Israelite Worship Practices

De Vaux documents and discusses early Israelite sanctuaries at Shechem, Bethel, Mambre, and Beersheba and concludes that all these sanctuaries were eventually condemned, not because worship was centralized,⁴⁵ but because the worship at these places had been corrupted, possibly by syncretism.⁴⁶ De Vaux used the word *syncretism* to describe the corruption of authentic Israelite worship practices by admixture and change under the influence of the different local worship practices which were encountered in the various places Israel settled when they entered Palestine. De Vaux explained that various prophets⁴⁷ and authorities⁴⁸ considered that pagan practices had contaminated pure Israelite worship at these sanctuaries and so they disavowed them. He notes that the construction

45. De Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 293.

46. De Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 322.

47. For example by Amos at Amos 3:14; 4:4; 5:5 (De Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 293–94) and Hosea at Hosea 9:15.

48. For example, by Hezekiah (De Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 288 citing 2 Kings 18:4) and Josiah (De Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 287 citing 2 Kings 23:19).

of the Israelite desert sanctuary likely followed Arab desert practice where their sacred objects were always packed up last and protected within a tent while camped.⁴⁹ However, from the entry into the Promised Land onward, an “anxiety to connect the new worship with the old”⁵⁰ inspired Joshua to protect the Ark of the Covenant with a building at Shiloh⁵¹ and David to similarly protect it with a tent when he brought it to Jerusalem, before Solomon also built a Temple to protect it.⁵²

Though “places of worship whose foundation was attributed to the Patriarchs are scarcely mentioned in the Bible once Israel is settled in Canaan . . . other sanctuaries are brought to the fore.”⁵³ Though the location of Gilgal is now disputed, it lies somewhere between the Jordan and Jericho, and was initially “marked by a circle of stones from which it took its name.”⁵⁴ At Gilgal, Joshua met “the captain of the Lord’s host” (Joshua 5:15), and like Moses at Sinai, was told to remove his shoes because he stood on holy ground. Samuel went there as well as to Bethel and Mizpeh to judge Israel.⁵⁵ It was at Gilgal that Samuel proclaimed Saul king (1 Samuel 11:15); Gilgal is where Samuel killed Agag the Amalekite king (1 Samuel 15:12–33); and it is also where Saul was rejected as king (1 Samuel 13:7–15). Gilgal is similarly the place where Judah came to meet David when he returned from Transjordan (2 Samuel 19:16, 41).

Shiloh and Bethel have already been mentioned, but de Vaux says there were also sanctuaries at Mizpeh, Gibeon,

49. De Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 296.

50. De Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 297.

51. De Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, citing 1 Samuel 1:7, 9; 3:15. It is noted from these early chapters in 1 Samuel that the building which housed the Ark of the Covenant is called variously a Temple and “the House of the Lord.” This is the house where Samuel came to live with Eli, the priest.

52. De Vaux, *Ancient Israel*.

53. De Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 302.

54. De Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 303, citing Joshua 4:20.

55. De Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 303, citing 1 Samuel 7:16.

Ophra, and Dan.⁵⁶ However, de Vaux says that it is David's installation of the Ark at Jerusalem which changed the focus of common worship forever. Jerusalem was David's "own personal conquest, and did not belong to the territory of any of the Twelve Tribes."⁵⁷ Not only was this place sacred from Abrahamitic times, but David there restored the Ark, set up an altar,⁵⁸ and thus made Jerusalem "heir to the sanctuary of Shiloh and to the Tent in the desert."⁵⁹ "Jerusalem became the focal point of [Israel's] . . . history of salvation. . . . [It] became the Holy City, and its religious significance was destined to eclipse its political importance . . . [for] as a religious centre it would survive the break-up of David's empire, and even the total destruction of national independence."⁶⁰

But there was also some admixture here. For David did all this as king and not by virtue of any ancestry which made him a priest. Though he accepted the counsel of Nathan the prophet that he should not build the new Temple he had planned (2 Samuel 7:1–17), and though Nathan cursed him for his adultery with Bathsheba without recorded consequence (2 Samuel 12:1–12), no one questioned David's authority to do religious things and even to minister as a priest, despite the fact that Samuel clearly withheld similar authority from Saul. David thus demonstrated to all his heirs and successors, the power available to the Israelite king if he could control religious and political authority at the same time. It is submitted that this innovation by king David was the premise for future efforts to centralize worship. Such centralization was seen as essential if any future king was to resume the political power David had demonstrated and consolidated.

56. De Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 304–308.

57. De Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 309.

58. De Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 309.

59. De Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 309.

60. De Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 309.

However, de Vaux, like Runesson, holds that the various efforts to centralize worship were never fully effective. Runesson has said that “the cult centralization [under Josiah] was a limited phenomenon and in any case did not last beyond Josiah’s death . . . as was also the case with the cult centralization of Hezekiah . . . [meaning] that the high places were in use when the exiles returned.”⁶¹ De Vaux is more detailed and disagrees with Runesson. He credits Josiah with an idea which “triumphed in the end.”⁶² He wrote:

Two kings of Judah tried to make Jerusalem’s Temple not merely the central sanctuary of the nation, but the only sanctuary in which public cult could be performed. . . . [Hezekiah] had learnt a lesson from the destruction of the Northern Kingdom, and wanted to strengthen and unite the nation by a return to traditional ways; the centralization of the cult at Jerusalem, under his eyes, was one element of this policy . . . [but] the work of [Hezekiah] . . . died with him, and his immediate successor, Manasseh, re-established the high places. . . .

To secure the centralization of Yahwistic cult, Josia[h] recalled to Jerusalem all the Priests in Judah “from Geba to Beersheba” and suppressed the local sanctuaries, *i.e.* the “high places.” . . . The reform covered the territory of the former Northern kingdom, too: the sanctuary at Bethel was certainly dismantled. . . . The conclusion of the reform was celebrated by a solemn Passover, attended by the entire nation, at Jerusalem; it was a natural consequence of the centralization of worship. This was the Passover of the year 621. Unfortunately, the reform was quickly compromised: after the death of Josia[h] at Megiddo in 609,

61. Runesson, *Origins of the Synagogue*, 109.

62. De Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 337.

the country once again fell under foreign domination, first Egyptian, then Babylonian. The old errors returned—syncretism in the Temple, foreign cults, and a new lease of life for the country sanctuaries . . . historical circumstances seemed to have put an end to the reforms of Josia[h]. But his ideas triumphed in the end, for the community which returned from exile never had any sanctuary in Judah except the rebuilt Temple in Jerusalem. The reason was that the reform was based on a written law which survived longer than the men who opposed it: it was the Book of Deuteronomy.⁶³

Both de Vaux and Runesson agree that there was local worship in sanctuaries before the centralization efforts of both Hezekiah and Josiah. Josiah's redaction of the law in the book of Deuteronomy changed the practice in the future, but worship in Israel before the exile was local in character. The Deuteronomic redaction may well be responsible for the impression which the Pentateuch leaves that there was no local worship in Israel before or after the exile. But it is still possible to glean some evidence of local worship in what remains of those first five books of scripture which have come down to us in the Judeo-Christian Bible.

Injunctions to Worship from Moses in the Residual Pentateuch

The Mosaic injunctions to worship in the Christian Bible that are most relevant to this essay are those made in prospect of their entry into the promised land without Moses. Both Moses and Joshua contemplated Israel's division into different and widely spread lands of inheritance.

63. De Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 336–37.

The primary reason why it is reasonable to expect regular weekly worship in Israel, even after they entered the Promised land, is the second commandment received at Sinai:

Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work: But the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates: For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it. (KJV Exodus 20:8–11)

It is hard to imagine that Israel would have ceased to live this law after they entered the Promised Land even though the Tabernacle would be remote from many of the tribes. Vitranga, of course, denied that Israel worshipped at the Desert Temple or elsewhere,⁶⁴ but others disagree. When discussing the theories as to when the synagogue originated, de Vaux has noted that synagogues may have resulted from “the reform of Josia[h] . . . when the country people were deprived of their local sanctuaries . . . [when] they could [not] go off to Jerusalem for the big feasts . . . they began to meet on certain days for public worship, but without offering sacrifice.”⁶⁵ One reason there may thus still be some evidence of local worship left in the Bible is that Josiah’s centralization policy may have allowed Sabbath observance to continue in the home or in other local places provided there was no sacrifice. There is thus still some scrip-

64. Runesson, *Origins of the Synagogue*, 26–27, where he interprets the Sabbath observance law as prohibiting the children of Israel from leaving their homes to worship in public or do anything else.

65. De Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 343. See also Binder, *Into the Temple Courts*, 205.

tural material that alludes to regular community worship in Israel before the exile. The following references are examples.

The first three verses of Leviticus 23 are a record of Moses' instruction in connection with the observance of the weekly Sabbath:

And the Lord spake unto Moses saying, Speak unto the children of Israel and say unto them, Concerning the feasts of the Lord, which ye shall proclaim to be holy convocations, even these are my feasts. Six days shall work be done: but the seventh day is the sabbath of rest, an holy convocation; ye shall do no work therein; it is the sabbath of the Lord in all your dwellings. (Leviticus 23:1–3)

The chapter then goes on to name the national or annual feasts that were to be observed—Passover (Leviticus 23:5), unleavened bread (Leviticus 23:6–8), firstfruits (Leviticus 23:10–14), Pentecost (Leviticus 23: 15–22; Pentecost is also known as the feast of weeks), trumpets (Leviticus 23:24–25), Atonement (Leviticus 23:27–32), and tabernacles (Leviticus 23:34–36, 39–43), also known as *ingathering*, at the completion of the harvest. Every Sabbath celebrated by the children of Israel, save for the Day of Atonement, was to involve a feast, that Israel might rejoice in her God and in His abundant mercy and gifts to them all.⁶⁶ Each Sabbath was to be a “convocation,” which means a calling together of a group of people—a congregation. The original word used to describe congregations of people gathered for religious reasons in Israel was *synagogue*. Before the word *synagogue* came, by the associative process of metonymy, to mean the building in which the synagogue met, the word referred to the congregation itself.

66. Note also that in modern revelation, the early saints of this dispensation were taught that their Sabbaths were likewise to be days of “rejoicing and prayer” (D&C 59:9–22, esp. 14).

However it was not just the weekly Sabbaths that were celebrated in local convocations. The national feasts were also celebrated locally since the whole population was not expected to pack up and make the trek to Shiloh, and later Jerusalem, up to six times every year.⁶⁷ This point is made later in the same chapter of Leviticus:

Speak unto the children of Israel, and say unto them, When ye be come into the land which I give unto you, and shall reap the harvest thereof, then ye shall bring a sheaf of the firstfruits of your harvest unto the priest: And he shall wave the sheaf before the Lord, to be accepted for you: on the morrow after the Sabbath, the priest shall wave it. And ye shall offer that day when ye wave the sheaf, an he lamb without blemish of the first year for a burnt offering unto the Lord. (Leviticus 23: 10–12)

If we interpret this passage in light of the requirement that sacrifices can only be performed in Jerusalem, then we must assume the Priest spoken of is serving in the Temple. But if the feast follows right on the heels of completion of the harvest, the reference is more likely to be local observance and sheaf-waving by a local priest. It is surprising that this reference remains in our latter-day version of Leviticus since it is a clear allusion not just to local worship, but to legitimate local sacrifice. In this context, Runesson refers to the theory that synagogues may have out-

67. Note that even in Deuteronomy 16:16, which Miller, Barker, and Christensen hold to be part of the Josiah-corrupted text, only three visits to “the place” appointed by the Lord are required, which rather begs the question of where (and how) the other feasts were to be celebrated. See Geoffrey P. Miller, “Golden Calves, Stone Tablets, and Fundamental Law,” New York University School of Law Working Paper 10–02, at <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1531262>; Margaret Barker, “What did King Josiah Reform?” in *Glimpses of Lehi’s Jerusalem*, 523; and Kevin Christensen, “The Temple, the Monarchy, and Wisdom,” in *Glimpses of Lehi’s Jerusalem*, 475. The three feasts where personal male presence was required were unleavened bread, weeks (Pentecost), and tabernacles.

grown the Ma'amadoth. The Ma'amadoth was the name given to the congregation left behind by the pilgrims from a place or village who responded to the commandment to go to Jerusalem three times a year to worship and make sacrifice in accordance with the law of Moses. While those who made the pilgrimage were seen as acting vicariously on behalf of those left behind, Runesson affirms that the congregation left behind still considered that they needed to make their own sacrifices in the right spirit to comply with the full spirit of the law.⁶⁸

If Runesson is correct that the great national feasts were also celebrated locally, then it is possible that careful review of the references to priestly involvement in those ordinances and feasts may reveal more local involvement and ministry by local priests than has been considered by most of the researchers who have accepted that the national feasts were only observed in the temple at Jerusalem.

The rules about how properties were to be consecrated to the Lord in Leviticus 27 also suggest local worship practice. Priests were assigned to value the offerings made (Leviticus 27:8, 12, 23). These offerings included cash (Leviticus 27:3–8) and animals (Leviticus 27:9–13) but also homes and fields (Leviticus 27:14–23), which are not movable chattels. While it is possible that priests were assigned to go out on circuit from the Tabernacle at Shiloh or the Temple at Jerusalem to value the offerings made, it seems much more reasonable to infer that the priests involved in such valuations were based in the villages and towns where the people making these offerings lived (Leviticus 27:12–33). Perhaps this was one of the distinctions between the service of the Levites and that of the sons of Aaron. The Levites were all appointed, and later divided in courses,⁶⁹ to do the work of the Tabernacle. But save for the high priestly

68. Runesson, *Origins of the Synagogue*, 124–27, 138.

69. Runesson says that rabbinic literature states that both the priests and the Levites were “divided regionally” into 24 courses (*Origins of the Synagogue*, 125).

descendants of Aaron, all Aaron's other sons were to minister as priests at the local community level, much as bishops do in the latter days.⁷⁰ While it is possible to read the recitation of ordinances in Numbers 15 as referring to priestly service at the tabernacle, since the reference twice is to their manner of worship after they have "come into the land of your habitations, which I give unto you," (Numbers 15:2, 18), it again seems more likely that the reference is to regular community worship where a priest would intervene to help his local flock.⁷¹ That reading is yet more reasonable if it is accepted that the participants in these ordinances were expected to involve the strangers among them (Numbers 15:15)—unlikely if this meant that they were to also insist that the strangers among them make pilgrimages to Shiloh or Jerusalem either three or six times every year.

That the sacrifices referred to in Numbers 28 are local seems undeniable, again since they are to be made weekly. Would the people have been left to make sacrifices in their own homes? Certainly the Passover feast was celebrated in Israelite homes from the very beginning in Egypt, but allowing or authorizing all worship at home would have involved the risk of ordinance change and corruption, a concern to many prophets when ordinances were carried out away from Jerusalem. The authorization of the performance of ordinances in the home also ran the risk that every man might become a law unto himself.⁷² In any event, there is no reference in Numbers 28 to the

70. This interpretation also resonates with Ezekiel's denunciation of the shepherds who did not feed their flocks but rather simply consumed their offerings without reverence (Ezekiel 34). See also D&C 68:15–21.

71. It also gives more meaning to Jeremiah's woe pronounced against the pastors of his people who had scattered the flock, driven them away and not visited them (Jeremiah 23:1–2). This denunciation would surely have been unreasonable unless the pastors spoken of were local ministers. See also Jeremiah 2:8 and 10:21.

72. Note that Isaiah taught that the people were cursed if they changed the ordinances (Isaiah 24: 5,6). And the idea that every man should do that which is right in his own eyes, was often castigated in the Old Testament, including even

sacrifices there specified being made in the Tabernacle. That omission is surprising since these instructions in Numbers 28 follow the chapter where Joshua was set apart to take Moses' place and therefore came at a time when worship practice after dispersion must have been top of mind for all leaders. Where were these ordinances and this feasting to take place? As when the people ate the first Passover, the feasting must have taken place in their own homes—but only after local Aaronic priests had supervised and endorsed the sacrifices to ensure that they conformed to Mosaic requirements. It will be remembered that on the occasion of the first Passover, the blood of the lambs was to be smeared across the lintel of the front door of each home—after Moses had given very explicit instructions as to the nature of the sacrificial symbol, how the sacrifice was to be made, how the blood was to be shed and spread, and how the resulting meal was to be eaten (Exodus 12:5–11). All of these actions took place at a time when there was no known tabernacle nor temple in Israel. Certainly the place of the sacrifice was changed when the tabernacle was raised among them, but the sacrifices were always made under the direction of appointed priestly leaders, and the meals were always eaten at home.

The sacrifices detailed in Numbers 29, however, must have been a national event, and that seems eminently reasonable since they only happened once a year. The volume of the sacrifices and their frequency witness that this was a great gathering, for no local community could provide, sustain, or consume all the food that would have been produced by the offerings which are here set forth.

Deuteronomy 12 is generally accepted by those who theorize about synagogue origins as part of the redaction of the law consistent with Josiah's reform policy. In this chapter it is stated that there was to be "one place" where Israel would worship

a possibly self-serving reference by the Deuteronomizers (Deuteronomy 12:8; Judges 17:6; 21:25; Proverbs 12:15; 21:2).

and make her sacrifices, and that place would be shown them (Deuteronomy 12:5,11,14,18; See also Deuteronomy 16:6, 7, 11, 16; 26:2). Only in this place were they to pay their tithes and make their offerings (Deuteronomy 12:5, 11, 14).⁷³ The statement that this “one place for worship” policy was reinforced to end other practices which allowed Israel to do “after all the things that we do here this day, every man whatsoever is right in his own eyes” (Deuteronomy 12:9), is surprising since it implies grand failure in Moses’ leadership, since he had been their personal guide for the last 40 years. Deuteronomy 12’s anticipation that a king would be appointed after they came into the Promised Land (Deuteronomy 17:14–20), also seems self-serving, particularly since no reference to this text is made by Samuel in the biblical record that remains to document Saul’s first appointment (1 Samuel 8:5–20).

But there is no reference to synagogues or other formal meeting places at a local level. Is it possible that the local congregations of Israel simply met under cover of trees in high places, commemorative both of the sacred trees of Eden (themselves commemorated in the Temple; 1 Kings 7:16–22⁷⁴) and of the high places where their prophets received revelation from God? Although it is more familiar to think of scriptural references to “high places” as intending the counterfeit places where idolatry was practised, De Vaux says that high places were the places where Israel worshipped before her practice was systematized

73. Note that there is a similar reference to “the place” where their tithes should be paid in Deuteronomy 26.

74. Runesson documents the theory that *bamoth* constituted the forerunner of the synagogue from Wellhausen (*Origins of the Synagogue*, 97–101). *Bamoth* is the name given to “high places” where traditional worship occurred and, in Wellhausen’s theory, the identification of *bamoth* with the embryonic synagogue was one of “three main stages” in its history (Runesson, *Origins of the Synagogue*, 98). See also De Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 284, where he notes that the name *bamoth* was also given to the artificial creation of “mounds or knolls” for worship. De Vaux also notes that sacred places where worship occurred in Israelite history were often marked by sacred trees (De Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 278).

and centralized at Jerusalem. Barker says worship at high places was a prominent part of “Old Testament [worship] . . . before Josiah’s purge.”⁷⁵ She notes the nature of transplanted Old Testament worship practices in Ethiopia and Western China and quotes Professor Thomas Torrance in relation to the latter: “The religious observances of the Chiang seem to derive from a period in Israel’s history . . . before the centralization of the cult in Jerusalem had been carried out, when high place worship was still prevalent.”⁷⁶ And then she adds her own comments:

The Chiang Min worship on a high place, with an altar of unhewn stones, a sacred tree behind the altar, and a white stone set between them. God, whom they called Abba Malak, came to his people through the sacred tree. They had remembered that Abba meant Father, but had lost the meaning of Malak, which is clearly the Hebrew for angel. They had a sacred rod in the form of a snake twisting around a pole, and they called their faith “the White Religion.”⁷⁷

Runesson, Binder, and Olsson note the argument recounted in Joshua 22:10–34 which nearly resulted in war when the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and half of Mannaseh were said to have offended the other tribes by building an altar of their own away from Shiloh. And they conclude that this “passage is . . . most likely an attempt by priestly circles in the Persian period to ‘neutralise’ evidence of a sacrificial cult dedicated to the God of Israel in an ‘unclean land’” but does not “provide . . . early evidence of synagogue liturgy . . . since no such rituals are

75. Barker, “What did King Josiah Reform?” 536.

76. Barker, “What did King Josiah Reform?” 536, quoting Thomas F. Torrance, *China’s First Missionaries: Ancient “Israelites,”* 2nd ed. (Chicago: Shaw, 1988), p. vii.

77. Barker, “What did King Josiah Reform?” 536, again quoting Torrance, pp. 53, 117, 121.

mentioned.”⁷⁸ But even if this narrow view of synagogal origins is accepted, since even the redacted text which remains accepts that the dispute was resolved when the three errant tribes explained they were not proposing to offer sacrifices, it is clear that non-sacrificial worship was allowed away from Israel’s temple place whether that place was Shiloh or later Jerusalem. However, the political agenda of the redacted account is still flawed since it seems unlikely that any Israelite tribe would have built an altar if the worship they proposed was non-sacrificial in nature.

What then of the Nephite preservation of pre-exilic Israelite worship places? Does the Book of Mormon say anything that can enlighten us about the origins of the synagogue, or the manner of Israelite worship before the exile and perhaps even before the construction of the first Temple?

If Lehi was faithful to earlier forms of worship, and if his people culturally replicated the pre-Josiah older forms as Fischer implies they would have done, does the Book of Mormon provide better understanding of pre-exilic Israelite worship practices? For example where and how did the Israelites worship before Solomon built the First Temple? Did they only worship at Shiloh during the reign of the judges while the Tabernacle rested there, or did they renew their covenants regularly at other places? Remote irregular worship certainly seems inconsistent with the nature of worship in wilderness Israel—and both Moses and Joshua must have considered and planned for the need for regular covenant renewal after the entry into the promised land, when few would be close enough to the Tabernacle to attend regularly for worship. Kevin Christensen says that “[t]he Book of Mormon prophets ke[pt] the law of Moses according to the version they brought with them on the brass plates,”⁷⁹ and specifically notes from Mosiah 2:3 that they offered sac-

78. Runneson, Binder, and Olsson, *Ancient Synagogue*, 290–94.

79. Christensen, “The Temple, the Monarchy, and Wisdom,” 475.

rifice and burnt offerings according to the law of Moses.⁸⁰ But most LDS scholars acknowledge that the events recounted in “the Sermon at the Temple” were likely a Day of Atonement commemoration at the Temple⁸¹ rather than part of their regular and perhaps weekly community worship practice. Does the Book of Mormon provide insights about regular community worship at the local level?

Nephite Worship Practices

The answer of course is a resounding yes. For without looking for inferential proofs, there are twenty-one references to the existence of synagogues among the Nephites and the Lamanites before the Savior’s visit. Perhaps the first of these is the most instructive, coming as it does within the first century after the flight of Lehi’s family from their native Jerusalem. Nephi writes “Behold, hath he commanded any that they should depart out of the synagogues, or out of the houses of worship? Behold, I say unto you, Nay” (2 Nephi 26:26).⁸²

This reference is deceptively simple but rich in meaning and implication. First, it makes the word *synagogue* a synonym

80. Christensen, “The Temple, the Monarchy, and Wisdom,” 475.

81. John W. Welch and Terrence L. Szink have suggested that King Benjamin’s famous address at the Temple three years before he died, at the time when he inaugurated his son Mosiah₂ as the new Nephite king in Zarahemla, bears all the hallmarks of coinciding with a Mosaic autumnal festival including the Day of Atonement. However they warn that we should not expect to find exact correlations between the Nephite religious practices and those in postexilic Israel because they would have diverged and both were changed after Lehi’s departure. In earlier Israel there was no clear demarcation between autumnal festivals of the seventh month on the Jewish calendar, which were later differentiated into Rosh ha-Shanah (New Year), Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) and Sukkot (Festival of Tabernacles) celebrations. See John W. Welch and Terrence L. Szink, “King Benjamin’s Speech in the Context of Ancient Israelite Festivals,” at <http://maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/publications/books/?bookid=31&chapid=119>.

82. See also 3 Nephi 18:32 which confirms that the interchangeability of the word *synagogue* and the phrase *place of worship* remained common practice even after the time of the resurrected Lord’s visit.

for the phrase, *house of worship*. That makes it fair to read *synagogue* for *house of worship* or similar expressions in other places where the latter phrase occurs in the Book of Mormon, and certainly during the first 600 years before the risen Christ's visit.⁸³ Secondly, it is clear that the Nephites, following Nephi's lead, drew a distinction between *synagogue* worship and *Temple* worship.⁸⁴ And thirdly, Nephi implies that Nephite religious practice held that no one could be excommunicated or otherwise excluded from worship in the synagogue. This third insight is the more noteworthy when it is compared with the Zoramite exclusion of the poor from their synagogues, a practice they may have shared with the followers of Nehor, which in turn is reminiscent of rabbinic practice in Jerusalem and Judah at the time of Christ.⁸⁵

Questions may also reasonably be raised as to why the word *synagogue* was chosen in the Book of Mormon to represent the concepts originally recorded on the gold plates.⁸⁶ For example,

83. It is conceivable that Christ might have authorized or instructed the Nephites in the construction of formal places of worship, though no such instructions are recorded in the 3 Nephi record of His three-day ministry. However, while it is the submission of this essay that the Lehitites likely preserved pre-exilic Israelite worship practices more faithfully than did the Jews in Babylon, it is probably pressing the argument to suggest that references to synagogues in the Nephite scriptures more than 600 years after the separation of the two cultures can inform our understanding of practices beforehand.

84. Note that one of the first things that Nephi did after Lehi's death and the separation from his brethren was to build a Temple (2 Nephi 5:16).

85. John W. Welch has observed to the author in private correspondence (3 April 2011) that there may well have been expulsions from pre-exilic synagogues because Alma's quotation of Zenos's words to comfort the repentant Zoramites (Alma 33:9–10) suggests that Zenos himself had been expelled but did not let that impede either his worship or his prayers.

86. While it might be asserted that Joseph Smith chose the word *synagogue*, Terryl Givens's summary of the limited materials we have explaining the process of Book of Mormon translation says that "sentences would appear and were read by the Prophet and written by Martin, and . . . [that sentence] remained until corrected" if an error had been made. Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture that Launched a New World Religion* (Oxford: Oxford

was this word chosen to replicate 19th century understanding or to reflect understanding at some earlier period in Israelite history? Answers to those questions are beyond the scope of this article and the writer has assumed that the Israelitish peoples dealt with in the Book of Mormon were indeed endeavoring to replicate and preserve worship “according to the Law of Moses” “after the manner of the Jews” as the original editors stated several times, though the first Nephi was reluctant to preserve every Jewish custom he remembered since he did not consider that all those traditions were righteous or spiritually helpful.⁸⁷

Nineteen of the references to synagogues or places of worship in the Book of Mormon are found in the book of Alma, five of those in Alma 21 and seven in Alma 32. They are quoted in order and discussed briefly below:

And Alma and Amulek went forth preaching repentance to the people in their temples, and in their sanctuaries, and also in their synagogues, which were built after the manner of the Jews. (Alma 16:13)

And it came to pass that Aaron came to the city of Jerusalem, and first began to preach to the Amalekites. And he began to preach to them in their synagogues, for they had built synagogues after the order of the Nehors; for many of the Amalekites and the Amulonites were after the order of the Nehors. Therefore, as Aaron entered into one of their synagogues to preach unto the people, and as he was speaking unto them, behold there arose an Amalekite and began to contend with him, saying . . . How knowest thou that we have cause

University Press, 2002), quoting *Latter-day Saints Millennial Star* 44 (February 6, 1882), 86–87.

87. See typical references to Nephite aspirations to live according to the law of Moses until Christ came in 1 Nephi 4:15; 2 Nephi 25:24; Mosiah 13:27; Alma 25:15; 30:3. As to variable Nephite wishes to replicate Jewish culture, see 2 Nephi 25: 2, 5–6; Alma 16:13.

to repent? How knowest thou that we are not a righteous people? Behold we have built sanctuaries, and we do assemble ourselves together to worship God. We do believe that God will save all men. (Alma 21:4–6)

Therefore, when [Aaron] saw that they would not hear his words, he departed out of their synagogue, and came over into a village which was called Ani-Anti, and there he found Muloki preaching the word unto them; and also Ammah and his brethren. And they contended with many about the word. . . . And they went forth whithersoever they were led by the Spirit of the Lord, preaching the word of God in every synagogue of the Amalekites, or in every assembly of the Lamanites where they could be admitted. . . . But [king Lamoni] caused that there should be synagogues built in the land of Ishmael; and he caused that his people, or the people who were under his reign, should assemble themselves together. (Alma 21:11, 16, 20)

Yea, [the king of the Lamanites] sent a decree among them, that they should not lay their hands on them to bind them, or to cast them into prison; neither should they spit upon them, nor cast them out of their synagogues, nor scourge them; neither should they cast stones at them, but that they should have free access to their houses, and also to their temples, and their sanctuaries. . . . And now it came to pass that when the king had sent forth this proclamation, that Aaron and his brethren went forth from city to city, and from one house of worship to another, establishing churches, and consecrating priests and teachers throughout the land among the Lamanites, to preach and to teach the word of God among them; and thus they began to have great success. (Alma 23:2, 4)

And we have entered into their houses and taught them, and we have taught them in their streets; yea,

and we have taught them upon their hills; and we have entered into their temples and their synagogues and taught them; and we have been cast out, and mocked, and spit upon, and smote upon our cheeks; and we have been stoned, and taken and bound with strong cords, and cast into prison; and through the power and wisdom of God we have been delivered again. (Alma 26:29)

Now, when [Alma and his brethren] had come into the land, behold to their astonishment, they found the Zoramites had built synagogues, and that they did gather themselves together on one day of the week, which day they did call the day of the Lord; and they did worship after a manner which Alma and his brethren had never beheld; For they had a place built up in the center of their synagogue, a place for standing, which was high above the head; and the top thereof would admit only one person. (Alma 31:12)

And it came to pass that [Alma and his brethren] did go forth, and began to preach the word of God unto the people, entering into their synagogues, and into their houses; yea, and even they did preach the word in their streets. And it came to pass that after much labor among them, they began to have success among the poor class of the people; for behold, they were cast out of the synagogues because of the coarseness of their apparel—Therefore they were not permitted to enter into their synagogues to worship God, being esteemed as filthiness; therefore they were poor; yea, they were esteemed by their brethren as dross; therefore they were poor as to the things of the world; and also they were poor in heart. Now as Alma was teaching and speaking unto the people upon the hill Onidah, there came a great multitude unto him...and the one who was foremost among them said unto him: Behold, what shall

these our brethren do, for they are despised of 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 laboured abundantly to build with our own hands . . . and we have no place to worship our God; and behold, what shall we do? And now when Alma heard this, he . . . said unto them. . . . Behold my brother hath said, What shall we do?—for we are cast out of our synagogues, that we cannot worship our God. Behold, I say unto you, do ye suppose that he cannot worship God save it be in your synagogue only? And moreover, I would ask you, do ye suppose that ye must not worship God only once in a week? I say unto you, it is well that ye are cast out of your synagogues, that ye may be humble, and that ye may learn wisdom. (Alma 32:1–12)

And Alma said unto them: Behold, ye have said that ye could not worship your God because ye are cast out of your synagogues. But behold, I say unto you, if ye suppose that ye cannot worship God, ye do greatly err, and ye ought to search the scriptures; if ye suppose that they have taught you this, ye do not understand them. Do ye not remember to have read what Zenos, the prophet of old, has said concerning prayer or worship? For he said: Thou art merciful O God, for thou hast heard my prayer, even when I was in the wilderness; yea, thou wast merciful when I prayed concerning those who were mine enemies, and thou didst turn them unto me. Yea, O God, and thou wast merciful unto me when I did cry unto thee in my field; when I did cry unto them in my prayer, and thou didst hear me. And again, O God, when I did turn to my house thou didst hear me in my prayer. And when I did turn unto my closet, O Lord, and prayed unto thee, thou didst hear me. Yea, thou art merciful unto thy children when they cry unto thee, to be heard of thee

and not of men, and thou wilt hear them. Yea, O God, thou hast been merciful unto me and heard my cries in the midst of thy congregations. Yea, and thou hast also heard me when I have been cast out and have been despised by mine enemies; yea, thou didst hear my cries, and wast angry with mine enemies, and thou didst visit them in thine anger with speedy destruction. And thou didst hear me because of mine afflictions and my sincerity; and it is because of thy Son that thou hast been thus merciful unto me; therefore I will cry unto thee in all my afflictions, for in thee is my joy; for thou hast turned thy judgments away from me, because of thy Son. (Alma 33:2–11)

It will suffice for the present time to make some simple observations which flow from these verses:

1. The children of Lehi all copied Jewish practice when they built synagogues (Alma 16:13). Therefore there were synagogues in Israel before the exile.
2. The missionary labors of Alma, Amulek, and the sons of Mosiah, manifest significant similarity with Christ's practice among the Jews during His mortal ministry among them. In particular, Luke records: "And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit into Galilee: and there went out a fame of him through all the region round about. And he taught in all their synagogues, being glorified of all" (Luke 4:14–15).
3. The children of Lehi distinguished between temples, synagogues, and sanctuaries.
4. Lehite synagogal practice not only allowed itinerant preachers to enter any synagogue and teach, but it also allowed other attendees to ask questions and even debate what was taught (Alma 21:5–6). This practice again

is reminiscent of what we know of Jewish practice in the time of Christ.

5. Lehite religious practice featured sectarian division, but several of the sects built synagogues of their own.⁸⁸ While they were still recognizable as synagogues, there were architectural differences most notably in the Zoramite synagogue which featured a raised stand for one person to use at a time—called the Rameumpton (Alma 31:12–14, 21). This architectural difference was shocking to Alma (Alma 31:19).⁸⁹
6. When some Lehite congregations perceived heresy, they followed similar disciplinary practices to those which applied among the Jews at the time of Christ. That is, they took steps to stone heretics (Alma 26:29). While there is no reference in the Book of Mormon to throwing a blasphemer headlong off a cliff and stoning him at the base,⁹⁰ the spitting and cheek slapping also have a particularly Jewish ring to them.⁹¹
7. People who offended religious rules (including rules of caste?) were excluded from some synagogues. This exclusion, though not perhaps the reason, is consistent with practices encountered by Christ among the Jews.⁹²

88. We read of synagogues built by the Amalekites (Alma 21:16), the Zoramites (Alma 31:12), and those built under direction of the kings (Alma 21:20).

89. It is possible that Alma's shock came from the use to which the Zoramites put their altar rather than from the fact that it was raised.

90. The Nazarenes sought to execute Christ in this manner when they disapproved of his sermon from Isaiah 61:16–21 wherein he proclaimed himself the Messiah (Luke 4: 28, 29).

91. Note again Professor Welch's observation to the author in note 85 that the prophet Zenos may well have been expelled from a pre-exilic synagogue.

92. For example, the man born blind who was healed by the Savior was excommunicated from the synagogue when he would not disclaim the Messiahship of the author of his miraculous healing (John 9:1–38).

8. The retreat of the poor among the Zoramites to the hill Onidah to hear Alma and Amulek preach since they had all been excluded from the synagogue, reminds us that the Israelites from time immemorial had built altars and worshipped in high places before they built Temples and presumably synagogues and other sanctuaries. It is further noteworthy that *Onidah* is used in respect of two different places in the Book of Mormon, both of them raised places of gathering, retreat and perhaps even sanctuary (Alma 32:4; 47:5). While it is possible they were the same place, we cannot be sure from the limited text provided by Alma and Mormon. If they are not, *Onidah* may have some generic sacred significance in denoting a hill, mountain, or other traditional high place but without any formal religious structure yet erected upon it.
9. For Alma at least, prayer was an essential or basic element of worship and did not require a building. The paradigm among the Zoramites was that they could not worship save in a building. This thought paradigm is reminiscent of Josiah's idea that worship should be centralized in one place (the temple). It also suggests that worship in synagogues, including congregational prayer, was very well established among the Lehites and probably indicates the nature of synagogal worship in Israel before Lehi's departure.
10. There is no reference in any of these passages in the Book of Mormon to the reading of the Torah as part of Lehite liturgy. This is a little surprising, since in many respects the reading of the Torah is the critical feature of synagogal worship which is sought by scholars looking for the origins of the synagogue among the Jews. The Book of Mormon references imply that prayer and preaching were the elemental aspects of Lehite synagogal ritual. We

may further infer that anyone could preach in a Lehite synagogue; that debate about the content of preaching was acceptable and even standard practice; but that the practice of exclusion from the synagogue varied among the Lehite sects.⁹³

Helaman's two short references to synagogues do not add a great deal but they do manifest that the construction of places of worship was among the primary tasks whenever the children of Lehi established a new community.

And the people who were in the land northward did dwell in tents, and in houses of cement, and they did suffer whatsoever tree should spring up upon the face of the land that it should grow up, that in time they might have timber to build their houses, yea, their cities, and their temples, and their synagogues, and their sanctuaries, and all manner of their buildings. . . . But behold, a hundredth part of the proceedings of this people, yea, the account of the Lamanites and the Nephites . . . and their building of temples, and of synagogues and their sanctuaries . . . cannot be contained in this work (Helaman 3:9, 14).

The synagogue-building practice of the children of Lehi provides affirmative evidence that synagogal worship predated the Babylonian exile. Is there anything else in Lehite religious

93. Note that local Zoramite practice allowed exclusion from the synagogue in the first century BC. However, four centuries earlier, Nephi says that it was contrary to the law of God that anyone be excluded from the synagogue (2 Nephi 26:26). However, Nephi's expectation would appear to be his 'correct' and rhetorical interpretation of the law in relation to synagogues. For since Jacob and presumably Nephi had read Zenos (both the allegory of the Olive Tree as recited in Jacob 5 and his teaching relative to prayer as recited by Alma in Alma 33), Nephi must have been aware that synagogal exclusion was practiced in Judah and perhaps in Israel in historical times. It also seems likely that one reason Lehi felt obliged to leave Jerusalem was because he too had been excluded from a synagogue for heretical teaching (see n 27 and supporting text).

practice which provides insight into the nature of Israelite worship before the exile?

The children of Lehi worshipped in at least four different places: temples, synagogues, sanctuaries, and in high or raised places when they had no building in which to worship. It was noted above that the word translated by Joseph Smith as “synagogue” appears to have been nothing more than a name for a place of worship. But why did he use the additional term *sanctuary*? Part of the reason for Joseph Smith’s choice of that word must have to do with the fact that he had to translate strings of ideas. If two different words or ideas were used, it would have been unsatisfactory for him to have chosen only one word when two different ideas were used in the record from which he was translating. This reasoning is sound even if the differences he was translating were no more than matters of nuance. In the minds of the children of Lehi, what were the differences between temples, synagogues, sanctuaries, and other raised places where they worshipped? The children of Lehi had altars in their temples where they sacrificed according to the Law of Moses. That much is clear from the detail in King Benjamin’s final address at the temple (Mosiah 1:18; 2:1, 3). But it is clear that the Nephite sanctuaries, or at least some of them, also featured altars. For the account of the mission of Alma and Amulek to Sidom, in Nephite territory, states:

Therefore after Alma having established the church at Sidom, seeing a great check, yea, seeing that the people were checked as to the pride of their hearts, and began to humble themselves before God, and began to assemble themselves together at their sanctuaries to worship God before the altar, watching and praying continually, that they might be delivered from Satan, and from death, and from destruction. (Alma 15:17)

Did the synagogues and sanctuaries among the children of Lehi all have altars, or is the presence of an altar a distinction between these two types of religious buildings? And, if this is a difference, did they sacrifice in community sanctuaries but use synagogues for other purposes? Or does the word *sanctuary* refer to the holiest part of the place of worship (synagogue) as is familiar in modern Christian parlance?—which seems to pick up on the original Mosaic use of the word *sanctuary* in reference to the most sacred part of the portable tabernacle, and which may be the reason Joseph Smith chose to use both *synagogue* and *sanctuary* in his translation of the Book of Mormon. Helaman’s separate reference to sanctuaries as buildings built by Lehi’s descendants also suggests that they were different from both synagogues and temples. This insight is consistent with de Vaux’s findings and suggests that sanctuaries were local places of sacrifice rather than prayer, as seems to have been the nature of synagogues among the children of Lehi. If that is correct, then it seems fair to infer that the worship that Josiah proscribed in the 7th century BC was worship in sanctuaries rather than worship in synagogues.

What of the high places used for religious purposes among the children of Lehi? Were these places precursors to both synagogue and sanctuary before they had organized themselves or accumulated enough resources to build either? Or did they continue to use high places even after they had built religious buildings, and if so for what purposes? We cannot answer all of these questions from the Book of Mormon record we have so far, but there is enough material in the extant text for us to make educated guesses to answer some of these questions.

The word *altar* is only used four times in the Book of Mormon. The first time is when Lehi “built an altar of stones, and made an offering unto the Lord, and gave thanks unto the Lord our God” (1 Nephi 2:7). At this point the family was only three days journey from Jerusalem (1 Nephi 2:6), but they were

in the wilderness and apparently had no other place to worship. In constructing “an altar of stones,” Lehi followed a very old tradition. Modern Latter-day Saints understand that Adam similarly built an altar upon which he offered sacrifice (Moses 4:4–8), but biblical scripture confirms that Noah (Genesis 8:20), Abraham (Abraham 2:17, 20; Genesis 12:7, 8; 22:9), and many other prophets did likewise.⁹⁴ And most of the time, these places of prayer and sacrifice appear to have been elevated places.⁹⁵

The second reference to an altar is in Jacob’s quotation of Isaiah’s vision and call as a prophet in 2 Nephi 16:6. The third reference is to the account of Alma and Amulek’s missionary journey to Sidom quoted above, where it was noted that the sanctuaries in that city at least featured altars (Alma 15:17). The last reference to an altar in the Book of Mormon comes in a passage about the missionary work of the sons of Mosiah₂ among the Lamanites. In that final Book of Mormon reference to an altar, it appears that the conversion of new church members involved a ritual appearance at the altar in the presence of the members of the congregation. The ritual is most apparent in the following passage: “And they had been teaching the word of God for the space of fourteen years among the Lamanites, having had much success in bringing many to the knowledge of the truth; yea, by the power of their words many were brought before the altar of God, to call on his name and confess their sins before him” (Alma 17:4).

This practice is strikingly unusual to modern Latter-day Saints and our inclination is to consider that it is probably a symbolic reference. It resonates more with our understanding of evangelical Christianity than with any ritual with which Latter-day Saints are familiar. Indeed, though there is a famous reference to Alma the Elder’s institution of the ordinance of baptism in the establishment

94. For example in Genesis 35:1, 3, 7, where Jacob built an altar at Beth-el.

95. For example, when Abraham went to Moriah, he was directed to a mountain place and went up to make the appointed sacrifice (Genesis 22:2–14).

of his churches (Mosiah 18:8–16; 25:17, 18),⁹⁶ there is only one mention of the baptism of Lamanite converts arising from the mission of the sons of Mosiah to that people (Alma 19:35). Now perhaps that is because baptism was such an established part of the conversion ritual among all the children of Lehi that it did not need particular emphasis. Perhaps Alma as recorder was simply waxing adjectival when he chose to describe the Lamanite converts as having been brought before the altar to call on God’s name and to confess their sins. But it is more likely that Alma intended to draw attention to something much more profound that had happened in the hearts of these converts—something that would reassure their future Nephite fellow-worshippers of the sincerity of these new Lamanite converts to the church established by his father. Perhaps for Alma, this confessional practice before the altar of their sanctuary was a better and more convincing proof than baptism of that humility which was the essential proof of true conversion, and that is why it rated more particular mention.

But this also brings to mind the Zoramite practice of one-by-one prayer on their raised stand or Rameumptom (Alma 31:12–23, esp. 21), within their synagogues. Rather than impress Alma, this shocked and appalled him (Alma 31:9–12, 24–35). He seems to have regarded it as apostasy—a corruption or changing of the ordinances that had not been approved by the prophets or local religious authorities. But the practice seems to have been derived from Nephite practice, both because these people were dissenters from the Nephites (Alma 31:8), and because Alma felt it his duty to reclaim them (Alma 31:35). Was the Rameumptom a species of altar? It seems that the normal synagogal practice of all Jewish peoples involved one standing and reading or reasoning from the scriptures from the focal point within that place of worship. When Christ later went and taught in the synagogue at Nazareth, the eyes of all those in at-

96. Note, however, that Alma the Younger did baptize Zeezrom, who was a converted Nephite from the city of Ammonihah (Alma 15:12–14).

tendance were fastened or focused upon him (Luke 4:20). And it was similar when Aaron was taken to task as he spoke in the Amalekite synagogue (Alma 21:4–6). What was it about the Zoramite practice that so shocked Alma? His shock seems to have come from the hypocrisy he felt in what he heard—and the fact that the stand or altar was raised so conspicuously. For it does not seem that Alma had been shocked at all by the public confession of the converted Lamanites before other altars. For Alma, it seems that the Zoramite practice was hypocritical (Alma 31:23, 27). Not only did the words spoken condescend to other people who did not worship in their manner (Alma 31:22), but it did not generate pure religious activity as the fruit of its spirit.⁹⁷ But Alma was also appalled by the Zoramite exclusion of the poorer classes among them from their synagogues (Alma 32:9, 10) and affirmed, quoting Zenos, that they could worship anywhere at all (Alma 33: 2–10).⁹⁸

Runneson, Binder, and Olsson also note some postexilic synagogal practices in the Old World that seem connected with the Zoramite synagogue practices which Alma found offensive. For in connection with the healing of the daughter of Jairus, they note that the synagogue leaders and scribes were a separate class from the generality of the people;⁹⁹ they note “fixed wording of public and private prayers for proselytes” from around AD 200;¹⁰⁰ and they note that when the Alexandrian Jews were

97. Rather Alma perceived that their hearts were set upon their riches and the other vain things of this world (Alma 31:24, 28).

98. Note that these ‘private religious worship’ injunctions from Zenos may explain why his words appeared on the brass plates but not in the Old Testament biblical records that have descended to us through the Jews. If Zenos’s teaching about private religious devotion was taken at face value, it would have undermined totally the central worship which both Barker and Miller assert that King Josiah sought to establish in his reforms. If Zenos was known for his advocacy of private religious devotion, this may have been good reason to exclude his words from the canonical text.

99. Runneson, Binder, and Olsson, *Ancient Synagogue*, 81–82.

100. Runneson, Binder, and Olsson, *Ancient Synagogue*, 105.

deprived of their proseuche (either a prayer hall or a synagogue) by Flaccus, the Roman Prefect in Egypt during the first century AD, the synagogal congregation retreated to the nearby beach to pray and sing hymns.¹⁰¹

There is “cultural significance” in all of this. For, in the spirit of David Hackett Fischer’s insight that transplanted people often follow the religious practices of their home more faithfully than those left behind,¹⁰² it seems that at least some groups of the children of Lehi used “access to the synagogue” as a means of exercising social control over their peers. For the exclusion of the man born blind from the synagogue because he would not deny Jesus (John 9:34); the fear of that man’s parents lest they be excluded (John 9:22); and the lament of the poor Zoramites that they could not worship because of an exclusion already carried out (Alma 32:2), have a similar spirit. And there is a similar spirit too in the fact that Peter (Acts 5:18; 12:3–6) and Paul (Acts 22:24; 23:10; 25:4), Alma and Amulek (Alma 14:4, 17–28), Aaron and his brethren (Alma 20–29), and Nephi and Lehi (Helaman 5:21–50) were all imprisoned for preaching unacceptable doctrines in synagogues that were theoretically open to all who would preach from the scriptures. Though there is nothing particularly remarkable about imprisonment for preaching religion, there is a particular and unique hypocrisy in excommunication with imprisonment following teaching in a synagogue.

Conclusion

The thesis of this essay is that Nephite worship practices likely provide a better picture of pre-exilic Jewish worship practices than has been preserved by Old World tradition. That is because the Nephites were probably more faithful to the

101. Runesson, Binder, and Olsson, *Ancient Synagogue*, 179–180.

102. See above, nn. 5–10, and supporting text.

old traditions than the Jews who remained in Jerusalem and who were later exiled to Babylon. This essay has suggested that this thesis can be tested by a careful review of Nephite worship practices as those are revealed in the Book of Mormon. In particular, the Nephite practice and use of synagogues and other places of worship in local communities is likely to have preserved the practices that existed in Jerusalem before Lehi left in a less adulterated form than came back with the exiles from Babylon. Traditional Jewish scholarship holds that synagogues did not exist before the exile, that synagogal worship evolved in Babylon as a response to separation from the Temple in Jerusalem. But a more holistic view of Israelite religious practice after the exodus from Egypt suggests that Moses and Joshua must have made provision for local worship where the tribes which were to settle in Palestine were necessarily separate from, first, the portable tabernacle at Shiloh and, later, Solomon's Temple at Jerusalem. That the Nephites built not only a temple, but also synagogues, sanctuaries, and other places of worship after their exodus from Jerusalem suggests that the practice of local worship in synagogues or like places of worship was much older than the Jewish exile in Babylon.

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