The book of Mosiah is a cultic history of the reign of Mosiah II, structured around three royal ceremonies in 124, 121, and 92–91 BC. On each of these occasions, newly discovered scriptures were read to the people, stressing the dangers of monarchical government and celebrating the deliverance of the people and the revelation of Jesus Christ. This book existed independently hundreds of years before Mormon engraved it onto the gold plates. The most likely occasion for the writing of such a book was in the aftermath of Mosiah’s death when Alma the Younger needed to undermine the Amlicite bid to reestablish the monarchy.
The Book of Mosiah: Thoughts about Its Structure, Purposes, Themes, and Authorship

Gary L. Sturgess

Abstract: The book of Mosiah is a cultic history of the reign of Mosiah₂, structured around three royal ceremonies in 124, 121, and 92–91 B.C. On each of these occasions, newly discovered scriptures were read to the people, stressing the dangers of monarchical government and celebrating the deliverance of the people and the revelation of Jesus Christ. This book existed independently hundreds of years before Mormon engraved it onto the gold plates. The most likely occasion for the writing of such a book was in the aftermath of Mosiah’s death when Alma the Younger needed to undermine the Amlicite bid to reestablish the monarchy.

1. A Book of Mosiah?

Although at first glance the book of Mosiah seems to be a history of the reign of Mosiah₂—who ruled over the people of Nephi from about 124 to 91 B.C.¹—very few of the twenty-one chapters in the book actually deal with the life of Mosiah, and more than half of them describe events that took place outside his kingdom.

¹ I accept the dates provided in the footnotes to the Book of Mormon for present purposes. The precise date of Zedekiah’s ascendancy to the throne of Judah is in dispute, but a time frame within the early months of 597 B.C. is probable. Lehi’s departure was, therefore, on some date after this.
Indeed, it might be questioned whether the book of Mosiah was identified as a separate work in the gold plates, in the same way as the book of Nephi and the record of Zeniff. We do not have the Original Manuscript for this part of the Book of Mormon, but the unamended text of the Printer's Manuscript set what became Mosiah 1 as chapter 2, the Words of Mormon being chapter 1. This suggests that the Original Manuscript, and perhaps the plates themselves, failed to identify a new book at that interval. The title of the book of Mosiah, and thus its identification as a discrete book, was provided during the correction of the Printer's Manuscript by Oliver Cowdery or Joseph Smith.²

In its present form, the book of Mosiah takes up the history of Mosiah's dynasty: "And now there was no more contention in all the land of Zarahemla among all the people which belonged to king Benjamin" (Mosiah 1:1). The beginnings of this history are now to be found in the Words of Mormon, which, according to Joseph Smith, was located not in its present position but right at the end of the plates. This suggests either that the 116 lost pages contained an introduction to the Mosiac dynasty similar to that portion now found in the Words of Mormon, or that an introduction to the book of Mosiah existed but was omitted either by Mormon or Joseph Smith.

What, then, is the book of Mosiah? Does it deserve to be treated as a distinct work of literature? Who was its original author or compiler? And, given the paucity of material therein directly relating to Mosiah himself, does the book deserve its present title?

My thesis is that the book of Mosiah had a separate identity long before Mormon engraved an abridged version of it onto his gold plates. And, while Mormon may have interfered somewhat with the book during the process of transcription, the structure of the original book of Mosiah is largely intact and can still be detected in the pages of the Book of Mormon.

As for compiling the book, the candidate most likely to be involved seems to be Alma the Younger. Other possible authors or compilers include Alma the Elder, Mosiah₂, or perhaps one of the sons of Mosiah₂, or several working in collaboration. The book of

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Mosiah concludes with King Moroni and Alma the Younger as the first nation. If, as suggested herein, the deliberate pattern, then this would suggest chroniclers who i

More than half of the book events far away in the land of Nephi, and attitudes in the land of Zara Nephites was reorganized by Al

After these two groups were in about 121 B.C., the book returning from the land of Nephi and attitudes in the land of Zara Nephites was reorganized by Al

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³ Although Nephi referred to baptism in the waters of Mormon in Mosiah 18:18, the tradition of the church of God. Since Alma is describe as a church, this would suggest that all those members of the church of God were baptised and those who had taken upon themselves at his coronation. Furthermore, the term baptism, not because of their preexi

strongly to Alma's having introduced peoples.
Mormon Studies 4/2 (Fall 1995)

Mosiah concludes with King Mosiah's death and the appointment of Alma the Younger as the first chief judge of the united Nephite nation. If, as suggested herein, the book was written according to a deliberate pattern, then this would suggest a date of compilation after Mosiah’s death in 91 B.C. It is possible, of course, that it was substantially written in the final years of Mosiah’s life and only completed after his death, but other reasons exist for associating this book with Alma the Younger.

More than half of the book of Mosiah is concerned with events far away in the land of Nephi. Although I present structural reasons for this departure from the Mosiah material, the heavy weighting to the record of Zeniff and the account of Alma would suggest chroniclers who identified strongly with the people of Limhi or the followers of Alma the Elder.

After these two groups were united with the people of Nephi in about 121 B.C., the book of Mosiah suggests that people returning from the land of Nephi had a strong influence on events and attitudes in the land of Zarahemla: the official religion of the Nephites was reorganized by Alma the Elder, and the rite of baptism was introduced among the people of Nephi; the deliverance

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3 Although Nephi referred to baptism in the final chapters of 2 Nephi, no baptisms were recorded among the Nephites until Alma introduced the practice at the waters of Mormon in Mosiah 18. If, as argued later in this paper, the religion of Christ had either not been successfully established by Nephi and Jacob, or had lapsed sometime after Jacob's death, then Alma must have learned of the ordinance from Abinadi. If so, then possibly it was from Abinadi that Limhi and his people also learned of baptism (see Mosiah 18:10–21).

When the Nephite religion was reorganized in 121 B.C., specific mention is made of baptism. Moreover, it is Alma who conducts those baptisms, which are specifically described: "yea, he did baptize them after the manner he did his brethren in the waters of Mormon" (Mosiah 25:18).

Mosiah 25:18 records that "as many as he did baptize did belong to the church of God." Since Alma is described at Mosiah 29:47 as the founder of the church, this would suggest that all those who came to consider themselves to be members of the church of God were baptized at this time, including King Mosiah and those who had taken upon themselves the name of Christ three years earlier at his coronation. Furthermore, the members are described as undertaking the rite of baptism, not because of their preexisting belief in Christ, but "because of their belief on the words of Alma" (Mosiah 25:18). All of this points very strongly to Alma's having introduced the rite of baptism among the Nephite peoples.
pattern, as expressed through the experiences of the peoples of Limhi and Alma, acquired a central place in the teachings of Mosiah; and Alma the Elder’s views on kingship came so to dominate the Nephite belief system that King Mosiah disestablished the monarchy. In doing so Mosiah used language reminiscent of refusing an offer of kingship in the land of Helam (Mosiah 23:7).

A plausible case can be made, then, that the chroniclers of the original book of Mosiah were under the influence of traditions introduced into the Nephite world by the people of Limhi. This is significant because not all of the people of Nephi shared this world view, an opinion demonstrated by the political and religious disharmony that emerged in Zarahemla following the establishment of the church of God by Alma the Elder and throughout the entire eight-year period that Alma the Younger held the office of chief judge. Indeed, Nehor, the founder of the monarchist faction that surfaced during the first year of Alma’s judgeship, had his most violent confrontation with one of the leaders of the Limhite group, Gideon, a man who had once sworn an oath to kill a King (Mosiah 19:4; Alma 1:8–9).

Of the known members of the Zeniffite peoples, Alma the Younger was best placed to influence the compilation of such a book. The deliverance theme, which lies at the heart of the book of Mosiah, had special significance for Alma. Part of the message delivered to Alma by the angel was that he should remember the captivity of his fathers and their deliverance by Jehovah (Mosiah 27:16). He was to repeat this message often during his lifetime (Alma 5:6; 36:1–30).

Finally, in a book that is primarily about the ceremony of kings and the wars between nations, one chapter stands out as anomalous, Mosiah 27, which describes the personal conversion of the same Alma the Younger. We will deal with why Alma should have felt the need to compile or to influence the compilation of a book, and why the chief judge should have produced a treatise on kingship.

This paper considers the structure and authorship of the book of Mosiah in light of its underlying themes and purposes. I argue that the original book was a ceremonial history of Mosiah’s reign,

built around three main then deliverance, and the revelation

2. A Cultic History of the Book

The structure of the book originally written as a cultic history was constructed around the three great ceremonies that punctuate Mosiah’s rule: his consecration “the people of Zarahemla, and the Nephites” (Mosiah 1:10).

The last of these gatherings in the final year of Mosiah’s life had “none to reign in his stead” (1:10). A new covenant is made of an assembly in Zarahemla, referring the sacred symbols of the covenant to the responses of the people to the described in Mosiah 28:18, as a gathering in 92 or 91 B.C.

At the final assembly, faced with the question of whether Mosiah disestablished the monotheistic system of government promulgated the communities in the communities or tribes of the 28:10–29:47).

The second of these three great ceremonies, which took place three years into his reign, is however the book of Mosiah. At this gathering, the people of Mosiah, the people of Limhi, and together to form a single nation,
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built around three main themes of kingship, the celebration of
deliverance, and the revelation of Christ.

2. A Cultic History of the Reign of Mosiah

The structure of the book of Mosiah suggests that it was origi-
nally written as a cultic history of Mosiah’s kingship. It is con-
structed around the three great political and religious ceremonies
that punctuate Mosiah’s rule over the people of Nephi. The first
marked Mosiah’s consecration as king over the dual kingdom,
“the people of Zarahemla, and the people of Mosiah” (Mosiah
1:10).

The last of these gatherings took place thirty-three years later,
in the final year of Mosiah’s life, as he prepared for his death with
“none to reign in his stead” (Alma 1:1). While no specific men-
tion is made of an assembly in the final chapters of Mosiah, con-
ferring the sacred symbols of leadership on a successor would
only have taken place at a public ceremony. The ritualized
responses of the people at the reading of the book of Ether,
described in Mosiah 28:18, also suggest some kind of formal
gathering in 92 or 91 B.C.

At the final assembly, faced with the dissolution of the king-
dom or possible war between rival pretenders to the throne,
Mosiah disestablished the monarchy and organized a decentral-
ized system of government promised upon judges chosen locally
by the communities or tribes of the people of Nephi (Mosiah

The second of these three great ceremonial occasions, three
years into his reign, is however the focal point of the book of
Mosiah. At this gathering, the people of Zarahemla, the people
of Mosiah, the people of Limhi, and the children of Amulon came
together to form a single nation, the people of Nephi (Mosiah

4 Cult is the term used to describe the formal, ritualized aspects of
religion and is contrasted with the doctrinal and ethical dimensions. According
(Oxford: Blackwell, 1967), 1:15, “Cult or ritual may be defined as the socially
established and regulated holy acts and words in which the encounter and
communion of the Deity with the congregation is established, developed, and
brought to its ultimate goal.”
More than half of the book of Mosiah is an account of the origins of these last two groups.

Using this triadic structure as a foundation, the book of Mosiah weaves a complex tapestry of religious messages—Jehovah's deliverance, sacred kingship, and the revelation of Christ—a superficial narrative being the veneer.⁶

Considerable research into the festival held in 124 B.C., in which Mosiah was consecrated king over the peoples living in the land of Zarahemla, has been undertaken by Book of Mormon scholars over the years. Indeed, if the published record is a reliable measure, then King Benjamin's address must be one of the most intensively studied passages in the Book of Mormon.

As long ago as 1957, Hugh Nibley recognized in Mosiah 1–6 the elements of an Old World New Year rite, and further research by Tvedtnes, Ricks, Welch, and Ostler has established a credible argument that this sacred assembly took place during a Feast of Tabernacles in a Sabbatical, and perhaps even a Jubilee year.⁷ The Old Testament records many such ceremonies that bear similarities to, but cannot be identified positively with, the Feast of Tabernacles.

What cannot be disputed is the similarity between King Benjamin’s speech and the cultic occasions recorded in Joshua 23–24; 1 Samuel 12; and 1 Chronicles 22, 28, and 29, all of which are

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¹⁵ The children of Amulon are the first recorded example of the offspring of a Nephite-Lamanite marriage being accepted among the people of Nephi. According to the teachings of Nephi, these people had been cursed by the Lord (2 Nephi 5:22–23).

⁶ A further reducton by Mormon in the fourth century A.D. adds to the complexity and further disrupts the underlying triadic structure.


¹⁰ See Tvedtnes, "King Benjamin on the similarity."

STURGESS, THE BOOK OF MOSIAH

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ly with, the Feast of Tabernacles recorded in Joshua 23–22, 28, and 29, all of which are

The cultic passages in the book of Mosiah have a very strong association with Deuteronomy. When Lehi and his family fled Jerusalem, Deuteronomy was probably one of the most recently introduced books of scripture. According to many Old Testament scholars, Deuteronomy was the “book of the covenant” discovered during the renovation of the temple in King Josiah’s day. Lehi would have been a young man when Josiah gathered “all the people, both great and small,” to the temple to read this book (2 Kings 23:3).

A religious reformation followed in which the temple was cleansed and the idolatrous priests of Israel were slain. Again, the similarity to the assemblies of Mosiah and in this case the possibility of direct influence on the Nephites is quite strong.

Turning to the great assemblies in Mosiah, we find a number of distinguishing characteristics that identify them with these ancient ceremonies and warrant their consideration as the structural foundation of the book.

1. On each occasion, newly written or recently discovered scriptures were read and expounded to the people, after the manner of King Josiah and Ezra the scribe. At the first assembly, King

10 See Tvedtnes, “King Benjamin and the Feast of Tabernacles,” 207–9, on the similarity.
Benjamin gave the revelation recorded in Mosiah 3:2–27, which was then written down and distributed among the people. It is also possible that the small plates of Nephi, with their emphasis on deliverance, political leadership, and the doctrine of Christ, had recently come into the possession of King Benjamin and may also have been read during the ceremony. 12

At the second great assembly, we are told that Mosiah read, and caused to be read (Mosiah 25:5–6), the record of Zeniff and the account of Alma (Mosiah 9–22; 23–24).

In Mosiah’s final ceremonial address to the people, the recently translated book of Ether was read to the people (Mosiah 28:11–18). It is possible that the original book of Mosiah departed from the story of King Mosiah at this point to provide a summary of the Jaredite history. The cultic importance of the original book of Ether was its inclusion of yet another discourse on kingship, one more revelation of Jesus Christ, and another testimony to the blessings of the land to those who would obey the commandments of God. But in Mormon’s abridged version of the book of Mosiah we find only the promise that “this account shall be written hereafter” (Mosiah 28:19).

This promise, of course, was never directly fulfilled by Mormon. Moroni edited Mosiah’s translation of the Jaredite plates and produced the book of Ether as we have it today. The case can be made that it was not a complete reproduction of the words that were read by Mosiah to his people in 92 B.C., for two reasons. The present book of Ether contains less than a hundredth part of the Jaredite record and features heavy editorial comment by Moroni (Ether 15:33). On the other hand, Moroni wrote that parts of the plates were kept from the people by Mosiah until after the coming of Christ (Ether 4:1). We can imagine that Mosiah’s reading of the Jaredite record would have concentrated on those elements that had cultic significance on the day of the great assembly.

Interestingly, the book of Omni may record an earlier version of these royal ceremonies. In a very brief account of the migration of the Nephites to the land of Zarahemla, we are told that

12 Amaleki recorded at Omni 1:25 that he proposed to deliver the small plates of Nephi, which had become the private record of Jacob’s family, to King Benjamin.
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“the people of Zarahemla, and of Mosiah did unite together; and 
Mosiah was appointed to be their king” (Omni 1:19). This sug-
gests a ceremony not unlike that recorded in Mosiah 25, but then 
Amaleki refers to the translation of a large engraved stone, which 
Mosiah interpreted by the power of God (Omni 1:20). First 
Nephi 5 also records a cultic occasion that links burnt offerings, 
celebration of deliverance, and the reading of newly obtained 
scriptures (cf. Deuteronomy 31:9–13, Joshua 24 [especially verse 
26] and perhaps 2 Chronicles 15).

2. At each of these three assemblies of Mosiah we find a 
formal ceremonial response by the people to the words of their 
leaders. This kind of interactive instruction is common among the 
Old Testament covenant rituals (cf. Exodus 24:3; Joshua 24:14– 
25; 2 Chronicles 15:12–15; 2 Kings 23:3; Nehemiah 8:6, 9–12).

The effect of King Benjamin’s words on the people was pro-
found: they fell to the ground and lamented because of their 
transgressions but, after being promised a remission of their sins, 
we are told that they rejoiced with “exceedingly great joy” 
(Mosiah 5:4; cf. 4:1–2; 5:1–4). The ceremonial nature of these 
responses has long been appreciated among Book of Mormon 
scholars. In Mosiah 25 the reaction of the people is described in 
such stylistic terms that it, too, was probably cultic in nature 
(Mosiah 25:7–11).

Likewise, in King Mosiah’s final address to this people, the 
reading of the record of the Jaredites caused his people “to 
mourn exceedingly,” but it also gave them much knowledge, “in 
the which they did rejoice” (Mosiah 28:18).

3. At the first two assemblies, this response by the people led 
them to enter into a covenant and, as a community, to take upon 
themselves a new name. We are on familiar ground here because 
in Deuteronomy we read,

The Lord hath avouched thee this day to be his pecu-
liar people, as he hath promised thee . . .

And to make thee high above all nations which he 
hath made, in praise, and in name, and in honour; and 
that thou mayest be an holy people unto the Lord thy 
God, as he hath spoken. (Deuteronomy 26:18–19)
We are told by the compiler of the book of Mosiah that King Benjamin called his people together for the very purpose of giving them a name (Mosiah 1:11). That name, of course, was the name of Christ (Mosiah 3:8). On the second occasion, three years later, the people took the name of Nephi, although further covenants were made through the baptisms that followed the ceremony (Mosiah 25:12, 17–19). In its present form at least, the book is silent on the subject of covenants and new names in relation to the third assembly of Mosiah, although a hint of this might be seen in the report that “every man expressed a willingness to answer for his own sins” (Mosiah 29:38).

4. Unsurprisingly, this covenancing process is often associated with the affiliation of different tribes or peoples. This lies at the heart of the second of Mosiah’s gatherings, the coming together of the peoples of Nephi and Zarahemla with the Lamanites and the Amulonites. Joshua 24 may record a similar occasion when those of Joshua’s clan who had already sworn allegiance to Jehovah were united in a treaty with the traditional inhabitants of Shechem. Echoes of a similar covenentral process are found in 2 Chronicles 15, in which the tribes of Judah and Benjamin came together with strangers out of the northern kingdom and swore to seek Jehovah, the God of their fathers.

5. In most of the Old Testament accounts to which reference has been made, Jehovah’s deliverance of Israel through the exodus is given a prominent place in the liturgy. One would expect that Exodus 24 should place such an emphasis on this theme, but Deuteronomy, Joshua 24, and Nehemiah 9 preserve this same tradition, which had a central place in Israel’s covenant ritual.

All three of the Mosiah ceremonies are centered on this deliverance motif, which is at the heart of the book of Mosiah. Significantly, on each of these three occasions, a Nephite exodus is used to illustrate the tradition rather than the original flight of Israel out of Egypt.

6. After each of these festivals, the narrative describes a religious reformation. According to the sacred history of ancient Israel, the religion of Israel was first organized by Moses after such an occasion. Asa purged the high places following the covenental renewal in Judah during the fifteenth year of his reign. Josiah cleaned out the Jerusalem temple and destroyed the local temple sites, which had been used for idolatry. Nehemiah also relates such a renewal.

In like manner, Mosiah 6:3 relates how a covenant was concluded as king, Benjamin, that they might hear the word of God. And even though there was a delay during the event, the people were again appointed and the churches were reorganized. The renewal of the church (Mosiah 29:47). It seems organization following Mosiah’s not religious, but the distinct reminder that the chief judge of the Nephites in ancient Judah, as well as clearing out the groves (2 Chronicles 17:1–9; 13).

In summary, the accounts of these events do not have come down to us in their first recorded, but the triadic structure of Mosiah remains intact and we see in each account the need for the book of Mosiah's second and third assembly.

The book of Mosiah features the history of the people to gather for the third assembly in liturgical language, and its promise of deliverance. For example, “Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob” is rare. One finds it only eight times in Mormon, and on every occasion in conjunction with this message of...
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temple sites, which had been used by Israel over many centuries.
Nehemiah also relates such a renewal after Israel’s return from
Babylon.

In like manner, Mosiah 6:3 records that after Mosiah had been
consecrated as king, Benjamin called teachers “to teach the
people, that thereby they might hear and know the commandments of
God.” And even though there does not seem to have been a fall-
ning away during the intervening three-year period, priests and
teachers were again appointed after the second great assembly,
and the churches were reorganized (Mosiah 25:19–23). Indeed, so
fundamental was the renewal of the Nephite religion at this time
that Alma the Elder came to be known as the founder of the
church (Mosiah 29:47). It seems, at first, anomalous that the reor-
ganization following Mosiah’s third assembly was political and
not religious, but the distinction begins to disappear when we
remember that the chief judge Alma was also the religious leader
of the Nephites. In ancient Judah, Jehoshaphat reformed the judi-
cracy as well as clearing out the high places and cutting down the
groves (2 Chronicles 17:1–9; 19:5–11).

In summary, the accounts of these three cultic assemblies may
not have come down to us in quite the form in which they were
first recorded, but the triadic structure of the original book of
Mosiah remains intact and we are able to see how it was con-
structed.

The book of Mosiah features a fourth great assembly con-
ducted by King Limhi at the temple of Nephi in about 122 B.C.
(Mosiah 7:17–18; 21). While this account interrupted the simple
format of the book, it was needed to explain the significance of
Mosiah’s second and third assemblies.

The assembly of Limhi began, as it should, with a procla-
mation to the people to gather to the temple. Limhi’s message, deliv-
ered in liturgical language, was the familiar theme of Jehovah’s
promise of deliverance. For example, the use of “the God of
Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob” as a title for deity in Mosiah 7:19
is rare. One finds it only eight times throughout the Book of
Mormon, and on every occasion except one the title is used in
conjunction with this message of deliverance.13

13 1 Nephi 6:4; 19:10; Mosiah 7:19; 23:23; Alma 29:11; 36:2; 3 Nephi
After recounting their own history of disobedience and bondage, Limhi called on Ammon to address the multitude. Ammon did so, significantly, by repeating the words King Benjamin had spoken at his last great assembly, new scripture to the people of Limhi. Immediately after this ceremony, Limhi tried unsuccessfully to get the Jaredite records translated. Thirty years later at another such assembly, King Mosiah fulfilled this request.

Once again, in Limhi's ceremony we find the king using language that is clearly intended to evoke an emotional response from his audience (Mosiah 7:18–19, 23). Although Mosiah 7–8 has no record of a covenant, Limhi does challenge his people:

But if ye will turn to the Lord with full purpose of heart, and put your trust in him, and serve him with all diligence of mind, if ye do this, he will, according to his own will and pleasure, deliver you out of bondage.

(Mosiah 7:33)

In Mosiah 21 we read that after the coming of Ammon, King Limhi and many of his people entered into a covenant with God "to serve him and keep his commandments" (Mosiah 21:32). The obvious occasion for such a covenant would have been the assembly recorded in Mosiah 7–8. At the conclusion of the ceremony, King Limhi formally dismissed the multitude, as did King Benjamin three years before at Zarahemla, and King Solomon several hundred years earlier following the dedication of the temple in Jerusalem (2 Chronicles 7:10).

In spite of this diversion, the three great cultic assemblies of King Mosiah form the basic structure of the book that bears his name.

3. Kingship as a Theme in the Book of Mosiah

Despite Mosiah2's decision to abolish the monarchy at the end of his reign, the book of Mosiah leaves us with generally happy memories of life under Mosiah1, Benjamin, and Mosiah2.

4:30–31. The exception is Mormon 9:11. This is, of course, the ancient name of Israel's God and suggests a link with ceremonies that were regarded as being of great antiquity.

Indeed, the monarchy was with the turbulent reign of King Benjamin's roya course are a classic exposition (Mosiah 2:9–30). He is Benjamin is a mortal, n "subject to all manner of i 2:11). As a servant of the says, should be reserved fo

As we read Benjamin again of Deuteronomy. De kings of Israel not to multi fortu tions of gold and silver personal copy of the book days of his life. This is to words of the law and not be ren. And if he does this, he i dynasty will be prolonged.

King Benjamin shows that he sought gold nor silver, nor h commit adultery. Referring to Benjamin confesses that he fully preserved the scriptures teaches his son Mosiah, and the keep the commandments so t (cf. Samuel in 1 Samuel 12:3-15).

The scriptural records re also provided an object lesson kindly one. The record of Z righteous king who saved hi mighty prayer and trust in the terms that make it clear that h nomic ideal. For example, in r his priests, the prophet used ti royal charge given in Deuteron
Indeed, the monarchy was a time of relative peace when compared with the turbulent reign of the judges that immediately followed.

King Benjamin’s royal confession and the accompanying discourse are a classic exposition of the Israelite ideal of kingship (Mosiah 2:9–30). He is not God made manifest among men; Benjamin is a mortal, no better than the people themselves, “subject to all manner of infirmities in body and mind” (Mosiah 2:11). As a servant of the people, he seeks no praise; praise, he says, should be reserved for Jehovah, their heavenly King.14

As we read Benjamin’s confession, we are reminded once again of Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy 17:14–20 warns the future kings of Israel not to multiply wives to themselves nor to acquire fortunes of gold and silver. The king is commanded to make a personal copy of the book of Deuteronomy and study it all the days of his life. This is to be done so that he will keep all the words of the law and not be lifted up in his heart above his brethren. And if he does this, he is promised that his rule and that of his dynasty will be prolonged.

King Benjamin shows deference to this tradition. He has not sought gold nor silver, nor has he suffered that the people should commit adultery. Referring to the assembled tribes as his brethren, Benjamin confesses that he is no better than they. He has faithfully preserved the scriptures contained in the brass plates, and he teaches his son Mosiah, and the people as a whole, that they must keep the commandments so that they might prosper in the land (cf. Samuel in 1 Samuel 12:3–5 and David in 1 Chronicles 29:14–15).

The scriptural records read by Mosiah at the second festival also provided an object lesson in kingship, on this occasion a less kindly one. The record of Zeniff begins with an account of a righteous king who saved his people from bondage through mighty prayer and trust in the Lord. But his son is described in terms that make it clear that he has turned against the Deuteronomic ideal. For example, in Abinadi’s indictment of Noah and his priests, the prophet used language that clearly reflected the royal charge given in Deuteronomy:

14 See Stephen D. Ricks, “The Ideology of Kingship in Mosiah 1–6,” in Reexploring the Book of Mormon, 114–16.
If ye teach the law of Moses, why do ye not keep it? Why do ye set your hearts upon riches? Why do ye commit whoredoms and spend your strength with harlots, yea, and cause this people to commit sin, that the Lord has cause to send me to prophesy against this people, yea, even a great evil against this people?” (Mosiah 12:29)

Because of the unrighteousness of their king, the Zeniffites were delivered into bondage and, although Noah’s son, Limhi, was a righteous king, Jehovah would wait some years to hear the people’s cries and deliver them from their captivity. Because of the suffering experienced at the hands of King Noah, an element among the people of Limhi had come to be firmly opposed to kingship.

Indeed, the twin records of Zeniff and Alma appear to have been heavily influenced by the Old Testament book of Judges, which also bears a strong antimonarchist flavor. One of the heroes of the record of Zeniff, a man described in Mosiah 19:4 as having taken an oath to slay King Noah (and having very nearly done so), is named Gideon. Gideon, of course, was the name of one of the great deliverers of Israel in the time of the judges and is said to have refused the throne when it was offered to him. Judges also records a poem attributed to Jotham, one of Gideon’s nephews, in which he warned against the institution of the monarchy (Judges 9:7–20).

Some scholars have suggested that the present book of Judges was based, in part, on an earlier “Book of Saviors” or “moši’im,” of whom Gideon may have been one. If so, then the association between the record of Zeniff and the book of Judges is even closer, for the Book of Mormon Gideon is quite clearly a savior or deliverer in this sense, as is Alma the Elder.


16 Yet another link between the book of Judges and the record of Zeniff is the close association between the rape of the women of Shiloh recorded in Judges 21:15–25 and the kidnapping of the daughters of the Lamanites by the priests of Noah recorded in Mosiah 20. Given the possibility that the Lamanites were influenced by the book of Judges, the question might be asked whether Gideon

STURGESS, THE BOOK OF I

At the final great ass of his sons willing to acc have been given to the ap King Limhi, who had pre some thirty years before, v no heirs, or that a king fr ceptable to a significant i chose the son of another Z earlier rejected the kingshi the Younger as chief judge bondage and deliverance to of monarchy.

At this assembly Mosia he had recently translated. E tions aside, is a history of the truth of the warning issues appointment of kings would 6:23). Thereafter, the book between the would-be leader eight of the Jaredite kings (11:9, 18). When Moroni’s ed the book of Ether, most of wh on the dangers of kingship—I preached at his final assembl people immediately thereafter.

The further exhortations to in Mosiah 29 were actually com people sent throughout the appear inconsistent with the Mosiah’s last cultic assembly wa his father’s famous discourse on sent forth among those that we voice” (Mosiah 2:8). We can w address at the festival in 92 or 91. written proclamation he distribute 29:5–36.

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STURGESSION, THE BOOK OF MOSIAH

At the final great assembly, Mosiah faced his people with none of his sons willing to accept his kingdom. No thought appears to have been given to the appointment of one of the descendants of King Limhi, who had presumably renounced his claims to the title some thirty years before. We must conclude either that Limhi left no heirs, or that a king from that group would have been unacceptable to a significant body of the Nephites. Instead, Mosiah chose the son of another Zeniffite leader, Alma the Elder, who had earlier rejected the kingship (Mosiah 23:7), and appointed Alma the Younger as chief judge rather than king, using the themes of bondage and deliverance to turn his people against the institution of monarchy.

At this assembly Mosiah read from the book of Ether, which he had recently translated. Ether 1:6 to 12:5, Moroni’s interpolations aside, is a history of the Jaredite kings, written to establish the truth of the warning issued by the brother of Jared that the appointment of kings would “surely” lead into captivity (Ether 6:23). Thereafter, the book of Ether is a history of the wars between the would-be leaders and a record of the captivity of eight of the Jaredite kings (Ether 7:5, 17; 8:3; 9:7; 10:14, 30; 11:9, 18). When Moroni’s editorial comments are removed from the book of Ether, most of what remains is a formalized discourse on the dangers of kingship—the very theme which King Mosiah preached at his final assembly and in his proclamations to the people immediately thereafter.

The further exhortations to the people on kingship recorded in Mosiah 29 were actually contained in a written proclamation to the people sent throughout the land and, at first glance, this may appear inconsistent with the “great assembly” theme. But Mosiah’s last cultic assembly was meant to balance his first, when his father’s famous discourse on kingship had been “written and sent forth among those that were not under the sound of his voice” (Mosiah 2:8). We can well imagine that King Mosiah’s address at the festival in 92 or 91 B.C. was similar in content to the written proclamation he distributed later, now recorded in Mosiah 29:5–36.

was not a name that had been deliberately acquired later in life for symbolic purposes.
Although it is written around three great royal festivals, the book of Mosiah is not a panegyric for kingship. While the author shows the greatest of reverence toward King Mosiah, the institution of kingship itself is discredited by the events that emerge throughout the book. These historic ceremonies, when powerful changes were effected in the government of Zarahemla, unfold a divinely ordained progression from kingship to judgeship. Mosiah, the last of the great Nephite kings, becomes a witness against kings and for judges.

In his very first year as chief judge, Alma was confronted by a divisive political and religious movement. Although the political ambitions of the dissidents may not have emerged immediately, by the fifth year of the judges, Alma faced a major challenge to his authority and a serious movement to replace the office of chief judge with a king (Alma 2:1–10).

It is plausible that, in these circumstances, Alma wrote, or caused to have written, a new book of scripture that was intended to reinforce the institution of chief judge and to strengthen his personal authority. It is not difficult to imagine that in seeking to boost support for the monarchist cause, the Amlicites would have drawn on the affection that the people still felt toward Mosiah. If so, then a strong argument could be made that Alma or someone sympathetic to his cause was instrumental in the compilation of the book of Mosiah so as to be laudatory of Mosiah while undermining Amlici’s bid to reestablish the kingship.

The account of Alma the Elder (Mosiah 23–24) also provides an unusual kind of support for Alma the Younger’s claim to the judgment seat. In this brief book we are reminded that Alma’s father had been offered the kingship and had rejected it for the very reasons that Mosiah ultimately abolished the monarchy—the sufferings inflicted on the people by the wickedness of King Noah. In recounting this story, Alma the Younger may have been reminding his audience that he too could have been the son of a king, but for his father’s dedication to the liberty of his people.

Finally, when we look at the book of Mosiah in this light, the omission of the Jaredite record from Mosiah 28 and the inclusion of Alma’s personal conversion at Mosiah 27 can be seen from another perspective. It is possible—and one cannot put the case higher than that—that the kings of Israel and Nephi and Zarahemla actually participated in the drama of bondage and redemption. In summary, it might be established Mosiah’s role over a united kingdom; judgment for Alma’s claim to the throne.

4. Deliverance out of the Land of Zarahemla

We come now to the prominent theme stands out in the Book of Mormon: Jehovah will deliver his people. They will place their trust in him. This can be commented on the recurrences of the Old Testament—whether in the Old Testament, but the deliverance image and one which dominates this period.

King Benjamin gives us the deliverance theme in his discourse:

If ye shall keep the commandments of God

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Mosiah 23–24) also provides the Younger’s claim to the are reminded that Alma’s and had rejected it for the abolished the monarchy— the the wickedness of King the Younger may have been oly have been the son of a the liberty of his people.

of Mosiah in this light, the Mosiah 28 and the inclusion of Mosiah 27 can be seen from and one cannot put the case Israel and Nephi and Zara-

hemla actually participated in a ceremony in which the cultic drama of bondage and redemption was played out. In another account of Alma’s conversion, recorded at Alma 36, the emphasis on bondage and deliverance is overwhelming, including the use of the ancient cultic title for deity, “the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.”

In summary, it might be said that the first of the great assemblies established Mosiah’s right to rule; the second, his right to rule over a united kingdom; and the final festival laid the foundation for Alma’s claim to the leadership over a united people of Nephi.

4. Deliverance out of the Hands of Their Enemies

We come now to the preeminent image of the book. If any theme stands out in the book of Mosiah, it is the message that Jehovah will deliver his people out of the hands of their enemies if they will place their trust in him. A number of scholars have commented on the recurrence of the exodus pattern in the Book of Mormon, but the deliverance theme—a much more fundamental image and one which recurs with even greater frequency in the Old Testament—dominates the Nephite religion throughout this period.17

King Benjamin gives us the standard formula for the deliverance theme in his discourse on kingship at the first great assembly:

If ye shall keep the commandments of my son, or the commandments of God which shall be delivered unto

you by him, ye shall prosper in the land, and your enemies shall have no power over you. (Mosiah 2:31)

The negative version of this formula we find in Abinadi’s message to King Noah at Mosiah 11:23, 25:

Except this people repent and turn unto the Lord their God, they shall be brought into bondage; and none shall deliver them, except it be the Lord the Almighty God....

And except they repent in sackcloth and ashes, and cry mightily to the Lord their God, I will not hear their prayers, neither will I deliver them out of their afflictions.

Deliverance is a common theme among Old Testament writers (although nowhere near as common as it is in the book of Mosiah), and its presence in the book of Deuteronomy suggests cultic uses. In Deuteronomy 26, for example, the people are commanded to bring firstfruit offerings when they come into the land of their inheritance. In handing their basket of offerings to the priest, they are instructed to say, before the Lord:

A Syrian ready to perish was my father, and he went down into Egypt, and sojourned there with a few, and became there a nation, great, mighty, and populous:

And the Egyptians evil entreated us, and afflicted us, and laid upon us hard bondage:

And when we cried unto the Lord God of our fathers, the Lord heard our voice, and looked on our affliction, and our labour, and our oppression:

And the Lord brought us forth out of Egypt with a mighty hand, and with an outstretched arm, and with great terribleness, and with signs, and with wonders:

And he hath brought us into this place, and hath given us this land, even a land that floweth with milk and honey.

And now, behold, I have brought the firstfruits of the land, which thou, O Lord, hast given me. (Deuteronomy 26:5–10)

By and large, the Israelite and redemption theme with Nephites experimented freely and new life by adapting it to their situations. Thus Nephi interpreted as having been equivalent to used their escape out of the hand Lemuel’s hearts (1 Nephi 7:1).

The authors and compiler account of Alma, and the origi nity and deliverance of the similar way. It is significant that the Younger should command thy fathers in the land of H (Mosiah 27:16).

Another archetypal version people in bondage and places power of Jehovah. In the Psalms times that God has delivered his people and he turns to Jehovah: “I have thee forever” (2 Nephi 4:34).

We find this same stress on deliverance of the people of L the land of Nephi was effected knowledge that Ammon had by trust in Jehovah was given cent.

The miraculous deliverance attributed to the Lord. In co Limhitites, made possible by the people of Alma were delivered come upon the Lamanites (Mo).

It is clear that this was with Abinadi in Mosiah 11:23–25: except it be the Lord the Alm emphasis on the “mighty pow wonders of Deuteronomy 26.

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By and large, the Israelites felt obliged to confine the bondage
and redemption theme within the story of the exodus, but the
Nephites experimented freely with the image, continually giving it
new life by adapting it to their own national and personal situa-
tions. Thus Nephi interpreted his family’s flight from Jerusalem
as having been equivalent to Israel’s exodus out of Egypt. He
used their escape out of the hands of Laban to soften Laman and
Lemuel’s hearts (1 Nephi 7:11).

The authors and compilers of the record of Zeniff, the
account of Alma, and the original book of Mosiah used the cap-

tivity and deliverance of the peoples of Limhi and Alma in a
similar way. It is significant that the angel who appeared to Alma
the Younger should command him to “remember the captivity of
thy fathers in the land of Helam, and in the land of Nephi”
(Mosiah 27:16).

Another archetypal version of the formula begins with the
people in bondage and places much of its emphasis on the saving
power of Jehovah. In the Psalm of Nephi, Nephi recalls all the
times that God has delivered him out of the hands of his enemies,
and he turns to Jehovah: “I have trusted in thee, and I will trust in
thee forever” (2 Nephi 4:34).

We find this same stress on absolute trust in the Lord in the
deliverance of the people of Limhi. Although their escape from
the land of Nephi was effected by the cunning of Gideon and the
knowledge that Ammon had brought with him from Zarahemla,
trust in Jehovah was given central place (Mosiah 7:33).

The miraculous deliverance of Alma and his people is also
attributed to the Lord. In comparison with the exodus of the
Limhites, made possible by the drunkenness of their guards, the
people of Alma were delivered through a sleep the Lord caused to
come upon the Lamanites (Mosiah 23:23–24).

It is clear that this was written to fulfill the prophecy of
Abinadi in Mosiah 11:23–25: “and none shall deliver them,
except it be the Lord the Almighty God” (Mosiah 11:23). The
emphasis on the “mighty power” of God recalls the signs and
wonders of Deuteronomy 26.

Not surprisingly, the deliverance theme took on particular
meaning in the wars against the Lamanites. Once again, the
emphasis is on trusting in the strength of Jehovah, rather than
relying on their own physical advantages. In the book of Mosiah, Zeniff typifies the first of these patterns:

...and in Mormon 3:9–16, in Nephites into battle because strength and sworn oaths of v...

One of the variations on in the Book of Mormon was commandments would bring be reason for considering this for the many passages in whc conjunction with this covenant lation of this covenant, the one ers recalled time and time again his people shortly before his d...

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One further observation s leaving this aspect of the book published an article in Vetus T ...Mośia” Reprinted by the Fou Mormon Studies, this study and Testament of a Hebrew word “deliverer.”

The traits of a mošia[c] are su...


19 John Sawyer, “What Was a M...
STURGESS, THE BOOK OF MOSIAH 127

and in Mormon 3:9–16, in which Mormon refuses to lead the Nephites into battle because they have boasted in their own strength and sworn oaths of vengeance.

One of the variations on the deliverance theme that emerged in the Book of Mormon was the teaching that obedience to the commandments would bring prosperity in the land. There might be reason for considering this an entirely separate theme, except for the many passages in which bondage and deliverance occur in conjunction with this covenantal promise. The most famous revelation of this covenant, the one which later Book of Mormon writers recalled time and time again, was the blessing given by Lehi to his people shortly before his death (2 Nephi 1:7, 9).

There seems to be little doubt that there is some cultic or liturgical pattern behind all this. The language of these bondage and deliverance passages such as bondage, captivity, deliverance, and out of the hands of is used repeatedly. When combined with images from the Exodus (Egypt, the Red Sea, etc.) and rarely used names for deity—such as “the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob”—it is difficult to avoid the conclusion of some underlying pattern that the Book of Mormon writers felt obliged to follow.

One further observation should be made, however, before leaving this aspect of the book of Mosiah. In 1965, John Sawyer published an article in Vetus Testamentum entitled “What Was a Mošia?” Reprinted by the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, this study analyzed the use throughout the Old Testament of a Hebrew word usually translated as “savior” or “deliverer.”

The traits of a mošia are summarized in the following terms:

a. a mošia is a victorious hero appointed by God;
b. he liberates a chosen people from oppression, controversy, and injustice after they cry out for help;
c. their deliverance is usually accomplished by means of a nonviolent escape or negotiation;
d. the immediate result of the coming of a mošia was “escape from injustice, and a return to a state of justice where each man possesses his rightful property”;

e. on a larger scale, “final victory means the coming of moshi'im to rule like Judges over Israel.”

Thus we read, in Isaiah 19:20, a passage that might have been available to the Nephites through the brass plates: “And it shall be for a sign and for a witness unto the Lord of hosts in the land of Egypt: for they shall cry unto the Lord because of the oppressors, and he shall send them a saviour, and a great one, and he shall deliver them.” The mošia’ here, of course, is none other than Moses. In Judges 3:9 and 15, we again see the term used to describe heroes whom the Lord has raised up to deliver his people. In this sense of the word, we can think of Ammon, Gideon, and Alma the Elder as moshi'im or “saviors.” Indeed, Gideon is described in precisely these terms: “Now the name of the man was Gideon; and it was he who was an instrument in the hands of God in delivering the people of Limhi out of bondage” (Alma 1:8). Not only is this a book of Mosiah; it is also a book of moshi'im. The very name focuses the reader on one of the central themes—Jehovah’s deliverance of his people when they obey his commandments and trust in his strength.

5. The Revelation of Christ in the Book of Mosiah

Sawyer also says of the word mošia’ that “in the language of the prophets, especially Deutero-Isaiah, it is one of the titles of the God of Israel.” Given this further perspective on the name mošia’, the third of the key themes of the book of Mosiah—the revelation of Jesus Christ as the God of Israel and the foundation of the religion of Christ among the people of Nephi—becomes especially relevant. Such a revelation was necessary because, until King Benjamin’s final great assembly, the peoples of Mosiah and Zarahemla were apparently living the law of Moses without any awareness of the doctrine of Christ that had been revealed to Jacob and Nephi four hundred years earlier.

Welch, “What Was a ‘Mosiah’?” in Reexploring the Book of Mormon, 105-7.

Alma the Elder is so portrayed at Mosiah 24:17. This passage is a good example of the lengths to which the author of the book of Mosiah went to portray Alma as a latter-day Moses.

Sawyer, “What Was a Mošia’?” 476.

Sturgess, The Book of Mosiah

It is often assumed by re-Lehi brought with him from the Promised Land a knowledge that included a complete understanding of the Book of Mosiah. Indeed, we can conclude that Lehi and his family assimilated a small part of the doctrine of Christ while in the land of Egypt, because the name of Christ is revealed to Nephi in Genesis 31:26, Nephi writes, “And we rejoice in Christ, for he is our Redeemer; and with him will we be called to live forever” (Alma 5:26). In Mosiah 25, Nephi delights in the thought of the flight of the people of Israel from Egypt.

The only passage inconsistent with the doctrine of Christ is 1 Nephi 9:18, where Nephi says, “I know that ye are a people who are aurious, and that God doth visit you; and the Father saith that he will give unto you the fulness of his glory.” This is not a difficult passage to understand, and it is the only time in the NT that Jesus is referred to as “the Father.”

Titles such as the Holy Ghost and the Father are unique to this section of the Book of Mormon. They are a reflection of the way in which the text was intended by its author, who was writing for a contemporary audience.

When we isolate 1 Nephi 10, we see the prophetic message of Nephi’s vision and the way in which it was received by his brother Jacob. The vision is a reminder of the importance of the Book of Mormon in our lives today.


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STURGESS, THE BOOK OF MOSIAH

129

It is often assumed by readers of the Book of Mormon that
Lehi brought with him from the Old World a religious framework
that included a complete understanding of Jesus Christ. But, at
least insofar as the Book of Mormon itself is concerned, we must
conclude that Lehi and his family had come to appreciate only a
small part of the doctrine of Christ prior to the patriarch's death.
For example, the name of Christ was revealed to Jacob only after
the flight of the people of Nephi out of the land of their first
inheritance, while the full name, Jesus Christ, was apparently
revealed to Nephi some years later (2 Nephi 10:3; 25:19). In
2 Nephi 25:26, Nephi writes that he and his brother "talk of
Christ, we rejoice in Christ, we preach of Christ, we prophesy
of Christ," and yet a few chapters earlier they did not even seem to
know his name.

The only passage inconsistent with this interpretation of the
doctrine of Christ is 1 Nephi 10–14. But as I have noted else-
where, this is a difficult passage, which appears to have been writ-
ten by Nephi many years after the surrounding material in
1 Nephi.23

Titles such as the Holy Ghost, the Lamb of God, and the Son of
God are unique to this section of the book and disappear abruptly
at the conclusion of 1 Nephi 14. Of even greater interest is the use
of the title Jesus Christ in the Original Manuscript of 1 Nephi
12:18. These words were changed to the Messiah in 1837, perhaps
because the occurrence here of Jesus Christ appeared to Joseph
Smith to be anachronistic (given that the name of Jesus Christ was
not revealed until 2 Nephi 25:19). If, as seems likely, the writing
of these five chapters should be dated closer to the writing of
2 Nephi 25, then Jesus Christ—or their Nephite equivalent—may
indeed be the words that Nephi wrote upon the small plates at this
passage.

When we isolate 1 Nephi 10–14 and study the language actu-
ally used by the Nephite prophets, it becomes clear that Nephi and
his brother Jacob were trying to introduce new religious under-
standings among their people. Moreover, they were perhaps

Symposium on the Book of Mormon (Sydney: The Student Association of The
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, University of Sydney, 1982); copy
in the FARMS collection.
unsuccessful in this endeavor, at least insofar as their public religious observances were concerned. In an incident that apparently occurred toward the end of Jacob’s life, the Nephite prophet was confronted by a conservative member of the community, Sherem, who made a formal accusation that Jacob was trying to “convert the law of Moses into the worship of a being which ye say shall come many hundred years hence” (Jacob 7:7).

In this small tribal community, Jacob was apparently concerned to avoid a confrontation with Sherem. Sherem told Jacob, “I have sought much opportunity that I might speak unto you” (Jacob 7:6). Moreover, as John W. Welch has argued, when Sherem finally did confront Jacob, he did so by making three formal charges under the law of Moses: blasphemy, false prophecy, and causing public apostasy.24 None of this bespeaks great confidence on Jacob’s part, but it does suggest that whatever success he had had in preaching the doctrine of Christ among the people, it was not such that he could be complacent about a charge of blasphemy for preaching about Jesus Christ.

Furthermore, when we look to the language of Jacob’s descendants, recorded in the minor books of the small plates of Nephi, with the exception of Enos’s private experience in the wilderness, the doctrine of Christ disappears entirely after the book of Jacob. As for Enos’s descendants, we are informed that they were strict in keeping the law of Moses, but all language that would suggest a belief in the doctrine of Christ disappears from the text. It is possible, of course, that this omission is a comment on Jacob’s descendants and not on the people of Nephi as a whole, but when it is combined with the very real threat to Jacob and the gospel of Christ that was posed by Sherem, a plausible case could be made that Nephi and his brother were unsuccessful in their bid to establish the doctrine of Christ as the official religion of the Nephites.

In these circumstances, the revelation of Christ during the first great assembly in the book of Mosiah takes on even greater significance. Benjamin delivered the doctrine of Christ in a form that is slightly different from the way that it was preached by Nephi and Jacob, declaring it to be God (Mosiah 3:2–27). If a being which ye say shall come many hundred years hence (Jacob 7:7).

We are explicitly told in Words of Mormon that Amaleki gave the Lamanites, we must assume throne for many years but Mosiah 2–6. What we cannot Benjamin had read the small that we have already observed the reading of newly discovered possibility that Benjamin did on this occasion. If so, then it of the doctrine of Christ that he that prompted Benjamin to s third chapter of Mosiah.

Nevertheless, Benjamin does knowledge of the doctrine of described in Mosiah 5, through themselves the name of Christ, bear covenant, but no reference is made to baptism was not introduced at the book of Mosiah record is to a second great assembly of Mosiah.

At this second great assembly, his father’s example and read to newly written scriptures, which Jesus Christ as their centerpiece. many years before the revealing his final public assembly. It brought with them a religion to the world. When Abinadi confronted the people, they taught, their ancestors: Moses” (Mosiah 12:28).


25 See n. 3 above on the origins of Zarahemla Nephites.
and Jacob, declaring it to be a recent revelation from an angel of God (Mosiah 3:2–27). After four hundred years, what had brought about this religious reformation?

We are explicitly told in the book of Omni and again in the Words of Mormon that Amaleki gave the small plates of Nephi to King Benjamin. We are not told just when this occurred, but given the account that Amaleki gives of King Benjamin’s wars against the Lamanites, we must assume that it was after he had been on the throne for many years but before the assembly described in Mosiah 2–6. What we cannot be certain about is whether King Benjamin had read the small plates. Given the strong association that we have already observed between these cultic assemblies and the reading of newly discovered scriptures, we must leave open the possibility that Benjamin did read the book of Nephi to the people on this occasion. If so, then it is possible that it was the revelation of the doctrine of Christ that he found in the small plates of Nephi that prompted Benjamin to seek the revelation recorded in the third chapter of Mosiah.

Nevertheless, Benjamin does not seem to have a complete knowledge of the doctrine of Christ. The covenantal process described in Mosiah 5, through which the people took upon themselves the name of Christ, bears some similarities to the baptismal covenant, but no reference is made to baptism itself. Indeed, if the Book of Mormon record is to be relied on, we must conclude that baptism was not introduced among the people of Nephi until the second great assembly of Mosiah three years later.25

At this second great assembly in 121 B.C., Mosiah followed his father’s example and read to the people from newly found or newly written scriptures, which carried yet another revelation of Jesus Christ as their centerpiece. The Zeniffites had left Zarahemla many years before the revelation of Christ by King Benjamin at his final cultic assembly. It is probable, then, that they had brought with them a religion that knew only the law of Moses. When Abinadi confronted the priests of Noah and inquired what it was that they taught, their answer was, “We teach the law of Moses” (Mosiah 12:28).

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25 See n. 3 above on the origins of the practice of baptism among the Zarahemla Nephites.
Having corrected their misconceptions about the law of Moses, Abinadi revealed a new religion, the doctrine of Christ. To Abinadi, the coming of the son of God was evident in the teachings of Moses and all the prophets who had prophesied since the world began. It is reasonable to conclude that Abinadi was blessed with spiritual insights not immediately obvious to his peers.

Once again a prophet of God was revealing Christ to a people who had previously known only the law of Moses. And yet again we find a prophet using language which suggests that the name of Christ has only recently been made known (Mosiah 15:21).

Abinadi’s doctrine of Christ differs somewhat from that of Nephi and King Benjamin, especially in his discourse on the relationship between the Father and the Son. Latter-day Saint theologians have struggled for decades with Abinadi’s language in Mosiah 15:2-4, when the simplest and most natural explanation for the curious wording surely lies in the fact that he had developed his doctrine in isolation based on inspired reading of ancient scriptures.²⁶

At Mosiah’s third and final assembly, the reading of the manifestation of Christ to the brother of Jared again revealed Christ to the Nephites. In Mormon’s version of the book of Mosiah, of course, any reference to this aspect of the plates of Jared was removed; but it must have come as a marvelous surprise to Mosiah and his people to discover in those ancient records yet another manifestation of Jesus Christ to a prophet more than a thousand years before. It is possible that the compiler of the book of Mosiah intended the conversion of Alma the Younger to perform this function in the third and final stage of the cycle.

What we can conclude is that at each of the three great assemblies of Mosiah, the revelation of Christ held a central place in the ceremonies. Why the revelation of Christ should have been important in a tract that was written principally for political ends is a question that cannot be pursued in full here, but deserves some comment. First, among ancient peoples questions of political order and spiritual well-being were intimately connected. More-


over, as Noel B. Reynolds has shown, the doctrine of Christ among Book of Mormon people may have been more central to their faith than to the Nephites.

This is almost precisely what John G. Bennett pointed out when he wrote that the Nephites, after having rejected the Lamanite tradition, embraced the Nephite tradition, which was partially compiled by Alma at the same time—i.e., Alma’s account of the Nephite traditions written anywhere (10:12–17).

If Reynolds’s assessment is correct, then in persecuting the name of Christ, Nehor and his followers did not only attack the Church; they also attacked the Nephite identity as a people of faith. The order of Nehor posed a grave threat to the Nephite identity as a people of faith in the face of external military and cultural pressures at this time in defense of their liberty and freedom.

6. Reaching out to the Lamanites

The book of Mosiah carries the message of reaching out to the Lamanites fighting against and reaching out to them. For example, we are told that Zeezrom among the Lamanites, had come to the conclusion that the Lamanites were

²⁷ Reynolds, “Nephi’s Political”
over, as Noel B. Reynolds has noted in his study of the book of Nephi, the doctrine of Christ was central to the political question among Book of Mormon peoples: "Who has the right to rule?" 27

This is almost precisely the situation in which Alma found himself when attacked by Amlici over his right to govern. Nehor and his followers had not only challenged Alma's political legitimacy, they had also questioned the doctrine of Christ and thus the entire Nephite tradition. Given this reading of the events in Alma 1–3, it should come as no surprise to us to find that after their rejection by the Nephites, the Amlicites went over to the Lamanites and fully embraced their tradition. Indeed, after recording this defection, Alma paused to take note of the differences between the Nephite and Lamanite traditions (Alma 3:11–12). Furthermore, in the book of Mosiah—which, according to my analysis, was at least partially compiled by Alma or one of his followers at about this same time—we find the most explicit version of these two foundation traditions written anywhere in the Book of Mormon (Mosiah 10:12–17).

If Reynolds's assessment of the Nephite cultural heritage is correct, then in persecuting those who had taken upon themselves the name of Christ, Nehor and Amlici were challenging the very foundations of Nephite society (Alma 1:19). This was far deeper than an attack upon the church or the institution of judgeship. The order of Nehor posed a direct threat to the tradition that defined the Nephite identity and kept their society intact in the face of external military and cultural encroachment. A book written at this time in defense of the Nephite tradition should therefore give the doctrine of Christ a prominent place.

6. Reaching out to the Lamanites in the Land of Nephi

The book of Mosiah carries within it the paradox of both fighting against and reaching out to the Lamanites. In Mosiah 9, for example, we are told that Zeniff, who had been a Nephite spy among the Lamanites, had come to believe that the Nephite traditions about the Lamanites were not entirely true and concluded

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that there was good among the Lamanites. He thus was concerned that they should not be destroyed. Acting upon this belief, Zeniff led a group of settlers back into the land of Nephi and entered into a treaty with the Lamanites that enabled his people to live among them.

In time he came to regret his confidence in the Lamanite leaders; indeed, Zeniff wrote some of the harshest words in the Book of Mormon about the Lamanite traditions toward the Nephites. The Zeniffites fought bloody wars against the Lamanites and later delivered themselves into bondage and suffered deeply at the hands of their Lamanite masters.

In the second half of the book, however, another mission to the Lamanites is recorded, a mission that was intended to convince the descendants of Laman and Lemuel of the falseness of their traditions and to break down their hatred toward the Nephites. This was not only a religious mission, but a mission of political goodwill through which the sons of Mosiah hoped to bridge the cultural barriers that had separated the two peoples (Mosiah 28:1–2).

In both cases, the attempt was not only to reach out to the Lamanites, but to reclaim the land of Nephi and the temple that Nephi had built there four hundred years earlier. Just how this particular theme was meant to serve the primary messages of the book of Mosiah is not at all obvious, but it would be wrong to assume that the compiler was not capable of building inconsistency into his work. There are strong textual reasons for associating these passages with Alma the Younger, and it may be that, in spite of the immediate need to reinforce the Nephite traditions, the author or compiler was also seeking subtly to transform them.

7. Conclusion: The Structure and Purpose of the Book of Mosiah

Based on this analysis, the book of Mosiah takes on a loosely chiastic structure built around the three great royal ceremonies of King Mosiah in 124, 121, and 92 or 91 B.C. These may or may not have been associated with the temple of Nephi under the law of Moses or with the laws of Deuteronomy. At each of these ceremonies, the book focuses on four key themes—deliverance of his people, anointing, and a sense of continuity with the past.

In addition, the compiler have wedged in between these themes that emphasize a residual of Gentile blood among the people of Nephi which, three generations later, threatened to divide the people of Nephi.

This structure was carefully planned, of course, to mitigate his editing of the Nephi compiler's manuscripts. The reasoning for rejecting such a reasonable explanation of the book is that it is clearly too obvious to disturb the balance of the book. Moreover, given the missing part of the book focused around the anointing of King Mosiah, it is possible that the compiler did not know of Mosiah or Almsgather's manuscript, which would suggest that it was a deliberate choice.

Furthermore, given the missing part of the book, it is possible that the compiler did not think of Mosiah as a place where the people of Nephi had been living. In any case, the book may well have been written to counteract the need for the current readers.

Who then might have needed this book? The answer is clear: the people of Nephi who, on one hand, needed the book to justify the institution of kingship and, on the other hand, needed to discredrit the institution of kingship. The answer is clear: the people of Nephi who, on one hand, needed the book to justify the institution of kingship and, on the other hand, needed to discredrit the institution of kingship.

not have been associated with the ancient Feast of Tabernacles, but they had some connection to the cultic obligations required of Israel under the law of Moses and appear to have been influenced heavily by the religious tradition associated with the book of Deuteronomy. At each of these assemblies, the king taught his people from newly discovered scriptures and centered his message around three key themes—the nature of kingship, Jehovah’s deliverance of his people, and the revelation of Jesus Christ.

In addition, the compiler of the book of Mosiah appears to have wedged in between these assemblies a secondary-level theme that emphasized a residual obligation to the Lamanites and to the land of Nephi which, three generations before, had been surrendered to the Lamanite nations.

This structure was carefully planned and skillfully executed. It is possible, of course, that Mormon provided this framework during his editing of the Nephite plates in the fourth century A.D. The reasons for rejecting such a thesis include the obvious editorial intervention of Mormon at Mosiah 28:19. Why would the compiler have gone to the trouble of constructing a carefully balanced book focused around the three great assemblies, and then so obviously disturb that balance by editing out one of the key lectures? Moreover, given the evidence of the unamended Printer’s Manuscript, we must consider it a real possibility that Mormon did not think of Mosiah as a separate book.

Furthermore, given the wealth of written material that Mormon must have had available, why would he have written a book with this particular complex of messages? Nothing in the book of Mosiah would suggest that it was intended for Mormon’s latter-day readers.

Who then might have need of a cultic history of the reign of King Mosiah which, on the one hand, lionized the last of the Nephite kings, and, on the other, used the king’s own words to discredit the institution of kingship? The answer, as I have suggested above, may well have been Alma the Younger or one of his followers, who needed such a book to assist in their efforts to counteract the assault that had been mounted by Nehor and his followers on the church and on Alma’s chief judgeship.