



NEAL A. MAXWELL INSTITUTE
FOR RELIGIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

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Title Book of Mormon Answers

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Reference *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8/1 (1999): 71.

ISSN 1065-9366 (print), 2168-3158 (online)

Abstract Responses to the following questions appear here:
“Did the Nephites have authority to sacrifice?” and
“Did the Nephites sacrifice first-born animals contrary
to the law of Moses?”



BOOK OF MORMON ANSWERS

Authority to sacrifice among the Nephites?

Did the Nephites sacrifice first-born animals contrary to the law of Moses?

Editor's Note: Each issue of the Journal addresses one or more questions that readers of the Book of Mormon have raised regarding the book. A number of FARMS researchers have collaborated to prepare answers to these questions based on sound scholarly research. This department depends upon the file they have produced.

Question: The Nephites offered sacrifice and burnt offerings according to the law of Moses (see Mosiah 2:3). But the Nephites were from the tribe of Manasseh (see Alma 10:3) and, according to the law of Moses, only the tribe of Levi, and particularly the sons of Aaron therein, could perform the sacrificial ordinances at the altar (see Exodus 28–31; Numbers 3:7; Nehemiah 7:63, 65; Hebrews 7:12–14).

Answer: The Old Testament reports instances of non-Levite men who offered acceptable sacrifices. For example, the first sacrifice offered for the Israelites after they left Egypt was performed not by a Levite, but by Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses, who was not even an Israelite (see Exodus 18:12). Gideon, an early judge in Israel, like Lehi was from the tribe of Manasseh. Yet when he was commanded of God to build an altar, Gideon made a burnt offering to the Lord upon it without

being condemned in any way for his act (see Judges 6:24–26). Elkanah, the father of the prophet Samuel, was from the tribe of Ephraim and his sacrifices too were accepted by the Lord (see 1 Samuel 1:1–3). Samuel continued his father's way, “and the Lord heard him” (1 Samuel 7:9; cf. 10:8).

It may also be supposed that since the Nephites were not descendants of Aaron, and there were no Aaronic priests to officiate for them, the Lord would provide an alternative arrangement. That was true of the situation in Genesis 4:4, where we read of Abel's sacrifice. Abel lived long before Aaron and of course could not deliver his sacrificial animals to priests of the Aaronic line, so he brought “of his flock and of the fat thereof” which he himself sacrificed to the Lord. The Nephites could have been justified in their offerings as much as were the pre-Aaronic patriarchs like Abel.

Many scholars are agreed that sacrifices by non-Levites were common in ancient Israel before the exile. They believe that the notion that only descendants of Aaron could offer sacrifices arose after the Babylonian captivity.

Question: Mosiah 2:3 says that the Nephites followed the law of Moses in offering firstlings of their flocks as burnt offerings, yet firstlings

were never used for burnt offerings or sacrifices under the Mosaic Law.

Answer: It is true that firstlings (the first lambs or calves born to their mothers) were not used for the normal *burnt* offering. However it is a mistake to think that they were not sacrificed at all. Under Mosaic law as given in Exodus 13:12 and 15 the firstborn of flocks and herds were dedicated to the Lord and were to be given to the Levites for their use. Other Israelites were forbidden to use them for work or economic gain (see Deuteronomy 15:19–20). On appointed occasions, the people were to take those firstlings to the temple where they would be slain as sacrifices. Deuteronomy 12:5–6 commanded that to the designated sacrificial altar “ye shall bring your burnt offerings, and your sacrifices, and your tithes . . . and the firstlings of your herds and of your flocks.” Their blood was to be sprinkled on the altar and their fat burned (see Deuteronomy 18:17–18). What was left of the meat then was given to the individual making the offering for him and his family to eat in a specified place (see Deuteronomy 15:19–20). Thus we see that the statement in the book of Mosiah that firstling animals were brought to the temple in Zarahemla and sacrificed is not contrary to the commandments given to Moses. □