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Saturday, November 20, 104

### About the Author



John A. Tvedtnes

### Idolatry in the Book of Mormon

By John A. Tvedtnes

Describing the wickedness of his time, Mormon wrote that the Lamanites marched "against the city Teancum, and did drive the inhabitants forth out of her, and did take many prisoners both women and children, and did offer them up as sacrifices unto their idol gods" (Mormon 4:15; see also verse 16). In a subsequent battle, when the Lamanites "had come the second time, the Nephites were driven and slaughtered with an exceedingly great slaughter; their women and their children were again sacrificed unto idols" (Mormon 4:21; Mormon also mentions the "unbelief and idolatry" of the Lamanites in Mormon 5:15).

Though Lehi was a prophet of God and angels had appeared to his four sons, idolatry appeared among them early in their history. Nephi's brother Jacob spoke of "those that worship idols, for the devil of all devils delighteth in them" (2 Nephi 9:37). Jacob's son Enos noted that the Lamanites "were led by their evil nature that they became wild, and ferocious, and a blood-thirsty people, full of idolatry and filthiness" (Enos 1:20). The Nephite king Zeniff wrote that "they were a lazy and an idolatrous people" (Mosiah 9:12). Strangely, Zeniff's son Noah and his priests "were supported in their laziness, and in their idolatry, and in their whoredoms, by the taxes which king Noah had put upon his people; thus did the people labor exceedingly to support iniquity. Yea, and they also became idolatrous, because they were deceived by the vain and flattering words of the king and priests; for they did speak flattering things unto them" (Mosiah 11:6-7).

#### Even in Zarahemla

King Noah may have been influenced by his Lamanite neighbors in turning to idolatry, but this does not explain how, at the same time, in the land of Zarahemla, "the sons of Mosiah were numbered among the unbelievers; and also one of the sons of Alma was numbered among them, he being called Alma, after his father; nevertheless, he became a very wicked and an idolatrous man (Mosiah 27:8).

This Alma was converted to the Lord when falling into a trance-like state following the appearance of an angel to chastise him and the sons of Mosiah. Ultimately, he became high priest over the church in Zarahemla, where some were still idolatrous: "For those who did not belong to their church did indulge themselves in sorceries, and in idolatry or idleness" (Alma 1:32). In a discourse delivered in the city of Gideon, Alma said, "I trust that ye are not in a state of so much unbelief as were your brethren [in Zarahemla] . . . yea, I trust that you do not worship idols, but that ye do worship the true and the living God" (Alma 7:6).

Alma's record notes that the Lamanites "were a very indolent people, many of whom did worship idols" (Alma 17:15), and that the Zoramites, a dissident Nephite group, "were perverting the ways of the Lord, and that Zoram, who was their leader, was leading the hearts of the people to bow down to dumb idols" (Alma 31:1). Many Nephites, too, had become idolators: "for it has been their quarrelings and their contentions, yea, their murderings, and their plunderings, their idolatry, their whoredoms, and their abominations, which were among themselves, which brought upon them their wars and their destructions" (Alma 50:21).

In the days of Alma's grandson Helaman, Satan "had got great hold upon the hearts of the Nephites; yea, insomuch that they had become

John A. Tvedtnes, senior resident scholar at the Institute for the Study and Preservation of Ancient Religious Texts, Brigham Young University, earned a bachelor's degree in anthropology from the University of Utah in 1969. He received a master's degree in linguistics and Middle East Studies (Hebrew), with minors in Arabic, anthropology, and archeology, from the University of Utah. Tvedtnes also completed much of his course work for a Ph.D. in Egyptian and Semitic languages at the Hebrew University

Tvedtnes is a member of the Society of Biblical Literature, the World Union of Jewish Studies, and the International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations. Tvedtnes has prepared papers at conferences sponsored by many societies and organizations, including the Society for Early Historic Archaeology, the Society of Biblical Literature and the Deseret Languages and Linguistics Society.

Born in North Dakota, Tvedtnes has lived in Montana, Washington, France, Switzerland, and Israel. He served a full-time mission for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in France and Switzerland. He has also served as a stake and district missionary in Salt Lake City and Jerusalem. Tvedtnes has six children and several grandchildren. His wife's name is Carol.

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exceedingly wicked; yea, the more part of them had turned out of the way of righteousness, and did trample under their feet the commandments of God, and did turn unto their own ways, and did build up unto themselves idols of their gold and their silver. And it came to pass that all these iniquities did come unto them in the space of not many years, insomuch that a more part of it had come unto them in the sixty and seventh year of the reign of the judges over the people of Nephi" (Helaman 6:31-32).

### **Finding the Source**

One may wonder how people who accepted the ancient Israelite scriptures and had followed prophets of God could have turned to idolatry. To be sure, one might expect apostasy, the establishment of false churches, even denial of God and turning to atheism, but how can such an enlightened people come to believe in idols made by the hands of men? Is it reasonable to expect that people who turn from God would replace him with idols?

The best explanation, I believe, is that Lehi's posterity lived among other peoples who already inhabited the New World, and that these people were idol-worshippers. We know that the Maya and the later Aztecs and other inhabitants of Mesoamerica sacrificed to their gods, many of whom are depicted in wall reliefs.

That there were already idolatrous peoples living in the New World at the time the people of Jared migrated from their homeland is also suggested in Moroni's abridgment of the Jaredite record. He wrote that "in the reign of Shule there came prophets among the people, who were sent from the Lord, prophesying that the wickedness and idolatry of the people was bringing a curse upon the land, and they should be destroyed if they did not repent ... And because the people did repent of their iniquities and idolatries the Lord did spare them, and they began to prosper again in the land" (Ether 7:23).

Just as it seems illogical that Nephites and Lamanites should turn to idols without some kind of outside influence, the Jaredites, too, probably got their idolatrous ways from their neighbors. Thus, the Book of Mormon provides one more piece of evidence for the existence of other natives not specifically named in the Nephite and Jaredite record.

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