

the Lamanites are still “a wild and a hardened and a ferocious” people. In Enos 1:20, they were also “wild and ferocious.” Thus, a basic characteristic perception of the Lamanites spans nearly the entire Book of Mormon. “Wildness” apparently remains, even though its original theoretical basis (not living in cities) has been completely erased. 2 Nephi 5:24 does not use “wild,” but its description of the Lamanites as nomadic hunters without apparent culture clearly intends to evoke the same stereotype. “Uncivilized” developed into “wild” and remained a description of Lamanites even when “uncivilized” could no longer be applied to them as a people (if it ever could).

Calling them “a people who delighted in murdering the Nephites” suggests a continuation of the historical antipathy between Lamanite and Nephite that assumes all Lamanites would like to “murder” the Nephites. The text does, in fact, report increasing frequency and intensity in Lamanite-Nephite wars. In the cultural context of Mesoamerica, this time period saw the concept of war as a religious duty developing. In the Aztec religion, a warrior who died in battle went straight to heaven.<sup>5</sup> Mormon obviously needed no further evidence than his own autobiography to understand the intensity of the wars.

Calling the Lamanites “murderers,” however, seems odd in this context. Murders are unjustified deaths with intentional causes. Accidents are not murders because there is no intention. Deaths in battle are intentional, but they are (presumably) justified by the circumstances. Mormon, as a military man, would almost certainly not apply “murder” to simple death in battle. I argue that he is using “murder” to refer to the Mesoamerican practice of human sacrifice, an important religious rite. One of warfare’s major functions was to supply prisoners for sacrifice. Certainly the Nephites did not practice or condone human sacrifice, and human sacrifice occurred during Mormon’s time (Morm. 4:14–15). Thus, that aspect of “Lamanite” religion of Alma’s time could easily have been on his mind. Interestingly but somewhat anomalously, Ammon’s converted Lamanites (Anti-Lehi-Nephites) called the deaths they had caused in war “murders” (Alma 24:9).

Mormon here adds two more categories of conflict between Lamanites and Nephites. In addition to murdering the Nephites, the Lamanites are “robbing and plundering them.” Both descriptions accurately characterize the aspect of Mesoamerican warfare that conquered enemy cities, then controlled them as tributaries. Mormon uses “robbing and plundering” frequently in his narrative, and they will always fit a warfare context in which the goal is to obtain tribute. (See commentary accompanying Alma 50:21 and Helaman 6:17).

Mormon further characterizes the Lamanites as greedy: “their hearts were set upon riches, or upon gold and silver, and precious stones.” Mesoamerican tribute lists include gold and silver. When they include precious stones, it was typically jade (semi-precious) rather than the Western precious stones such as emeralds,

---

<sup>5</sup>Bernardino de Sahagún, *General History of the Things of New Spain: Florentine Codex*, translated by Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble, 13 v. in 12 (Salt Lake City: School of American Research and the University of Utah, 1975), 3:49.

rubies, and diamonds. The Book of Mormon frequently mentions “gold and silver” as a synonym for desiring wealth. Mesoamerican cultures did not value either gold or silver as highly as Westerners who explored, conquered, looted, and plundered in the search for those metals. (See commentary accompanying Jacob 2:12–13.) I hypothesize that “gold and silver” is a phrase with an idiomatic, rather than literal, meaning—in this case, greed for wealth. A parallel English expression is acquiring a property “lock, stock, and barrel.” Someone has purchased real estate and all that is on it including buildings and natural resources. However, the idiom did not originally apply to land at all, but rather to parts of a rifle.

Similarly, when we go to a sporting goods store to be outfitted for golf, we purchase “the whole enchilada.” Of course, golf clubs, balls, shoes, gloves, and cap have nothing to do with food, let alone Mexican food. The idiom has transcended its literal meaning to convey “everything necessary” to play golf. “Gold and silver” seems to have become a set phrase in the same way. I suspect that Joseph Smith introduced the phrase during his translation. However, I also suspect that John L. Sorenson would suggest that it might be part of the plate language, based on his reading of the linguistic labeling issue of Book of Mormon fauna where he and I have a similar difference of opinion.<sup>6</sup>

Mormon then charges that the Lamanites “sought to obtain these things by murdering and plundering, that they might not labor for them with their own hands.” Since self-support was a high value in Nephite society, not working is automatically a description of evil. Mesoamerica presents precisely this scenario in the development of the great city-states of the Olmec, Maya, Zapotec, and Teotihuacanos. Each of these societies created its wealth and influence by military conquest and by exacting tribute from its conquered cities. This tribute sustained the hierarchy, allowing elites to have a wealth and prestige that they did not create with their own hands. Since the time of Benjamin, the Nephites have denounced any ideology that included social hierarchies and living off the labor of others; and their continual recurrence manifests their strength in the cultures and competing ideologies around them. One consequence of this ideological difference is that the most magnificent and elaborate cities and public buildings would be Lamanite, not Nephite. Nephite egalitarianism would dampen the very impulses that led to the aggrandizement of hierarchy-valuing Lamanite cities.

It is no surprise that Mormon’s catalog of Lamanite evils should so closely resemble both the earlier catalogs and general descriptions of non-Nephite behavior. Indeed, much of the order of the Nehors consisted in incorporating some of these elements into a form of brass-plates religion. The ancient world did not change nearly as rapidly as our modern world does, and it is quite common to see certain cultural forms persisting for hundreds of years. (See also commentary accompanying Alma 50:21.)

---

<sup>6</sup>Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon*, 288–98.