

Jaredite arrival to Moroni's last writing. However, lengthy periods are passed over in almost total silence. Sixty-two percent of the entire Book of Mormon deals with one particular 160-year period (130 B.C. - A.D. 30), while the following three centuries take up only four pages. The Jaredite account is even skimpier; some centuries get no more than a couple of lines. Surely we could not label such a concise volume "the story of the American Indian." Even for "the people of Nephi" it can barely be considered a history.

What most people mean by history is a sequential record of significant events affecting a people or nation, yet the Book of Mormon contains mainly sermons, letters, and other writings of religious intent. All this is strung together in a chronological scheme that many readers never really get straight. From the historian's point of view there are major chronological and other gaps. For example, in the Book of Ether—the Jaredite record—the major figure in the early portion is "the brother of Jared," yet throughout the rest of the account only a single one of his descendants is ever identified (Ether 12:18), and even he is represented as an interloper among the rulers. This is really an odd kind of history. Much the same situation is seen in the Nephite record, where, after we have been told that the people of Zarahemla were more numerous than were those Nephites descended from Lehi (Mosiah 25:2), nothing else substantial is said about that majority. What sort of history is that? The answer is, lineage history.

The Book of Mormon as Lineage History

Lineage as used here means a group of people recognizing descent from a common progenitor and using that shared descent as the basis for their social identity. Elite dominant groups organized on this basis occurred in pre-Hispanic America just as in Europe ("the house of" such and such) and throughout much of the world. An expert on native documents, Dr. Robert Carmack, has shown that

for highland Guatemala each of the major "political-descent groups" of the Quichean peoples who dominated that area when the Spaniards arrived possessed its own written history. Specialist priest-scholars kept and interpreted the records. The books or codices themselves served as symbols of the power of the rulers, who publicly displayed them with pomp and reverence and had portions of them read to their subjects. These documents were consulted to settle questions of history and public policy, and they were used to foretell the future. They recited the formal origin story of the group while also conferring legitimacy and sanctity on the rulers. The books served as well to explain the existing social order, justifying that certain social or ethnic elements were dominant or subservient inside the society and telling why there was cooperation or conflict with surrounding peoples.¹

The Book of Mormon makes clear that it is such a lineage history, for statements abound in it showing that it served and was thought of in the ways mentioned. Nephi, the lineage founder, says in the first sentence of the whole book that it was a personal account "of the proceedings in my days," made of his own knowledge and "with mine own hand" (1 Nephi 1:3). As soon as he became ruler over a part of Lehi's descendants, Nephi's personal record in fact became the record of his rule over the people (2 Nephi 5:33; Jacob 7:26). Thereafter his successors, consisting of direct descendants from him, continued to make entries in the growing account (Jacob 1:2-3, 9-20; Omni 1:11; Mosiah 17:2; 25:13; 28:10-11, 20; Alma 63:1; Helaman 3:37; 3 Nephi 1:2; 5:20; Mormon 1:1-5; 6:6). The record of this ruling lineage was kept on "the plates of Nephi" as the official account of notable events of their reign. Mormon finally abridged and consolidated the entire record of his, that is, of Nephi's lineage (Mormon 6:6; 8:13). (But the "small plates of Nephi," which were to be devoted to sacred materials, were given to and maintained by the lineage of Jacob, Ne-

phi's brother, who was appointed by Nephi as the first high priest of the group—2 Nephi 5:26; Jacob 1:1-3, 7:27; Jarom 1:1, 14-15; Omni 1:3-4, 8-12, 23, 25, 30.)

Possessing sacred records was a source of prestige and a demonstration of authority to rule among Lehi's descendants (Omni 1:14, 17-19; Enos 1:14, 20; Mosiah 1:2, 6, 15-16; 10:15-16). The documents were periodically displayed and read to the subjects (Mosiah 6:3 was apparently such a public presentation, involving the records mentioned in Mosiah 1:16; compare 3 Nephi 23:8). The plates clearly justified the rulership of the lineage of Nephi rather than any other. Historical accounts about relationships between the Nephites and Lamanites—lengthy explanations of how each group got into the position it did historically—are a major concern of the Book of Mormon. Most of First Nephi in our present volume is devoted to the Nephite origin story. Thus we see that most characteristics of the lineage histories of Guatemala as described by Carmack are also true of this account of Nephi's lineage.

The record of the Jaredites is similar. Nothing makes that clearer than the genealogy we find in Ether 1:6-32. Some of the leaders listed were kings and some others claimants to the throne, but all of them were of the lineage of Jared. Jared's descendants carried the right to rule (Ether 6:22-25), as with Nephi's descendants—the ruling line—who kept the official account during the much later era. The brother of Jared, on the other hand, held the prophetic (priestly?) office and had even disapproved of the idea of kingship. Not surprisingly, his descendants are mostly ignored in the dynastic record we have through Ether. Thus, Ether 10:30-31 tells us that after one king named Hearthom had ruled 24 years, the kingdom “was taken away” from him—obviously by another lineage, since the name of the new king was not even recorded in the Jared line's account. Then Heth, Aaron, Amnigaddah, and Coriantum of the Jared-Ether line all lived out their days in captivity. During that time the rulership obviously remained with another

lineage, either that of the brother of Jared or some other descent group (Ether 2:1).

The "history" kept by a lineage is not, of course, a comprehensive account of everything taking place in the area. Instead it is like Abraham's history in the Bible. That account was fundamentally concerned only with his family group's affairs, and he mentioned others only incidentally (for example, in Genesis 23). A comparison can also be made to a family history. Notable events of only certain sorts are recorded there, and most of those briefly. For example, if selected Mormon families had kept their own records of experiences in Missouri in the late 1830s, consider how impossible it would later be to construct a history of Missouri from those accounts. The keepers of Nephi's or Jared's records put down no more than a selective fraction of even what they were aware had happened. Obviously this is why the Nephite scripture is so silent about "the people of Zarahemla." They are mentioned when their presence occasionally touches upon the fortunes of Nephi's lineage headed by the "Nephis" or kings, but we would have to have the Zarahemlaite's own records to learn anything significant about their history.

Another thing is important about the nature of the Nephite record. All those who kept it were from the powerful and wealthy level of society. We must keep in mind that in archaic civilizations like those of Egypt or the Nephites in America, most people were not literate. The difficulty of becoming competent in the difficult writing system employed on the plates is emphasized. King Benjamin pointedly "caused that [his princely sons] should be taught in all the language of his fathers, that thereby they might become men of understanding" (Mosiah 1:3). It was clearly a notable, uncommon accomplishment to master the system of writing. Moroni confirmed that this mastery was difficult when he lamented that the Lord had not made the Nephites "mighty in writing" (Ether 12:23). Learning based upon writing was time-consuming and thus expensive:

"some were ignorant because of their poverty, and others did receive great learning because of their riches" (3 Nephi 6:12). In other words, the top socioeconomic levels of society alone normally had that chance. Given who they were, we expect the writers of the history to be concerned about big, dynastic, capital-city or priestly matters. Only rarely do we find factual information about common people.

Having these qualifications in mind allows us to see more clearly through some puzzles in the Book of Mormon. Careful study of the term *Nephites*, for example, shows that this name is used with at least six meanings:

1. The specific lineage of Nephi (Jacob 1:13-14; Mosiah 25:12; Alma 3:17; probably 43:14).

2. More narrowly, an elite ruling group consisting of the kings bearing the title "Nephi" and their relatives (likely the senior sub-lineage of category one) (Jacob 1:11; compare "the Nephites" in the interesting phrase "people of the Nephites" as in Alma 54:14; Helaman 1:1; Moroni 8:27).

3. All those validly ruled by the "Nephis" (Jacob 1:10-14; Mosiah 25:13; Mormon 1:8-9). (The two Mosiahs and Benjamin continued the "charter" of kingship held by the "Nephis"; the "judges" or "governors" who succeeded the younger Mosiah were no doubt legitimized by Mosiah's passing on the same authority, if not the title.)

4. Believers in a particular set of religious practices and beliefs (Alma 48:9-10; 54:10; 4 Nephi 1:36-37).

5. Participants in a cultural tradition (2 Nephi 5:6, 9-17; Jacob 3; Enos 1:20-23; Jarom 1:4-10; Helaman 3:16).

6. An ethnic or "racial" group (1 Nephi 12:19, 23; 2 Nephi 5:21-23; Jacob 3:5; Alma 55:4, 8).

Sometimes the Nephites are said to be numerous in the sense of the third meaning; in other places the first meaning is intended, in which case the population involved would be understandably smaller (Alma 43:13?). The distinctions were no doubt perfectly clear to the keepers of the

records when they wrote, and usually the context implies the intended meaning.

The same principle applies to "the Lamanites." When "the Zoramites became Lamanites" (Alma 43:4), for example, this does not mean that they took on new biological characteristics, only that they changed their political allegiance.

All this information boils down to the fact that the Book of Mormon is a partial record of events, emphasizing what happened to one group of people, put in their own ethnocentric terms, in the midst of other peoples each with its own version of events. In this way, it is much like other records from the ancient past. The Israelites from Joseph to Moses loomed large in their own account, which reached us through Moses, but in Egyptian records, Israel is apparently not so much as mentioned. Similarly the *Popol Vuh*, a lineage document from highland Guatemala, describes Nahua-speaking groups who entered the land around the thirteenth century and subdued the numerically superior Mayan locals. The native inhabitants are all but ignored in the account. Yet by Spanish times only the merest trace of the language and a handful of cultural traits of the intruders could be detected. At length they found themselves culturally swallowed up by the basic population whom they had conquered.² In a similar case, M. K. Fredolino, comparing a traditional history in the Tarascan area of western Mexico with the archaeological record, found no evidence in the artifacts of any immigrant group such as the tradition reported. She could only conclude that while the story may have been accurate from the point of view of the intruding elite, the tradition they passed down did not reflect the broader flow of events in the geographical area they entered and certainly failed to have noticeable impact on the archaeological record.³ Of course, the end of the Nephite lineage at Cumorah, though involving large numbers of their subjects, was recorded as the termination of that

group's history in a way far more earthshaking than would appear from the outside. Moroni noted laconically that there were plenty of Lamanites and robbers around, fighting each other, but that was no comfort when *his* people were gone, for, "My father hath been slain . . . , and all my kinsfolk, and I have not friends nor whither to go" (Mormon 8:5, 8-9). The record came to an end because the lineage did, not because an entire civilization ceased (see Moroni 9:20, 24). The difference is important if we are to relate the volume accurately to archaeological finds.

Cultural Format and Scripture

Any statement is phrased in some cultural context, involving standards of vocabulary, experience, symbols, and assumptions. These are essential in the same sense that one needs some sort of vessel in which to bring water to a thirsty man. When Christ taught the Jews during his lifetime, he spoke of sheep and sheepfolds, vineyards and the winepress, debts and prison, camels and goats. His meanings reached the minds of his hearers as freight riding on the linguistic and visual symbols he used. Nephi recognized the cultural uniqueness of the message coming through the Jewish prophets: "Behold, Isaiah spake many things which are hard for many of my people to understand; for they know not concerning the manner of prophesying among the Jews. For I, Nephi, have not taught them many things concerning the manner of the Jews" (2 Nephi 25:1-2). But he himself "came out from Jerusalem, and mine eyes hath beheld the things of the Jews, and I know that the Jews do understand the things of the prophets, and there is none other people that understand the things which were spoken unto the Jews like unto them, save it be that they are taught after the manner of the things of the Jews" (verse 5). He is telling us that gospel truth is best communicated in culture-specific terms, and we may not fully understand what is being conveyed without learning the meaning system bearing the message. The Book of Mormon has its own