

Inequality and Narrative in the Book of Mormon

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In every country the history of inequality is political—and chaotic.
—Thomas Piketty¹

So a dispute arose as to whether dearth and not death had not been the word in the verse; but at the present juncture, it was of course decided in favour of the latter; for the people made their recollection fit in with their sufferings.

—Thucydides²

That's the problem with history, we like to think it's a book. . . . But history isn't the paper it's printed on. It's memory, and memory is time, emotions, and song. History is the things that stay with you.

—Paul Beatty³

I speak unto you as if ye were present,” writes Moroni, “and yet ye are not. But behold, Jesus Christ hath shown you unto me, and I know your doing” (Morm. 8:35). Eyewitnesses to the end of their civilization, Moroni and his father, Mormon, address us, their modern readers, from the perspective of exiled visionaries. Like twentieth-century exiles Hannah Arendt or Czesław Miłosz, these editors and part-authors of the Book of Mormon write as refugees from a society in utter, violent

1. Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Belknap, 2014), 359.

2. Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Richard Crawley, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/7142/7142-h/7142-h.htm>.

3. Paul Beatty, *The Sellout* (New York: Farrar, 2015), 115.

collapse, left to piece together a narrative of how things came to such a bitter end and what the future will hold.

Tracing their own history back to the events that gave rise to ruin, Mormon pinpoints inequality as a corrosive catalyst. He records that after almost two hundred years of unmatched peace following an appearance by Jesus Christ, his then-prosperous society ceases to “have their goods and their substance” in common and “began to be divided into classes” (4 Ne. 1:24–26). As the “fine things of the world” and avarice supplant common endeavor and a shared “love of God” in the hearts of the people, the swift results are persecution, imprisonment, war, and despotic forms of rule and misrule that seek to entrench the privileges of a few over those of the many (4 Ne. 1:15–18, 24–34, 39–46).

And what does Moroni see of today? His description of our circumstances and ills is so similar to his father’s assessment of their own past that it could be the same: “Ye do love money, and your substance, and your fine apparel, and the adorning of your churches, more than ye love the poor and the needy, the sick and the afflicted” (Morm. 8:37). And the consequences, Moroni warns in a prophetic voice, will be the same, like a “sword of vengeance” (Morm. 8:41).

But these writings and prophecies present an enigmatic paradox. In the Book of Mormon a reader today has an ancient text by ancient authors whose stated desire is to speak to a modern audience on issues that span from antiquity to modernity. In about AD 400, when the Book of Mormon comes to a close, Mormon and Moroni understand inequality primarily in terms of impact on faith and worship. But they are writing to a people centuries later whose “social imaginary” has changed, including a grasp of the roots and effects of inequality.⁴

There can be no doubt that Mormon and Moroni are convinced their record will be relevant for its recipients. In part, this is a matter of faith for the authors and readers alike. But as demonstrated, for example, in the thought experiments of the Apostle Paul (see 1 Cor. 9:19–23), faith may require an astute reader to reconcile Book of Mormon messages with the prevailing background practices and understandings of modernity.⁵

4. See, for example, Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Belknap, 2007), 171–76. Taylor says that in using the term “social imaginary,” he is trying to describe the deep background understanding of a people or society, “the ways in which they imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations which are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images which underlie these expectations” (171).

5. See, for example, Taylor, *Secular Age*, 13–14. The notion of “background” is one that has currency with many thinkers from Martin Heidegger onward. It is related to

While stubborn antagonisms between religion and an age of science and scientism can make this appear difficult, it is not impossible, and Mormon and Moroni's focus on inequality may be a good place to start.

In fairness, the unequal conditions that Mormon and Moroni describe could similarly apply to many (or even most) human eras. Economist and historian Thomas Piketty estimates that in antiquity as well as in the Middle Ages and in modern rural societies, the top 10 percent of society owns 80 percent to 90 percent of all wealth, with the top 1 percent usually holding 50 to 60 percent.⁶ Like any other condition experienced by humans over time, inequality feeds mentalities and narratives, which can in turn reinforce disparities. Racial tension, barriers to collective action, institutions that protect the privileged, extractive political and economic systems with their conflicts of interest, and simple inertia also do their work. Given their human ubiquity, these patterns should manifest themselves not only in the Book of Mormon apocalypse, but across the entire record, and they do.

This study is an attempt to understand these patterns of inequality while reconciling the Book of Mormon with our modern background. The work presented here can be seen as an extension of the author's prior study on conflict in the Book of Mormon.⁷ That study applies tools of the modern social imaginary (in particular the methods of mathematical game theory) to make visible patterns of conflict and resolution, inequality and struggle, and hope and long-term cooperation that might not be clear without those tools. Provocatively, that analysis also suggests that inequality is in fact one of the key drivers of conflict in the histories that the Book of Mormon presents.⁸

For this study, two main areas of recent insight in the social and economic sciences stand out as potentially fruitful in seeking to interpret the Book of Mormon with new eyes.

First, recent research suggests that individuals with privilege might systematically share less than their less-privileged counterparts. This

the idea of "social imaginary" and is most usefully employed in this context again by Charles Taylor.

6. Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-first Century*, 436. Piketty specifically writes that we find "extremely high concentration of wealth—with 80 to 90 percent of capital owned by the top decile and 50–60 percent by the top centile—in most societies prior to the nineteenth century, and in particular in traditional agrarian societies in the modern era, as well as in the Middle Ages and antiquity" (436).

7. Robert F. Schwartz, "Game Theory, the Prisoner's Dilemma, and the Book of Mormon," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 52, no. 2 (2013): 67–112.

8. See Schwartz, "Game Theory," 99, 103, 105.

could revise or even upend certain readings about the privileged and less-privileged people that the Book of Mormon portrays.

Second, the Book of Mormon convincingly illustrates and reinforces some of the best current understanding on the relationship and correlation between inequality on the one hand and the prevailing socio-political order on the other, specifically whether the prevailing order is extractive or inclusive. While contemporary understanding focuses on the democratic or undemocratic nature of an extractive or inclusive regime, the Book of Mormon may have something to say about how faith within a society affects the type of regime and, by extension, how it affects inequality.

As much as evaluation of the Book of Mormon may be enriched by a reconciliation with today's scientific background, so too the world at large may benefit from the resulting amalgam in ways that vindicate ambitions expressed by Mormon and Moroni. The Book of Mormon, as will be seen, gives unique views into how human bias feeds into personal and group perception in ways that can perpetuate inequality. It gives prescriptions on how to create inclusive institutions and move past patterns of inequality as well as perspectives on whether and how these prescriptions work, why they encounter challenges, and whether equality is a realistic aim.

Early Days, Seminal Events: Privilege, Payoffs, and Distributional Preferences

As a reader wades into the Book of Mormon narrative, she may find herself murmuring, "How did it come to this?" The narrative begins with common family origins. The authors and their people enjoy education and frequent prosperity. They are led by faith in God handed down in tradition, scripture, and direct experience. They profess to desire peace. And yet despite these advantages, neighboring peoples always seem ready to fight, their hatred inscrutable. For the authors, the explanation often seems clear: their neighbors are hateful and spiteful by nature. Inquiry into how they fail to convert their advantages into lasting peace does not arise, because the endless struggle is simply the way things are and seem destined to be, unless their neighbors are willing to change.

The Book of Mormon's first third chronicles the travails of a single family and the conflicts and disputes that eventually fracture it into two groups. The two groups develop distinct narratives about how and why they ruptured, and as they drift apart, the respective narratives reveal differences in how the groups live and what means they have. Once

they are separated, not much appears to change in either the means or the narratives of the two groups over a period of almost three hundred years.⁹ A critical juncture occurs for one of the groups when an aging king institutes a new social order that makes inclusive political reforms possible, establishing a different set of conditions for how that society will develop and, in time, how the two groups interact with one another.

The opening family narrative describes a father, Lehi; a mother, Sariah; and four sons (in age order): Laman, Lemuel, Sam, and Nephi. In time, Sariah and Lehi have two more sons who are mentioned by name, Jacob and Joseph, and the group expands further through marriage and—for lack of a better term—recruitment. The family history is recorded by two of the youngest sons, Nephi and Jacob.

Between them, Nephi, Jacob, and Jacob's son, Enos, fill 138 English typeset pages, or approximately 25 percent of the Book of Mormon, and a span of 179 years.¹⁰ Though the Old Testament presents many family vignettes (for example, Jacob and Esau's birthright-wrangling or Joseph's envy-inducing colored coat), and the New Testament also gives glimpses into family life, nothing else in Judeo-Christian scripture resembles the intimate portrait that emerges from the books of 1 Nephi, 2 Nephi, Jacob, and Enos. It is the intimacy of this view that allows readers to track patterns of praise and privilege from the family's earliest days.

The arc of Lehi-and-family's early history can be précised as follows: a Jerusalem-based prophet in the time of Jeremiah (around 600 BC), Lehi receives a command from God in a dream that he and his family must depart into the wilderness before Jerusalem is destroyed (1 Ne. 1–2). They comply immediately but then exist in desert limbo for a time while the sons undertake two divinely appointed excursions back to Jerusalem to obtain sacred records (described as “plates of brass,” 1 Ne. 3:2–4) and enlist more people to accompany them (1 Ne. 3–7). From there, the group proceeds through years of trial and hardship toward a “land of promise” (1 Ne. 12:4; see 1 Ne. 8–18), which they ultimately reach by sailing across a “sea” of “many waters” (1 Ne. 17:5; 18).

As he weaves these events into a family saga, Nephi presents himself as eager to do the things that his father-prophet asks him to do. Over time, Nephi receives Lehi's praise and parental blessing while Laman and Lemuel become targets of grievance and regret (see, for example,

9. See Enos 1 and Mosiah 1.

10. See the time footnotes in 1 Nephi 1 to Enos 1. Many thanks to Roger Terry for his astute observations on some of the relevant timings in this context.

1 Ne. 2:9–14, 8:2–12). Although early on Nephi admits a natural instinct to “rebel against” Lehi, prayer softens his heart, and he then obeys practically without exception (1 Ne. 2:16). Sam often joins Nephi in carrying out family tasks while Laman and Lemuel consistently push back (for example, 1 Ne. 3:28).¹¹

The text shows Nephi taking decisive action to bring sacred records from Jerusalem back to the wilderness (1 Ne. 4:6–24), cracking the spiritual code of a dream that Lehi shares with his family (1 Ne. 15:6–36), feeding the family during a food crisis (1 Ne. 16:15–32), and leading in building a ship that takes them to the land of promise (1 Ne. 17:7–55). In each of these seminal tasks, Laman and Lemuel fail to lead or receive much credit despite being the eldest and despite often taking part. In their frustration, they often resort to violence against Nephi (see, for example, 1 Ne. 3:28–29; 18:11).

In their back-and-forth struggles, the brothers are vying for what is arguably the most fundamental of all goods: the right to rule, to “become the political elite, enforce property rights, maintain order, and also benefit from their status.”¹² Nephi understands this struggle and his right to rule primarily in faith terms, equating (as does Lehi) the right to rule with righteous living (see, for example, 2 Ne. 5:19–20). He writes that Laman and Lemuel “knew not the dealings of that God who had created them” and prays that they might come to know better (1 Ne. 2:12, 18). In the wilderness, younger Nephi scolds the two eldest for being “swift to do iniquity but slow to remember the Lord your God” (1 Ne. 17:45).

For their part, Laman and Lemuel are calculating and decisive in response: “Our younger brother thinks to rule over us; and we have had much trial because of him; wherefore, now let us slay him, that we may not be afflicted more because of his words. For behold, we will not have him to be our ruler; for it belongs unto us, who are the elder brethren, to rule over this people” (2 Ne. 5:3).

Shortly before his death, Lehi formalizes Nephi’s privileged status, doing so in a way that humiliates Laman and Lemuel and their families. Lehi gives Laman, the eldest, “a blessing, yea, even my first blessing,” but solely on the condition that Laman, Lemuel, and the other brothers and brothers-in-law must “hearken unto the voice of Nephi” (2 Ne. 1:28).

11. For even casual readers, the received wisdom says that Nephi is “obedient” while Laman and Lemuel are “rebellious.” Although broadly accurate, these labels fail to reflect the fact that Laman and Lemuel oblige most of the time. Schwartz, “Game Theory,” 91–96.

12. Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson, *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty* (New York: Crown Random House, 2012), 139.

If Laman and Lemuel fail to observe the condition, the “first blessing” reverts to Nephi and stays with him (2 Ne. 1:29). Lehi teaches the children of Laman and Lemuel that they will eventually find redemption, but not before enduring curses and destruction (2 Ne. 4:3–9). Shortly afterward, Lehi passes away (2 Ne. 4:12).

Nephi’s victory in the family struggle over who will rule is pyrrhic from the outset. Although he tries to fulfil his appointed role as family leader, Nephi quickly finds himself in a lethal struggle with Laman and Lemuel and decides to flee into the wilderness with his family and others (2 Ne. 4:13–35; 5:5–9). Although they depart in haste, Nephi and his followers take “the plates of brass; and also the ball, or compass, which was prepared for my father by the hand of the Lord, . . . [and] the sword of Laban” (2 Ne. 5:12, 14). These items are the key assets of the family’s years of travel and adversity, and as the eldest, Laman and Lemuel would have also had strong claim to them. When Nephi disappears into the wilderness with his father’s final blessing and all of the family’s treasures, the family and its descendants cease to have a shared narrative or history for many hundreds of years.

In the exercise of tracking conflicts and imbalances that begin in Lehi’s family and then continue for many generations, a reader should not lose sight of both Lehi’s and Nephi’s tenacity and visionary leadership. To buck the prevailing culture at Jerusalem, strike out into the desert, survive the better part of a decade in the wilderness, express distinct prophetic vision(s), undertake a pioneering cross-ocean voyage, and then put down roots on a new continent requires a singularity of effort and drive that might necessarily cut across the intentions and desires of others. The intention is not to criticize Lehi or Nephi or put in question their status as prophets; quite the opposite: the present exercise effectively requires a reader to take the narrators at their word regarding faith and the prophetic mantle and then ask what the record suggests about the trade-offs, sacrifices, and conflicts that result from such faith and guidance.

This article’s companion study on conflict in the Book of Mormon—and in Lehi’s family in particular—argues that the patterns of conflict between Nephi and his two oldest brothers fit classic models of conflict developed in modern economic theory.¹³ Considering scriptural history in terms of economics or mathematical models of conflict and its resolution can feel strange or even profane. But to the extent it feels reductive, one does well to remember that scripture can be read as a

13. Schwartz, “Game Theory,” 91–99.

string of human conflicts with more and less successful resolutions. Cain and Abel (Gen. 4), Joseph and his brothers (Gen. 37), Moses and Pharaoh (Ex. 5), Jonah and the Ninevites (Jonah 3), Jesus's disciples bickering over who is the greatest (Luke 22:24–30)—the list is long. When two or more individuals or groups seek common access to finite goods (such as birthright, praise, food, land, wealth, or freedom), the result is conflict that can be resolved either cooperatively or destructively. Faith has power to inform the outcome, but conflict is the inescapable stuff of daily humanity.

In conflicts akin to those in Lehi's family, experience and economic models suggest that those who consistently receive less from a bargain will often take advantage of others, or strike out at them, to create a deal that feels more equal.¹⁴ Studies in neuroscience support the notion that unequal outcomes often trigger visceral, emotional negative reactions from those receiving the raw deal.¹⁵ In economics, the benefit of a bargain or daily struggle is often referred to as a “payoff.” The payoffs do not end up equal for Nephi, Laman, and Lemuel. Where Nephi receives praise, effective birthright, and the family treasures, Laman and Lemuel receive almost nothing, and their response is casual violence that crescendos into murderous rage. The deeper structure and trajectories of these conflicts can be studied in more detail in this article's sister piece on conflict.¹⁶

But just as drawing the short straw provokes anger, recent studies in economics and social science suggest that privilege itself guides how people divide goods among themselves and creates its own forms of blindness. Oxford historian Norman Davies once observed that “human nature always tempts people to imagine that they inhabit the cultural upland whilst their neighbours inhabit the Styx.”¹⁷ It turns out that this observation is reliably true not only anecdotally but also in practice.

Let us recall how Nephi, Laman, and Lemuel articulate their struggle (all in Nephi's telling): Nephi describes his path as virtuous in distinction to the unrighteousness of his older brothers, while Laman and Lemuel describe Nephi as entitled and out of place (the brother who “thinks to rule over us,” 2 Ne. 5:3). Whether as a product of his narrative or by chance, Nephi takes the primary family capital with him when

14. See Schwartz, “Game Theory,” 83–84; compare Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).

15. See, for example, Sarah F. Brosnan and Frans B. M. de Waal, “Monkeys Reject Unequal Pay,” *Nature* 425 (September 18, 2003): 297–99, <https://doi.org/10.1038/nature01963>.

16. See Schwartz, “Game Theory.”

17. Norman Davies, *Europe: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 54.

he retreats into the desert. Rather than distribute the goods equally (for example, take the plates but leave the sword), Nephi deals these goods to himself. This behavior and its supporting narrative can be observed as a predictable pattern in human conduct where privilege is concerned.

Around the turn of the present century, the RAND Corporation (a storied research institute that also conducted some of the first studies in game theory) assembled a panel of 800 Americans that ultimately expanded to include 6,000 people, which remains its present size.¹⁸ The panel—named the “American Life Panel,” or ALP—is designed to represent American society at large, reflecting a similar mix of age, gender, race, income, and other relevant traits, so that researchers can conduct field surveys and experiments to achieve better understanding of preferences within society.¹⁹

In 2014, a trio of economists used the ALP to, in their words, understand “the individual distributional preferences of the general population.”²⁰ A “distributional preference” is a view on how income or assets should be distributed or redistributed. Economists look at two main signs: first, the weight that a person places on “own income versus the incomes of others,” and second, the weight “on reducing differences in incomes versus increasing total income.”²¹

Based on these two factors, an economist can assess what an individual prizes more: “efficiency” (increase total income with a focus on own income) or “equality” (reduce overall differences in income with a focus on the incomes of others).²² Although rough as analogues, one might express the efficiency mindset as “taking-oriented” and the equality mindset as “sharing-oriented.” These attitudes represent two extremes with many gradations between them, and the authors of the study explain that “the fair-minded should place equal weight on themselves and others. . . . [But] fair-minded people may disagree about the extent to which efficiency should be sacrificed to combat inequality.”²³

18. “About the Panel,” RAND Corporation, accessed January 25, 2022, <https://www.rand.org/research/data/alp/panel.html>.

19. “Demographics,” RAND Corporation, accessed January 25, 2022, <https://www.rand.org/research/data/alp/panel/demographics.html>.

20. Raymond Fisman, Pamela Jakiela, and Shachar Kariv, “The Distributional Preferences of Americans,” Working Paper 20145 (Cambridge, Mass.: National Bureau of Economic Research, May 2014), 2, <http://www.nber.org/papers/w20145>.

21. Fisman, Jakiela, and Kariv, “Distributional Preferences of Americans,” 2.

22. Fisman, Jakiela, and Kariv, “Distributional Preferences of Americans,” 2.

23. Fisman, Jakiela, and Kariv, “Distributional Preferences of Americans,” 2.

The study on distributional preferences within the ALP found that American society at large tends to be quite fair-minded.²⁴ In other words, despite the fact that society includes people of all preferences—those who favor efficiency and those who favor equality—the general distribution of preferences does not skew either way. On average, in society at large (at least to the extent American society is representative), people balance their inclination to take with their inclination to share. Looking at the overall distribution, about a quarter have a hard preference for efficiency, about a quarter have a firm preference for equality, and roughly half are spread somewhere between the two.²⁵

The researchers then repeated the same experiment with a narrower cohort: students at Yale Law School (YLS).²⁶ Noting why they chose to examine YLS students, the economists remark, “Overall, the YLS subjects are one of the most academically elite groups in the United States and can, in expectation, expect to join the ranks of the economic and political elite as well.”²⁷ Looking at this small group, then, allows the economists to ask whether distributional preferences of people with high privilege are different from those in society at large.

The YLS study finds a very marked difference, specifically that YLS students favor efficiency over equality vastly more than society at large. “We found that the YLS subjects are 29.2 percentage points more likely to be efficiency-focused than are the ALP subjects. . . . After controlling for demographics, the YLS subjects are still 14.1 percentage points more likely to be efficiency-focused than are the ALP subjects.”²⁸ Where the general distribution in society of equality-moderation-efficiency preferences is roughly 25-50-25, for YLS students the spread is closer to 25-25-50.²⁹ Though about 50 percent of ALP subjects are more efficiency-focused, in the YLS group this increases to a remarkable 80 percent.³⁰

To check that their YLS results are not anomalous, the economists also survey undergraduate students at University of California, Berkeley (UCB), and zero in to analyze the more educated, wealthier ALP subjects.³¹ These groups also skew toward efficiency, though not as radi-

24. Fisman, Jakiela, and Kariv, “Distributional Preferences of Americans,” 6.

25. Fisman, Jakiela, and Kariv, “Distributional Preferences of Americans,” 26.

26. Raymond Fisman and others, “The Distributional Preferences of an Elite,” *Science* 349, no. 6254 (September 18, 2015).

27. Fisman and others, “Distributional Preferences of an Elite,” aabo096-2.

28. Fisman and others, “Distributional Preferences of an Elite,” aabo096-5.

29. Fisman and others, “Distributional Preferences of an Elite,” aabo096-4–aabo096-5.

30. Fisman and others, “Distributional Preferences of an Elite,” 1300.

31. Fisman and others, “Distributional Preferences of an Elite,” aabo096-5–aabo096-6.

cally as the YLS group, with the additional wrinkle that the UCB cohort is more efficiency-focused than the privileged ALP group, leading the researchers to conclude, “Our findings indicate sharp differences in distributional preferences between subjects of varying degrees of eliteness.”³²

In short, the more privilege a person has, the more likely that person is to prefer efficiency over equality, or to take rather than to share as a matter of perceived natural right.

But the researchers also reveal an element of blindness in the efficiency preference of the elite, or at least internal incongruity. In a comment that they present almost as an aside, the economists assert that the “YLS subjects displayed this distinctive preference for efficiency over equality in spite of overwhelmingly (by more than 10 to 1) self-identifying” with more liberal political philosophies.³³ “In addition,” note the authors, “YLS subjects were less likely to be classified as fair-minded and more likely to be classified as selfish than were the ALP subjects.”³⁴

Although the economists do not delve any deeper into their comment on political leanings, the observations imply that privileged individuals could have preferences for efficiency at odds with their professed beliefs. One social commentator and former student says of his time at Yale Law School, “You’re sitting in a seminar room, you’ve got a professor who’s written a million books, surrounded by 20 students from San Francisco, New York, mostly, all pontificating about how to help poor people in America.”³⁵

This mismatch of preference and belief could represent an uncoupling of beliefs as much as it represents true blindness. One possible interpretation is that while it feels good to embrace causes and communities that assist others and seek to achieve equality, the integrity of this belief breaks down when faced with tangible choices to divide or allocate capital in ways that could erode settled privilege. It is possible publicly to support the cause of economic equality while privately—through, for example, spending or voting—seeking efficiency. The disparity could be conscious, or it could be unconscious, and in any case the observation is an aside to the social scientists’ main conclusion: the more elite the person, the more likely that person is to seek efficient outcomes.

32. Fisman and others, “Distributional Preferences of an Elite,” 1300, aabo096-5-aabo096-6.

33. Fisman and others, “Distributional Preferences of an Elite,” 1300.

34. Fisman and others, “Distributional Preferences of an Elite,” 1300.

35. Jamil Jivani, quoted in Simon van Zuylen-Wood, “The Radicalization of J. D. Vance,” *Washington Post*, January 4, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/magazine/2022/01/04/jd-vance-hillbilly-elegy-radicalization/>.

And so back to Nephi, Laman, and Lemuel. It is fair to question what, if anything, studies of twenty-first-century Americans, Yale Law School students, and other contemporary privileged groups can tell us about ancient preferences or behaviors of the privileged. Culture, technology, forms of wealth, and many other elements are entirely different. But it should be feasible, at the very least, to assess whether the narrative set out by Nephi and Jacob evidences similar patterns of behavior.

The patterns do not fit perfectly. Nephi would likely not label himself as “privileged” or “elite.” He describes himself being beaten by his brothers with a stick (1 Ne. 3:27–31), opposed in returning to the wilderness from Jerusalem with new recruits (1 Ne. 7:6–16), mocked when he proposes to build a ship (1 Ne. 17:17–22), tied up and beaten at sea (1 Ne. 18:9–11), and ultimately forced to run for his life (2 Ne. 5:3, 5–9). Sneering Laman and Lemuel often appear to have an unbeatable upper hand.

And yet. Nephi’s ability to record his narrative is premised on the fact that he has the wherewithal to do so. Throughout his narrative, he presents himself as fit (or at least able) to urge family members to loyalty and faith (1 Ne. 2:16–18; 3:7, 21; 4:1–3; 7:8–12; 16:22; 17:23–47). He describes himself as a “ruler” and establishes a nation and a people, both of which bear his name (2 Ne. 5:8, 19; see Enos 1:19), having first obtained the right to rule by virtue of his father’s dying blessing (2 Ne. 1:28–29). He has the plates, which enable ongoing education, as well as the potent symbols of a sword that came with the plates and a compass that led his people through the wilderness (2 Ne. 5:12, 14).

However one chooses to describe the result, there is a positive correlation between Nephi’s privilege and his efficient distributional preference in taking the family treasures. Nephi ascribes these results to faith and divine gift, and perhaps that is the point. With privilege in hand, the fact that the means get distributed to him is simply the way things are supposed to be.

Thousands of years later, it is easy to ask what might have happened if things had been spread more evenly, but the personalities at play suggest that another allocation might not have been achievable. Lehi does nominally bestow his “first blessing” on Laman as firstborn, and one could take his difference-splitting bid to give Nephi spiritual leadership as an attempt to achieve fairness in the circumstances (2 Ne. 1:28). The nuances of the text arguably whisper, “I tried,” as Lehi’s *mea culpa*, especially given that Laman quickly misuses his gift, such as it is.

Taking the historical characters as they are (were) and not as we wish they would be, the reader finds it hard to fault Nephi for preserving such

important relics in the face of brothers who, in his telling, behave in brutal and myopic ways. Perhaps in the ancient Americas, as in the America founded later in the eighteenth century, as Tocqueville describes, there is simply an unresolvable tension between freedom and equality, and the struggle for freedom will sometimes squelch equality by necessity.³⁶ In any case, both inequality and the privilege-and-efficiency-of-distribution nexus become clearer and more pronounced in the ensuing generations, where the analysis now turns.

Centuries of Inequality and Separation

While there is a credible argument that ruling Nephi shows an efficient distributional preference when he settles his late father's estate, does this preference extend to the ensuing groups, and more fundamentally, does the text show evidence of inequality between the two groups? The short answers to these questions are yes and yes. As the groups that follow Nephi and Laman separate and then grow, the text shows evidence of inequality both within and between the two groups.

When Lehi's family splits and the principal factions go separate ways, Nephi takes his people, who later come to be known as "the people of Nephi," or "Nephites" (Jacob 1:13–14), and flees "into the wilderness, . . . journey[ing] in the wilderness for the space of many days" (2 Ne. 5:5, 7). Now in two different places, the Nephites and the people of Laman and Lemuel (or "Lamanites") develop independently and at a distance from one another, having ruptured over their fierce differences of opinion (Jacob 1:14). Though geographical references are not well defined early in the Book of Mormon, the Nephites reside in a land that they refer to as the land of Nephi (see Omni 1:12), while the Lamanites dwell in close enough proximity that Nephites continue to make reference to them and have some visibility on how they live (see, for example, Jacob 7:24).

In *Why Nations Fail*, a seminal treatise on how groups develop social and political structures at historic crossroads and how those structures influence inequality, Daron Acemoglu of MIT and James A. Robinson of the University of Chicago observe:

Even societies that are far less complex than our modern society create political and economic institutions that have powerful effects on the lives of their members. . . . No two societies create the same institutions;

36. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. James T. Schleifer, ed. Eduardo Nolla, vol. 1 (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2012), 879, compare cxix.

they will have distinct customs, different systems of property rights, and different ways of dividing a killed animal or loot stolen from another group. . . . Societies are constantly subject to economic and political conflict that is resolved in different ways because of specific historical differences, the role of individuals, or just random factors. These differences are often small to start with, but they cumulate, creating a process of institutional drift. Just as two isolated populations of organisms will drift apart slowly in a process of genetic drift, . . . two otherwise similar societies will also slowly drift apart institutionally.³⁷

This is precisely what the Book of Mormon shows as the Nephites and Lamanites become nascent nations. Lehi's grant of ruling status to Nephi, Laman and Lemuel's murderous response, and Nephi's resulting departure into the wilderness together constitute what Acemoglu and Robinson would term a "critical juncture." A critical juncture can be understood as "a major event or confluence of factors disrupting the existing economic or political balance in society."³⁸

The significance of a critical juncture is that it can materially influence both the political and economic institutions that develop after the event and whether those institutions are "extractive" or "inclusive."³⁹ Extractive economic institutions are "structured to extract resources from the many by the few and . . . fail to protect property rights or provide incentives for economic activity."⁴⁰ Acemoglu and Robinson explain that extractive political institutions (such as absolutist monarchies) tend to create extractive economic institutions, "transferring wealth and power toward the elite . . . who will then have incentives to maintain and develop extractive economic institutions for their benefit and use the resources they obtain to cement their hold on political power."⁴¹

By contrast, an inclusive political institution is one that shares "political power widely in a pluralistic manner" but is still able to maintain enough of a political core "to establish law and order, the foundations of secure property rights, and an inclusive market economy."⁴² Just as extractive political and economic arrangements go hand in hand, so too inclusive economic institutions tend to have a symbiosis with inclusive political institutions. And so, as the Nephites and Lamanites establish themselves, what kind of institutions do they establish and with what effect?

37. Acemoglu and Robinson, *Why Nations Fail*, 108–9.

38. Acemoglu and Robinson, *Why Nations Fail*, 101.

39. Acemoglu and Robinson, *Why Nations Fail*, 101, 113.

40. Acemoglu and Robinson, *Why Nations Fail*, 430.

41. Acemoglu and Robinson, *Why Nations Fail*, 401, 430; compare 113.

42. Acemoglu and Robinson, *Why Nations Fail*, 364–67, 372, 430.

Almost immediately upon striking out on their own, Nephites choose rule by king. Nephi explains that though he does not desire kingship, he accedes to the desire of his people and accepts the role (2 Ne. 5:18). According to Jacob, the Nephites look to Nephi “as a king or a protector” and “depend [on him] for safety” (2 Ne. 6:2). From the time that Nephi is established as king, the reigns of Nephite kings last for almost five hundred years (approximately half of Book of Mormon history).⁴³

While monarchy has the benefit of central political power and decision-making, the clear downside is that it puts decision-making in the hands of a single individual and of those who can influence that individual, making extractive regimes more likely. For his part, as one would expect from his narrative, Nephi is an equitable leader, whom Jacob describes as being “loved . . . exceedingly” by his people for being their “protector,” “having wielded the sword of Laban in their defence, and having labored in all his days for their welfare” (Jacob 1:10).

At the end of his life, Nephi anoints an unnamed successor as the second king, cementing “reigns of the kings” (Jacob 1:9, 11), and matters appear to deteriorate quickly from there. Jacob relates that the people “under the reign of the second king” begin to be obsessed with “gold and silver” and what Jacob calls “wicked practices” in describing men who take additional wives and concubines (Jacob 1:15–16).

Dedicated to the ministry with his brother Joseph (Jacob 1:18–19), Jacob inveighs against rising inequality as certain classes within the society persecute others on the basis of “apparel” and acquired wealth (Jacob 2:12–13). To combat this trend, Jacob encourages the Nephites to be “familiar with all and free with [their] substance” (Jacob 2:17). Despite Jacob’s efforts, his teaching does not appear to have much effect, and his son, Enos, describes a Nephite people who are prosperous in their crops and herds but who appear to be destined for some kind of “destruction” (Enos 1:21–23).

Although the record is not focused on distribution of wealth in all of its different forms (income, provisions, opportunity, education), the Book of Mormon does give some clear evidence that the institutions established by Nephite kings were often politically and economically extractive. After over four hundred and sixty years of kings,⁴⁴ a transformational Nephite king named Benjamin (who will be studied in

43. Nephi becomes king in approximately 588 BC (2 Ne. 5), and the constitutional change in which kings are replaced by judges occurs in approximately 92 BC (Mosiah 29).

44. From the start of Nephi’s reign in about 588 BC (2 Ne. 5), 464 years pass until King Benjamin speaks to his people in 124 BC (Mosiah 2).

detail later) introduces himself in a speech by stressing his credentials as a peaceful public servant who has not imposed harsh imprisonment, violence, oppression, slavery, heavy taxation, or collection of gold and silver (Mosiah 2:12–14). The very mention of these things suggests that they are a matter of record if not living memory for the hearers. In a contemporary view, all of these practices are textbook hallmarks of extractive regimes that increase societal inequality.⁴⁵

Lest any reader wonder whether Nephites engage in the kinds of practices that this king says he has abandoned, the Book of Mormon describes a rough contemporary of this monarch who rules over a Nephite offshoot that develops away from the main body. The offshoot ruler, King Noah, runs classic extractive institutions, levying a “tax of one fifth” on all monetary wealth, crops, and herds in order to “support himself, and his wives and his concubines; and also his priests, and their wives and their concubines,” fuel nonstop wine consumption, build “many elegant and spacious buildings,” and erect a “spacious palace” complete with a gold-ornamented throne (Mosiah 11:3–15). Jacob’s account combined with the contrasting examples of Kings Noah and Benjamin together provide compelling evidence that, at least at times, the Nephites plainly experience extractive regimes and witness inequality within their own societies.

The Book of Mormon (authored as it is by Nephites) does not give a similarly detailed view of the formation and features of Lamanite institutions, but there is some evidence that they are similar in some ways and also broadly extractive. Although it is unclear when their institutions first take shape, the Lamanites are also ruled by kings (see, for example, Mosiah 20:22–25; 24:1; Alma 20:8). Jacob gives a description of Lamanite society that suggests it may have been less extractive than Nephite society in certain respects, with an absence of the concubine arrangements seen among affluent Nephites (and presumably the economic arrangements needed to support concubines à la King Noah, Jacob 3:5). Readers see Lamanite kings with flocks, pastures, and servants who could be executed for poor service (Alma 17:25–29, 39; 18:16), and the Lamanites have a hierarchy of kingdoms with greater and lesser kings where a principal king appoints lesser kings and the lesser kings have their autonomy limited by the principal (Mosiah 24:2–3; Alma 20:8, 24, 26).

45. See, for example, Acemoglu and Robinson, *Why Nations Fail*, 81, 116, 168–69, 343–44.

In addition to these elements, there is a passage in Lamanite history that lends further credence to the notion that the political and economic arrangements are extractive. At a certain point in Nephite history, a group of Nephites led by a man named Zeniff goes to reclaim old lands and enter into a treaty with a Lamanite king named Laman. The treaty sets up an uneasy *détente* with agreed landholdings and mutual economic affairs (Mosiah 9:5–10). Ultimately the treaty plays out like the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact with the Lamanites playing Germany, rushing across an agreed-upon border to grab Nephite lands and property. The Nephites defend themselves for a period of some years, but the exchange yields the observation that King Laman fears the destabilizing effect of Nephite prosperity and desires “to bring [the Nephites] into bondage, that they might glut themselves with the labors of our hands; yea, that they might feast themselves upon the flocks of our fields” (Mosiah 9:12). The default space for a Lamanite king (as for a typical Nephite king or any king) appears to be extractive.

While both Nephite and Lamanite societies display traits that an economist might consider extractive, and there is evidence of inequality within each, each of the societies likewise recognizes a degree of personal autonomy and property rights. Nephites ruled by kings acquire wealth, engage in farming and industry, and enjoy liberties such as freedom of movement (see, for example, Jacob 2–3, Enos 1). The text likewise describes king-ruled Lamanite trade and Lamanite flocks that do not belong to the crown and appear to be private property (Mosiah 24:7; Alma 17:26–27). While each group evidences inequalities, the reader does not see endemic slavery as in ancient Rome, a slave trade as in sub-Saharan Africa from the fifteenth century, or widespread serfdom as in feudal medieval Europe. Which is to say that there could be enough fluidity within each society to make change possible if there were impetus for change.

Understanding that there is inequality within both Nephite and Lamanite societies and some evidence of extractive political and economic institutions, is there also a wealth gap *between* the two groups? Are Nephites richer than Lamanites or vice versa? As has already been documented, Nephi first receives the original and fundamental currency within any society, the right to rule, obliterating Laman’s expectation of primogeniture. The sword and compass that Nephi takes as ruler may have had more symbolic than economic value, but the brass plates contain a key technology (the written word) that gives Nephites an advantage that Lamanites lack for many centuries and desire to gain.

From Nephi's time to the end of Book of Mormon history a millennium later, Nephites benefit from written language, and this bestows on them the literacy, education, and economic benefits that usually accompany writing as a technology.⁴⁶ Deanna Draper Buck convincingly argues that literacy is widespread among Nephites, but this driver of wellbeing is absent in Lamanite society for hundreds of years until introduced by Nephites after the time of King Noah (Mosiah 24:1–6).⁴⁷ Tellingly, as soon as the Lamanites are taught “the language of Nephi . . . [and] that they should keep their record, and that they might write to one another” (Mosiah 24:4, 6), the immediate effect is that they begin “to increase in riches, and . . . to trade one with another and wax great” (Mosiah 24:7). The Book of Mormon seems to establish that literacy has economic value, and the fact that Nephi takes the plates means that Nephites have this wealth driver for generations while the Lamanites do not.

The Lamanites know that they have drawn the short straw in their relations with the Nephites. Some four hundred years after the split of nations,⁴⁸ Mormon summarizes the Lamanite narrative worldview in aggrieved, bleak terms. In Lamanite memory, they were “driven out” of Jerusalem and then repeatedly “wronged” in the wilderness, on the sea, and after arrival in the promised land. In this telling, Nephi usurps the right to rule from his elder brothers and robs them of “the records which were engraven on the plates of brass.” In return, the Lamanites “have taught their children that they should hate [the Nephites], and that they should murder them, and that they should rob and plunder them, and do all they could to destroy them” (Mosiah 10:12–17).

In short, given the heavy costs that they have paid over time, the Lamanites view themselves as having free license to deal with Nephites as they please. As noted, this Lamanite narrative embodies textbook economic and emotional reaction to inequality. Another hundred years later when (Nephite) Ammon and (Lamanite) Lamoni happen upon Lamoni's father, a Lamanite king, the father's immediate response is “Whither art thou going with this Nephite, who is one of the children

46. Deanna Draper Buck, “Internal Evidence of Widespread Literacy in the Book of Mormon,” *Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel* 10, no. 3 (2009): 64; see also Acemoglu and Robinson, *Why Nations Fail*, 213–15.

47. Buck, “Internal Evidence of Widespread Literacy,” 68–69.

48. The Book of Mormon chapter headings estimate that 2 Nephi 5 was written between 588 BC and 559 BC and that the events recorded in Mosiah 10 occurred between 187 BC and 160 BC, giving an overall span of between 372 years and 428 years.

of a liar? . . . These Nephites . . . are sons of a liar. Behold, he robbed our fathers; and now his children are also come amongst us that they may, by their cunning and their lyings, deceive us, that they again may rob us of our property” (Alma 20:10, 13). Both this narrative and Mormon’s summary suggest that the Lamanites recognize the value of the plates (with their attending literacy and educational benefits) and that they have been deprived of this and other wealth.

The Nephite self-perception and assimilation of history is hand-in-glove with the Lamanite narrative. In their own view, the Nephites are “industrious” (2 Ne. 5:17), “fair and delightsome” (2 Ne. 5:21), wealthy (Jacob 1:16), and hopeful that the Lamanites will return to “the knowledge of the truth” about God (Jacob 7:24; see Enos 1:13–19). In that same view, the Lamanites are “an idle people, full of mischief and subtlety” (2 Ne. 5:24), possessed of “an eternal hatred against [the Nephites]” (Jacob 7:24), and a “wild, and ferocious, and a blood-thirsty people, full of idolatry and filthiness” (Enos 1:20; see also Jacob 3:5, Jarom 1:6, Mosiah 10:12). Nephites build temples like Solomon’s (thanks to the brass plates, 2 Ne. 5:16), enjoy shareable surplus means (Jacob 2:17–22), and learn to farm land and raise livestock effectively (Enos 1:21), while the Lamanites, according to one Nephite account, live in tents, wander “about in the wilderness with a short skin girdle about their loins,” and feed on “beasts of prey” (Enos 1:20).⁴⁹

In their own eyes, the Nephites are privileged, and they know it, and the Lamanites are deprived, and they know it. Although early on, Jacob uses Lamanites as positive examples of how to conduct healthy family relationships between husbands, wives, and children (Jacob 3:7), he also claims that Lamanites are filthy, bloodthirsty, hateful, and descended from iniquitous fathers (Jacob 3:5, 7, 9; 7:24). While both Jacob (who has primary experience with Laman and Lemuel) and his son, Enos, express concern for Lamanites and hope that they will adopt “true faith” (Enos 1:14, 16–20), their perception of Lamanites as inherently inferior is unshakable.

Visible as a nascent trend in Nephi’s dealings with Laman and Lemuel, the blindness of Nephite privilege and the accompanying efficiency in distributional preference calcify in following generations. While

49. The specific reference to Lamanites in tents and dwelling in the wilderness may have been more specific to the time of Enos and Jacob, since later interactions clearly evidence Lamanites living in permanent structures and raising flocks (Alma 17–18). Nonetheless, the reference remains useful as an artifact of Nephite narrative.

Nephites define themselves by their faith and industry, that same faith and industry mean that Nephites never question their economic superiority or wonder whether the conflicts they face might be a product of economic imbalance. No, the Lamanites fight because they are bad, and why should someone who has worked hard for what they have share with people who are so clearly undeserving? Nephites hope that Lamanites will change their minds, especially because they are so bad.

A rounded assessment of Nephites' and Lamanites' perception of themselves and each other would be incomplete without addressing the matter of race. The two groups effectively start out from one large family unit led by Lehi and Sariah together with Ishmael and his wife (whose name is not mentioned), suggesting ethnic unity and common origin. However, as the nations drift apart, Nephi records: “[God] had caused the cursing to come upon [the Lamanites], yea, even a sore cursing, because of their iniquity. . . . Wherefore, as they were white, and exceedingly fair and delightsome, that they might not be enticing unto my people the Lord God did cause a skin of blackness to come upon them” (2 Ne. 5:21). What to make of this unusual evolution away from common ethnic origin over a single generation, and how does it fit into the broader narrative?

Nephi's statements of “cause” read as revelation (God “caused the cursing to come” and “the Lord God did cause a skin of blackness”).⁵⁰ Without questioning Nephi's station as a prophet or truthful witness of events, it is possible to consider his observations in the context of his conflicts of interest. After all, he is commenting not on people observed for the first time but on his brothers and their posterity—brothers who at various times beat him, tied him up, opposed him, habitually mocked him, and tried to kill him. He takes flight away from them to create living space, and it is natural that he now wants to develop a new people and a fresh narrative away from one-time tormentors. It is possible to embrace Nephi the seer and prophet while observing Nephi the human, who is working to assimilate God's will while grappling with partially or wholly unresolved family trauma.

In processing Nephi's assimilation of divine will amid trauma, the Old Testament prophet Jonah stands out as a valuable antecedent. Jonah

50. It should be observed that certain scholars have tried (not terribly convincingly) to interpret the reference to “skins” narrowly, hypothesising that perhaps Nephi was referring to garments rather than actual skin. See, for example, Ethan Sproat, “Skins as Garments in the Book of Mormon: A Textual Exegesis,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 24, no. 1 (2015): 138–65.

is historically interesting because he predates Lehi's departure from Jerusalem by some years and may well have been sufficiently famous to be known to Nephi (see, for example, 2 Kgs. 14:25), but the book of Jonah could not have been in the brass plates because it was composed after the Babylonian invasion of which Lehi prophesies before leaving Jerusalem.⁵¹ God calls Jonah to preach to his Assyrian oppressors at Nineveh, a call from which he runs (Jonah 1–2), not unlike Nephi's ultimate escape into the wilderness away from Laman and Lemuel.⁵² When Jonah eventually heeds the call and God forgives the Ninevites, Jonah is "very angry," overcome by his antipathy for the inhabitants of the head city of his cultural enemies (Jonah 4:1).

Like Lehi's cursing his sons and their children and Nephi's mention of "sore cursing" for them (2 Ne. 5:21), the Jonah of scripture subscribes to a notion of God as propagator of *Midat Hadin*⁵³ as laid bare in Exodus: "visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth generation" (Ex. 34:7; see Jonah 4:1–3). Jonah is a rough cultural contemporary for Nephi, a prophet from the same general period who also seeks to fulfil God's will while struggling to contain anger toward an abuser and perceiving (or, as the book of Jonah would have it, misperceiving) God as a bringer of vengeance. Nephi's pronouncement of a divine curse fits a larger pattern of cursing that we see in Jonah and that can be traced in Israelite heritage back to its founding events. Had the brass plates contained the book of Jonah, Nephi might have seen more clearly the future of his people and the quick forgiveness that comes when prejudice melts. But all of that is to come.

Nephi's controversial perception becomes part of the Nephite narrative, and Jacob makes similar references to the "darkness" of Lamanite skin (Jacob 3:5, 8–9). These descriptions align with concurrent descriptions of Lamanite filthiness and indolence. The Nephites, who do not bear this "sore curse," have industry on their side as well as perception of themselves as "fair and delightful" (2 Ne. 5:17, 21).

But as with his distributional preference, privilege plays a key role in Nephi's narrative on the curse of dark skin that follows his father's original curse. Though generations of Book of Mormon readers have

51. See Grazia Papola, "A Biblical Story of Conversion: The Book of Jonah," *The Person and the Challenges* 6, no. 2 (2016): 156–57.

52. See Papola, "Book of Jonah," 156–57.

53. Moshe Pelli, "The Literary Art of Jonah," *Hebrew Studies* 20–21 (1979–1980): 23.

interpreted these references as racist value judgments of the book itself, the broader critical context of Nephite narrative suggests that an aspect of Nephite privilege was an “othering” of the Lamanites on racial terms. Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas expresses othering as “totality” and violence, the process of reducing another person to a term or concept like darkness.⁵⁴ In modern terms, othering includes being “denied the fullness of one’s humanity,” “subordination,” and a process that “renders the subject as object.”⁵⁵

History and experience suggest that privilege, inequality, and othering as a natural aspect of the narrative of the privileged go hand-in-hand. Studying the opposition of twentieth-century white Americans to welfare in the form of “means-tested transfer programs,” social and political scientist Martin Gilens explains that “attitudes towards blacks must be counted as the most central” of the factors creating the opposition.⁵⁶ “In particular,” notes Gilens, “the beliefs that blacks’ poverty reflects a lack of effort and that, economically, blacks have gotten what they deserve are strong predictors of whites’ opposition to welfare.”⁵⁷ On this view, the Nephite opinion of Lamanites as “an idle people, full of mischief and subtlety” (2 Ne. 5:24), who are “wild, . . . full of idolatry and filthiness” (Enos 1:20), can be seen in its divisive racial light. And if Gilens’s findings are any guide, a reader should expect that these Nephite views will impede the sharing of technology (like the brass plates and the written word that they make possible) and other wealth. In the round, Nephite race narrative becomes another reason—conscious or not, expressed or not—to stay separate and not share.

As a privileged, elite group, the Nephites do not, in centuries of separation from the Lamanites, take any identifiable action to share from their means to lift Lamanite living conditions. When interaction consists primarily of war (Jacob says that Lamanites “sought by the power of

54. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Philadelphia: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 54–58.

55. Erin Kerrison, Wizdom Powell, and Abigail Sewell, “Object to Subject: Three Scholars on Race, Othering, and Bearing Witness,” *Othering and Belonging* 3 (August 2018): 17. https://haasinstitute.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/otheringbelongingjournal_issue_3_publish_web_bwk_select-spreadsmq.pdf.

56. Martin Gilens, “Racial Attitudes and Opposition to Welfare,” *Journal of Politics* 57, no. 4 (November 1995): 1009–10; compare Martin Gilens, *Why Americans Hate Welfare: Race, Media, and the Politics of Antipoverty Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). At the time that he published his research, Gilens was at Yale University; he later went to teach at both Princeton University and UCLA.

57. Gilens, “Racial Attitudes,” 1010.

their arms to destroy us continually,” Jacob 7:24), it is not surprising that equality does not rank high on the Nephite agenda. But the efficiency of the Nephite distributional preference is stark nonetheless.

This efficiency preference also stands out because of the Nephites’ professed desire to help Lamanites acquire faith (Enos 1:20). Like YLS students who nominally support equality but in fact have a hard preference for efficiency, Nephites say they want to help Lamanites, but practical efforts to make outcomes more equal do not appear forthcoming from this elite group. Centuries pass without any notable effort to share wealth or faith.

The observed fact that privilege can impede sharing is intensified by both Nephite and Lamanite narratives. As noted, studies in game theory show that unequal payoffs in repetitive conflicts produce a narrative pattern where deprived parties feel like they are being cheated and privileged parties see their counterparts as irrational and devious.⁵⁸ In a seminal study of conflict, the disadvantaged person protests that the privileged party will not share, and this fact entitles him to take at will.⁵⁹ By contrast, the advantaged person describes the taker as “a shady character,” “shiftless,” “crazy,” and “unintelligent.”⁶⁰ This clash closely resembles the Nephite-Lamanite civil wars.

Inequality, by its very nature, creates separation between individuals and groups. As people exist at a distance, separated by space and means, misunderstandings arise. Misunderstanding leads to suspicion and contempt that then get reinforced by narratives encompassing both racial and value judgments. The Nephite-Lamanite civil wars sprawl and tumble over centuries of suspicion, contempt, racial animus, reprisals, and more separation. Narratives become immovable as generation follows generation again and again.

Where the connection between privilege and efficiency is merely plausible when initially studied between Nephi and Laman and Lemuel, the connection and its effects become staggering over years of struggle between Nephites and Lamanites. The distributional preferences of elite Nephites flow into lasting inequality of means between the two groups, which then calcify into narratives that feel unbreakable.

58. Schwartz, “Game Theory,” 83–84.

59. Schwartz, “Game Theory,” 83; compare Merrill M. Flood, “Some Experimental Games,” U.S. Air Force Project RAND Research Memorandum RM-789-1 (June 20, 1952), https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_memoranda/2008/RM789-1.pdf.

60. Schwartz, “Game Theory,” 100.

The question becomes how these vicious circles can ever end or evolve. Acemoglu and Robinson show that extractive institutions “have been the norm in history,” and both Nephite and Lamanite institutions affirm this state of affairs.⁶¹ The two societies wage wars fueled by history, mutual antipathies, and further inequalities. Can the groups experience critical junctures, whether exogenous shocks or internal reforms, that shrink their internal inequalities or change their incentives in a way that makes war less likely?

Breaking Down Inequality: Sermon as Critical Juncture

In the midst of this radical separation and centuries of war and extractive inequalities, the record written by Nephi, Jacob, and their lineal descendants comes to a close. Following the initial trio of Book of Mormon prophets in Lehi, Nephi, and Jacob, Nephite introspection and public thought seem to endure a three-hundred-year dark age.⁶² Once the reader passes Jacob and his son, Enos, a series of kings and chroniclers pass in sequence without much depth or description other than to note nonstop conflict with Lamanites (Jarom, Omni).

Near the end of this succession of record keepers, a lineal descendent of Jacob named Amaleki tells of a Nephite named Mosiah who receives a warning from God to leave the land of Nephi (Omni 1:12–13). Mosiah gathers the Nephites, presumably including Amaleki, and departs into the wilderness (by now a Book of Mormon leitmotif), where they are led to a land called Zarahemla (Omni 1:12).

At Zarahemla, Mosiah and his group discover a new people, neither Nephite nor Lamanite. On discovery, the people at Zarahemla are unintelligible to Mosiah and his travelers, having no records and their language having been corrupted. Mosiah arranges for them to be taught in the Nephite language anchored by the brass plates, which Mosiah and his people bring with them out of the land of Nephi (Mosiah 1:3–6). Ultimately, Mosiah and his people join together with the natives at Zarahemla, and Mosiah is anointed king of the united nation, who continue together to be referred to as Nephites (Omni 1:19).

At this juncture, Mormon focuses his writings on the teachings of a king named Benjamin, the lead figure of the book of Mosiah. When

61. Acemoglu and Robinson, *Why Nations Fail*, 431; compare 428–37.

62. Compare Enos 1 and Mosiah 1.

Mosiah passes away, his son Benjamin becomes king (Omni 1:23). This study took a quick look at Benjamin earlier when it mentioned the king who distinguishes himself as the ruler who chooses not to employ extractive practices like slavery and onerous taxation. Although not a lineal descendant of Nephi or Jacob as far as the text makes clear, Benjamin ends up as keeper of the record Jacob and his descendants have been keeping when Amaleki, who has no children and deems Benjamin to be “a just man before the Lord,” passes them to him (Omni 1:25). Benjamin also succeeds in “obtain[ing] much advantage over [the Lamanites] . . . and . . . [driving] them out of the land of Zarahemla” after “a serious war and much bloodshed” (Omni 1:24).

Aging and sensing that his own time is drawing near, Benjamin exercises the privilege of relative peace and makes plans to address his people at Zarahemla. He arranges for his son Mosiah to summon the public to the temple, and an innumerable crowd gathers (Mosiah 2:2). The gathering has a celebratory air of festival and thanksgiving as people offer sacrifice and burnt offerings, give thanks and praise for deliverance and just leaders, and pitch tents in family groups pointed toward a tower erected at the temple from which the king will speak (Mosiah 2:3–8).

With his people gathered and listening, Benjamin delivers an extended oration in three parts. His triptych in spoken word focuses first on preparation, setting a common context and background for his listeners. Part two sees the aged king relate a visionary revelation from an angel, foretelling the coming of Jesus Christ (a vision with precedents in Book of Mormon history) as he seeks to construct and consolidate shared faith. The final segment builds to a series of challenges intended to both reform the culture of Zarahemla and the Nephite nation and wed shared belief to collective action in a way that, as will be seen, ultimately clears the ground for more inclusive institutions.

Benjamin opens his address with an account of his years of unpretentious service for the betterment and defense of his people. Expressing hope that all listeners will have open hearts to hear his words and understand God’s mysteries, he affirms his own aging mortality and infirmity “in body and mind” while witnessing that he has been kept and preserved by God (Mosiah 2:9–11). As mentioned, unlike earlier kings, rent-seeking, unjust imprisonment, slavery, lawlessness, and godlessness have not been aspects of Benjamin’s rule (Mosiah 2:12–13). He has labored with his own hands to serve and defend his people, which he mentions merely to make the point that if he merits any praise from them, then God a fortiori deserves thanks (Mosiah 2:14–19).

In Benjamin's view, there is a cosmic inequality at play in the relationship between Deity and humankind: because God gives such profuse, fundamental blessings (creation, preservation, agency), even lifelong, nonstop, whole-souled service to him falls short of adequate thanks (Mosiah 2:20–21). “Ye cannot say that ye are even as much as the dust of the earth; yet ye were created of the dust of the earth; but behold, it belongeth to him who created you” (Mosiah 2:25). The profound imbalance suggests that no human—not even a monarch—can merit special praise, and with all humans on a level, all humans should devote themselves to serving God and one another, which amounts to the same thing.

Knowing that the native people at Zarahemla were godless when his father, Mosiah, discovered them (Omni 1:17), Benjamin uses his early remarks to forge common understanding among his subjects and put them on a common footing of intellect and faith. From this perspective, the discourse is constitutional, seeking to form one body out of many listeners. Extending this constitutional spirit, Benjamin announces that the time has come for him to step down as king and that Mosiah, his son, will reign in his place (Mosiah 2:29–30). Once Benjamin passes away, yielding his “mortal frame to mother earth” in fulfilment of the cosmic inequality, Mosiah will protect the Nephites from their enemies and help them prosper (Mosiah 2:26, 31).

Having laid a basis for common understanding, Benjamin proceeds to the second, expository portion of his thoughts, specifically exposition on Christ. The aged king declares that in answer to his prayers, an angel appeared to him to deliver a message of joy and salvation for him and his people (Mosiah 3:1–4). Like Nephi and Jacob, Benjamin teaches that Christ and his fair judgment are the sole means of salvation for humankind. But Benjamin pushes further and affirms that, in the same way that Christ saves children and those without the law, people fail to achieve salvation unless they humble themselves as children and embrace the law in Christ (Mosiah 3:16–18).

Benjamin teaches more clearly than his forebears that human nature fundamentally pits each individual against God and his laws, and that the significance of a Christ figure is that Christ can make the debased human condition revocable when individuals are willing to try to exercise control over corrupted nature in reverence, meekness, humility, patience, and love before God and one another (Mosiah 3:19–20). The Christ narrative in Benjamin's telling presents another perspective on divine inequality and what it means for the human condition.

Benjamin presents himself as humbly accountable to the command of the angel, who told him that he must share these messages with his people to hold them accountable before God, leaving all except children to seek salvation through repentance and faith in God (Mosiah 3:21–22). In fulfilling the command to proclaim, the king has discharged his duty, and he explains that his words will stand as a testimony to either the salvation or damnation of the listeners (Mosiah 3:23–27).

The response to Benjamin's proclamations is dramatic, with the entire assembled body politic falling to the ground, having "viewed themselves in their own carnal state, even less than the dust of the earth. And they all cried aloud with one voice, saying: O have mercy, and apply the atoning blood of Christ that we may receive forgiveness of our sins, and our hearts may be purified; for we believe in Jesus Christ" (Mosiah 4:1–2). By marrying social consciousness and civic mindedness with his own (and others') prophecies about the coming Christ, Benjamin has a visible impact on his people. The power of this new narrative to shift conviction in a crowd of listeners appears to be both immediate and extraordinary. Whether the narrative will have lasting influence has yet to be seen, and Benjamin is not done.

Repeating his calls to repentance, humility, and faith (Mosiah 4:4–12), Benjamin continues interweaving Christology, civic-mindedness, and cosmic imbalance as he drives to the final challenge for his people. Those who reach a state of conversion, as Benjamin's listeners say they have, will naturally live in peace and "render to every man according to that which is his due" (Mosiah 4:13). The converted will care for and teach their children and help those in want, not suffering "the beggar" to make requests in vain (Mosiah 4:14–16). In Benjamin's view, those who pass judgment on beggars, withholding substance on the basis that such suffering is self-inflicted, must think again. Those who persist in such a mindset have no interest in God's greatness (Mosiah 4:17–18).

Here, in the context of the beggar, Benjamin reaches the peak of his oration and his final challenge. Though human nature and the economic reality of having means tempt each person to see the beggar as "less" and "other," Benjamin responds, "Are we not all beggars? Do we not all depend upon the same Being, even God, for all the substance which we have, for both food and raiment, and for gold, and for silver, and for all the riches which we have of every kind?" (Mosiah 4:19). Benjamin's move here is very deft, taking the faith that has served as a basis for the Nephite narrative of superiority and turning it inside out, making

it the prism through which personal dependence and lowliness must be viewed. Nephites have been blinded by their privilege, and Benjamin is redefining their faith with the aim of restoring their sight.

Everything that he has explained thus far—the commands of an angel, the coming of Christ, the practicability of repentance, and the attainability of salvation—is effectively forfeit unless a person is willing to recognize dependence on God and give to others in need: “for the sake of retaining a remission of your sins from day to day, that ye may walk guiltless before God—I would that ye should impart of your substance to the poor, every man according to that which he hath, such as feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and administering to their relief, both spiritually and temporally, according to their wants” (Mosiah 4:26; see 19–26).

Benjamin’s formulation here closely mirrors Jacob’s earlier teaching during the rule of the second Nephite king: “Be familiar with all and free with your substance, . . . to clothe the naked, and to feed the hungry, and to liberate the captive, and administer relief to the sick and the afflicted” (Jacob 2:17, 19). The mirroring suggests that Nephites (at least Nephites of a certain class) are familiar with teachings of their forebears. But whereas Jacob was a voice in the wilderness, preaching against what he saw as degenerative practices of the wealthy taking hold under a new king, Benjamin is king, and he is iterating the same message in a new context with new energy.

Benjamin levels his challenge not only at the wealthy. Just as those with means should give reasonably in proportion to their ability, so too those who have no particular means should be willing to give if means were to permit (Mosiah 4:24–27). Given all of life’s imbalances, Benjamin suggests that being a good citizen and a model believer requires taking steps to remedy inequality, even if the only realistic step is maintaining a heart and mind that are willing to say, “If I had I would give” (Mosiah 4:24). Where usually a king is the locus of extraction (taking from the many to give to the few), Benjamin reverses this and teaches that each individual has an obligation to give what is possible.

The logic that runs through Benjamin’s address has a forceful arc. Starting with recognition of an infinite gap between God and humans—despite which God remains willing to sustain life and bless without measure—the sermon ultimately stretches back to finish with an argument that people ought to reflect divine compassion in relation to others. Benjamin chooses to share the message in a very public act as sovereign, and his words have the effect of royal decree for a newly unified nation. He

evidently does not want giving to be merely a private matter; he wants it to serve as the foundation of Nephite society and public policy.

Having conveyed his message and challenge, Benjamin surveys his listeners: “He sent among them, desiring to know of his people if they believed the words which he had spoken unto them” (Mosiah 5:1). The response is overwhelming acclaim combined with a public affirmation of oath and covenant to follow Benjamin’s teachings (Mosiah 5:2–6).

In his final constitutional acts, Benjamin confirms the rightness of the covenant accepted by his people, records the names of each person who has taken the oath, anoints his son Mosiah as king, appoints priests to “teach the people . . . [and] stir them up in remembrance of the oath which they had made,” and finally dismisses the people to return to their homes (Mosiah 5:6–15, 6:1–3). He dies three years later (Mosiah 6:5).

Without knowing the course of history following Benjamin’s address, an analyst of these Nephite affairs should bear in mind that the same economic and social studies which find skewed distributional preferences among the elite also find that thought leadership makes a difference. The YLS study authors explain that when people are exposed to teaching that emphasizes equality (“reducing differences in payoffs”) over efficiency, their preferences can shift accordingly.⁶³ Giving Benjamin’s thoughts normative weight, the economists state: “The overarching lesson from hundreds of experiments is that people often sacrifice their own payoffs in order to increase the payoffs of (unknown) others, and they do so even in circumstances that do not engage reciprocity motivations or strategic considerations.”⁶⁴ In different disciplines, observers concur that exposure to egalitarian values can lead people to regard themselves less and share more.⁶⁵

Reviewed in sum against the backdrop of the foregoing analysis of extractive Nephite institutions and conflict-ridden Nephite-Lamanite relations, Benjamin’s teachings have the potential to do a few things. First, Nephites might work to reform their institutions to become more inclusive. Benjamin does not abolish rule by king, but he does teach the

63. Raymond Fisman, Shachar Kariv, and Daniel Markovits, “Exposure to Ideology and Distributional Preferences” (working paper, July 19, 2009), 1, http://eml.berkeley.edu/~kariv/FKM_II.pdf.

64. Raymond Fisman, Pamela Jakiela, and Shachar Kariv, “Distributional Preferences and Political Behavior” (working paper, August 23, 2017), 7, https://eml.berkeley.edu/~kariv/FJK_II.pdf.

65. Paul K. Piff, “Wealth and the Inflated Self: Class, Entitlement, and Narcissism,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 40, no. 1 (2014): 39–40.

absolute necessity of sharing, bind the people by oath to live the teachings, and create a class of teacher-priests to reinforce the oath. Further, Nephites might possibly become more aware of their own privilege and advantage, skewing their distributional preferences away from efficiency and back toward equality. Finally, as these changes occur, the Nephite narrative surrounding their relations with Lamanites might change in a way that gives way to new understanding and healing of old wounds. But as Benjamin passes the torch to Mosiah, these remain theoretical possibilities, not practical realities, and whether the address constitutes a true critical juncture has yet to be proven.

New Social, Political, and Economic Order

After Benjamin's death, emissaries travel from Zarahemla to discover the fate of a long-lost Nephite offshoot in another land (Mosiah 8). On locating this group, led now by King Noah's son Limhi, the Zarahemla envoys' first order of business is to convey the teachings of King Benjamin. They "rehearsed unto them the last words which king Benjamin had taught them, and explained them . . . *so that they might understand all the words which he spake*" (Mosiah 8:3, emphasis added). Benjamin's teachings are so valued and constitutional to the Zarahemla group that they ensure the principles are clear before undertaking any other business. Independently, a group that separated from Limhi's people, led by a prophet named Alma, arrive in Zarahemla after being led there by God.

As the Nephite offshoots join the main group in Zarahemla, Mosiah acquaints himself with the histories of his new people, causes those histories to be taught widely to enhance shared narrative, and installs newcomer Alma (a reformed priest of the aforementioned Noah) as leader to manage the launch of seven "churches throughout all the land of Zarahemla" with "power to ordain priests and teachers over every church" (Mosiah 25:5–6, 19, 23). As first established by Benjamin, priests have a constitutional role in Zarahemla, both ensuring the feeling of "one church, . . . even the church of God" and teaching the people to "stir them up in remembrance of the oath" that forms the basis of their particular social compact (Mosiah 25:22; 6:3).

The nascent order that King Benjamin puts in place as his last public act flourishes and grows as Mosiah leads a newly united and diversified nation. With the curious itch to explore and repossess the land of Nephi well and truly extinguished after years of Lamanite war and captivity, Zarahemla becomes the undisputed heart of Nephite territory, and the people there enjoy an extended measure of peace and plenty. "And they

were called the people of God. And the Lord did pour out his Spirit upon them, and they were blessed, and prospered in the land” (Mosiah 25:24).

Not long after this time of consolidation, Mormon describes a significant point of evolution in post-Benjamin history, marked specifically by the coming of age of those who do not have a personal memory of the speech itself and the social order that it instituted. Many of these “rising generation” reject the order and traditions, refusing to conform and in some instances seeking to tear down (Mosiah 26:1–4). In response to this disorder, Mosiah issues a royal “strict command” that unbelievers should not persecute believers, that there should not be persecution among churches, and “*that there should be an equality among all men; . . . that every man should esteem his neighbor as himself, laboring with their own hands for their support*” (Mosiah 27:3–4, emphasis added).

To further establish these proclamations of equality, Mosiah decrees that “all their priests and teachers should labor with their own hands for their support, in all cases save it were in sickness, or in much want; and doing these things, they did abound in the grace of God” (Mosiah 27:5). Mosiah’s proclamations both deepen and echo the calls of Benjamin’s social pact, and the effects are widespread peace and prosperity (Mosiah 27:7).

Amid this progress, the Nephite royal lineage encounters an unexpected constitutional crisis. Mosiah’s sons (Benjamin’s grandsons) desire only to go to the land of Nephi to preach to the Lamanites (Mosiah 28:1–5). The post-Benjamin mindset shifts thinking and desire from a historical focus on having and reclaiming the land of Nephi as a matter of birthright to sharing and reclaiming a relationship with the Lamanites themselves. A tall order to be sure. Mosiah takes the pleas of his sons seriously and receives divine confirmation that a mission to the Lamanites will have deep impact, so he gives his consent (Mosiah 28:6–8). As the sons depart for the land of Nephi, “king Mosiah had no one to confer the kingdom upon, for there was not any of his sons who would accept of the kingdom” (Mosiah 28:10).

By the time Mosiah’s sons all forswear the throne, Nephites have enjoyed rule by a king for the better part of five hundred years, dating back to Nephi.⁶⁶ Mosiah inquires of his people, “desiring to know their will concerning who should be their king” (Mosiah 29:1). The people respond

66. Mosiah 28 dates to approximately 92 BC while Lehi and his family departed Jerusalem around 600 BC; we should note that it is not clear precisely when Nephi was declared king following Lehi’s death.

that they want Mosiah's son Aaron. With Aaron gone on a mission to the Lamanites and unwilling to be king, Mosiah sends "a written word . . . among the people" with thoughts on the way forward (Mosiah 29:4).

Mosiah tells his people that, like Benjamin, he has upheld the rule of law and sought to govern justly (Mosiah 29:13–16). If, by historical contingency, "it were possible that you could have just men to be your kings, . . . then it would be expedient that ye should always have kings to rule over you" (Mosiah 29:13). But Mosiah explains that this is simply not how history works, with King Noah being exhibit A (Mosiah 29:18).

Describing the weight of extractive institutions and highlighting the role of historical contingency and vicious circles, Mosiah laments that a single "wicked king" can deploy his guards and armies to shred any laws, means, or human lives that stand in his way (Mosiah 29:17, 20–23). Modern economists and political scientists such as Acemoglu and Robinson would tend to agree with and echo Mosiah's lament.⁶⁷

As the best alternative, Mosiah proposes judges chosen by "the voice of the people" (Mosiah 29:11, 25). Reflecting the modern view that inclusive political institutions are those that share "political power widely in a pluralistic manner" but remain able "to establish law and order, the foundations of secure property rights, and an inclusive market economy,"⁶⁸ Mosiah seeks to establish a "land of liberty" where each individual "may enjoy . . . rights and privileges" and exercise their voice to choose judges who will judge "according to the laws which have been given you by our fathers" (Mosiah 29:25–26, 31–32). The new system proposed by Mosiah reads, within its context and compared against the system of kings that it replaces, as a model inclusive institution that has potential to abolish "the inequality" that is associated with "the iniquities of [the] kings" (Mosiah 29:31–32).

As Benjamin's grandsons, the natural heirs to the throne, abandon the kingdom to preach, and Benjamin's son, the king, proposes to abolish the system of potentially extractive kings to institute an inclusive system of judges, the reality of King Benjamin's speech as a critical juncture in Nephite society comes into sharp focus. Mosiah can see both that rule by king introduces too much variability and that one effective way to stabilize political (and economic) volatility will be to give a broader base of people a voice in and ownership of the result. These radical changes are a

67. See Acemoglu and Robinson, *Why Nations Fail*, 335–67 (a chapter focusing on vicious circles and extractive institutions).

68. Acemoglu and Robinson, *Why Nations Fail*, 430.

natural consequence of Benjamin's teaching, a complete revolution in the political order that follows in the wake of a new social and religious order. The principles of equality and fair dealing with others move beyond the realm of ideas and begin to change the fabric of Nephite society itself.

While economic growth and peace can occur in extractive regimes, there is a "link between inclusive economic and political institutions and prosperity."⁶⁹ Following nineteen years of the more inclusive reign of judges, Mormon records that "there was continual peace among them, and exceedingly great prosperity" (Alma 49:30). In the following years, the Nephites build a string of new cities, "prosper exceedingly, . . . [and] became exceedingly rich; yea and they did multiply and wax strong in the land" (Alma 50:18). Mormon reflects that "there never was a happier time among the people of Nephi, since the days of Nephi" (Alma 50:23).

Though the history, as will be seen, is more complicated and nuanced than this idyllic summary might suggest, the book of Mosiah in Mormon's editorial hands reads as an extended treatise on inclusive versus extractive systems and their impact on inequality. As the Nephites are brought together in one body and into alignment under the Benjaminite oath (Mosiah 8:3), Mormon focuses on the breakdown and abolishment of monarchy, the establishment of a new and more inclusive system, and the nature of political power.

Ups and Downs of the "Equal" Life: Warring Narratives

The stretch of Book of Mormon history that begins with the abolition of kings in Mosiah 29 and ends with the appearance of the resurrected Jesus Christ among the Nephites and Lamanites in 3 Nephi 11 spans just over one hundred years (roughly one-tenth of the Book of Mormon's chronological history), but it occupies close to half of the Book of Mormon's overall content.⁷⁰ Mormon recounts this relatively short period in very close detail. To comprehensively summarize the conflicts and dealings covered in these accounts would require a separate work.

What follows is an attempt to consider, as succinctly as possible, how successfully the Nephites and Lamanites are able to live Benjamin's social order with its inclusive institutions and whether, in turn, these developments

69. Acemoglu and Robinson, *Why Nations Fail*, 429.

70. The page span of this period runs from page 203 to page 428, or 225 of the Book of Mormon's 531 pages (42 percent). The abolition of kings in Mosiah 29 is estimated to take place around 92 BC, and the appearance of Christ is, as one would expect, approximately 34 AD (roughly 122 of the Book of Mormon's approximately 1,020-year history).

impact historic Nephite-Lamanite inequality and the accompanying narratives. This effort will necessarily require some selective summary and synthesis, revealing episodes of stunning success and crushing failure.

Very shortly after being elected as the inaugural chief judge at Zarahemla, Alma finds himself challenged by a man named Amlici and his followers. Amlici strives to return the political order at Zarahemla to a rule of kings (Alma 2:2–4). Opposed by Alma and ultimately defeated by the majority voice of the people of Zarahemla, Amlici and his followers secede from the main body politic at Zarahemla. The dissenters make Amlici their king, and he incites them to war against the Zarahemla majority (Alma 2:5–15).

Alma and the people of Zarahemla defeat Amlici and his followers in battle, but the skirmish draws them into conflict against Lamanites with whom Amlici allies himself (Alma 2–3). Though Alma and his forces ultimately win, the victory proves fleeting as Amlici’s people join with the Lamanite faction and sow his discontent further—political dissent “gone viral” in a way that increases conflict. Mormon terms these mixed Lamanites “Amalekites” (for example, Alma 21:3) and explains that they come to follow “the order of the Nehors” (Alma 21:4).⁷¹

A man named Nehor appears in Zarahemla not long after King Mosiah passes away and Alma assumes political leadership as the inaugural chief judge (Alma 1). Appealing to the people at Zarahemla, Nehor attacks the order established by Benjamin: “bearing down against the church; declaring unto the people that every priest and teacher ought to become popular; and they ought not to labor with their hands, but that they ought to be supported by the people” (Alma 1:3).

Where the inclusive order at Zarahemla is grounded in notions of equality and widespread labor (Mosiah 29:38; Alma 1:26), the teachings of Nehor invert this and imbed the extractive tendencies of systems that “concentrate the power in the hands of a few, who will then have incentives to maintain and develop . . . institutions for their benefit.”⁷² Adding

71. The name of this group in the book of Alma is rendered both as “Amlicites” (Alma 2:15–38) and “Amalekites” (Alma 21:2; 43:6). At least two recent studies have hypothesized that the two spellings refer to one group and that the variation is a matter of how the Book of Mormon was translated and transcribed rather than a difference in identity. See, for example, J. Christopher Conkling, “Alma’s Enemies: The Case of the Lamanites, Amlicites, and Mysterious Amalekites,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 14, no. 1 (2005): 108–17, 130–32; see also Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon: Part Three, Mosiah 17–Alma 20* (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2006), 1605–9.

72. Acemoglu and Robinson, *Why Nations Fail*, 430.

crude eschatology to this degenerate order, Nehor teaches “the people that all mankind should be saved at the last day, and that they need not fear nor tremble, but that they might lift up their heads and rejoice; for the Lord had created all men, and had also redeemed all men; and, in the end, all men should have eternal life” (Alma 1:4).

The teachings of Nehor benefit from their clarity and simplicity: be popular, seek to be supported by others, and know that ultimate redemption requires no special sacrifice of self for others. Nehor’s appearance is remarkably brief (fourteen verses all told) and related entirely in the context of one of Alma’s earliest trials, which concludes with Nehor’s execution by law for murdering a local dignitary named Gideon (Alma 1:15). But this, Mormon relates, “did not put an end to the spreading of priestcraft through the land; for there were many who loved the vain things of the world, and they went forth preaching false doctrines; and this they did for the sake of riches and honor” (Alma 1:16).

And so despite the radical reordering of Nephite society in line with Benjamin’s teachings, Nehor’s appearance suggests that political and theological opposition begin soon afterward. The opposing schools of thought represent the familiar dichotomy of immediate versus delayed gratification and inclusive versus extractive systems. In the context of distributional preferences, Benjamin’s order nudges its adherents toward equality while Nehor’s order pulls them back toward efficiency, though for different reasons than the historic Nephite blindness. Where Nephites historically held to a faith that yielded privileges which blinded them to their efficient, conflict-enabling, nonsharing preferences, Nehor embraces taking as a virtue. On the take, all the time.

Kingship-seeking Amlici appears almost immediately in the wake of Nehor’s demise, and his appeal to the people at Zarahemla is consciously modeled on Nehor’s teachings (Alma 2:1). In contemporary political thought, Amlici would rightly be classified as a populist. Though its manifestations vary over time, populism can broadly be described as “a political movement with anti-elite, authoritarian, and nativist tendencies. . . . At the most basic level, populists divide society into the elites and the people. . . . The people may lack the education of the elite, but they possess a basic common sense, passed down through collective traditions . . . and community, to which populist politicians can appeal.”⁷³

73. Barry Eichengreen, *The Populist Temptation: Economic Grievance and Political Reaction in the Modern Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 1–2.

Amlici's appeals—to abolish the newly established political order of elite judges and return to the age-old tradition of kings—certainly have a populist ring, and they embody the core irony of all populism, which tends to tear down authority only to erect tyranny and extractive systems in its place. Mormon describes Amlici as “a very cunning man, yea, a wise man as to the wisdom of the world, he being after the order of the man that slew Gideon by the sword, who was executed according to the law” (Alma 2:1). Dark, populist credentials.

Far from an incidental figure, Nehor and his teachings become the antithesis to the thesis laid down by Benjamin before his death. Most of the aforementioned hundred-year stretch chronicled in the Book of Mormon books of Alma, Helaman, and 3 Nephi is centered on the spiraling interchanges between these two opposing forces and the adherents of one and the other. Lamanites join Nephites to adhere to the inclusive social order of King Benjamin and the rule of judges, and Nephites join Lamanites, where, ruled by kings, they live out the extractive, populist doctrines first announced by Nehor and then perfected by Amlici.

In a break from this dismal spiral and writing of a lull after years of war, Mormon records a note on the effect of the pluralism and equal relations between Nephites and Lamanites that begins with the mission of the sons of Mosiah to the Lamanites. In Helaman 6:7, Mormon describes a period of “peace in all the land.” Lamanites preaching to Nephites, Nephites preaching to Lamanites, Lamanites and Nephites traveling and trading together on equal footing, all parties sharing the gain of their common enterprise (Hel. 6:7–11). “And they did flourish exceedingly [and] . . . multiply and wax exceedingly strong in the land” (Hel. 6:12). As both nations share common levels of education, social constitution, trade, and belief (within reason), prior curses, distributional preferences, extractive tendencies, and inequalities fade and even disappear for a time.

But, of course, intrigue among the Nephites and Lamanites does not cease. Readers witness corrupt judges, more murder, prophets who testify that Christ's coming is nigh only to be rejected and chased away, mysterious bandits who occupy hilly regions and raid both Nephites and Lamanites, and Nephites and Lamanites who join forces to defeat their common foe, the bandit robbers (Hel. 7–16, 3 Ne. 15). As the coming of Christ to the Nephites and Lamanites draws closer, an ominous note gets logged on class distinctions as a driving factor in a general breakdown of civil society: “And the people began to be distinguished by ranks, according to their riches and their chances for learning; yea, some were ignorant because of their poverty, and others did receive

great learning because of their riches. . . . *And thus there became a great inequality in all the land, insomuch that the church began to be broken up*" (3 Ne. 6:12, 14, emphasis added).

As a long chapter closes on Nephite-Lamanite history, it is a lonely band of "a few of the Lamanites" who refuse to depart from the social order, "firm, and steadfast, and immovable, willing with all diligence to keep the commandments of the Lord" (3 Ne. 6:14). And so the Nephite narrative comes full circle. Nephi, Jacob, and Enos would be very surprised to know that it is Lamanites, the "wild, and ferocious, and a blood-thirsty people, full of idolatry and filthiness," who end up as the sole emissaries of the order and faith that they cherish (Enos 1:20; see also Jacob 3:5, Jarom 1:6, Mosiah 10:12). Narratives and reality change as education, contact, and pluralism increase over generations.

The Long Equality and the End of History

The coming of Jesus Christ to the Nephites deserves book-length treatment (and it has, in fact, received such treatment).⁷⁴ Landed among the Nephites and Lamanites as an emissary from another realm, Christ is the absolute embodiment and fulfilment of everything that Benjamin prophesied, taught, hoped, and dreamed. He is everything that the Benjamin-adjacent Nephites and Lamanites have lived for and sought to achieve for generations. He calls leaders and reestablishes his church (3 Ne. 11, 18). He teaches compassion, the ceasing of disputation, and to prize eternal reward over earthly gain (3 Ne. 11–13). He heals their sick, greets them one by one, and ministers to their children (3 Ne. 17–19). If the teachings of Benjamin, Nephi, and Jacob were clear pencil sketches pointing to a brighter day, Christ brings to the Nephites and Lamanites rich tapestries, canvases full of unspeakably beautiful paintings, symphonies and arias, and sculptures to last for the ages.

The record of the first actions of the Nephites and Lamanites upon Christ's ascension relates that they "taught, and did minister one to another; and *they had all things common among them*, every man dealing justly, one with another. And it came to pass that they did do all things even as Jesus had commanded them. And they who were baptized in the name of Jesus were called the church of Christ" (3 Ne. 26:19–21,

74. See, for example, John W. Welch, *Sermon at the Temple and Sermon on the Mount: A Latter-day Saint Approach* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1990).

emphasis added). After all of Christ's teachings, one of the first-order effects of the instruction is an increase in equality, a people who have "all things common" among them. And a long equality ensues, bringing the reader full circle to where this work began, with Mormon and Moroni as exiles, puzzling over why and where the entire project went so wrong.

For the better part of two hundred years after Christ's appearance, the people have "all things common among them; therefore there were not rich and poor, bond and free, but they were all made free, and partakers of the heavenly gift. . . . There were no robbers, nor murderers, neither were there Lamanites, nor any manner of -ites; but they were in one, the children of Christ, and heirs to the kingdom of God" (4 Ne. 1:3, 17). Where Benjamin's Christ-looking prophecies and social order succeeded in helping to maintain peace among different parties and tilt distributional preferences toward equality and away from efficiency, Christ and his teachings erase class and race distinctions altogether, creating one people out of factions that had continued for many hundreds of years and giving rise to equality that is organic and natural.

Had Robert Frost lived in the post-Christ period, he might have warned the people that "nothing gold can stay."⁷⁵ Mormon records, as noted at the outset of this work, that inequality creeps in and eats away at the unity like a cancer (4 Ne. 1:24–26). And so begins the death spiral of a people who again become divided into Nephites and Lamanites, resurrecting a distinction that had been erased for well over a hundred years, factions derived from some principle related to spite passed on from a long-distant memory (4 Ne. 1:36–39).

The Book of Mormon ends with the final accounts of Mormon and Moroni. They are military leaders, leading a nation of Nephites drunk on violence and hell-bent on destruction (Morm. 1–6). They each try to preach repentance and revive the spirit of the old Benjamin order and the teachings of Christ, but somehow things are worse than they have ever been. Bleak, hopeless. If there had ever been valor or "good guys," both evaporated a long time ago, and all that is left is a war of evil pitted against evil (see Morm. 4:5).

As Moroni brings the record to a close, the reader's head swims. Mormon and Moroni manage to unearth and share lost records of Christ among the Nephites. Beautiful rituals, social order, and edification at

75. Robert Frost, "Nothing Gold Can Stay," Poetry Foundation, accessed January 26, 2022, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/148652/nothing-gold-can-stay-5c095cc5ab679>.

their most rarefied and refined. Moroni shares notes from an old sermon that Mormon once gave, exhorting to love as Christ loved, with charity. And then we are wrenched from these reveries to learn that their actual surroundings consist of Lamanite cannibal squads, Nephites committing atrocities and war crimes that include rape and torture, and widespread agony and suffering among anyone who cannot wield a sword. Moroni closes the record with his own witness of its truth and a prophecy that all will meet before the judgment bar of God.

Conclusions

Viewing the patterns of inequality, inclusive and extractive institutions, shifting distributional preferences, and the accompanying narratives that play out in the millennial history of the Book of Mormon, students might derive two principal lessons:

First, Christians ignore the sharing imperative—expressed in the Book of Mormon most clearly by King Benjamin and Jesus Christ—at their peril. Because living Christian principles can lead to privilege, and privileged people (Christian or not) often express natural, unconscious preferences for extractive efficiency (greater focus on self) over inclusive equality (greater focus on others), part of Christian repentance should include assessment of whether a life filled with the material fruits of faith might be feeding narratives or preferences that leave others behind or even fuel conflict. Indeed, the need for repentance might arguably be greater among the faithful than among the faithless.

Second: the good work that can be done by Christians to achieve equitable, inclusive outcomes is and will be assailed by populism and other easy appeals to the basest human instincts. People may walk an inspired path, but anyone willing to play to predictable patterns in human nature can interrupt that path.

And so faith is destined to be a struggle. If all this were not arduous enough, narratives that arise to explain and justify actions of the productive faithful, the counterproductive faithful, and faith detractors can complicate efforts to achieve equitable ends. Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz is noted to have often observed that “our world is the worst of all possible worlds, in which there is still hope.”⁷⁶ As a volume that begins with family

76. Rabbi Adin Even Israel Steinsaltz, “The Paganization of Western Culture,” Oxford University Chabad Society Lecture in Memory of Sir Isaiah Berlin, May 2009, https://www.oxfordchabad.org/templates/articlecco_cdo/aid/908669/jewish/Rabbi-Adin-Even-Israel-Steinsaltz-Isaiah-Berlin-Lecture-2009.htm; see also Jonathan Sacks,

feuds and ends with a man penning missives from a cave while hiding from cannibals, the Book of Mormon embodies a similar ethos.

In his 2007 Reith Lecture, development economist Jeffrey Sachs observed, “There is no sense in theory if there is not something to do, starting today.”⁷⁷ In this spirit, a reader of this piece is left to wonder: What, if anything, should a study on inequality in the Book of Mormon mean for the world at large, especially for champions of the scientific method and those who do not regard the Book of Mormon as scripture or as even having any value? And what should it mean for the faithful, for those who do hold the Book of Mormon close to their hearts?

First, for society and scientists generally, as Thomas Piketty and scores of other economists have noted for some time, inequality is on the rise, reaching levels not seen for many decades if not a century. The effects of global pandemics and the like might only accelerate its advance. While it is possible to debate Gini coefficients and argue about root causes, the fact remains that capital seems to be concentrated in ever fewer hands while the balance of humanity makes do with ever less to distribute. In a world where increasing inequality is a problem, where old extractive institutions can arise in new guises, and where Christianity often gets thrown into the mix because it is too often paired incongruously with political movements that are seen to make things worse, the Book of Mormon matters because it presents a free society where faith is a key element in creating inclusive institutions and solving centuries-long endemic inequality.

But do those who believe in the Book of Mormon as scripture fulfill this hope? Sometimes. As per the first takeaway mentioned above, one of the takeaways from the Book of Mormon’s opening third is that sometimes the faithful can unconsciously foster efficient preferences and narratives in ways that yield conflict.

The early Nephites fervently and sincerely embraced beliefs with an internal tension: they believed that the Lamanites could find faith, peace, and truth (Jacob 7:24; Enos 1:13–19), but they also believed the Lamanites were “idle,” “full of mischief and subtlety,” and “wild” (2 Ne. 5:24; Enos 1:20). Nephite history and history generally suggest that it is hard for two parties to find common faith and truth when one party sincerely

“The Persistence of Faith: A Community of Communities,” lecture 6, *BBC Reith Lectures*, 1990, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/poogxthb>.

77. Jeffrey Sachs, “Bursting at the Seams,” lecture 1, *BBC Reith Lectures*, 2007, 41:36, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/boo776j3>.

believes that the other is inferior. There exists the danger that a faithful person can fall into thinking that because faith yields privilege, that privilege need not be shared with those less faithful or less supposedly enlightened.

Reviewing Book of Mormon history through the long view of inequality, privilege, and the narratives surrounding each demands a relearning of the lessons that it has to teach. Readers see distinct periods that might not have been as clear before. There are the initial founding events in Lehi's family. Years of separation and inequality ensue owing to blindness, extractive institutions, and divergent narratives that are sometimes at odds with the stated intentions of the respective parties. King Benjamin shatters old mindsets, realigning Nephite culture and changing Nephite distributional preferences through education combined with a social pact. Actions by Mosiah, Alma, and others who apply his teachings begin to create inclusive institutions and pockets of equality and peace amid extremely chaotic circumstances over decades. Jesus Christ eventually appears to the Book of Mormon peoples, and a long period of equality and peace follows. After centuries, old evils reappear, and the ancient societies quickly descend into chaos and violence that prove to be their end. Redemption is possible. Prejudice, racism, discrimination, populist appeals, murder, revenge, and destruction are also possible. What will the reader choose?

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