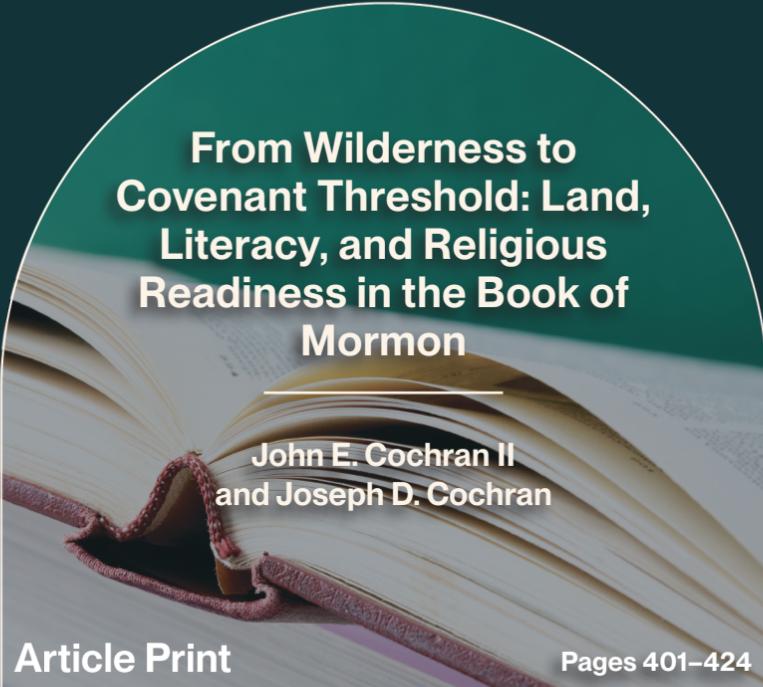# Interpreter

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From Wilderness to Covenant Threshold: Land, Literacy, and Religious Readiness in the Book of Mormon

John E. Cochran II
and Joseph D. Cochran

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From Wilderness to Covenant Threshold: Land, Literacy, and Religious Readiness in the Book of Mormon

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John E. Cochran II and Joseph D. Cochran

Abstract: *Using a case study from the Book of Mormon, this article explores how divine preparation can create the conditions for covenantal receptivity. Focusing on the Lamanite transformation during the mission of the sons of Mosiah, we propose that their readiness to receive the gospel reflects a "covenant threshold." This is defined as a moment when spiritual soil, shaped by both divine and social forces, becomes capable of receiving a covenant. Drawing on Alma 13:24, which describes angels preparing hearts ahead of the gospel's arrival, we examine how developments in land use, record-keeping, and communal organization are portrayed as signs of gospel readiness. Developments such as the spread of literacy and the influence of Nephite religious frameworks are treated here not as prerequisites for faith, but as signs of a broader readiness, cultivated over time. We do not claim these elements are universally necessary for covenantal engagement; instead we observe how the Book of Mormon links spiritual receptivity to changing conditions in this particular scenario. Our interdisciplinary approach draws from Mesoamerican anthropology, covenant theology, and narrative analysis—deferring to the scriptural text as primary. In framing societal transformation as one mode of divine cultivation, we offer a model for interpreting how God prepares peoples, communities, and individuals to receive him.*

The Book of Mormon traces a remarkable transformation wherein the Lamanites, over several centuries, evolved from resisting Nephite missionaries (circa 550–400 BC; see Jacob 7:24; Enos 1:14)

to embracing the gospel during the mission of the sons of Mosiah (circa 90 BC; see Mosiah 28:7; Alma 17–26). While spiritual factors such as missionary zeal and divine intervention remain central, evolving societal conditions also played a meaningful role. One moment in that transformation may reflect a "covenant threshold": a divinely prepared convergence of spiritual readiness and social context that helped enable a covenantal response.

In their earliest depictions, the Lamanites lived a nomadic, conquest-driven life, avoiding urban centers such as the city of Nephi:

> They [the Lamanites] became wild, and ferocious, . . . dwelling in tents, and wandering about in the wilderness with a short skin girdle about their loins and their heads shaven; . . . [while] the people of Nephi did till the land, and raise all manner of grain, and of fruit, and flocks of herds. (Enos 1:20–21)

This pattern reflected more than mere geographic mobility–it embodied resistance to Nephite religious structures, including fixed worship sites, written law, and covenantal memory. Note that missionary efforts in the days of Jacob, Enos, and others found limited success amidst this misalignment (Jacob 7:24; Enos 1:14–20). Yet, by 90 BC the Lamanite world had changed. Literacy and sociopolitical cohesion, possibly influenced by reforms under Amulon, had begun to reshape a cultural landscape into which the gospel could be planted (Mosiah 24:4–7, 9:12). These shifts, while not sufficient alone, may help explain the unprecedented success of Ammon and his brethren in teaching and baptizing entire Lamanite communities.

We propose that patterns of land stewardship, Nephite literacy reforms, and the Lamanite adoption of written practices during this period reflect a local instance of covenant readiness — a moment of divinely prepared receptivity. These patterns mirror scriptural precedents found in Eden (Genesis 2:15; Moses 3:15), in ancient Israel (Leviticus 25), and in early Nephite society (1 Nephi 18:24), wherein divine covenants are often preceded by both spiritual and structural shifts. While faith remains the ultimate catalyst, we propose that in this Lamanite case, the ability to receive the gospel was supported by societal developments, including the rise of literacy and community governance. We draw on textual, anthropological, and theological tools to explore how evolving conditions in this context may have made covenantal engagement possible.

Covenant Theology and Stewardship

Scripture consistently ties land care to covenantal faithfulness. In the Garden of Eden, God commanded Adam "to dress it, and to keep it" (Moses 3:15). This framed *labor* not as punishment, but as a sacred trust. Joseph Spencer expands on this theme, interpreting covenantal labor as hope made manifest. It is an embodied act of trust in divine promises.[1] Across the scriptural record, communal stewardship often accompanies covenantal flourishing. This can be seen in Israel's laws of sabbath and jubilee, and in Nephite patterns of agriculture and worship. These practices not only support physical life but also foster the social and spiritual conditions necessary for sacred communal life.

This continuity persists across major covenant communities. Ancient Israel's relationship with God was rooted in their care for the land, regulated by sabbath cycles that ensured rest for both people and the earth (Leviticus 25:1–7). When these laws were neglected, exile followed, and only then did the land "enjoy her sabbaths" (2 Chronicles 36:21). Among the Jaredites, the text links agricultural abundance with political unity (Ether 10:12). Nephite society likewise followed this pattern. Upon arriving in the promised land, both Nephites and early Lamanites tilled the earth and planted seeds (1 Nephi 18:24). Later, Nephite settlement in the land of Nephi included temple-building and organized worship (2 Nephi 5:16). In Alma's day, righteousness and prosperity coincided: "there never was a happier time" than when the people lived according to divine law (Alma 50:23). In each of these examples, land stewardship reflected a people's spiritual alignment with divine order.[2] This shift can be seen among the Lamanites throughout the hundreds of years following the original split between Nephi and Laman (in 2 Nephi 5:5). This accelerated at the time of Amulon, a former priest of King Noah:

> And it came to pass that Amulon did gain favor in the eyes of the king of the Lamanites; therefore, the king of the Lamanites granted unto him and his brethren that they should be

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1. Joseph M. Spencer, *For Zion: A Mormon Theology of Hope* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2014).
2. This stewardship pattern extends to secular contexts, such as ancient Egypt, where agricultural surplus enabled temple construction during times of plenty, fostering societal stability and administrative literacy, much like Lamanite literacy prepared communities for covenantal engagement; see Toby Wilkinson, *The Rise and Fall of Ancient Egypt: The History of a Civilization from 3000 BC to Cleopatra*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), 76–78.

> appointed teachers over his people. . . . For the Lamanites
> had taken possession of all these lands; therefore, the king
> of the Lamanites had appointed kings over all these lands.
> . . . and he appointed teachers of the brethren of Amulon in
> every land which was possessed by his people; and thus the
> language of Nephi began to be taught among all the people
> of the Lamanites. And they were a people friendly one with
> another. . . . [And] they taught them that they should keep
> their record, and that they might write one to another. And
> thus the Lamanites began to increase in riches, and began
> to trade one with another and wax great, and began to be a
> cunning and a wise people. (Mosiah 24:1–2, 4–7)

In this light, the emergence of literacy and stability among the
Lamanites in Mosiah 24:4 may be viewed as indicators—not
causes—of spiritual readiness. Their shift from nomadic conflict to
structured community life helped remove earlier barriers to cove-
nantal engagement.

Before going back to the early Lamanite condition, it is important
to clarify the potential misconception that nomadic life and covenantal
faith are inherently incompatible. Scriptural history offers counterex-
amples, such as Abraham, Moses, and Lehi—each of whom was
mobile during key covenantal phases. Yet each operated as a car-
rier of preexisting covenantal structures. Abraham departed from an
advanced urban culture in Ur; Moses bore prophetic authority and
transmitted law during Israel's wilderness years; and Lehi brought
sacred records and priesthood authority from Jerusalem. These were
not preliterate nor structureless peoples. What distinguishes these
covenantal nomads from the early Lamanites is not mobility itself,
but what was preserved and what was abandoned. Lehi's descen-
dants had access to written law, scriptural tradition, and prophetic
leadership. The Nephites embraced these institutions, while the early
Lamanites rejected them. Thus, it was not nomadism that precluded
covenantal life—rather, it was the absence of covenantal scaffolding.

Lamanite nomadism and resistance

From approximately 550 to 400 BC, the Lamanites' nomadic and
conquest-oriented lifestyle limited the emergence of covenantal insti-
tutions. Dwelling in tents, relying on hunting and gathering, and reject-
ing written records (Enos 1:20), they lacked the stability and resources
typically associated with temples, preserved scripture, or communal

worship. This was in contrast to the Nephites, who developed through settled labor in "wood and iron" and constructed both cities and temples (2 Nephi 5:15–17). The Lamanites' mobile, militarized existence did not easily support the agricultural base or social cohesion often required for sustained sacred life.

Beyond structural conditions, the sustained hostility of the Lamanites toward Nephite religious traditions — particularly record-keeping and literacy — posed further obstacles to covenantal alignment. This generational estrangement cut them off from foundations, such as prophetic continuity and access to divine law.

A useful comparison appears in the account of "the people of Zarahemla" (the Mulekites), who, lacking sacred records, had lost their language and knowledge of God, underscoring the importance of preserved written tradition in maintaining spiritual identity:

> Behold, he [Mosiah$_1$] being warned of the Lord that he should flee out of the land of Nephi. . . . and they were led by the power of his arm, through the wilderness until they came down into the land which is called the land of Zarahemla. And they discovered a people, who were called the people of Zarahemla . . . [who] were brought by the hand of the Lord across the great waters, into the land where Mosiah discovered them; and they had dwelt there from that time forth. . . . Nevertheless, . . . their language had become corrupted; and they had brought no records with them; and they denied the being of their Creator; and Mosiah, nor the people of Mosiah, could understand them. (Omni 1:12–14, 16–17)

By contrast, King Mosiah later taught that the Nephite records had been divinely preserved, "that we might read and understand of his mysteries, and have his commandments always before our eyes" (Mosiah 1:5). Meanwhile, without that textual infrastructure, the Lamanites (as with the Mulekites in Zarahemla) lacked the organizing memory that had helped shape Nephite religious life.

As mentioned above, Enos vividly describes the Lamanite condition during this period:

> Their hatred was fixed, and they were led by their evil nature . . . a blood-thirsty people, full of idolatry and filthiness; feeding upon beasts of prey; dwelling in tents . . . and their skill was in the bow, and in the cimeter, and the ax. (Enos 1:20)

This hunting-based economy limited the generation of resource

surplus, which in covenant theology supports sabbath obser-
vance, temple construction, and community care (Alma 50:23). The
Lamanites' religious worldview, centered on idolatry and tribal war-
fare, also diverged significantly from Nephite covenantal frameworks.
As John Sorenson observes, "Institutions we take for granted, like
bureaucracy . . . codified laws, [and] courts . . . did not exist as such.
. . . Limitations of technology prevented the production of enough sur-
plus goods to support a large apparatus of specialists."[3] In this con-
text, the Lamanite sociocultural model offered few supports for formal
religious life.

Closely tied to this economic precarity was the absence of urban
development. In contrast to Nephite efforts to build temples, syna-
gogues, and cities (2 Nephi 5:15–17), the Lamanites appear largely
dispersed and militarized. Jarom observes that "they were exceed-
ingly more numerous than were they of the Nephites; and they loved
murder and would drink the blood of beasts" (Jarom 1:6). This descrip-
tion seems to reflect both cultural hostility and social fragmentation.

A separate but related question concerns the consistent portrayal
of Lamanites as more numerous than the Nephites (for example,
see Jarom 1:6; Mosiah 9:1). Population growth on this scale might
seem at odds with a subsistence-based society, but scholars widely
acknowledge that both Lamanite and Nephite lineages likely incorpo-
rated indigenous peoples upon arriving in the promised land.[4] These
assimilated groups may have practiced mixed subsistence strategies,
combining agriculture with foraging, and exhibited regional variation in
resource availability. The textual emphasis in Enos and Jarom reflects
a specific cultural subset — one defined by mobility, violent con-
quest, and resistance to Nephite institutions. This study focuses not

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3. John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt
   Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 100–1.
4. Scripture Central Staff, "Did Others Influence Book of Mormon Peoples?"
   KnoWhy 138, 21 August 2019, scripturecentral.org/knowhy/did-others
   -influence-book-of-mormon-peoples. Additionally, it is worth noting that
   Jacob clarified what determined whether a person was considered Nephite or
   Lamanite. When less than a full generation had passed from the separation of
   the two groups, and familial lineage was no longer the determining character-
   istic, Jacob wrote, "I shall call them Lamanites that seek to destroy the people
   of Nephi, and those who are friendly to Nephi I shall call Nephites" (Jacob 1:14).
   This opens the door to any group that was opposed to the Nephites as being
   delineated as Lamanite.

on numbers, but on the conditions that enable covenantal receptivity: surplus, governance, and shared sacred memory.

Lamanite governance appears to be decentralized at this time, likely consisting of kin-based settlements held together by shifting alliances and tribute systems, rather than stable institutions. Sorenson, interpreting these patterns within a Mesoamerican context, suggests that the Lamanites during this period may have resembled pre-archaic societies. By this, he means cultures that existed before the development of cities, formal governments, or written records.[5] Such societies depended on oral tradition and subsistence hunting, rather than structured agriculture or civic institutions.[6]

Archaeological context: religion and pre-archaic societies

Archaeological studies consistently show that organized religion often develops in tandem with key structural shifts, notably food surplus, settled living, and social hierarchy. Pre-archaic societies — defined as small, mobile groups without permanent settlements or writing systems — typically practiced animism or ancestor veneration in informal, kin-based settings, according to anthropological models. The early mobile lifestyle of the Lamanites, as described in Enos and Jarom, reflects similar features: small-scale subsistence, kin-based governance, and cultural resistance to Nephite religious institutions.

We propose that the interpretive concept of "temples follow granaries" is a general pattern. Thus, agricultural surplus and social organization frequently enable the emergence of civic and sacred institutions.[7] In other words, religion that expands beyond household or clan

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5. Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 100.
6. This study does not depend on a fixed geographic or historical placement of the lands of the Book of Mormon. While it draws upon Mesoamerican anthropological categories—such as surplus, kin-based governance, and literacy— these are used typologically to illuminate the text's internal theological structure, not to make historical or archaeological claims. The analysis treats the Book of Mormon as a coherent work, in narrative and theology, with depictions of societal transformation that remains meaningful, independent of any historical geography.
7. The phrase *temples follow granaries* is not a historical claim, but a literary and theological lens derived from both scripture and anthropology. It reflects a pattern seen in scripture, in which surplus and social organization often precede communal worship (Leviticus 25; Alma 50:18–23), and it highlights how the Book of Mormon links material preparation with spiritual readiness. Again, this framework is intended to illuminate narrative meaning—not to reconstruct ancient history or geography.

settings often relies on broader institutional support. This model does not prescribe how covenants can form, but helps illuminate why certain religious patterns — like temple worship or scriptural tradition — appear when and where they do.[8]

This pattern holds in Mesoamerican prehistory as well. Early Olmec and Zapotec archaeological sites demonstrate that formal religious architecture and iconography emerge after the establishment of agricultural villages and centralized governance.[9] These findings suggest that religious expression in public space tends to follow, rather than precede, communal stability.

In this light, the early Lamanite resistance to sacred structures was not solely a spiritual rejection of Nephi and his people; it also came about by social and material context. Only with the emergence of more stable settlements (Mosiah 9:8) and the introduction of written tradition (as cited previously in Mosiah's account of Amulon's reforms), could the conditions needed for covenantal engagement begin to take form.

Zeniff and the witness of structural instability

Zeniff's firsthand account offers the most detailed description of Lamanite society before its transformation. Lehi-Nephi, the city he sought, had served as the Nephite capital and a center of temple worship and record-keeping. Around 200 BC, Mosiah I, following divine instruction, led the righteous Nephites from "the land of Nephi" to Zarahemla (Omni 1:12–13), leaving everything behind rather than resisting rising tensions. The Lamanites subsequently occupied the territory, but did not rebuild nor sustain it (Mosiah 9:6–8). When Zeniff returned, the Lamanite king, whom Zeniff describes as practicing "cunning and craftiness" (Mosiah 9:10), ceded the lands of Lehi-Nephi and Shilom, revealing a lack of stewardship or sacred attachment to the city. Zeniff found Lehi-Nephi in collapse: "We began to build buildings, and to repair the walls of the city, yea, even the walls of the city of Lehi-Nephi, and the city of Shilom" (Mosiah 9:8). Broken walls and absent

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8. Jacques Cauvin argues that the Neolithic shift to agriculture and sedentism enabled symbolic and religious developments, with surplus and social complexity fostering cultic structures. Jacques Cauvin, *The Birth of the Gods and the Origins of Agriculture,* trans. Trevor Watkins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 22–28.

9. Richard A. Diehl, *The Olmecs: America's First Civilization* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2004), 29.

infrastructure indicate not mere neglect, but the erosion of urban continuity. This reflects a period of institutional unpreparedness that, in time, would be reshaped through divine and historical processes.

In addition to infrastructural decay, Zeniff records a revealing economic dynamic about the Lamanites: "Now they were a lazy and an idolatrous people; therefore they were desirous to bring us 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 king's intent was not collaborative but exploitative, permitting Nephite cultivation in order to later seize its fruits. A few generations later, another Lamanite king achieved this goal when he subjected Limhi's people and caused "that his people should pay tribute unto him, even one half of all they possessed" (Mosiah 19:26). In covenant theology, stewardship entails accountable labor before God and mutual responsibility within a consecrated community (Genesis 2:15; Mosiah 2:12–18). The Lamanite model at this point exhibits neither stewardship nor reciprocity. It highlights a deeper spiritual unreadiness for sacred community; not only as a moral failing, but also as a condition awaiting divine cultivation through both reform and grace.

Lehi taught that the promised land is "consecrated unto him whom [the Lord] shall bring . . . if it so be that they shall serve him according to the commandments which he hath given" (2 Nephi 1:7). He also warned that disobedience would lead to their loss of the land and eventual removal (2 Nephi 1:9–11). The Lord had earlier affirmed this principle to the brother of Jared, declaring that this "choice land" would be preserved only for those who "serve the God of the land, who is Jesus Christ" (Ether 2:12). In both teachings, land is not merely a geographic possession; it is a sacred trust, sustained by righteousness and by the community structures that uphold divine law.

The same narrative reveals the fragility of Lamanite governance. The king's authority, marked by cunning, appears fragile and transactional. Lamanite attacks stem from sudden raids, not official decrees. "Therefore it came to pass that king Laman began to stir up his people that they should contend with my people; therefore there began to be wars and contentions in the land" (Mosiah 9:13). The king's influence relied on emotional manipulation, not structured administration. Unlike the Nephite model — where kingship was tied to law, records, and temple worship — Lamanite leadership was reactive, coercive, and lacking transparency. Brant Gardner notes that such patterns reflect

"segmentary tribalism," in which power is distributed through kin networks and short-term alliances, not centralized statecraft.[10]

Ultimately, Zeniff's account gives credence to what earlier depictions only implied: that Lamanite society during this era lacked the necessary scaffolding for sustainable religious life. Anthropologically, their world aligns with previously described non-centralized societies. It was made up of small, kin-based communities without cities, written records, or stable governance. Spiritually, they had no temples, no priesthood, no system of sacred labor, and no scriptural memory. This does not imply that the Lamanites were outside God's concern, but rather that their preparation, both spiritual and institutional, had not yet reached the level required for lasting covenant belonging. This was not merely a material limitation: It represented a broader departure from the sacred order exemplified by Nephite society. The land may have been inhabited, but it was not yet sanctified in covenantal terms. Without the rhythms of surplus, communal worship, and written law, covenant identity could not take root. What they lacked was not just belief, but the integrated structures — social, spiritual, and sacramental — that sustain consecrated life. In time, these would emerge among the Lamanites, allowing the covenant to flourish.

Societal Stability and the Covenant Threshold

The century following Zeniff's account witnessed a gradual but profound transformation in Lamanite society. Through migration, conflict, and intermittent Nephite influence, what had once been a fragmented, subsistence-level culture began to coalesce into something more stable, literate, and urbanized. This trajectory unfolded over time, but was significantly accelerated under the influence of Amulon. His secular reforms in language instruction, record-keeping, and administrative structure quickened existing shifts and brought Lamanite society to a pivotal juncture (Mosiah 24:4–7). It is in this context that the Lamanites approached what this study terms a *covenant threshold* — the societal tipping point at which covenantal religion becomes sustainable by means of surplus, literacy, governance, and social cohesion. While not a standard term in Book of Mormon scholarship, *covenant threshold* draws conceptually from Spencer's theology of covenantal hope and

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10. Brant A. Gardner, *Traditions of the Fathers: The Book of Mormon as History* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2015), 273–80.

Brant A. Gardner's analysis of sociopolitical development in Nephite and Lamanite contexts.[11]

Crossing a covenant threshold requires more than personal conviction. It depends on the emergence of societal structures that can carry covenantal identity across generations. It requires surplus to support worship, literacy to preserve doctrine, governance to administer justice, and social cohesion to sustain moral community. Spiritual awakenings can happen anywhere, but covenant belonging as a people requires more than belief. It requires a foundation. Between roughly 150 and 120 BC, the Lamanites crossed that threshold (Mosiah 24:1–); Alma 18–19, 23:1–3, 24:17–18). Through contact with Nephite systems, they adopted written law, administrative order, and stewardship of land and labor. These were not cosmetic borrowings, but deep structural changes. For the first time in their recorded history, they were capable of receiving and preserving the covenant, not as scattered individuals but as a prepared people. The mass conversions that followed were not spontaneous miracles. They were the harvest of deliberate preparation, both divine and societal.

Nephite reforms brought by Amulon to the Lamanites

Into this landscape of emerging stability entered Amulon, a Nephite dissenter whose influence was as paradoxical as it was pivotal. As previously noted, Amulon rose to power among the Lamanites through political alliance (Mosiah 23:31–39). He was granted authority not only to rule but also to restructure: "And he appointed teachers of the brethren of Amulon in every land which was possessed by his people; and thus the language of Nephi began to be taught among all the people of the Lamanites" (Mosiah 24:4). This "language of Nephi" refers not only to spoken dialect but to the Nephite system of writing, record-keeping, and legal instruction (Mosiah 24:4–7). For a people who had once rejected Nephite records and language (Enos 1:14–20), its formal introduction represented a profound cultural and religious shift. Marked by exploitation, forced labor, and religious suppression, the regime of Amulon was harsh, but his reforms directly addressed the societal deficiencies seen in Zeniff's generation. Three of the most significant reforms are identified below.

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11. This framing draws conceptually from Joseph M. Spencer's theology of covenantal hope (*For Zion*, 147) and Brant A. Gardner's analysis of sociopolitical development in Nephite and Lamanite contexts (*Traditions of the Fathers*).

Amulon's first reform

The new administration reintroduced formal instruction and record-keeping, thus reversing generations of cultural rejection. Enos had described the Lamanites' desire to destroy Nephite records (Enos 1:14), yet under Amulon's influence, they were taught to read and write in the Nephite tongue. While coercively implemented, this initiative laid a foundation for theological dialogue and covenantal instruction, as later reflected in Lamoni's ability to comprehend Ammon's teachings on the Creation, Fall, and Redemption (Alma 18:36–39). In this case, education did not immediately result in spiritual transformation, but it enabled the interpretive capacity necessary for it. By fostering written communication and systematic learning, Amulon's policies inadvertently contributed to the social and religious stability that would support covenant life in following generations.

While widespread literacy was rare in ancient societies, and the Book of Mormon likely reflects an elite scribal tradition consistent with broader historical patterns, Amulon's introduction of Nephite-language instruction nonetheless marked a significant structural shift. Even limited written education, especially when standardized, can extend theological vocabulary, enable memory preservation, and foster institutional stability. As Gardner explains, such elite literacy "serves as a keystone for social organization and religious continuity in oral-dominant cultures."[12] This framework helps explain why Amulon's reforms, though coercive, laid groundwork for later religious engagement.

Amulon's second reform

Amulon implemented economic coordination and labor specialization. Although his methods were oppressive, they moved Lamanite society beyond subsistence hunting toward organized agriculture and infrastructure. Zeniff's earlier account underscores the contrast: "we began to build buildings, and to repair the walls" (Mosiah 9:8), implying prior neglect of land and settlement. Amulon's administration mobilized human capital on a broader scale, reversing this indifference and

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12. For background on oral-literate dynamics in the Book of Mormon, see Brant A. Gardner, "Literacy and Orality in the Book of Mormon," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 9 (2014): 29–85, interpreterfoundation.org /journal/literacy-and-orality-in-the-book-of-mormon/. See also William G. Eggington "'Our Weakness in Writing:' Oral and Literate Culture in the Book of Mormon," *FARMS Reprint* (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1992).

establishing patterns of productivity. While Mosiah 24 emphasizes the suffering of Alma's people, it also reflects a larger shift toward structured economic development within Lamanite society. That development was likely necessary to sustain widespread exploitation. What began as coerced labor ultimately became a framework that could support religious transformation.

This is not the only example in the Book of Mormon where a political or economic system outlived its originator and enabled covenantal progress. Shortly after Amulon's reforms, King Mosiah II instituted a major shift in Nephite governance, dissolving the monarchy in favor of a system of judges (Mosiah 29). That system would endure for over a century. Both reforms — one born of oppression, the other of prophetic foresight — created space for broader individual involvement and long-term covenantal stability. Structure, even when introduced under duress, can become fertile ground for spiritual readiness.

Amulon's third reform

Amulon contributed to political centralization in two ways. First, Amulon "did gain favor in the eyes of the king of the Lamanites," leading the king to grant unto Amulon and his brethren "that they should be appointed teachers over his people" (Mosiah 24:1). Also, the king "appointed teachers of the brethren of Amulon in every land which was possessed by his people" (v. 4). Second, Amulon contributed to political centralization by forging administrative hierarchies. In this sense, his influence addressed the earlier political disarray of the Lamanites and facilitated the emergence of urban governance and regional coordination among them.

Critics may argue that Amulon's legacy was spiritually barren or even counterproductive, given his persecution of Alma and his converts and suppression of religious freedom (Mosiah 24:9–11). That critique, while morally sound, risks overlooking the structural dimension of divine preparation. Amulon was no spiritual reformer, yet it is precisely this paradox that invites theological reflection. His policies, though unrighteous in intent, established frameworks which included literacy, governance, and economic coordination. All these factors would later enable genuine spiritual transformation.

In this light, Amulon becomes a scriptural type of what Paul calls a "vessel unto dishonour" (Romans 9:21); an instrument used in divine preparation, despite moral failure. This study does not argue that civilization equals righteousness. Rather, it affirms that God can, and often

does, use unrighteous systems to prepare the way for sacred outcomes. The covenantal conversions that ultimately flourished among the Lamanites were not the fruit of Amulon's regime. They were God's redemption of the scaffolding that Amulon inadvertently left behind.

Covenant readiness during the mission of the sons of Mosiah

By the time that Ammon and his brothers undertook their mission among the Lamanites (circa 90 BC), the society they encountered had been quietly but profoundly reshaped from the era of Zeniff. Though spiritual resistance and political volatility remained, the foundational supports necessary for sustained sacred life, including literacy, governance, surplus, and social cohesion, had now emerged. As a result, their ministry bore unprecedented fruit: mass conversions, royal decrees, and coordinated religious reformation. These episodes mark the moment when large Lamanite communities crossed what this study terms a *covenant threshold* — a point of convergence between divine initiative and societal readiness.

In the land of Ishmael, King Lamoni illustrates a pivotal shift in Lamanite leadership ideology. When Ammon defended the royal flocks, Lamoni interpreted the act not merely through tribal or dynastic frameworks, but as a sign of divine power and profound allegiance: "Surely, this is more than a man" (Alma 18:2). His recognition reveals a leader prepared not only for political discernment but also for spiritual transformation. By elevating Ammon, Lamoni rejected conquest-based prestige in favor of service, hospitality, and revelatory openness (Alma 17:14).

Lamoni's capacity to engage deeply with Ammon's theological teaching — covering the Creation, the Fall, and the redemptive mission of Jesus Christ (Alma 18:36–39) — may suggest more than spiritual curiosity; it potentially implies a readiness shaped by prior exposure. Such exposure likely contributed to the conditions necessary for communal religious transformation as seen in Lamoni's conversion and the mass response it inspired (Alma 19:31–36). Yet structural readiness alone was insufficient. The catalyst was divine intervention, met by the prophetic voice of Ammon's humility, along with a king ready to learn and repent. Lamoni's willingness to listen, to ask sincere questions, and ultimately to believe in a God he had not known (Alma 18:24–40) illustrates the spiritual openness required for covenant transformation. It was this convergence of divine power, prophetic teaching, and

genuine receptivity that ignited lasting change. Preparation may cultivate the soil; but only grace and human willingness bear the fruit.

The structural change becomes even more apparent in the actions of Lamoni's father, the high king. After his conversion under Aaron's preaching, he issued a proclamation of religious freedom across seven Lamanite territories: "he sent a proclamation . . . that the word of God might have no obstruction" (Alma 23:1, 3). This decree signaled a new stage of societal maturity in which sacred identity could be publicly supported, preserved, and shared. It required centralized governance, some degree of scribal infrastructure, and bureaucratic tools for communication. These were capacities that earlier generations, as described by Zeniff and Enos, had not yet developed.

As Spencer observes, covenantal hope emerges not only from divine promises, but also from the social conditions that allow it to be practiced and remembered. He emphasizes that covenantal identity depends on more than individual belief. According to Spencer, it "sets out a kind of life—the common life—the Saints are to embrace, a kind of life that has unmistakably economic implications (especially for the rich and poor!), but one that means to produce the joy of the Saints more than merely the satisfaction of needs."[13] Such a life depends, in part, on shared systems of worship, mutual accountability, and social memory—none of which can thrive in total structural instability.

In this light, the high king's decree reflects more than personal conviction. It marks a society approaching the threshold of religious sustainability. It demonstrates that faith has found not only individual expression but also institutional support. Still, it was the preaching of Aaron, the humility of the king, and divine grace—not bureaucracy— that brought this transformation to fruition.

This maturation reaches a high point in the community of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies, whose decision to bury their weapons of war was a collective act of repentance and covenantal belonging: "they took their swords . . . and they did bury them up deep in the earth" (Alma 24:17). This public ritual required mass coordination and cross-tribal trust. It marked a turning point in covenant theology by operating on communal rather than merely individual terms. Their unified commitment to peace and their later willingness to relocate as refugees to Jershon (Alma 27:22–24) demonstrated the capacity to act as a cohesive

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13. Spencer, *For Zion*, 105.

covenantal body — one made possible by a literate and structurally prepared society capable of sustaining sacred life together.

Equally significant was the willingness of the Nephites to receive the Anti-Nephi-Lehies. The agreement was not merely charitable, but covenantal: "on condition that they will give us a portion of their substance to assist us that we may maintain our armies" (Alma 27:24). This reciprocal arrangement marked the formal integration of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies into Nephite covenant society. Like their new hosts, they would soon be tested — first through shared sacrifice, then through the collective trauma of warfare. The ensuing conflict was, in Mormon's words, "a tremendous battle; yea, even such an one as never had been known among all the people in the land from the time Lehi left Jerusalem" (Alma 28:2). Through this mutual alliance, a new covenantal people emerged — one capable of enduring not only external trials but generations of shared worship, spiritual resilience, and communal trust.

The missionary success of the sons of Mosiah is best understood through the dual lens of spiritual preparation and structural transformation. Their personal readiness, which was marked by fasting and prayer to receive the Spirit (Alma 17:9), underscores the fact that divine power remains the catalyst. In the theology of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, sacred space and spiritual flourishing are often co-constituted: worship depends on the conditions that allow it. As the Lord declared, "inasmuch as my people build a house unto me . . . and do not suffer any unclean thing to come into it, that it be not defiled, my glory shall rest upon it" (Doctrine and Covenants 97:15). This principle — that consecration requires readiness — echoes throughout scripture and finds rich illustration in this Lamanite transformation.

The extraordinary fruit of this mission was royal conversions, societal repentance, and enduring community identity. This fruit was not a contradiction of prior missionary failure among the Lamanites, but its resolution. What had once been impossible had become divinely opportune. Through slow and sometimes paradoxical preparation, including Amulon's introduction of Nephite language instruction, a society that had resisted covenantal worship became capable of embracing it. A sacred threshold had been crossed.

Counterarguments and Responses

The thesis of a covenant threshold reframes traditional readings of the Lamanite conversions by emphasizing the societal preconditions

necessary for covenantal engagement. In doing so, it challenges a range of interpretive assumptions—particularly those rooted in spiritual exceptionalism, individual agency, or a linear view of civilizational progress. The sections below address four possible critiques to this thesis and our response to each of them.

Divine power alone accounts for conversion

Argument: Some may contend that the transformative missionary success of the sons of Mosiah in Alma 17–26 can be wholly attributed to divine initiative and prophetic faith, rather than to any underlying societal readiness. Ammon and his brothers are described as having "waxed strong in the knowledge of the truth" through diligent scripture study, prayer, and fasting (Alma 17:2–3). The dramatic nature of the conversions, complete with trances and profound spiritual experiences, seems to affirm this view (Alma 18:42; 22:17–18).

Response: The scriptural record complicates such a reading. Earlier missionaries like Jacob and Enos preached with equal fervor and conviction, but saw little to no response from the Lamanites (Jacob 7:24; Enos 1:14–20). If divine power alone were sufficient, why the disparity between generations? The Spirit can descend at any moment, but this does not always take root. As the text affirms in the case of the converts of the sons of Mosiah, "the Lord did pour out his Spirit on all the face of the land to prepare the minds of the children of men, or to prepare their hearts to receive his word" (Alma 16:16). This spiritual preparation was not abstract; it emerged within concrete societal transformation—literacy, governance, surplus, and openness to dialogue.

The contrast between Enos's frustration and Ammon's success suggests that faith is not diminished by structural readiness, but magnified through it. Grace is always divine, but its fruitfulness often depends on the ground it falls upon. Covenant transformation does not bypass community conditions; it matures within them.

Lamanite readiness was not inevitable—it was catalyzed

Argument: Some may suggest that a Lamanite social development was inevitable in that, given time, all societies stabilize, adopt writing, and centralize governance.

Response: The assumption of inevitable civilizational progress is neither supported by scripture nor by anthropology. Many cultures

plateau, fragment, or regress, without sustained internal development or catalytic external forces. The Book of Mormon does not portray Lamanite transformation as automatic. It portrays it as intentional, editorially emphasized, and theologically charged.

Mormon's inclusion of episodes like Zeniff's reconstruction efforts (Mosiah 9:8–9), Lamoni's father's administrative decree (Alma 23:1–3), and most prominently, Amulon's literacy and labor reforms (Mosiah 24:4), are not incidental. They are narrative signals. Despite limited engraving space (as expressed in Words of Mormon 1:5; 3 Nephi 5:10), Mormon appears to preserve these secular developments in order to underscore divine orchestration through structural preparation. He is teaching that God works not only in hearts, but also in systems.

Amulon's paradoxical role, as an unrighteous figure whose oppressive policies catalyzed societal transformation, occupies the center of this arc. He is not one of many minor contributors, but rather the hinge between Zeniff's observation of chaos and Ammon's encounter with order.

In this light, Mormon is not merely chronicling historical episodes; he is shaping a theological arc. He foreshadows the Lamanites' redemptive destiny (Mormon 7:1–10) and teaches that covenant readiness requires more than individual belief — it also requires a society capable of sustaining that belief. Through a series of divinely preserved transformations, the covenant threshold was not reached passively–it was crossed decisively.

The Lamanite conversions that followed were not inevitable fruits of gradual maturation. They were the result of providential convergence–spiritual openness meeting structural capacity. Without such a convergence, covenantal change might occur, but it would remain miraculous rather than reproducible. With this convergence, a people can be transformed.

Emphasizing structure undermines individual agency

Argument: A third criticism might center on agency. If covenant readiness depends on social conditions, does that diminish personal choice or spiritual accountability?

Response: This study contends otherwise, affirming that individual agency is essential to all covenantal transformation, but also insists that agency is most fruitfully exercised within societies that enable individuals to encounter, understand, and act upon divine truth.

Structure does not override agency; it creates the space for its fullest expression.

This principle is embedded in the Savior's own teachings. In the parable of the sower (Matthew 13:3–8, 18–23; Mark 4:3–8, 14–20), Christ identifies the seed as the word of God. The seed is constant across every field. What varies is the capacity of the ground to receive, nurture, and sustain that seed. Some ground is stony, some is choked with thorns, some lies by the wayside, and some is good — described as those who "hear the word, and receive it, and bring forth fruit" (Mark 4:20). This parable affirms human choice, because the hearer must respond, but it also acknowledges that conditions affect how freely and fruitfully that choice can be made.

This parabolic metaphor directly illuminates the Lamanite transformation. Early in the Book of Mormon, Lamanite society resembles stony ground or the wayside: mobile, reactive, violent, and without scriptural memory. The seed was present but could not take root. Over time, through the unintended legacy of Amulon and the emergence of stability, literacy, and surplus, the soil changed. By the time the sons of Mosiah arrived, many Lamanite communities had become fertile ground. The seed remained the same, but when sown, it bore fruit "an hundredfold" (Matthew 13:23; see also Alma 19:35).

Spencer affirms this principle, arguing that covenantal hope must be practiced and sustained within the shared memory and mechanisms of a consecrated people. The kings Lamoni and Anti-Nephi-Lehi and their people chose to follow Christ, but they did so within a social framework that supported instruction, preserved memory, and made public acts of faith logistically and politically viable. Agency remained intact, with the difference that now conditions allowed agency to flourish.

Spiritual readiness is independent of social conditions

Argument: A related theological objection might hold that spiritual readiness is solely an inward disposition, unrelated to economic or civic life.

Response: Scripture consistently portrays spiritual growth as both inward and communal. True worship depends on rhythm, sacred space, and shared resources. As discussed earlier in the Covenant Readiness section, divine presence is tied to communal sanctification: "inasmuch as my people build a house unto me . . . and do not suffer any unclean thing to come into it, that it be not defiled, my glory shall

rest upon it" (Doctrine and Covenants 97:15; see also verses 16–17). Without order, rhythm, and shared commitment, sacred space cannot flourish.

While ancient Israelite covenant theology—especially in its pre-exilic desert context—relied heavily on kinship and oral tradition, the Book of Mormon presents a covenantal culture extended and intensified through literacy. As Noel Reynolds notes, Nephite civilization preserved kinship-based covenantal ideas while adapting them into a Christ-centered, literate framework that supported new forms of sacred memory and public discipleship.[14] On the other hand, the disorganization of early Lamanite society—fragmented, nomadic, and violent—undermined religious memory and made sustained covenant practice nearly impossible.

Covenant identity in the Book of Mormon emerges not solely from belief, but also from collective ritual and public belonging. The Nephites gathered at the temple to hear King Benjamin's sermon, renew their covenant with God, and become one people (Mosiah 2–5). This illustrates how spiritual transformation was anchored in shared sacred space and coordinated effort. Alma's specific instruction that those being baptized "mourn with those that mourn; yea, and comfort those that stand in need of comfort" (Mosiah 18:9) illustrates the importance of covenantal community care. Later, Mormon demonstrates that the leaders of Alma's group "did watch over their people, and did nourish them with things pertaining to righteousness" (Mosiah 23:18).

Perhaps the Lamanite converts offer the most striking example. The Anti-Nephi-Lehies unified as one people, burying their weapons in a coordinated, covenantal act of renunciation (Alma 24). They chose martyrdom over apostasy. This choice only makes sense within a society capable of mutual trust, sustained stability, and collective sacrifice. Their spiritual readiness was real, and it was enabled by years of structural change that made such readiness actionable.

That structural change, we propose, was not simply the result of slow evolution, but was catalyzed by Amulon's regime. His reforms, though unrighteous, introduced literacy, labor organization, and political centralization. The threshold moment is not distributed across a dozen figures or events; rather, it was Amulon's disruptive legacy that shifted Lamanite society from fragmentation to structure.

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14. See Noel B. Reynolds, "Covenant Language in Biblical Religions and the Book of Mormon," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 61, no. 2 (2022): 139–76, scholars archive.byu.edu/byusq/vol61/iss2/8.

Figures like Lamoni and the Anti-Nephi-Lehies did not create the threshold — they crossed it. The Book of Mormon thus affirms that spiritual transformation is not disconnected from society. It is often sustained, and sometimes even made possible, by structural conditions that enable public discipleship, preserve memory, and support covenant rhythms. In the Lamanite story, readiness was not inevitable; it was prepared. And Amulon, despite his intentions, was the catalyst.

Covenant readiness and cultural diversity

While this article explores multiple instances of covenant readiness as depicted in the Book of Mormon, we do not suggest that covenantal life must always emerge through literacy, economic surplus, or centralized governance. Throughout sacred history, covenant communities have flourished in oral, migratory, tribal, and kinship-based settings — often without formal institutions. While this paper focuses specifically on one model, our intent is not to provide this model as a spiritual "silver bullet" for creating a covenant community. Rather, we interpret how the Book of Mormon portrays the transformation of a people in a distinct historical and narrative context.

As Nephi declared, the Lord "speaketh unto men according to their language, unto their understanding" (2 Nephi 31:3). We affirm that God works through diverse societies and sacred traditions, meeting his children where they are and calling them into his covenant through many forms.

Structural Readiness, Modern Discipleship, and the Work of the Lord

The covenant threshold is not just an ancient pattern — it is a living one. Today, as in Book of Mormon times, the Lord prepares people and societies for covenantal belonging. The preparation includes spiritual invitations, prophetic warnings, and individual transformations. But it also includes external conditions: education, stability, memory, and trust. These are not replacements for grace, but scaffolding for discipleship. Alma taught: "the Lord doth grant unto all nations, of their own nation and tongue, to teach his word, yea, in wisdom, all that he seeth fit that they should have" (Alma 29:8). The Lord also works within their existing institutions, economies, and cultures to prepare them to receive the fulness of His covenant.

Amulon's reforms, however unrighteous, tilled the soil for divine

truth. His oppressive policies — imposing literacy, organizing labor, and centralizing governance — unwittingly created a framework wherein covenantal faith could flourish. The Book of Mormon's narrative signals this shift: Enos prayed for a people too disorganized to receive the word (Enos 1:13–14) and Zeniff noted their warlike chaos (Mosiah 9:2); yet by Ammon's arrival, the Lamanites possessed the societal tools to hear, retain, and act on divine teachings (Alma 23:1–3). This echoes the Savior's parable of the sower: the seed of the gospel is constant, but its yield depends on prepared soil (Matthew 13:3–9). Amulon, an unlikely instrument, helped make the ground fertile.

President Ezra Taft Benson's insight illuminates a version of this dynamic: "The Lord works from the inside out. The world works from the outside in. . . . Christ changes men, who then change their environment."[15] Through his post–World War II relief efforts of distributing aid and otherwise helping to rebuild Europe, President Benson's own life illustrates how God can work through external means to prepare receptive conditions. The Church's welfare system today also reflects this balance, fostering self-reliance while providing temporary aid to stabilize lives.[16] It could be said that Amulon's role fits this pattern: his structural changes, however coercive, aligned with God's providence to enable the Anti-Nephi-Lehies' covenantal rise. Christ transforms hearts and he also tills the soil of history, sometimes through figures like Amulon, enabling such hearts to bear lasting fruit.

This interaction between internal transformation and external preparation is not merely theological, it reflects a broader principle of communal life. In philosophy, this is known as *collective intentionality*. It consists of the shared beliefs, goals, and assumptions that allow groups to create social realities — nations, schools, religious communities, and so forth.[17] When individuals act together with mutual awareness and purpose, they generate the very structures that shape their

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15. Ezra Taft Benson, "Born of God," Ensign (November 1985), 6, catalog.church ofjesuschrist.org/assets/9787fb37-f69d-49b6-a2af-0fc322e2ff1a/0/9.

16. As of this writing, guidelines relating to the Church's welfare system are contained in "Providing for Temporal Needs and Building Self-Reliance," *General Handbook: Serving in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2025), chapter 22, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/general-handbook/22-providing-for -temporal-needs.

17. See David P. Schweikard and Hans Bernhard Schmid, "Collective Intentionality," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, plato.stanford.edu/entries/collective -intentionality/.

spiritual and civic lives. Covenant readiness, in this light, is not just a matter of personal desire, but also a function of collective will, made possible by shared trust, memory, and structure.

This pattern carries profound implications for how members of the Church approach missionary work, community development, and welfare. It means that preparing people to receive the gospel includes preparing the ground: cultivating education, economic stability, and relational trust. It means that social uplift is not just humanitarian, it is covenantal. And it means that we should recognize that God works in ways we do not always understand, sometimes even through individuals and systems not aligned with His commandments.

Summary and Conclusions

Mormon's editorial focus on Amulon is purposeful. It was under Amulon's oppressive hand that literacy was imposed, labor centralized, and order established. Though he acted with unrighteous dominion, his reforms catalyzed the transformation that later enabled spiritual renewal. The Lamanites' covenantal awakening was not spontaneous — it was the fruit of long-prepared ground. Record-keeping, political order, and stewardship, introduced through both righteous and unrighteous actors, tilled the soil for covenantal belonging. Their decision to bury weapons, once unthinkable in their fragmented and subsistence-bound past, testifies to a people who had crossed a covenant threshold.

This model can reframe how we read the Book of Mormon. Amulon is not a cautionary tale only — he is a theological hinge. His legacy, however unintended, reveals how divine providence sometimes operates through flawed agents to shape covenant outcomes. The gospel seed, ever constant, could not flourish among the early Lamanites because the ground was not yet ready. But by the time divinely inspired messengers arrived, the structures were in place for covenant life to take root and endure.

Practically, the covenant threshold model invites modern readers to consider how readiness can manifest today: through land stewardship, digital record-keeping, community trust, and intergenerational teaching. Just as ancient societies were prepared through otherwise mundane reforms for sacred outcomes, today's covenant people are shaped by both spiritual and structural forces.

This message is both cautionary and hopeful. Covenant identity is not merely inherited; it is cultivated and sustained. Societies and souls

become ready through patterns of labor, trust, and order. The idea of a covenant threshold invites scholars and Saints alike to discern divine fingerprints in unlikely places, including urban reform, educational access, and peaceable surplus.

The Book of Mormon reveals not only God's message, but also his method. He prepares soil before he sows. Amulon's shadow looms large, not because he bore light, but because his hand, unwittingly, cleared the way for it. God's purposes are not thwarted by oppression — they often unfold through it. And in almost every age, the Lord prepares his people through unlikely reformers, unfolding conditions, and merciful timing for covenant life with him.

John E. Cochran II *was born in Las Vegas, Nevada, and raised in Fort Collins, Colorado, and Roosevelt, Utah. He earned a BS in biochemistry from Utah State University and an MD from Ross University School of Medicine, completing his family medicine residency at Mercy Medical Center in Des Moines, Iowa. He currently practices family medicine in southern Arizona. He enjoys gardening, homesteading, board games, and swimming in the backyard pool — a requirement from his wife when they moved to the Arizona heat. Together, they are raising and homeschooling their four children. John served his mission in Houston, Texas, and is currently serving in his local bishopric.*

Joseph D. Cochran *was raised primarily in Fort Collins, Colorado, and Roosevelt, Utah, before graduating with a bachelor's degree in Secondary Education from Brigham Young University. After teaching Social Studies in a middle school for five years, Joe completed a doctorate degree at Utah State University in Curriculum and Instruction, with an emphasis in Teacher Education. He is currently an adjunct professor in the Ancient Scripture and the Church History and Doctrine departments at Brigham Young University. His research primarily focuses on helping gospel teachers understand and approach challenging scripture stories, along with the delineation of controversial issues in secondary schools. Joe served a full-time mission in Mexico City and, nearly twenty years later, still believes that eating tacos al pastor is akin to "tasting heaven."*

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