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## **Dynastic Dynamics II: Lamanite Governance and Politics**

**Noel Hudson**

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# Dynastic Dynamics II: Lamanite Governance and Politics

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Noel Hudson

**Abstract:** *The Book of Mormon preserves only fragmentary evidence concerning Lamanite internal politics. Most references to the Lamanites come through Nephite narrators, whose focus usually centers on the many wars, missionary activity, and Nephite affairs, rather than on Lamanite institutions. Even so, the narratives in the books of Mosiah, Alma, Helaman, and 3 Nephi contain enough incidental detail to permit a cautious reconstruction of important developments in Lamanite political history. This study proposes that from the time of Zeniff to the rise of the Gadianton order, Lamanite society underwent substantial military, administrative, and dynastic change. More significantly, many major developments in Lamanite political and military life seem to have been shaped by successive waves of Nephite dissenters, including the Amulonites, Amalekites, and Zoramites. In that sense, many of the conflicts commonly described as Nephite–Lamanite wars may be more precisely understood as struggles in which Lamanite populations were repeatedly drawn into contests rooted in Nephite factionalism. Although some parts of this reconstruction remain speculative, the cumulative evidence suggests a more dynamic and internally differentiated picture of Lamanite history than is often assumed.*

**T**he Lamanites first appear as a distinct people in the aftermath of the schism between Nephi and his brothers following the death of Lehi as recorded in 2 Nephi 5. Conflict erupted almost immediately. The separation of the family into two communities and the Nephites' preparations for defense are narrated together. Not long thereafter, the record reports bloodshed between them (2 Nephi 5:14, 34). From

this beginning, the Lamanites enter the Nephite record chiefly as rivals in a recurring state of hostility.

For the next several centuries, however, the Book of Mormon says little about Lamanite internal societal life. The surviving references are sparse, often polemical, and usually incidental to specifically Nephite concerns. Even so, the narratives in the middle of the Book of Mormon preserve enough detail to permit a cautious reconstruction of important developments in Lamanite political history.

This study is an extension of an earlier paper.<sup>1</sup> That paper provided evidence that the political turmoil and wars in the book of Alma are best understood not only as religious or moral conflicts, but also as struggles over dynastic legitimacy among competing Nephite, Mulekite, and possibly Jaredite bloodlines. It suggested that the merger of Nephites and Mulekites created a fragile political order that had been stabilized under kings with mixed lineage, but that the abolition of monarchy and the rise of the judges exposed deep tensions over who had the right to rule. With that understanding, Alma's abdication of his role as chief judge, the limited power of Nephihah and Pahoran, and the elevation of Captain Moroni were all deliberate efforts to manage a legitimacy crisis by redistributing authority and balancing rival constituencies. The earlier paper also used naming patterns and cultural affiliations to argue that bloodline and inherited political claims shaped dissent, rebellion, and military leadership throughout Nephite history, revealing the Book of Mormon as a sophisticated account of how faith, lineage, and political authority intertwine.

The present article focuses on the other side of the Nephite–Lamanite saga. It proposes that, from the time of Zeniff (Mosiah 9) to the rise of the Gadianton order (3 Nephi 2), Lamanite society appears to have undergone its own substantial military, administrative, and dynastic changes. Many of the major political and military developments that are visible in the record seem to have been shaped not only from Lamanite opportunism, but also by successive waves of Nephite dissenters. Amulonites, Amalekites, Zoramites, and later dissident leaders did not merely break away from Nephite society to join the Lamanites as members; they repeatedly rose to leadership roles

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1. Noel Hudson, "Dynastic Dynamics: Competing Bloodlines and Political Legitimacy in the Book of Mormon," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 69 (2026): 23–48, [interpreterfoundation.org/journal/dynastic-dynamics-competing-bloodlines-and-political-legitimacy-in-the-book-of-mormon](https://interpreterfoundation.org/journal/dynastic-dynamics-competing-bloodlines-and-political-legitimacy-in-the-book-of-mormon).

as organizers, advisers, military commanders, and rulers. In this sense, many conflicts commonly described as Nephite–Lamanite wars may be more precisely understood as struggles in which Lamanite populations were repeatedly drawn into highly costly contests. These contests began as domestic disputes within the Nephite polity and then expanded beyond their borders. The most surprising conclusion from this study is that, for generations, the native Lamanites lost control of their own political destiny as they were repeatedly manipulated by foreign outsiders, leading them into one costly war after another. These domestic uprisings occurred despite repeated attempts by Nephite leaders to limit the spread of dissident movements, as well as grass-roots movements by the Lamanites on multiple occasions to resist the most disastrous policies and regain some level of control of their own government.

Because the evidence is fragmentary, the discussion must proceed carefully. Some conclusions are explicit in the text, others are inferences; still others remain speculative reconstructions offered because they make coherent sense of otherwise disconnected details. The aim is not to press the evidence beyond what it can bear, but to show that the text supports a more dynamic view of Lamanite history than is often assumed.

### **Early Glimpses of Lamanite Society**

The earliest Book of Mormon references to Lamanite politics provide only narrow windows into Lamanite life. Jacob suggests that—in at least one respect—the Lamanites surpassed the Nephites morally, namely in their treatment of their wives and children (Jacob 3:5–7). Enos offers a harsher portrayal of the Lamanites, describing them as living in tents and wandering the wilderness hunting beasts of prey (Enos 1:20); with an additional description by Zeniff of their being wild, ferocious, bloodthirsty, and following false traditions (Mosiah 10:12). These descriptions in Enos and Mosiah note characteristics that were typical of many hunting and gathering groups worldwide. As far as one can tell from the already-cited record of Nephi—who mostly focused on the events of his own people—Laman and his followers quickly abandoned not only their religion, but also their way of life. Some Book of Mormon scholars have suggested that this change in culture was

due to the early integration of Lamanite society into already-present indigenous groups that lived a hunter-gatherer lifestyle.<sup>2</sup>

Not long after the great separation of Laman and Nephi, and immediately following the death of their father Lehi, Nephi writes that:

The word of the Lord was fulfilled which he spake unto me, saying that: Inasmuch as they will not hearken unto thy words they shall be cut off from the presence of the Lord. And behold, they were cut off from his presence. . . . And because of their cursing [spiritual separation] which was upon them they did become an idle people, full of mischief and subtlety, and did seek in the wilderness for beasts of prey. (2 Nephi 5:20, 24)

The speed with which this happened also supports the idea that they may have melded with local indigenous people, even becoming their leaders. John Sorenson theorizes as much when he writes that “the immigrant Lamanites incorporated under their rule native peoples already living in the region.”<sup>3</sup> Sorenson goes on to add that “The Book of Mormon is a record by an elite group who dominated a folk population of undisclosed characteristics whom they found resident on the land.”<sup>4</sup> The Lamanites would have already known how to hunt and forage opportunistically for food, because that is what they did for several years as they traveled down the Arabian peninsula from Jerusalem, but the knowledge of local flora and fauna in the promised land possessed by native inhabitants would have been invaluable as they sought to exploit local resources in the early years of colonization.

While the views of Enos of the Lamanites wandering the wilderness and subsisting primarily on a meat-based diet may have been accurate in the early years of the colony, such a lifestyle would likely not have been sustainable in the long term for the population density numbers achieved by the Lamanite polity. Researchers have shown that hunter-gatherer societies with a large fraction of their diet based on meat sources maintain population densities an equal order of magnitude or lower than those which exploit primarily plant sources.<sup>5</sup>

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2. Michael R. Ash, “Who Are the Lamanites,” Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research (FAIR), [fairlatterdaysaints.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/ash-Who\\_Are\\_the\\_Lamanites.pdf](http://fairlatterdaysaints.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/ash-Who_Are_the_Lamanites.pdf).

3. John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 86.

4. Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 89.

5. Dan Zhu et al., “Global Hunter-Gatherer Population Densities Constrained by

This difficulty is noted particularly hundreds of years later in the case of the Gadianton Robbers who could not maintain their numbers by hunting (3 Nephi 4:2–3). Perhaps the most warlike of the Lamanites were members of a hunter-warrior caste that frequently engaged in the hunting of prestige prey. Enos specifically mentions their focus on beasts of prey, a food source anathema to the Nephites, who followed the law of Moses (Leviticus 11). However, in hunter-gatherer societies, the younger men most likely to pride themselves on their skills as warriors were also most likely to spend their time seeking prestige kills by hunting dangerous animals such as large predators.<sup>6</sup>

It seems to follow that the most dangerous of the Lamanites would have been the ones most likely to interact with the Nephites and drive their perceptions. However, the majority of the Lamanites seem more likely to have been primarily sedentary hunter-gatherers, relying on the abundance of plant resources for the bulk of their calories, as their high population density would indicate. The fact that groups such as king Laman and his people seem to have primarily remained in a single location, adjacent to Zeniff's settlement, reinforces this view. King Noah's tower mentioned in Mosiah 11:12 apparently allowed the Nephites to monitor any significant movement among the Lamanites that might presage an attack (Mosiah 19:6, 20:8). While the classic view of hunter-gatherer societies might lead one to expect that mobility and seasonal migration were a key aspect of their lifestyle, this view has been tainted by the fact that hunter and gatherer societies in the modern world, such as the Inuit, have been pushed to marginal habitats.<sup>7</sup> Foraging societies with access to fertile lands frequently limited their movement and remained as sedentary hunter-gatherer societies, especially if they had access to coastal or lakeside fisheries.<sup>8</sup>

If the Lamanites had settled fertile lowland coastal regions while

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Influence of Seasonality on Diet Composition," *Nature Ecology & Evolution* 5, no. 11 (2021): 1536–45, doi.org/10.1038/s41559-021-01548-3.

6. Karen D. Lupo and Dave N. Schmitt, "Reframing Prehistoric Human-Probo-scidean Interactions: On the use and Implications of Ethnohistoric Records for Understanding the Productivity of Hunting Megaherbivores," *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory* 31, no. 2 (2024): 390–98, doi.org/10.1007/s10816-023-09607-8.

7. J Colette Berbesque et al., "Hunter-gatherers have less famine than agriculturalists," *Biology Letters* 10, no. 1 (January 2014): 9, doi.org/10.1098/rsbl.2013.0853.

8. Amber L. Johnson, "Exploring Adaptive Variation among Hunter-Gatherers with Binford's Frames of Reference," *Journal of Archaeological Research* 22, no. 1 (2014): 20–23, doi.org/10.1007/s10814-013-9068-y.

the Nephites were driven into the highlands into narrow, fertile mountain valleys, as Sorenson suggests,<sup>9</sup> the Lamanites were likely to have remained as sedentary hunter-gatherers, especially if they were able to exploit the bounty from the adjacent seas. Historically, such communities could achieve comparable population densities as agrarian societies.<sup>10</sup> In the land of their first inheritance, the people of Lehi experienced great success in the planting and harvesting of their crop seeds transported from the Mediterranean world: “yea, we did put all our seeds into the earth, which we had brought from the land of Jerusalem. And it came to pass that they did grow exceedingly; wherefore, we were blessed in abundance” (1 Nephi 18:24). It is reasonable to suppose that the Lamanites who remained in that land continued to benefit from the abundance of the area, whether or not they continued to actively cultivate the agricultural crops from the Mediterranean. If native peoples in the area joined the more culturally sophisticated Lamanites and taught them established methods for subsistence on the land, they would have benefited from multiple resources that would have allowed for a surge in population.

Given Laman’s insistent ambition toward control, it seems likely that he would have seized the leadership role over any groups that integrated with the Lamanites, calling himself a king. Within a few generations, the scriptural text points out that the Lamanites “were scattered upon much of the face of the land” (Jarom 1:6). In addition to dispersal, Nephite authors consistently point out the Lamanites’ larger population; whether this was due to extraordinary fertility or having combined with indigenous peoples, they became “exceedingly more numerous than were they of the Nephites” (v. 6).

Those who favor a Mesoamerican setting for the Book of Mormon, such as Sorenson, tend to believe that the Nephites inhabited the fertile mountain valleys of the highlands. Brant Gardner writes that “the location of their city, [was] presumed to have been in the Guatemalan highlands.”<sup>11</sup> Nephi’s account of that first location records the process

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9. Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 25–26.

10. Patrick H. Kavanagh et al., “Hindcasting Global Population Densities Reveals Forces Enabling the Origin of Agriculture,” *Nature Human Behaviour* 2, no. 7 (2018): 478–84, doi.org/10.1038/s41562-018-0358-8.

11. Brant Gardner, “A Social History of the Early Nephites” (presentation, FAIR Conference, Provo Women’s Center, Provo, UT, August 2001), fairlatterday saints.org/conference\_home/2004-1999-fair-conferences/august-2001-fair-conference/a-social-history-of-the-early-nephites.

of centralization with a focus on the temple as the center of their agrarian society:

And the Lord was with us; and we did prosper exceedingly; for we did sow seed, and we did reap again in abundance. And we began to raise flocks, and herds, and animals of every kind. . . . And I did teach my people to build buildings, and to work in all manner of wood, and of iron. . . . And I, Nephi, did build a temple . . . and the manner of the construction was like unto the temple of Solomon; and the workmanship thereof was exceedingly fine. (2 Nephi 5:11, 16)

The continuation of their theocratic and agricultural society is recorded by Enos about 160 years after their initial landing, which was about 589 BC:

The people of Nephi did till the land, and raise all manner of grain, and of fruit, and flocks of herds, and flocks of all manner of cattle of every kind, and goats, and wild goats, and also many horses. And there were exceedingly many prophets among us. (Enos 1:21)

Had the Lamanites restricted themselves to merely hunting and gathering, times may have been peaceful. However, Jarom, the son of Enos, reports that the Nephites "multiplied exceedingly, and spread upon the face of the land, and became exceedingly rich in gold, and in silver, and in precious things, and in fine workmanship of wood" (Jarom 1:8). It appears that the opportunistic Lamanites could not resist seeking this bounty:

It came to pass that they came many times against us, the Nephites, to battle. But our kings and our leaders were mighty men in the faith of the Lord; and they taught the people the ways of the Lord; wherefore, we withstood the Lamanites and swept them away out of our lands, and began to fortify our cities, or whatsoever place of our inheritance. (Jarom 1:7)

None of this should have been a surprise to the Nephites. The Lord had told Nephi at the very beginning, back in Old World Jerusalem, that "if it so be that they [Laman, Lemuel, and their descendants] rebel against me, they shall be a scourge unto thy seed, to stir them up in the ways of remembrance" (1 Nephi 2:24).

It should be noted that these descriptions of Lamanite culture and practices were filtered through Nephite narrators and could potentially

contain cultural bias.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, the descriptions may have been designed for domestic consumption. For these reasons, the descriptions should be treated with caution. Still, they suggest a broad and highly significant contrast between Nephite sedentary, agricultural-based society and way of life, compared to the portion of the Lamanite populace that most frequently interacted with the Nephites.<sup>13</sup>

## Zeniff and the Expansion of Lamanite Power

The early chapters of the Book of Mormon offer little to no explicit evidence of Lamanite life, nor of centralized Lamanite political institutions or religiosity.<sup>14</sup> Rather, the early record emphasizes conflict. If kings, confederations, or dynastic structures existed, they remain largely invisible in the small plates of Nephi (1 Nephi through Omni). The first substantial narrative evidence for Lamanite political development appears in the account of Zeniff in the book of Mosiah, about 400 years after the landing of Lehi's party in the promised land.

Zeniff was a Nephite obsessed with returning to the land of Nephi after King Mosiah and his followers fled to the land of Zarahemla. The initial Nephite expedition to return to the land was of a military nature (Mosiah 9:1), but Zeniff became convinced that a peaceful approach would be preferable. Zeniff obtained permission from the king of the Lamanites to settle Lehi-Nephi and Shilom (Mosiah 9:6–8). Zeniff later interpreted this apparent concession as a calculated strategy, wherein the Lamanite king intended eventually to bring Zeniff's people into bondage (Mosiah 9:10).

The arrangement itself is revealing, telling us that there was a Lamanite ruler—a king. Moreover, the king was willing to tolerate a dependent Nephite enclave within his sphere of control, perhaps

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12. Richard O. Cowan, "The Lamanites—A More Accurate Image," in *The Book of Mormon: Helaman Through 3 Nephi 8, According to Thy Word*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1992), 251–64, [rsc.byu.edu/book-mormon-helaman-through-3-nephi-8-according-thy-word/lamanites-more-accurate-image](http://rsc.byu.edu/book-mormon-helaman-through-3-nephi-8-according-thy-word/lamanites-more-accurate-image).

13. Gordon C. Thomasson, "Lamanites," in *The Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 804, [scripturecentral.org/archive/articles/encyclopedia-entry/lamanites](http://scripturecentral.org/archive/articles/encyclopedia-entry/lamanites).

14. John L. Cochran II and Joseph M. Cochran, "From Wilderness to Covenant Threshold: Land, Literacy, and Religious Readiness in the Book of Mormon," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 67 (2025): 409–10, [interpreterfoundation.org/journal/from-wilderness-to-covenant-threshold-land-literacy-and-religious-readiness-in-the-book-of-mormon](http://interpreterfoundation.org/journal/from-wilderness-to-covenant-threshold-land-literacy-and-religious-readiness-in-the-book-of-mormon).

because the cities were underused (Mosiah 9:8), or maybe because tribute and later subjugation were anticipated from the outset, or perhaps for both reasons. In any case, the episode points to strategic calculation and long-term political intent.

Additionally, this situation indicates that the Lamanites encountered by Zeniff were apparently city-dwellers, a situation substantially different from the one Enos reported centuries earlier (Enos 1:20). However, the text suggests that while the Lamanites may have inhabited the cities they took from the Nephites after the flight of Mosiah, they did little, if anything, to maintain those cities (Mosiah 9:8). Zeniff isn't explicit regarding the city or place where he met the king of the Lamanites (Mosiah 9:5). Was it Lehi-Nephi or Shilom, the cities the Lamanites captured from the Nephites? No Lamanite cities, except those captured from the Nephites, are mentioned in the record up to this point. The Lamanites possess the land of Shemlon, adjacent to the city of Nephi (Mosiah 11:12), but there is no mention of a city there. The alacrity with which King Laman abandons the cities and cedes them to the Nephites may suggest that the Lamanites did not have a penchant for urban life. The decrepit state of the cities (Mosiah 9:8) may indicate that while the Lamanites lived there, they did not have an urban culture, preferring instead to maintain their forager lifestyle while still possibly taking advantage of the bounty of the neglected Nephite fields.

At first, relative to the Lamanites, Zeniff's colony appears militarily formidable, twice having decisively defeated Lamanite attacks (Mosiah 9:14–19; 10:10–20). In the first battle the Lamanites suffered more than ten times the number of men killed in comparison to the people of Zeniff. It was nothing short of a disastrous defeat. The narrative attributes these victories to divine aid, but from a historical standpoint, it also implies some practical Nephite advantage, including superior fortification, better discipline, more effective close combat, or some combination; the text does not specify. What it does suggest is that in Zeniff's early years, the Lamanites were not yet able to overwhelm even a relatively small but well-organized Nephite settlement. However, in the world of military rivalries, decisive advantages are rarely held by one side for long.<sup>15</sup>

By the time of Limhi, about fifty-five years after Zeniff first settled in the land, the balance of power had shifted dramatically. The Lamanites

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15. Benjamin A. Taylor, "Military Innovation in the Rise and Fall of Great Powers: Lessons for America" (PhD dissertation, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, CA, 2011), 6, [apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/ADA547844.pdf](https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/ADA547844.pdf).

imposed tribute and reduced Zeniff's descendants to subjection (Mosiah 19:15). Limhi's people could still resist occasionally, especially when driven by desperation or aided by tactical surprise, but they were no longer clearly superior in open conflict (Mosiah 20:8–11). Gideon's warning that continued war would likely end in destruction of this segment of the Nephites proved prescient (see Mosiah 20:17–26; 21:6–12).

Mosiah 20–21 also gives a theological explanation for this reversal for this segment of the Nephites, in terms of their wickedness, and that explanation should not be minimized. The narrative also strongly implies structural change among the Lamanites themselves, indicating that their forces had become more numerous, more coordinated, and better able to sustain pressure against settled opponents. Achieving a decisive shift in power implies the integration of military technologies, tactics, and strategies. In turn, that implies changes in economic, cultural, and other elements of society in a way that allows for social innovations to be reflected in military outcomes.<sup>16</sup> Thus, the improvements in Lamanite capabilities suggest a shift in broader underlying social factors.

The Nephite centralized governmental system in the land of Nephi included the king and his counsel of literate priests, who served as the head of the legal system (Mosiah 12:17) and likely as administrators. King Laman had the opportunity to observe and learn from this system, and his son Laman appears to have copied it a generation later after he incorporated the people of Amulon into his empire (Mosiah 23:35).

### **Tribute, Proximity, and the Growth of State Capacity**

The nearly eight decades of close contact between the Lamanites and the Zeniff colony likely contributed to the transformation of the Lamanite polity. As cited earlier, Nephite descriptions had emphasized Lamanite mobility and relative distance from Nephite agricultural life. After Zeniff, by contrast, the Lamanites and Nephites lived in sustained proximity. Through tribute and dominance, the Lamanites gained regular access to grain, flocks, wine, metal goods, and other products of Nephite labor (see Mosiah 7:22; 19:26; 21:3). The need to monitor the Zeniff colony and ensure the continual flow of tribute resulted in the stationing of guards living in constant contact with Limhi's people (Mosiah 19:28).

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16. Taylor, "Military Innovation," ix.

The issue of tribute is a key point because tribute supports institutions. A ruling elite able to extract agricultural surplus can maintain retainers, reward subordinates, support military mobilization, and govern more effectively over time.<sup>17</sup> Thus the subjugation of Zeniff's people may have marked not only a military success, but also a turning point in Lamanite political economy. At first, the extra goods extracted as tribute would have been an unexpected windfall, but in all likelihood, after some time the Lamanites would have become at least somewhat dependent on these agricultural benefits (see Mosiah 7:22; 19:26; 21:3).

A further stage in this development appears with Amulon, who was a former priest under King Noah. After Amulon and his followers entered Lamanite service, he was granted authority and exercised clear influence within the kingdom (see Mosiah 23:39, 24:1–4). The record explicitly states that Amulon caused Lamanites to be taught in his native Nephite language (Mosiah 24:4–7). Whatever one makes of the broader implications, this passage strongly suggests cultural and administrative assimilation from literate Nephite dissenters into Lamanite society.

It is interesting to note the Nephite author's disapproval of Amulon teaching the Nephite language to the Lamanites without including any theological content (Mosiah 24:5). This suggests that perhaps the Hebrew belief that speaking or writing words can actually perform creative acts may have also been held by the Nephites. Jeremie Matchie states that in Hebrew: "Words are not merely abstract sounds; they are seen as having substance and the power to shape events and define things. This is particularly evident in the concept of God's Word as the force behind creation."<sup>18</sup> Thus, the idea of separating the written word from its religious context may have been seen as sacrilegious.

Whatever the Nephite view of their written language being transmitted to the Lamanites for purely secular purposes, John L. and Joseph M. Cochran have demonstrated that the Amulonite presence may have contributed to increased literacy, more structured agriculture, and more centralized administration among the Lamanites.<sup>19</sup> Some parts of that reconstruction remain inferential, but the larger point is

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17. Gerald West, "Mode of Production: An Ancient Near Eastern Economic System: The Tributary Mode of Production and the Temple-State," *Old Testament Essays* 24, no. 2 (2011): 516–17, [scielo.org.za/pdf/ote/v24n2/11.pdf](http://scielo.org.za/pdf/ote/v24n2/11.pdf).

18. Jeremie Matchie, "Davar-Word," *Sermons by Logos*, [sermons.logos.com/sermons/1557215-davar-word](http://sermons.logos.com/sermons/1557215-davar-word).

19. Cochran and Cochran, "From Wilderness to Covenant Threshold," 401–24.

persuasive: the Book of Mormon itself depicts Amulon and his associates as a group capable of transmitting skills and helping shape institutions.<sup>20</sup> The Lamanite polity later visible in Alma is more developed than the one glimpsed in the small plates, and the Amulonite episode may help explain part of that change as well as the early failure of Enos as a missionary, and the later success of Ammon and his party.

### **Dynastic Change: From “Laman” to Ishmaelite Rule?**

One of the more intriguing questions raised by the text is whether a dynastic realignment occurred in the land of Nephi between the time of Zeniff (about 200 BC) and the mission of Ammon, Aaron, Omner, and Himni (about 91 BC). In Zeniff’s record, the Lamanite ruler is called Laman (Mosiah 10:6). This may simply be a personal name; but it is also possible, though not demonstrable, that “Laman” functioned as a dynastic or regnal name, much as “Nephi” did among the Nephites (Jacob 1:11). The fact that Laman’s son is also named Laman reinforces this possibility (Mosiah 24:3). If so, the recurrence of the name would suggest enduring prestige attached to the lineage of Laman.

However, by the time of the mission of the sons of Mosiah—recorded in Alma 17–22—the political structure appears different. Lamoni’s father is described as king “over all the land,” while Lamoni and others rule individual lands under him (see Alma 20:1–4, 8–9). Lamoni himself rules in the land of Ishmael, and the ruling house appears tied to that territory (Alma 17:21).

This does not prove that an older line of “Lamans” had been displaced, but it permits that possibility. At minimum, the text suggests that, by this point, Lamanite kingship had become more hierarchical, territorial, and centralized. A plausible reconstruction is that an older ruling tradition associated with the name *Laman* gave way to a new high-kingship, centered in Ishmaelite territory.

### **A possible crisis of legitimacy**

If some form of Lamanite dynastic leadership shift did occur—from the line of Laman to the line of Ishmael—what may have caused it? The text does not describe a Lamanite coup nor a succession struggle explicitly, but it does describe several developments that could have destabilized an older ruling house. The essential issue is whether or not the ruling dynasty was perceived by the people as retaining a

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20. Cochran and Cochran, “From Wilderness to Covenant Threshold,” 407.

legitimate claim to power. In the ancient world, it was quite common that whenever an internal coup toppled a dynasty, the new rulers justified their rise to power on the basis of their predecessor's loss of legitimacy.<sup>21</sup> Nephi was sensitive to the way in which he portrayed his ascension to the leadership of Lehi's group. In his rise to power, he employed many of the apologetics that were also used by Ancient Near Eastern kings.<sup>22</sup> There were a number of ways that a ruler could lose legitimacy in the eyes of the people, and at least three of these ways are relevant to the Lamanite situation.

The first way can result from military humiliation.<sup>23</sup> In the Nephites' conflict involving the Amlicites, the Lamanites allied themselves with these Nephite dissenters and twice suffered major defeats despite their numerical superiority (see Alma 2:24–35; 3:20–26). The king of the Lamanites fled the field, an act that may have severely damaged his royal prestige (Alma 2:32).<sup>24</sup>

The second is the arrival of foreign dissenter groups.<sup>25</sup> The remnants of the Amlicites seem to have joined the Lamanites after their defeat (Alma 2:35–36). As the sons of Mosiah began their missionary labors, groups such as the Amalekites and Amulonites (both groups comprised mainly of former Nephites) occupied important positions in Lamanite lands (Alma 21:2–4). These groups do not appear to have simply absorbed into the population. Rather, they retained identity, established settlements, and introduced alternative religious institutions.

The third is the possibility of the adoption of foreign customs by the sitting ruler, and the resulting social resentment against foreigners that

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21. A. T. Nuyen, "The Mandate of Heaven: Mencius and the Divine Command Theory of Political Legitimacy," *Philosophy East and West* 63, no. 2 (2013): 113–26, [jstor.org/stable/43285816](https://www.jstor.org/stable/43285816).

22. Noel Hudson, "Irregular Kings and Precious Things: Viewing Nephi and Joseph Smith through the Lens of Ancient Near Eastern Kingship," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 67 (2025): 229–66, [interpreterfoundation.org/journal/irregular-kings-and-precious-things-viewing-nephi-and-joseph-smith-through-the-lens-of-ancient-near-eastern-kingship](https://interpreterfoundation.org/journal/irregular-kings-and-precious-things-viewing-nephi-and-joseph-smith-through-the-lens-of-ancient-near-eastern-kingship).

23. Andrew Knapp, "Royal Apologetic in the Ancient Near East," *Society of Biblical Literature* (2015) :51, [doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt18z4h1f](https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt18z4h1f).

24. Knapp, "Royal Apologetic in the Ancient Near East," 53–54.

25. Jack Bennett, "Impending Collapse: Holy War and the Fall of Jerusalem in 1187," *Retrospect Journal* (2019): [retrospectjournal.com/2019/11/03/impending-collapse-holy-war-and-the-fall-of-jerusalem-in-1187/](https://retrospectjournal.com/2019/11/03/impending-collapse-holy-war-and-the-fall-of-jerusalem-in-1187/).

such a situation may cause.<sup>26</sup> In the case of the Lamanites, this cannot be established with certainty, of course, but it is historically plausible. A ruling family associated with military failure and favoritism toward influential immigrant elites could easily face a legitimacy crisis, doubly so if the ruler was seen to be adopting foreign ways and distancing himself from his own people and culture.<sup>27</sup> If so, a rival line in the Book of Mormon — perhaps associated with Ishmael (whose family joined Lehi's family in 1 Nephi 7) — might have risen up by presenting itself as the defender of native interests and order. This reconstruction remains tentative, but it offers a potentially coherent explanation for the altered political structure visible in the book of Alma.

### **Lamoni's father and the politics of foreign influence**

The narratives involving Ammon and Aaron (in Alma 17–23) reveal a Lamanite kingdom that is now politically layered and internally contested. Lamoni's father clearly exercises supremacy over subordinate, regional kings. As Ammon and King Lamoni were traveling to the land of Middoni to secure the release from prison of Ammon's brother and two others, they encounter Lamoni's father. It becomes clear that there were lesser, regional "kings" and an overall, possibly national, "king."

And he [Lamoni, apparently a regional "king"] said unto Ammon: Come, I will go with thee down to the land of Middoni, and there I will plead with the king [presumably another regional "king" of Middoni] that he will cast thy brethren out of prison. And it came to pass that as Ammon and Lamoni were journeying thither, they met the father of Lamoni, who was king over all the land [presumably the "national king" over the "regional kings"]. (Alma 20:7–8)

After a brief conflict wherein Ammon disarms Lamoni's father (the national king), Ammon requests of Lamoni's father that he will "grant that . . . Lamoni may retain his kingdom" (Alma 20:24), whereupon the national king grants Ammon's request that his "son Lamoni should retain his kingdom," adding, "behold, I will grant unto you that my son may retain his kingdom from this time and forever; and I will govern him

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26. Shana Zaia, "My Brother's Keeper: Assurbanipal versus Šamaš-šuma-ukīn," *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern History* 6, no. 1 (2019): 46–47, doi.org/10.1515/janeh-2018-2001.

27. Shana Zaia, "Going Native: Šamaš-Šuma-Ukīn, Assyrian King of Babylon," *Iraq* 81 (2019): 264, jstor.org/stable/26888063.

no more" (v. 26). This wording makes it clear that there were levels of kingship among the Lamanites, but the behavior of Lamoni and his father also suggests tension over religion, loyalty, and perhaps foreign influence.

When Lamoni's father encountered Lamoni in the company of Ammon, his reaction was immediate and severe (Alma 20:10–16). On one level, this is a father enraged at a son's disobedience.<sup>28</sup> Yet the context may suggest more. Lamoni had allied himself with a Nephite prince-turned-missionary, accepted a new religion, and was evidently moving to support its spread. In a kingdom already shaped by the presence of foreign Nephite dissenter groups, this may have appeared not merely as defiance but also as a politically dangerous act.

The missionary experiences of Aaron and his brethren point in the same direction. They could preach in some places, especially in Jerusalem (albeit unsuccessfully), where Amalekite synagogues were prominent, but they were imprisoned in others (Alma 21:4, 12–14). This uneven pattern suggests that religious policy was not uniform or truly centralized across the Lamanite kingdom. Some lands may have tolerated or protected foreign religious institutions, while others may have restricted them.

In that light, Lamoni's later declaration that his people were "free" and could worship according to their desires appears to be a genuine political act, not merely a conventional pious statement (Alma 21:21–22). It may imply that previous restrictions had been in place and it confirms that Lamoni, after his conversion, had secured a degree of autonomy in his own territory, reflected in the words of his father, "I will govern him no more" (Alma 20:26).

### **The Anti-Nephi-Lehi Crisis as a Struggle for the Kingdom's Future**

The conversion of Lamoni, Lamoni's father, and many other Lamanites appears to have destabilized the balance of power within the kingdom. The people later known as the Anti-Nephi-Lehies rejected violence and accepted the gospel preached by Nephite missionaries. Their opponents, however, included precisely those Nephite dissenter

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28. Val Larsen, "In His Footsteps: Ammon<sub>1</sub> and Ammon<sub>2</sub>," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 3 (2013): 106–7, [interpreterfoundation.org/journal/in-his-footsteps-ammon-and-ammon](http://interpreterfoundation.org/journal/in-his-footsteps-ammon-and-ammon).

groups that had long exercised influence inside Lamanite society and that bore particular animosity toward Nephite orthodoxy.<sup>29</sup>

Mormon identifies the main agitators as the Amalekites and Amulonites (Alma 24:28). This is an important detail, as it shows that the most determined resistance to the converted Lamanites came not simply from the Lamanites as a whole, but from a coalition of Nephite-derived groups with entrenched interests.

The massacre of many of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies, and the subsequent conversions that followed, weakened that coalition and accelerated wider political fracture (Alma 24:21–27). The issue was no longer merely religious—it was also political: would the future of the kingdom be shaped by a converted royal line and a pacified population or by dissenter elites committed to continued hostility and older structures of influence?

### **The destruction of the Amulonites and the persistence of Amalekite influence**

The aftermath of the killing of converted Lamanites proved especially costly for the Amulonites. After later campaigns and retaliatory violence, the Lamanites turned against the Amulonites and destroyed them (Alma 25:4–9). Mormon interprets this as the fulfillment of Abinadi's prophecy (Mosiah 17:16–19). While that is correct, it also had political implications, for if the Amulonites had served among the Lamanites as an important scribal or administrative class, their destruction could have destabilized governance.

The fate of the Amalekites is less clear. They remain prominent after the fall of the Amulonites and soon reappear as major instigators of further conflict (Alma 43:44). Whether the Amalekites were identical with the earlier Amlicites remains debated,<sup>30</sup> and because the evidence is inconclusive, the safest course is to note the possibility without insisting on it. The similar roles and behavior of the Amulonites and the Amalekites make the identification attractive, but the text does not require it.

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29. Scripture Central Staff, "Book of Mormon Evidence: Amalekites, Amlicites, and the Anti-Nephi-Lehies," Evidence 482, 19 February 2025, [scripturecentral.org/evidence/book-of-mormon-evidence-amalekites-amlicites-and-the-anti-nephi-lehies](https://scripturecentral.org/evidence/book-of-mormon-evidence-amalekites-amlicites-and-the-anti-nephi-lehies).

30. Benjamin McMurtry, "The Amlicites and Amalekites: Are They the Same People?," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 25 (2017): 269–81, [interpreterfoundation.org/journal/the-amlicites-and-amalekites-are-they-the-same-people](https://interpreterfoundation.org/journal/the-amlicites-and-amalekites-are-they-the-same-people).

What is clear is that Amalekite influence endured. In Alma 27:12, the Lord identifies the Amalekites among those who stirred up the Lamanites against the people of Ammon. After the destruction of the Amulonites, the Amalekites seem to have remained a major force in directing policy and mobilizing violence (Alma 43:6). Possibly their longer history of involvement with literacy among the Nephites made them the only choice for replacing the Amulonite bureaucratic class, after it was destroyed.

### **The turn to the Zoramites**

The failed attempt to destroy the converted Lamanites did not end dissenter influence within the Lamanite kingdom. Instead, the center of gravity shifted as the kingdom fractured and the Amalekites, Zoramites, and other dissenters, together with the unconverted Lamanites, reorganized the government (Alma 24:1–2). The attack on Jershon ended in Nephite victory (Alma 28:1–3), but the dissenter project continued with the Amulonites and Amalekites taking a greater role in driving the affairs of the kingdom.

By the time of Alma's mission to reclaim the apostate Zoramites, the Zoramites had begun moving away from their loyalty to the Nephite government (Alma 31:2) and apparently toward an alliance with the Lamanites (Alma 31:4). Mormon does not explicitly say that the Amalekites brokered this shift, but given the established pattern, it is plausible that existing dissenter networks inside Lamanite society helped facilitate it. Alma recognized the danger immediately. His mission to Antionum was not only pastoral but political: "Now the Nephites greatly feared that the Zoramites would enter into a correspondence with the Lamanites, and that it would be the means of great loss on the part of the Nephites" (Alma 31:4). Alma hoped that the preaching of the word might prevent formal alignment between the Zoramites and the Lamanites.

Although Alma converted some of the poorer Zoramites, the mission did not prevent the final break (Alma 35:9–11). The result was a new phase in Lamanite politics in which dissenter influence was no longer centered only in Amalekite and Amulonite enclaves, but increasingly in a broader coalition that included the Zoramites.

### **Zoramite and Amalekite leadership over Lamanite armies**

This development also becomes explicit in the war led by Zerahemnah against the Nephites only a few months later. Mormon states that the

chief captains of the Lamanites were “Zoramites and Amalekites” (Alma 43:6).

It came to pass that the Zoramites became Lamanites. . . . And now, as the Amalekites were of a more wicked and murderous disposition than the Lamanites were, in and of themselves, therefore, Zerahemnah appointed chief captains over the Lamanites, and they were *all* Amalekites and Zoramites. . . . Now in this case the Lamanites did fight exceedingly; yea, never had the Lamanites been known to fight with such exceedingly great strength and courage, no, not even from the beginning. And they were inspired by the Zoramites and the Amalekites, who were their chief captains and leaders, and by Zerahemnah, who was their chief captain. (Alma 43:4, 6, 43–44)

Few verses are more important for understanding the political dynamics of the period. The armies were Lamanite en masse, but their leadership was exclusively in the hands of Nephite-derived dissenters. Zerahemnah himself may also have been such an outsider. Because of his name, some have suggested Mulekite connections.<sup>31</sup> Whatever his precise origin, the larger pattern is clear: military direction rested heavily with elites whose political identity was shaped by prior conflict with the Nephite state. This particular campaign ended in the Lamanites being defeated, but the main significance lies in the renewed dominance of the Lamanite polity by Nephite dissenters (Alma 43–44). By this point, the Lamanite kingdom had become a principal vehicle through which Nephite dissenters repeatedly attempted to conquer the Nephites.

### **Amalickiah and the Capture of the Lamanite State**

Another clear expression of the pattern of dissenter exploitation by the Lamanites is found in the rise of Amalickiah. After failing to seize power among the Nephites in the wake of a Mulekite uprising,<sup>32</sup> Amalickiah fled to the Lamanites, where he rapidly became the dominant political

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31. McMurtry, “Amlicites and Amalekites,” 274.

32. Lyle H. Hamblin, “Proper Names and Political Claims: Semitic Echoes as Foundations for Claims to the Nephite Throne,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 60 (2024): 431, [interpreterfoundation.org/journal/proper-names-and-political-claims-semitic-echoes-as-foundations-for-claims-to-the-nephite-throne](https://interpreterfoundation.org/journal/proper-names-and-political-claims-semitic-echoes-as-foundations-for-claims-to-the-nephite-throne).

figure, immediately influencing the Lamanite king to instigate another war:

Amalickiah and those who had fled with him into the wilderness . . . went up in the land of Nephi among the Lamanites, and did stir up the Lamanites to anger against the people of Nephi, insomuch that the king of the Lamanites sent a proclamation throughout all his land, among all his people, that they should gather themselves together again to go to battle against the Nephites. (Alma 47:1)

Mormon's account is especially significant because it preserves evidence of Lamanite resistance to another dissenter-led war (Alma 47:2). When Amalickiah persuaded the Lamanite king to prepare for invasion, many Lamanites refused and fled to the Mount Antipas under Lehonti, rather than submit: "And it came to pass that when the proclamation had gone forth among them they were exceedingly afraid; yea, they feared to displease the king, and they also feared to go to battle against the Nephites lest they should lose their lives" (Alma 47:2). This indicates that large portions of the Lamanite population were not eager participants in the ambitions being pressed upon them.

Amalickiah overcame that resistance through a form of leadership that involved propaganda and deception. He first gained control of Lehonti's forces, arranged for the death of the king, and then overcame the opposition through indoctrination: "yea, he did appoint men to speak unto the Lamanites from their towers, against the Nephites. And thus, he did inspire their hearts against the Nephites," (Alma 48:1–2).<sup>33</sup> With these steps, he did not merely influence policy; he also seized the kingship over the Lamanites. Whatever earlier dissenter groups had accomplished, Amalickiah completed the process by capturing the Lamanite state.

The regime he created was deeply dependent on dissenter leadership. Under Amalickiah and later Ammoron, the Lamanite kingdom became the base from which repeated major wars were launched against the Nephites, often at moments of Nephite internal weakness (Alma 51:9–20).

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33. David L. Rockwood and J. Gordon Daines III, "Contrasting the Leadership Styles of Moroni and Amalickiah," *Religious Educator* 21, no. 2 (2020): 132–33, [rsc.byu.edu/vol-21-no-2-2020/contrasting-leadership-styles-moroni-amalickiah](https://rsc.byu.edu/vol-21-no-2-2020/contrasting-leadership-styles-moroni-amalickiah).

### **The limits of dissenter rule**

Yet, Amalickiahite rule also revealed its own limits. The campaigns against the Nephites were costly, and despite occasional gains, they repeatedly ended in severe losses. Amalickiah's chief captains, drawn from Zoramite circles, made rash oaths and suffered disastrous attrition (Alma 49:13, 23). As a result, Amalickiah ultimately had to take direct command and was killed by Teancum (Alma 51:34). His brother Ammoron succeeded him, but likewise was required to take personal control of the war effort. His presence on the battlefield rendered him susceptible to the same fate (Alma 62:36).

After the deaths of these rulers, the rapid deterioration of the war effort may suggest that the regime had depended on a narrow ruling circle. It is possible that Amalickiah had marginalized or eliminated rival power centers, though the text does not say so explicitly. It is interesting to note that the Amalekites disappear from the record after the ascension of Amalickiah. At a minimum, the narrative implies that military effectiveness under this regime was tied heavily to a few key leaders rather than to a broad and stable Lamanite command structure.

### **Tubaloth, Coriantumr, and the persistence of the pattern**

The same approach employed by the dissenters in the book of Alma appears to continue into the book of Helaman. In chapter 1, Ammoron's son, Tubaloth, is the Lamanite king (presumably the high king). He employed Coriantumr, a leader identified as a descendant of Zarahemla, as his war leader:

And they came down again that they might pitch battle against the Nephites. And they were led by a man whose name was Coriantumr; and he was a descendant of Zarahemla; and he was a dissenter from among the Nephites; and he was a large and a mighty man. Therefore, the king of the Lamanites, whose name was Tubaloth, who was the son of Ammoron, supposing that Coriantumr, being a mighty man, could stand against the Nephites, with his strength and also with his great wisdom, insomuch that by sending him forth he should gain power over the Nephites— Therefore he did stir them up to anger, and he did gather together his armies, and he did appoint Coriantumr to be their leader. (Helaman 1:15–17)

Once again, Lamanite manpower was directed by an elite figure

whose roots lay outside traditional Lamanite lineage. Coriantumr's campaign achieved striking early success, but it ended in reversal: "And thus had Coriantumr plunged the Lamanites into the midst of the Nephites, insomuch that they were in the power of the Nephites, and he himself was slain, and the Lamanites did yield themselves into the hands of the Nephites" (Helaman 1:32).

The broader significance lies in the persistence of the model: major Lamanite offensives continued to arise in the aftermath of Nephite factional crises and under the influence of outsider elites. This may be seen in the campaigns described in Helaman 4, where renewed Nephite dissent again led to Lamanite military success:

And it came to pass in the fifty and fourth year there were many dissensions in the church, and there was also a contention among the people, insomuch that there was much bloodshed. And the rebellious part were slain and driven out of the land, and they did go unto the king of the Lamanites. . . . And thus those dissenters of the Nephites, with the help of a numerous army of the Lamanites, had obtained all the possession of the Nephites which was in the land southward. (Helaman 4:1–2, 8)

The text does not identify every ruler involved, but the recurring pattern remains visible: Nephite dissenters co-opted Lamanite manpower to prosecute and achieve their political aims.

### **Lamanite Resistance and the Power of Conversion**

The record makes clear that the Lamanites were not merely passive instruments in these struggles. Their resistance appears at several points. For example, the flight to the Mount Antipas under Lehonti shows collective refusal to participate in another dissenter-driven war: "And it came to pass that they would not, or the more part of them would not, obey the commandments of the king" (Alma 47:2). Also, the destruction of the Amulonites reveals violent rejection of a dissenter faction by native Lamanite elements:

Now this martyrdom caused that many of their brethren should be stirred up to anger; and there began to be contention in the wilderness; and the Lamanites began to hunt the seed of Amulon and his brethren and began to slay them; and they fled into the east wilderness. (Alma 25:8)

Another significant matter is that conversion movements, involving martyrs who stood up for their beliefs at the cost of their lives, repeatedly weakened or overturned the structures of elite manipulation.<sup>34</sup> An example of this is seen in Helaman 5, wherein Nephi and Lehi first converted a combined group of Lamanites and Nephite dissenters (Helaman 5:35) and then many Lamanites. Their imprisonment and the miraculous conversion of their captors triggered a mass religious change:

And there were about three hundred souls who saw and heard these things; and they were bidden to go forth and marvel not, neither should they doubt. And it came to pass that they did go forth, and did minister unto the people, declaring throughout all the regions round about all the things which they had heard and seen, insomuch that the more part of the Lamanites were convinced of them, because of the greatness of the evidences which they had received. (Helaman 5:49–50)

The result was extraordinary: the Lamanites yielded up their lands to the Nephites (Helaman 5:52). This episode marks a political watershed. For generations, Nephite dissenters had repeatedly directed Lamanite populations into war. Here, by contrast, religious conversion broke the cycle and produced voluntary de-escalation. Whether the surrender of lands was driven by the court, local populations, or both, the event demonstrates that the cycle of violence could indeed be ended by the power of the word, just as Alma had envisioned during his mission to the Zoramites many decades earlier (Alma 31:4–5).

### **Later Realignments and the Gadianton Era**

The peace did not endure. Later chapters in Helaman and in 3 Nephi show renewed fragmentation, now involving the Gadianton Robbers. These developments are more difficult to reconstruct, due to the lack of details in the text, but they seem to preserve the same larger tendency: dissident elements crossing political boundaries and destabilizing both Nephite and Lamanite societies.

Helaman 11 notes that dissenters again joined with Lamanites in renewed conflict:

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34. Derek Squire, "The Literary Structure of Alma 23–27," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 64 (2025): 13, [interpreterfoundation.org/journal/the-literary-structure-of-alma-23-27](https://interpreterfoundation.org/journal/the-literary-structure-of-alma-23-27).

And it came to pass that in the eightieth year of the reign of the judges over the people of Nephi, there were a certain number of the dissenters from the people of Nephi, who had some years before gone over unto the Lamanites, and taken upon themselves the name of Lamanites, and also a certain number who were real descendants of the Lamanites, being stirred up to anger by them, or by those dissenters, therefore they commenced a war with their brethren. (Helaman 11:24)

This time, however, there are multiple twists: first, the dissenters and Lamanites were confederate with the Gadianton Robbers. Second, the conversion of many of the Lamanites had resulted in a new era of peace and prosperity: "And behold, there was peace in all the land, insomuch that the Nephites did go into whatsoever part of the land they would, whether among the Nephites or the Lamanites" (Helaman 6:7). The Robbers stirred up wars and contentions during this period, but they failed to fracture the détente between the Lamanites and Nephites. Indeed, their continuing depredations led to the opposite outcome, which was the complete integration of the remaining Nephite and Lamanite polities:

All the Lamanites who had become converted unto the Lord did unite with their brethren, the Nephites, and were compelled, for the safety of their lives and their women and their children, to take up arms against those Gadianton robbers. (3 Nephi 2:12)

The demonstrated ability of the Robbers to penetrate political organizations likely led to their success in targeting and overthrowing polities across the land: "Yea, for they did visit many parts of the land, and did do great destruction unto them; yea, did kill many, and did carry away others captive into the wilderness, yea, and more especially their women and their children" (Helaman 11:33).

The ability to easily cross boundaries between lands and cities meant that the Robbers could more easily reconnoiter and target cities and towns. Perhaps it was the recognition of this situation that led Lachoneus to propose his radical solution:

The proclamation of Lachoneus had gone forth throughout all the face of the land, and they had taken their horses, and their chariots, and their cattle, and all their flocks, and their herds, and their grain, and all their substance, and did march forth by thousands and by tens of thousands, until they had

all gone forth to the place which had been appointed that they should gather themselves together, to defend themselves against their enemies. (3 Nephi 3:22)

With all of the righteous Nephites and converted Lamanites united against the Robbers in a single location, it would be much easier to deny all intelligence to the enemy by strictly controlling the entire border. Previously, Nephite dissenter-Lamanite allied factions had counted on the edge in intelligence as supplied by the dissenters who were familiar with the Nephite lands, cities, and defensive posture:

And thus he did appoint chief captains of the Zoramites, they being the most acquainted with the strength of the Nephites, and their places of resort, and the weakest parts of their cities; therefore he appointed them to be chief captains over his armies. (Alma 48:5)

Bringing all of the people into a single land—after the dissenters had left—thus rendered moot the intelligence from the dissenters due to a complete change in the political, military, and geographic factors the dissenters were familiar with. This also gave the combined Lamanite and Nephite force an immense advantage in being able to control access to their lands, thus making it much more difficult for any putative spies to come and go without risking capture.

The exact identity of the dissenters in 3 Nephi and their relation to previous groups of dissenters is unclear, although 3 Nephi 1:29 suggests that they were likely Zoramites:

And there was also a cause of much sorrow among the Lamanites; for behold, they had many children who did grow up and began to wax strong in years, that they became for themselves, and were led away by some who were Zoramites, by their lyings and their flattering words, to join those Gadianton robbers. (3 Nephi 1:29)

Although the exact identities of leaders such as Giddianhi (3 Nephi 3:9) and Zemnariyah (3 Nephi 4:17) remain uncertain, the broader narrative pattern remains recognizable. The chief destabilizing force again came not from a self-contained Lamanite kingdom acting independently, but from hybrid dissenter coalitions that drew strength from internal fracture.

## Summary and Conclusions

The Book of Mormon does not provide a continuous narrative of Lamanite internal history, but the evidence it does preserve points to substantial political development. Early references suggest the Lamanites being a people distinct from the Nephites in subsistence, mobility, and social practice, with little explicit evidence of strong centralization. By the time of Zeniff and his descendants, however, the Lamanites had developed greater military effectiveness and the capacity to extract tribute from settled agricultural populations. The incorporation of groups such as the Amulonites likely accelerated changes in literacy, administration, and political organization.

The record also permits the possibility of dynastic realignment. The evidence does not prove that an older ruling order associated with the name Laman was displaced by a new Ishmaelite dynasty, but it does suggest that by the time of Lamoni's father, the Lamanite kingdom was more hierarchical, centralized, and internally differentiated than before.

Most importantly, the narrative repeatedly shows that Nephite dissenters were exercising disproportionate influence within Lamanite society. Amulonites, Amalekites, Zoramites, Amalickiah, Ammoron, and later outsider military leaders did not merely merge into the Lamanite population; they helped to shape policy, direct armies, and repeatedly draw Lamanite populations into wars rooted in Nephite factionalism. In that sense, many so-called Lamanite wars were not simply ethnic conflicts between two stable civilizations, but episodes in a prolonged contest over who would control the political future of both peoples.

A close reading of Mosiah through Helaman suggests that Lamanite history was shaped by more than inherited hostility toward the Nephites. The text instead reveals a dynamic society whose institutions evolved over time and whose ruling structures were repeatedly affected by tribute relations, migration, religious conflict, and elite capture of the organs of power. Although the evidence is often indirect, it consistently indicates that Nephite dissenters played a major role in Lamanite administration and war-making for several generations. The frequent identification of the various players as descendants of Nephi, Zarahemla, Ishmael, Zoram and others indicates that the authors of the Book of Mormon were sensitive to the impact of bloodlines on the political history of the people.

This perspective clarifies two important features of the Book of Mormon narrative. First, it helps explain why Lamanite political

organization and military behavior change so markedly across the record. Second, it reframes many inter-polity conflicts as consequences of internal Nephite division, rather than as simple ethnic warfare. The result is a more historically textured picture of the Lamanites—not merely a static foil to the Nephites, but a complex people whose dynastic and political development became deeply entangled with the ambitions of dissident Nephite elites. Such a reading makes better sense of the narrative details and reinforces one of Mormon’s recurring warnings: the gravest threats to a society often arise not only from external enemies, but from internal corruption, factionalism, and struggles for power.



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**Noel Hudson** was born in Idaho Falls, Idaho, and raised in Provo, Utah. He earned a BS in Zoology from BYU, an MS in Engineering Technology from BYU, and an MBA in marketing from BYU. While working as an electrical engineer in Salt Lake City, he published eight books of historical and science fiction and has written articles on the Book of Mormon. He and his wife, Luciana, are the parents of three children.



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