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Mark Alan Wright

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NEPHITE DAYKEEPERS: RITUAL SPECIALISTS IN MESOAMERICA AND THE BOOK OF MORMON

Mark Alan Wright

Abstract: *Mark Alan Wright describes a common type of ritual specialist among the Maya called a “daykeeper.” He discusses similarities and differences with descriptions of ritual specialists in the Book of Mormon, including those who used the Urim and Thummim, performed rituals of healing, experienced near-death episodes at the inauguration of their calling, kept track of calendars, mastered astronomy, and invoked God to bring rain. He finds several intriguing similarities, but also differences — the most important one being that the Nephites understood that the people to do all these things came from the God of Israel rather than the local pantheon.*

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Contrary to popular belief, the Maya civilization did not mysteriously disappear in the distant past. In actuality, there are millions of Maya

people alive and well today who reside in southern Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and Belize. There are 31 distinct living Mayan languages that continue to be spoken, and the people still maintain many of their ancient traditions. It is true that the Classic period Maya civilization collapsed around the tenth century AD, but rather than annihilation, that simply means that the top-heavy elite culture that commissioned monumental architecture and demanded heavy tribute from the lower classes was overthrown. It was at the time of collapse that the large civic centers were abandoned, and the people returned to farming their land without the burden of heavy tribute; the meek inherited the earth, as it were. Although the political system was overthrown, their fundamental religious ideology remained largely intact. Fortunately, thanks to elaborately carved stone monuments and intricately painted ceramics and murals, there is demonstrable and remarkable continuity in many of their religious beliefs and practices, some of which are evidenced as early as the Formative period — over 1,000 years before Christ — and continue among contemporary Maya cultures today. For 3,000 years they have maintained a core set of beliefs and practices.

An integral part of Maya religious practice was (and is) their reliance on ritual specialists, individuals who claim a special relationship with the divine realm and who are responsible for the physical and spiritual health of the people in their community. Mesoamerican anthropologists and archaeologists broadly refer to these ritual specialists as “shamans.” The Maya have indigenous terms for their ritual specialists, which vary according to which specific roles they play and which particular Maya group is under discussion.

A common type of ritual specialist among contemporary Maya groups is called a “daykeeper”; *aj k'iin* in the Yucatan or *aj q'ij* among the highland Quiche. One of the primary roles of the daykeepers is to keep track of the count of days; they are “calendar priests.” But “daykeepers” have also been described as “mediums,” “shaman-priests,” “priest-shamans,” “shaman-healers” or simply “healers.”¹ Regardless of their specific title, they offer a wide range of beneficial services to the people of their town.

Although there is a variety of ritual specialists found in Maya groups that are separated by language and great geographic distance, they share much in common, which indicates such roles have great time depth. Unfortunately, because of limitations in the archaeological record we only get glimpses into the roles that religious specialists played anciently in the Maya area, but hints remain from their art, writing, and even burial

goods that indicate continuity in many of these practices from the earliest days until the present.

In the Mesoamerican worldview, there are countless different spirit beings that might influence their daily lives. Some of these beings are believed to be allies or helpers, but others prove to be enemies or pranksters; there are givers of life as well as dealers of death.² The shaman's job is to help his fellow villagers stay in the good graces of the benevolent spirits and overcome the malevolent ones.

A wide variety of ritual specialists is also known from the Book of Mormon. Among the righteous there are teachers, priests, high priests, prophets, seers, and revelators, and even the Twelve Disciples, who qualify as their own unique class of religious specialists. However, not all ritual specialists are necessarily the "good guys." Among the Maya there are *brujos*, or witches and sorcerers, who perform black magic and intentionally send illness and bad fortune to their enemies or the enemies of their clients. In the Book of Mormon, we are explicitly told that in times of wickedness there are those who create and worship idols as well as witches and soothsayers (3 Nephi 21:16) and sorcerers and magicians (Mormon 1:19). We are not given many details about these apostate ritual specialists, but their titles alone are telling.

***Zaztun* and the Urim and Thummim**

In modern-day Yucatan, the most common title for shaman or ritual specialists is *aj-meen*, which literally means "practitioner" or "one who knows and does."³ The *aj-men* use crystals, clear rocks, or even fragments of broken glass bottles as a medium through which they receive revelation. They hold them up to a light source and wait for three flashes of light to shine through, which indicates the revelation is about to begin. They interpret these three flashes as representing the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, which scholars attribute to the heavy influence of Catholicism among the modern Maya. They call these stones *zaztun*, which literally means "clear stone" or "stone of light."⁴ They are considered extremely sacred objects, and the ritual specialist who owns them does not allow the stones to be casually handled by others. But not all clear stones are necessarily considered *zaztuno'ob* (plural of *zaztun*). Anthropologist Bruce Love recounted meeting a shaman who keeps a jar full of glass marbles on his table and says they are mere toys that are used as "practice" *zaztuno'ob* for his apprentices.⁵

Maya shamans believe that true *zaztuno'ob* are gifts from the gods that have been intentionally placed along their paths for them to find. If

the stone they are meant to find is not along a well-traveled path but is out in the uncultivated forest, they receive some type of spiritual guidance to lead them to where they will find it, sometimes even given vivid dreams or visions of where it is located. One ritual specialist named Don Cosimo was led out to the forest and found his *zaztun* embedded in the fork of a tree.⁶ The finding of these stones is a sign that they have been called and chosen to be a diviner and a healer. *Zaztuno'ob* are not only gifts from the divine realm, but they provide the means of communicating with the Otherworld and enable the ritual specialist to tap into divine powers.

An *aj-meen* named Don Jose once held his *zaztuno'ob* to the sky and when they flashed he said:

“Look! You can see the angels.” *Ti'aaan te ka'an 'elo*, “They are in the sky. This is how they speak to me. They are near. Their words come down. The spirit makes a blessing, makes salvation. The holy ones make a sign and then READY!”⁷

There is evidence that such divination stones were used anciently as well. For example, a burial from Copan dating to the Middle Classic period contained “five peculiar quartz stones, with ferromagnesium inclusions, probably used in divination rituals.”⁸ This burial was likely that of a royal priest or shaman rather than of a ruler, as these stones were found along with other paraphernalia common to ritual specialists.⁹

Now, what does all this have to do with the Book of Mormon? I suggest there are conceptual and functional similarities between the *zaztun*, which literally translates as “light stone” or “clear stone” in Mayan, and the Urim and Thummim, which means “Lights and Perfections” in Hebrew. In Ether 3:1 we read that the stones the brother of Jared made upon the mount Shelem were “white and clear, even as transparent glass.” Interestingly, the brother of Jared went up the mount with sixteen stones, but he came down with eighteen; the two extra stones were the interpreters that were given to him by the Lord. Just as Maya ritual specialists believe their clear stones are gifts directly from their gods, the brother of Jared was given his *zaztuno'ob* by the Lord himself.

We know that Mosiah I interpreted the engravings on a “large stone” that was brought to Zarahemla that told of the demise of the Jaredites, but we are not told exactly how he translated them other than that it was done “by the gift and power of God” (Omni 1:20). It is not until the days of Mosiah II, grandson of Mosiah I, that the Jaredite plates are discovered along with the interpreters that were given to the brother of Jared. We may presume that Mosiah I used an interpreter of some kind to translate

the large stone, as that was the *modus operandi* among the Nephites. If Mosiah I did have an interpreter, it is unclear where he got it; we might speculate that it was a “found object” like unto the *zaztuno’ob* of Maya shamans (or Joseph Smith’s seer-stone, for a more recent analogy).¹⁰

Although the name *Urim and Thummim* never appears in the text of the Book of Mormon, in Doctrine and Covenants 17:1 the Lord explicitly refers to the interpreters given to the brother of Jared (and subsequently to Joseph Smith) as the Urim and Thummim. The interpreters are explicitly associated with light within the text of the Book of Mormon. The stones the brother of Jared made were for the express purpose of providing light in the darkness of their barges (Ether 3:4), and the implication is that the additional stones that the Lord gave him did likewise. The interpreters are also associated with light when Alma passed them to his son Helaman along with the records. In Alma 37:23, he informs Helaman that the Lord proclaimed, “I will prepare unto my servant Gazelem, *a stone, which shall shine forth in darkness unto light*,” and in the next verse Alma explains that the interpreters had fulfilled the words of the Lord. He states, “These interpreters were prepared that the word of God might be fulfilled, which he spake, saying: *I will bring forth out of darkness unto light* all their secret works and their abominations” (italics added).

Similarly, Ammon explained to King Limhi the role of a seer; he said, “A seer can know of things which are past, and also of things which are to come, and by them shall all things be revealed, or, rather, shall secret things be made manifest, and hidden things shall come to *light*, and things which are not known shall be made known by them, and also things shall be made known by them which otherwise could not be known” (Mosiah 8:17, italics added). The interpreters, therefore, were for much more than simply translating languages; they were for receiving the light of revelation as well.

Rituals of Healing

There is a modern ethnographic account of a Yucatecan man who was working in his field one day with his brother when suddenly he was overtaken by a strong force that knocked him to the earth. That night they sought out an *aj-meen*, a healer, and he consulted his *zaztun* and other sacred objects to determine the cause of his ailment. After three days of prayers, offerings, and cleansing rituals, the man was restored to health and his “spiritual balance returned.”¹¹

This, of course, calls to mind the account of Alma the Younger, who was stricken upon being rebuked by an angel. Alma the Elder called upon

his ritual specialists to bring healing to his son. In Mosiah 27:22-23 we read, “He caused that the priests should assemble themselves together; and they began to fast, and to pray to the Lord their God that he would open the mouth of Alma, that he might speak, and also that his limbs might receive their strength ... And it came to pass after they had fasted and prayed for the space of two days and two nights, the limbs of Alma received their strength.”

There are several other significant points to be made about Alma’s conversion narrative, which we will return to later in the chapter.

An important aspect of healing practices among Mesoamerican ritual specialists is their use of herbal remedies to treat the infirm. They believe medicinal plants were provided by the gods for the purpose of healing. Fray Diego de Landa, a Catholic Bishop in the sixteenth century informs us, “Certain priests were regarded as doctors who cured with herbs and many superstitious rites.”¹² Modern Maya ritual specialists use their *zaztun* to “see” the causes of afflictions and discern whether or not the person can be cured. Sometimes, *zaztuno’ob* are used as tools to receive specific knowledge through dreams about how to use specific herbs. One *aj-meen*, a healer called Papa Loh, said:

The first night after finding the *zaztun* I dreamt that two old men sat down by my hammock. They came with herbs in their hands; each one brought a certain herb and they began to show me medicine. “Papa Loh, this is medicine for such and such affliction. This medicine cures such and such illness and this is how much is needed.” The other old man spoke up. He said: “This cures such and such ailment, this is how much you use, but take good care of us! Don’t let us die, don’t let us waste away.”

Similarly, in Alma 46:40 we read that in certain seasons the Nephites were afflicted with fevers and other ailments, “but not so much with fevers, because of the excellent qualities of the many plants and roots *which God had prepared* to remove the cause of diseases, to which men were subject by the nature of the climate” (italics added). Note that God did not simply *provide* the plants and roots, he *prepared* them, which I suggest may indicate they received knowledge from Him about how to use them.

Among the Maya, many infirmities are believed to be caused by bad or evil winds (called *k’ak’as iik’* in Yucatec Mayan), which are sometimes sent as a punishment from the gods for failing to make appropriate offerings or for engaging in impious behavior.¹³ This is perhaps reflected

in the Book of Mormon when Abinadi preaches that the “east wind” was sent to punish the wicked (see Mosiah 7:31 and 12:6).¹⁴ *Aj-meen* can cure individuals afflicted by evil winds through prayers or ritual washing.¹⁵ Likewise, those afflicted by the punishing winds spoken of by Abinadi could only be delivered by turning to their ultimate high priest, Jesus Christ (Mosiah 7:31-33; 12:6-8; see Alma 13:9).

A more complicated form of healing is known as *k'ex*, which literally translates as “exchange” or “transference.” When someone is sick or afflicted, either physically or spiritually, the shaman ritually transfers the ailments to an animal, and then the animal is sacrificed to the gods. In the Book of Mormon they continued to obey the Law of Moses, the authors emphasizing their observance of animal sacrifice (ex. 1 Nephi 5:7; Mosiah 2:3). These offerings served to transfer the sins of the penitent onto the animal, reminiscent of the purposes of Maya *k'ex* rituals. The greatest of all *k'ex* offerings of course, is the Atonement (see Jacob 4:5), wherein the Savior took upon him the sins of us all.

Becoming a Ritual Specialist¹⁶

Ethnographic work among traditional societies has shown that holy men of various types — broadly referred to as shamans — commonly receive their calling through near-death experiences. As anthropologist Frank J. Lipp states in reference to modern Mesoamerican shaman-priests called *curanderos* (curers or healers), “Divine election occurs within a context of some physical or emotional crisis” such as “a severe, chronic, or life-threatening sickness.”¹⁷ While in this state they have a vivid dream where “the individual is informed by a spirit being,” such as an angel, that “she or he will receive the divine gift to cure illnesses.”¹⁸ The healing process is often aided by the prayers and ritual actions of another *curandero* on behalf of the critically ill individuals. Once recovered, the newly called shamans possess a power and authority that is recognized by the members of their community due to their shared “cultural language.” According to Lipp, “During the initiatory dream vision the individual may experience temporary insanity or unconsciousness” and it is through this near-death experience that “he or she is reborn as a person with shamanic power and knowledge.”¹⁹

The Book of Mormon similarly describes individuals who fall to the earth as if dead and then recover and become healers. Beyond the examples where physical infirmities are removed, the Book of Mormon also provides numerous examples of individuals who are spiritually healed. It would be a mistake to place physical and spiritual healing in

separate categories; the two concepts are equated in scripture and in the ancient mind. For example, during the Savior's visit to the Nephites in the land Bountiful, beyond the healing he provided to the "lame, or blind, or halt, or maimed, or leprous, or that are withered, or that are deaf, or that are afflicted in any manner" (3 Nephi 17:7), he taught his disciples that they must minister to the unworthy with the hope that "they will return and repent, and come unto me with full purpose of heart, and I shall heal them" (3 Nephi 18:32). Centuries earlier, Abinadi quoted Isaiah's comforting message that it is "with his stripes we are healed" (Mosiah 14:5) from our sins and our iniquities.

The first recorded instance in the Book of Mormon where someone falls to the earth as if dead in connection with a prophetic commission is that of Alma the Younger. As he was going about with the sons of Mosiah to destroy the Church, an angel came down to "stop [them] by the way" (Alma 36:6; compare Mosiah 27:10). Significantly, when the angel first spoke to them as with a voice of thunder, they "understood not the words which he spake unto them" (Mosiah 27:12). The angel "cried again," and this time his words were plainly understood (Mosiah 27:13; compare 3 Nephi 11:3-6).

After being threatened with destruction, Alma fell to the earth and became so weak that he could neither speak nor move his hands (Mosiah 27:19). After Alma's helpless body was carried back to his home by his friends (who had also fallen to the earth but were not the focus of the angel's rebuke and therefore quickly recovered), Alma's father rejoiced, acknowledging the Lord's hand in what had transpired. What his father did next is significant: "He caused that the priests should assemble themselves together; and they began to fast, and to pray to the Lord their God that he would open the mouth of Alma, that he might speak, and also that his limbs might receive their strength" (Mosiah 27:22). These priests were acting in their capacity as *curanderos*, or healers. Alma was healed, not just physically but spiritually as well. His exquisite and bitter pain was replaced by exquisite and sweet joy (Alma 36:21). He clearly linked his physical healing with his spiritual healing when he declared, "My limbs did receive their strength again, and I stood upon my feet, and did manifest unto the people that I had been born of God" (Alma 36:23).

Because Alma had been healed, both body and soul, he then possessed a culturally recognized power to heal. This recognition would extend beyond just the believing Nephites who had a clear understanding of the priesthood which Alma held (see Alma 13). For example, Zeezrom was a contentious and apostate Nephite from Ammonihah who knew

nothing concerning true points of doctrine (see Alma 12:8). After contending with Alma and Amulek, Zeezrom became convinced of his own guilt and endured a painful repentance process.

The language used to convey Zeezrom's situation intentionally parallels that used to describe Alma's experience. Alma 14:6 tells us that Zeezrom "knew concerning the blindness of the minds, which he had caused among the people by his lying words; and his soul began to be *harrowed up* under a consciousness of his own guilt; yea, he began to be encircled about by the *pains of hell*" after which he lay "sick, being very low with a burning fever; and his mind also was exceedingly sore because of his iniquities." Just as Alma was snatched out of "an everlasting burning" (Mosiah 27:28), Zeezrom was "scorched with a burning heat" that was caused by "the great tribulations of his mind on account of his wickedness" (Alma 15:3) and his fear that Alma and Amulek "had been slain because of his own iniquity" (Alma 15:3), much as Alma was concerned that he "had murdered many of [God's] children, or rather led them away unto destruction" (Alma 36:14).

Despite the parallels in their accounts, Zeezrom's soul does not appear to have been carried away in vision, and his conversion and healing come at the hands of men rather than from some interaction he had with the Lord while in his near-death state. We instead read that Zeezrom besought healing from both Alma and Amulek. However, the only one to take Zeezrom by the hand was Alma, as he had become the culturally (and spiritually) recognized healer by virtue of his own near-death experience. Alma turned Zeezrom's focus back to the Lord when he asked, "Believest thou in the power of Christ unto salvation?" and then assured him that "If thou believest in the redemption of Christ thou canst be healed." Alma wanted to be clear that healing came through Christ and not through any of his own power, so he cried, "O Lord our God, have mercy on this man, and heal him according to his faith which is in Christ." His plea was heard, and Zeezrom "leaped upon his feet, and began to walk" (Alma 15:6-11).

At the same time Alma was preaching to reclaim apostate Nephites within the greater lands of Zarahemla, Ammon was in the land of Nephi trying to win new converts in Lamanite territory. Through his acts of humility and dedicated service, he gained audience with Lamoni, king over the land of Ishmael (Alma 17:21). Ammon's preaching opened the spiritual eyes of King Lamoni, and for the first time he saw his need for a Redeemer. The king humbled himself and cried unto the Lord for mercy, at which point he fell as if he were dead (Alma 18:42). Lamoni

was seemingly on his deathbed for three days and was even believed to be dead by many of his people (Alma 19:5). Ammon understood that this was not the case, as he had previously witnessed Alma's equivalent experience. The similarity between Lamoni's and Alma's experiences demonstrates the larger cultural language that was shared by Nephites and Lamanites in their ancient Mesoamerican setting.

The New Testament account of Saul's conversion experience on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:3–9) may bear superficial similarities to Alma's experience in the Book of Mormon, but there is a significant difference. We have no record that Saul had a near-death experience in the sense that his soul embarked on a spirit journey while his body lay suffering (as did Alma and Lamoni), which is a defining factor in Mesoamerican shamanic calls.

While Lamoni was lying as if dead, his wife was truly concerned for his well-being. Acting on faith in Ammon's word alone, she stayed by Lamoni's side all that night and anxiously waited for him to emerge from his deep sleep. When he arose, he testified, "I have seen my Redeemer," and he prophesied that "he shall come forth, and be born of a woman, and he shall redeem all mankind who believe on his name." Lamoni then sinks to the earth again, being overcome by the Spirit (Alma 19:13). The queen was likewise filled with the Spirit and also fell to the earth, followed by Ammon; finally even the servants of the king were overwhelmed by the Spirit. At the apex of the narrative, Ammon, the king, the queen, and their servants were all prostrate upon the earth, "and they all lay there as though they were dead" (Alma 19:18). When the queen was raised from the ground by her faithful handmaid Abish, she testified that she had interacted with the Lord by proclaiming "O blessed Jesus, who has saved me from an awful hell!" (Alma 19:29). Even the king's servants who had fallen united their testimony with Ammon's to declare "they had seen angels and conversed with them" (Alma 19:34). King Lamoni, his wife, Ammon, and the king's servants all "administered" unto the gathered crowd (Alma 19:33), which often carries connotations of healing in the Book of Mormon (Jacob 2:19; Mosiah 4:26). While their bodies had lain motionless, their spirits were busy interacting with the Lord and increasing in culturally recognized spiritual potency.

Ammon appears to have fallen to the earth more than any other individual in the Book of Mormon. His initial converting experience occurred when the angel rebuked him and his brothers along with Alma (Mosiah 27:12). As discussed above, he fell to the earth again when king Lamoni and his wife were converted (Alma 19:14) and once more when

he was overcome with joy as he and his brothers chanced upon Alma in the wilderness (Alma 27:17). In his Mesoamerican context, Ammon's experiences — rather than being viewed as a sign of physical weakness or perhaps a case of spiritual hypersensitivity — would actually have imbued him with more spiritual potency as a holy man. Among the modern Tzotzil Maya of Chamula, for example, “the ability to cure illnesses of increasing severity is dependent upon the number of times the shaman has lost consciousness in a trance.”²⁰

Calendar Specialists

Another role of ritual specialists beyond that of healer is that of calendar priest. Modern daykeepers are concerned with keeping track of the solar calendar and knowing when to sow and when to reap, but more importantly, they keep track of the count of days relating to the 260-day sacred calendar and determining whether a particular day is auspicious or not. Knowing the omens of each day enables them to guide people as to when to perform particular rituals, when to bless their child, or knowing whether one's day of birth was a good day or a bad day.²¹

It appears that there were calendar specialists in the Book of Mormon as well. In 3 Nephi 8:1-2 we read, “And now it came to pass that according to our record, and we know our record to be true, for behold, it was a just man who did keep the record—for he truly did many miracles in the name of Jesus; and there was not any man who could do a miracle in the name of Jesus save he were cleansed every whit from his iniquity—And now it came to pass, *if there was no mistake made by this man in the reckoning of our time, the thirty and third year had passed away*” (emphasis added). The implication is that there was one particular individual who was responsible for the “reckoning of [their] time,” and this man was also a healer and a record keeper. This complex of roles mirrors that of Maya “daykeepers.”

The Nephites kept track of hours, days, weeks, months, and years. Omni 1:21 informs us that the people of Zarahemla also maintained a lunar calendar. Nephite record keepers reckoned from at least three distinct starting points: the time Lehi left Jerusalem, the beginning of the reign of the judges, and the time the signs were given of Christ's birth (see 3 Nephi 2:5-8). The ancient Maya daykeepers had a similarly complicated job. They kept track of single day names with associated numbers: periods of 7, 9, 13, 20, and 819 days; 584-day Venus cycles; periods of single “years” of 360 days called *tuns*; 20-year periods called *katuns*; and 400-year periods called *baktuns*, as well as lunar cycles.

The majority of Classic period monuments begin with a “Long Count,” which begins with a count of *baktuns* (400 years) and *katuns* (20 years). Notably, the concluding chapter of the Book of Mormon likewise begins with a count of “four hundred and twenty years” (Moroni 10:1), perhaps an intentional allusion to the Maya Long Count. The twenty-year katun was subdivided into five-year periods called *hotuns*, which were often celebrated by royalty and commemorated in monumental inscriptions. Samuel the Lamanite may have been making a *hotun* prophecy when he stated that in “five years” signs would be given concerning the birth of Christ (Helaman 14:2). Maya monuments often record the “Lunar Series,” which, as mentioned above, appears to be attested in the Book of Omni.

Ritual Specialists and Astronomy

Along with the calendar, ancient Maya ritual specialists were also masters of astronomy. Royal astronomer priests would work in conjunction with rulers and their architects to precisely lay out their city plans to use heavenly bodies for the purposes of royal propaganda. Royal palaces or temple complexes would be aligned with the solar equinoxes and solstices, so on particular days the sun would be seen to rise directly over the abode of the ruler and his gods.²² They tracked the cycles of planets, had their own set of constellations, and were even able to predict eclipses.

Ritual specialists in the Book of Mormon likewise had a firm grasp of astronomy. Alma affirmed that “all things denote there is a God; yea, even the earth, and all things that are upon the face of it, yea, and its motion, yea, and also all the planets which move in their regular form do witness that there is a Supreme Creator” (Alma 30:44). In Helaman 14, Samuel the Lamanite prophesied that wonders in heaven would be used as signs to signify the birth of Christ, including the appearance of a new star, and these were all fulfilled in 3 Nephi 1. Nephi, son of Helaman, even proclaimed a heliocentric model rather than a geocentric one (Helaman 12:15).

Rainmaking Ceremonies

One of the primary responsibilities of modern Maya shamans is performing rain-making ceremonies, which are called *chà chaak* ceremonies by the Yucatec Maya. They cover a sanctified table with food and drink offerings, which are fed first to the gods and then to the people. The ritual specialists then make other offerings and utter prayers to petition the gods for rain on behalf of the people.²³

In the Book of Helaman we read that Nephi was given power to seal the heavens, and he did so in hopes that it would compel his people to be humble and stop engaging in endless warfare. In Helaman 11:7-8 the people finally got the message: “And it came to pass that the people saw that they were about to perish by famine, and they began to remember the Lord their God; and they began to remember the words of Nephi. And the people began to plead with their chief judges and their leaders, that they would say unto Nephi: Behold, we know that thou art a man of God, and therefore cry unto the Lord our God that he turn away from us this famine, lest all the words which thou hast spoken concerning our destruction be fulfilled.”

Note that the people did not turn directly to God themselves, nor did they think their political leaders could help. They turned to Nephi, their ritual specialist, the one who had the power to intercede on their behalf with the divine realm on their behalf and bring the rains. We may shrink at the thought that Nephites, the people of the Lord, would behave in such a way, but the context of the chapters makes it clear that they were largely apostate at this point. Just a few chapters earlier in Helaman 6:31 we read, “Insomuch that they had become exceedingly wicked; yea, the more part of them had turned out of the way of righteousness, and did trample under their feet the commandments of God, and did turn unto their own ways, and did build up unto themselves idols of their gold and their silver.” In other words, they had turned away from their own religious traditions and adopted those of the native population.²⁴

Conclusion

Despite the many similarities between Nephite and traditional Maya ritual specialists mentioned above, it must be noted that many profound differences exist as well, as would be expected. The believing Nephites were annihilated before the end of the fourth century AD, and it stands to reason that their specific beliefs and practices perished with them. To be very clear, I am not suggesting that Maya ritual specialists were influenced by the Nephites; rather, Nephite religious practices may very well have been colored by the native cultures that surrounded them. Some may bristle at that suggestion, but as Latter-day Saints many of our common ritual practices are admittedly quite similar to those of other faiths and unquestionably influenced by them. For example, what we believe to be proper ritual attire — a white shirt and tie for men and a modest dress for women — did not originate with a revelation to Joseph Smith, nor did the sitting on pews in a chapel, the singing of opening and closing hymns, the

offering of invocations and benedictions, the giving of sermons, or the administration of the emblems of Christ's body and blood.

Latter-day Saint worship services are likely far more similar to those of other modern churches than they would be to those of the ancient Nephites, and Nephite worship services would undoubtedly have been far more similar to those of their ancient Mesoamerica neighbors than to those of the modern Church. Jacob, among others, noted that it is not the specific ritual practice that matters, but the belief that underlies the practice. The Nephites performed the same rituals as the Jews in their observance of the Law of Moses, but Jacob asserted that the Jews looked beyond the mark and lost their understanding that the law pointed toward Christ (Jacob 4:14). The Nephites would have been at home among their Mesoamerican neighbors by offering sacrifices to take away spiritual afflictions, by fasting and praying over the sick, looking to a ritual specialist to make it rain, by using multiple complex calendars, and by receiving the light of revelation through clear stones. But the Nephites understood that the power to do all these things came from the God of Israel rather than the local pantheon.

Notes

- 1 Cecilia F. Klein, Eulogio Guzmán, Elisa C. Mandell, and Maya Stanfield-Mazzi. "The Role of Shamanism in Mesoamerican Art." *Current Anthropology* 43, no. 3 (2002): 393.
- 2 Bruce Love, *Maya Shamanism Today: Connecting with the Cosmos in Rural Yucatán* (Lancaster, CA: Labyrinthos, 2004), ix.
- 3 Love, *Maya Shamanism*, ix.
- 4 Linda A. Brown, "From Discard to Divination: Demarcating the Sacred Through the Collection and Curation of Discarded Objects." *Latin American Antiquity*, December 2000, 325.
- 5 Love, *Maya Shamanism*, 4.
- 6 Brown, "From Discard to Divination," 326.
- 7 Love, *Maya Shamanism*, 18.
- 8 William Fash, *Scribes, Warriors and Kings: The City of Copan and the Ancient Maya* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991), 92.
- 9 Marc Zender, *A Study of Classic Maya Priesthood*, Unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Calgary, 2004, 65-66.
- 10 Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Vintage Books, 2007), 48-49.
- 11 Love, *Maya Shamanism*, 1-3.
- 12 Alfred Marston Tozzer, ed. "Landa's Relación de las Cosas de Yucatán:

- a Translation.” Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, 1941, 94.
- 13 Robert Redfield and Alfonso Villa Rojas. *Chan Kom: A Maya Village*, 1934, 167.
- 14 In Mesoamerica east winds tend to be beneficial and are typically a sign that the life-giving rains are soon to come (Spence, 139). However, destructive tropical storms and hurricanes typically develop in the eastern Gulf Coast and sweep across the Maya lowlands from the east or northeast, which devastate both field and forest (Bassie, 50-51). In these particular contexts (Mosiah 7:29-31; 12:6), Abinadi is directly quoting the Lord from an unknown source, but it is likely from the brass plates (as he is wont to do), which would as expected reflect the traditional biblical association of the east winds with punishment.
- 15 Redfield and Villa Rojas. *Chan Kom*, 167.
- 16 The bulk of this section was previously published by the author in “According to Their Language, Unto Their Understanding: The Cultural Context of Hierophanies and Theophanies in Latter-day Saint Canon” in *Studies in the Bible and Antiquity*, Vol. 3 (2011) under the subheading “Prophetic Commissions in the Old and New Worlds” (pp. 58-64). It appears here with only minor modification from the previous publication and with permission of the editor.
- 17 Frank Lipp, “A Comparative Analysis of Southern Mexican and Guatemalan Shamans,” *Mesoamerican Healers*, 2001, 95-116.
- 18 Lipp, “Comparative Analysis,” 103.
- 19 Lipp, “Comparative Analysis,” 104.
- 20 Lipp, “Comparative Analysis,” 104.
- 21 The belief in auspicious and inauspicious days may strike some as “primitive,” but it should be noted that scholars estimate that businesses in the United States lose between \$800-900 million every Friday the 13th due to superstitious avoidance of perceived risky behavior such as driving or making large purchases (Travis Ng, Terence Chong, and Xin Du. “The value of superstitions.” *Journal of Economic Psychology* 31, no. 3, 2010, 3).
- 22 Anthony Aveni “Archaeoastronomy in the Ancient Americas,” *Journal of Archaeological Research* 11, no. 2 (2003): 149-191.
- 23 Love, *Maya Shamanism*.
- 24 Mark Alan Wright and Brant Gardner. “The Cultural Context of Nephite Apostasy.” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 1, 25-55. www.mormoninterpreter.com/the-cultural-context-of-nephite-apostasy/ (accessed September 12, 2014).

Mark Alan Wright earned his BA in Anthropology at UCLA and his MA and PhD in Anthropology (with a subfield of specialization in Mesoamerican Archaeology) from UC Riverside. He regularly conducts research in Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras and Belize. Dr. Wright is Assistant Professor of Ancient Scripture at Brigham Young University and Associate Editor of the Journal of Book of Mormon Studies at the Maxwell Institute.