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LEHI, JOSEPH, AND THE KINGDOM OF ISRAEL

Richley Crapo

***Abstract:** I present evidence of two priesthoods in the Jewish Bible: an Aaronite priesthood, held by Aaron and passed down through his descendants; and a higher Mushite priesthood, held not only by Moses and his descendants but also by other worthy individuals, such as Joshua, an Ephraimite. The Mushite priests were centered in Shiloh, where Joshua settled the Ark of the Covenant, while the Aaronites became dominant in the Jerusalem temple. Like Joshua, the prophet Lehi, a descendant of the northern tribe of Manasseh, held the higher priesthood. His ministry, as recounted in the Book of Mormon, demonstrates four characteristics that show a clear connection to his ancestors' origins in the northern Kingdom of Israel: (1) revelation through prophetic dreams, (2) the ministry of angels, (3) imagery of the Tree of Life, and (4) a positive attitude toward the Nehushtan tradition. These traits are precisely those which scholarship, based on the Documentary Hypothesis, attributes to texts in the Hebrew Bible that originated in the northern Kingdom of Israel rather than in Judah.*

There is a cultural continuity between Joseph, the son of Jacob, and his descendants down through Lehi that I wish to highlight. Joseph's sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, became the two largest tribes that settled in the southern part of what later became the Kingdom of Israel when the monarchy established by King David seceded from the northern tribes. Lehi discovered that he was a descendant of Joseph's son Manasseh when he read this in the brass plates that contained his genealogy (1 Nephi 5:16). His heritage stretched back to Joseph in Egypt, although he apparently had not known this before that time. I propose to throw some light on Lehi's northern heritage and trace how it shows up in his own ministry, as reported in the Book of Mormon. I also explain how Lehi's ancestors had come to live in Jerusalem and why Lehi may have lost track of his own genealogy.

To recount this history, I first discuss some of the evidence of a higher priesthood that is typically not found in the writing of non-Latter-day Saint interpreters in other Christian denominations, who typically recognize only the existence of the Aaronic priesthood, to which Moses appointed his brother Aaron to care for the Ark of the Covenant. This distinction between two orders of the priesthood is essential to a Latter-day Saint understanding of the story of Lehi.

The Two Orders of the Priesthood

Consider what it meant in Hebrew when Exodus refers to Moses as a *prophet*. Unlike the English word *prophet*, the Hebrew *navi* merely means “spokesperson.” Moses was indeed a spokesperson for God, but other humans could have spokespersons too, as exemplified in Exodus 7:1, which refers to Aaron as a spokesperson (*navi*) for Moses. So the Hebrew word itself does not have an inherently religious meaning and does not necessarily imply an office within a priesthood. However, Moses did not simply declare that his older brother Aaron and Aaron’s sons were priests; rather he appointed and ordained them to those positions. That he did so at least raises the question of whether Moses’s authority to declare God’s will entailed a priesthood office — one with authority to ordain another — as well as a special relationship with God. Yet Christian exegetes have not addressed this distinction.

A near-exception among sectarian interpreters, George W. Coats, a former professor at McMurry College and at Lexington Theological Seminary, sees Joshua, the successor to Moses, not as a secular authority but as a “cultic” figure who exercised authority over the Levites who took care of the Ark. Recognizing that Joshua’s authority was superior to that of the Levite, Coats acknowledges that “it is interesting to note that in this pericope [in which Joshua built an altar on Mount Ebal] movement of the ark by the hands of the Levites comes from the command of Joshua.”¹ However, although he refers to Joshua as a *cultic figure*, a term that implies some sort of religious authority, Coats does not raise the question whether his “cultic” commission represented a priesthood order rather than a unique personal authority conferred upon him by Moses. Nor does he examine the similar issues regarding the nature of the authority held earlier by Moses.

In contrast with a number of non-Latter-day Saint sectarian exegetes, several scholars have recognized the existence of a priesthood held

1. George W. Coats, “The Ark of the Covenant in Joshua: A Probe into the History of a Tradition,” *Hebrew Annual Review* 9 (1985): 151.

by Moses and his descendants, a priesthood that differed from that of Aaron's descendants. The existence of *Mushite* priests was first suggested by Julius Wellhausen² and later reinforced by Frank Moore Cross.³ More recently, Richard Friedman⁴ has also argued that there were Mushite priests who were descendants of Moses in addition to those priests who were descendants of Aaron. He bases this on both biblical texts and Jewish traditions.

Socially, the roles of both the Aaronites and the Mushites changed over time. Before the establishment of the First Temple in Jerusalem, the priestly offices were disbursed throughout all the tribal territories, and sacrificial rites were conducted locally at "high places": "Only the people sacrificed in high places, because there was no house built unto the name of the LORD, until those days" (1 Kings 3:2). Even after Solomon built the First Temple, worship continued through the reign of Jehoshaphat at the high places throughout the two post-Solomonic kingdoms (1 Kings 22:43) and was not fully stopped in Judea until Josiah had the shrines and high places eliminated (2 Kings 23:19-20). Furthermore, instances of non-Aaronites offering sacrifice can be found during the period of Judges and the Monarchy. Examples include the son of the Ephraimite Micah (Judges 17), Jonathan, a descendant of Moses (Judges 18); and Samuel, who was an Ephraimite (1 Samuel 1:1).

A Latter-day Saint Viewpoint

Typically, Jewish scholars have not viewed these two priesthoods as ranked but have interpreted them as different, sometimes competing clans that asserted their right to serve as priests. An alternative viewpoint is a ranked relationship between the Mushites and Aaronites. According to Joseph Smith, "All the prophets had the Melchizedek Priesthood."⁵ This would include Moses and offers the possibility that the Mushite priesthood represented the line of those who held the Melchizedek authority, which oversaw the work of the Aaronites.

2. Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena Zur Geschichte Israels* (Berlin, DE: G. Reimer, 1886), 141-43.

3. Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), 195-215.

4. Richard Eliot Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1973) 22-23, 136.

5. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997), 181.

Unlike the priesthood of Aaron, which was passed down strictly by descent, the Melchizedek Priesthood held by Moses was passed down to someone chosen by God, from any tribe of Israel, to govern that priesthood. Numbers 27:18-19, 21-23 recounts the passing of authority to Joshua (an Ephraimite):

And the Lord said unto Moses, Take thee Joshua the son of Nun, a man in whom is the spirit, and lay thine hand upon him; And set him before Eleazar the priest, and before all the congregation; and give him a charge in their sight. . . . Moses did as the Lord commanded him: and he took Joshua, and set him before Eleazar the priest, and before all the congregation: And he laid his hands upon him, and gave him a charge, as the Lord commanded by the hand of Moses.

The Hebrew word, here translated as “gave him a charge,” is *tsâvâh* (צָוָה), which means “give charge over, appoint, ordain.”⁶

This commission included authority to direct the lower priesthood of Aaron and his descendants. Thus it was Joshua, not the Levites, who consistently decided when and where those guardians of the Ark would transport it from one place to another. Joshua ultimately had the Ark taken to the territory of Ephraim, his own tribe, and it came to be housed at Shiloh, under the care of the Mushite priest Eli, who was also a descendant of Moses.

Lehi and the Kingdom of Israel

Although Lehi lived at Jerusalem, he consistently refers to himself as belonging to the House of Israel. Even though he resided in Jerusalem, he never referred to himself as a Judean (Jew). Rather, he speaks of “the Jews” (i.e., those who governed the Kingdom of Judah) in the third person, making it clear he was not writing of his own tribal or political heritage. This contrast between the two kingdoms is an important one, and knowing more about the northern kingdom in which Lehi’s identity was rooted will help us appreciate the Book of Mormon and our Latter-day Saint understanding of the Bible as well. Lehi’s ancestral connection to the Kingdom of Israel is important because the culture of the northern tribes was significantly different from that of the southern kingdom, and the difference is clear in the Book of Mormon.

When Joshua, himself an Ephraimite, led the twelve tribes into the Promised Land, the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh settled in the lands

6. In some translations of this text, the chosen word is *commissioned*.

north of Jerusalem. It was here that Joshua placed the holy Tabernacle of God and the Ark of the Covenant that was housed in the town of Shiloh in the lands of Ephraim among the northern tribes (Joshua 18:1). The sons of Eli served as the priests of this first sanctuary. Thus, while kingship was held by Judah and exercised in the city of Jerusalem, the sacred sanctuary of God was kept by Ephraim in Shiloh under the authority of those priests who held the higher priesthood of God.⁷

At this time, a shrine was also erected at the northern town of Dan, where the priest was Jonathan. Judges 18:30 says Jonathan was the son of Gershom and that Gershom was the son of Manasseh. However, according to the Talmud,⁸ the Jewish codification of the oral traditions, Jonathan was actually the son of Moses's son Gershom, but because of Jonathan's great wickedness, the name of the wicked king Manasseh was substituted for Moses's name. This shrine in Dan was subordinate to the shrine in Shiloh, where the higher priesthood held by Moses was held by Eli.

However, like Jonathan, the sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were unrighteous, and God allowed the Ark to be captured by the Philistines. After it was recovered, the Ark was not returned to Shiloh but was carried by King David to Jerusalem. King David installed two Mushite high priests to take charge of the Ark in Jerusalem: Zadok, Eli's grandnephew, who was a priest from Jerusalem, and Abiathar, the great-great-grandson of Eli (Abiathar, the son of Ahimelek, the son of Ahitub, the son of Phinehas, the son of Eli), whose priestly line claimed descent from Moses and therefore authority based on the higher priesthood. This state of affairs lasted only until Solomon replaced his father David as king and exiled Abiathar from his position as high priest of the Tabernacle because Abiathar had supported Solomon's brother Adonijah as the successor to David. Thus the control of the temple under Solomon fell to the Aaronic priests of Jerusalem, and the exile of the Melchizedek high priest set the stage for the later secession of the northern tribes from the monarchy after Solomon's death.

7. While non-Latter-day Saint sectarian exegetic commentaries typically assume that Eli was a descendant of Aaron, the Book of Joshua, which lists all the cities associated with Aaron, makes no mention of Shiloh, and Sam 2:27 strongly suggests that Moses, to whom God appeared in Egypt, was the ancestor of Eli. For an excellent discussion of Moses's family, including Eli, see Flavio Barbiero, "The Great Ancestor of Eli High Priest of Siloh," Alien Eyes (website), accessed September 2, 2019, http://www.altriochi.com/H_ENG/pen5/moses_family/ancestor_eli.html.

8. *Bava Basra* 109b. While the part of the Talmud containing *Bava Basra* was compiled at the beginning of the third century, the same information is found in the second-century *Seder Olam*.

The Northern Tribes and Their Religious Texts

The modern Hebrew Bible was compiled in Jerusalem, the capital of the Davidic monarchy and of the later Kingdom of Judah after the division of the monarchy. This is why Jerusalem is the preeminent city in biblical stories and why the Kingdom of Israel and its capital are viewed as if from afar. Yet the northern Kingdom of Israel was far wealthier and more influential than the Kingdom of Judah until the fall of Israel to the Assyrians in 721 BC. During this era, the southern kingdom was actually something of a backwater. For instance, the southern capital of Jerusalem remained a rather small town with a population scholars estimate to vary from as low as 2,000 to no more than about 5,000 at the fall of Israel.⁹

The fall of the Kingdom of Israel caused Jerusalem to achieve the status of a real city. When the Assyrians conquered the Kingdom of Israel in 721 BC, the elites of that kingdom — including the aristocrats and priests — were taken into captivity; but as is common in times of conquest, many of the people of the northern kingdom fled to safety among their southern cousins in Judea. This influx of northern refugees (and likely some refugees from western Judea) caused the city of Jerusalem to swell to about 25,000. These refugees and their descendants made up more than 80 percent of the total population of the walled city,¹⁰ although the Jerusalem Jewish establishment maintained political control over their kingdom. Having lost their tribal roots in their homeland, it was easy for the northern refugees to assimilate into the culture of Judea over more than a century; it is unsurprising that at least some lost track of their original tribal identities. Such was the case with Lehi and his family, who learned they descended from Joseph's son Manasseh only after Nephi obtained the plates of Laban for his father (Alma 10:3).

Since the northern refugees were a numerical majority, their very numbers were a potential threat to the domination of the Judean elites. As one way to integrate the many northerners into Judean society, the Jewish leaders added many of the northern stories and traditions into their own scriptures by editing them into the existing southern corpus. Biblical scholars refer to these northern texts as the *E* (or *Elohistic*) texts because they refer to God by variations of the name El, Eloah, or Elohim rather than by the southern name, which in English we know as Jehovah.

9. Hershel Shanks, "Ancient Jerusalem: The Village, the Town, the City," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 42, no. 3 (May/June, 2016): 51-53.

10. Magen Broshi, "Estimating the Population of Ancient Jerusalem" *Biblical Archaeology Review* 4, no. 2 (June 1978): 10-15.

The Jerusalem priesthood did the best they could to knit the two peoples into their common Hebrew heritage. First and foremost, they placed the northern creation story by Elohim at the head of their new, integrated version of the text of Genesis. This was no great concession, since that is the version that speaks of God in the more courtly and urbane language of the northern kingdom and stresses his omnipotence. Today, teasing apart the Hebrew Bible to identify those texts that were original to the northern and southern traditions is carried out by scholars who follow what they call *historical criticism*.

Historical Criticism and the Hebrew Bible

Contemporary historical criticism of the Jewish scriptures has its roots in the “Documentary Hypothesis” of Julius Wellhausen. Scholars who follow this approach find reason to believe that the biblical text was the product of an editorial process in which later writers brought texts of diverse origins together into a finished product. For instance, the first two chapters of Genesis both tell the story of God’s creation of the world, but from two very different viewpoints that refer to the Creator by two quite different names. Genesis 1 was brought to Jerusalem by refugees from the Kingdom of Israel when it fell to the Assyrians in 721 BC. In this northern text, God is referred to as *Elohim*, while in chapter two the Creator’s name is *Yahweh* (who is better known to English speakers as *Jehovah*). *Elohim* was the common designation for God among the northern tribes, which eventually claimed their independence as the Kingdom of Israel after they rebelled from the rule of Solomon’s son Rehoboam. This name for *God* is a plural form, derived from the shorter name of the Semitic deity El, who was universally seen as the Father of the lesser Semitic gods of the Babylonians and Assyrians in the East as well as the Canaanites, neighbors to the northern tribes. In the Genesis 1 account, *Elohim* takes a singular verb as he “creates” (Hebrew *bara*, (בָּרָא) “to shape, fashion, or form by cutting”) the heavens and the earth, the day and the night, and the plants and animals by “speaking” them into existence. He is a God of authority whose word is law.

God’s creation account in Genesis 1 differs markedly from its portrayal by the priests of Judah in the south, where the story is found in Genesis 2. Beginning in verse 4, God is referred to by the Hebrew name *Yahweh*, which is said to have been revealed to Moses (Genesis 6:3). In Genesis 2, *Jehovah* never “creates.” Instead, he is a hands-on creator who “forms” (Hebrew *yatzah*) man out of the dust of the earth, who “sends”

(Hebrew *matar*) rain, who “plants” (Hebrew *nata’*) a garden, and who “makes” (Hebrew *tzamach*) the plants of the garden.

The Major Differences between the Northern and Southern Texts

Book of Mormon authors often follow the Elohist style of writing, which is in the tradition of Lehi’s fathers. John L. Sorenson, while pointing out a number of these from the Book of Mormon, argues that there is “good evidence that the Book of Mormon contains elements which are congruent with what scholars of the Old Testament distinguish as the E or Elohist source.”¹¹

I cite just one such example here: even centuries after Lehi’s departure, the Book of Mormon perpetuated the characteristic Elohist phrase “the man, Moses” (Hebrew *ha-ish Mosheh*; for example, in Exodus 11:3, Exodus 32:1, and Numbers 12:3) in Helaman 8:13. However, instead of exploring many simple examples like this one, I wish to focus on four *general* characteristics that distinguish the northern Elohist texts that came from the Kingdom of Israel. These four Elohist characteristics strongly contrast with the so-called J texts written by the southern authors.

The Ministry of Angels

In the Elohist texts, prophets interact with angels. For instance, at Beth-el, Jacob saw angels ascending and descending between earth and Elohim in heaven, while in the Jahwist version of the same story, he simply witnesses God above the earth without mention of angels. The Elohist text also contains the story of Jacob wrestling with an angel. Angels also play a prominent role for Lehi and his family. Angels are first referred to in 1 Nephi 1:7-8, in which Lehi cast himself upon his bed, was overcome by the Spirit, and experienced a vision of “God sitting on his throne, surrounded by numberless concourses of angels, in the attitude of singing and praising their God.” In 1 Nephi 11, an angel appears to Nephi and speaks to him about the meaning of Nephi’s vision. Later, an angel even appears to Nephi’s brothers.

11. John L. Sorenson, “The ‘Brass Plates’ and Biblical Scholarship,” *Dialogue* 10, no. 4 (1977): 37, https://www.dialoguejournal.com/wp-content/uploads/sbi/articles/Dialogue_V10N04_33.pdf.

Interpreters of Prophetic Dreams

According to Gnuse,¹² revelations through dreams were particularly characteristic of the Elohist text, where they are typically introduced in a formulaic way (*ba-h alomi wehinneh* — “In my dream, behold!”¹³ as in Genesis 40:9, 16; 41:17, 22). Like his ancestor Joseph, Lehi was a visionary, and he drew upon the symbolism of the Kingdom of Israel where the descendants of Joseph’s sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, settled. Lehi, whose ancestry was of northern origins, was spoken to in a dream (1 Nephi 2:1-2; 3:2, where Lehi’s son Nephi uses this kind of introduction). In fact, Lehi treats dreams and visions as synonymous when he writes, “Behold, I have dreamed a dream; or, in other words, I have seen a vision” (1 Nephi 8:2).

The later southern editor Ezra, writing in the latter half of the fourth century BC, commented on the role of prophetic dreams: “Hear now my words, If there be a prophet among you, I the Lord will make myself known unto him in a vision, and will speak to him in a dream. My servant Moses is not so, who is faithful in all mine house. With him I will speak mouth to mouth, even apparently, and not in dark speeches. God is able to give understanding to people concerning these dreams” (Numbers 12:6). The Bible says that the meaning of prophetic dreams belongs to God (Genesis 40:8, an Elohist text). Although inspiration through dreams can also be found in some Jahwist texts, they seem more characteristic of practices among the northern tribes, where they follow a developed formula.

The Imagery of the Tree of Life (Hebrew *etz ḥayim*)

Prophets in the Kingdom of Israel not only emphasized Elohim when speaking of God, they also maintained a “Mother in Heaven” tradition.¹⁴ Elohim’s consort was known to them as *Asherah*, her primary symbol being the Tree of Life. Both *Asherah* and her tree were eventually rejected by the compilers of the Hebrew Bible in Jerusalem, where veneration of her tree came to be viewed as an idolatrous practice. However, in Lehi’s vision of the tree of life, Lehi draws heavily on this theme, present in the Kingdom of Israel from which his ancestors came:

12. Robert Karl Gnuse, *The Elohist: A Seventh-Century Theological Tradition* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017), 65–66.

13. “Bible Encyclopedias: The 1901 Jewish Encyclopedia,” StudyLight.org, accessed September 2, 2019, <https://www.studylight.org/encyclopedias/tje/e/elohist.html>.

14. Daniel C. Peterson, “Nephi and his *Asherah*,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 9, no. 2 (2000), <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1253&context=jbms>.

And it came to pass that while my father tarried in the wilderness he spake unto us, saying: Behold, I have dreamed a dream; or, in other words, I have seen a vision. ... And it came to pass that I beheld a tree, whose fruit was desirable to make one happy. And it came to pass that I did go forth and partake of the fruit thereof; and I beheld that it was most sweet, above all that I ever before tasted. Yea, and I beheld that the fruit thereof was white, to exceed all the whiteness that I had ever seen. And as I partook of the fruit thereof it filled my soul with exceedingly great joy. (1 Nephi 8:2, 10-12)

Later, Lehi's son Nephi experienced the same vision:

And it came to pass that the Spirit said unto me: Look! And I looked and beheld a tree; and it was like unto the tree which my father had seen; and the beauty thereof was far beyond, yea, exceeding of all beauty; and the whiteness thereof did exceed the whiteness of the driven snow. And it came to pass after I had seen the tree, I said unto the Spirit: I behold thou hast shown unto me the tree which is precious above all. And he said unto me: What desirest thou? And I said unto him: To know the interpretation thereof. (1 Nephi 11:8-11)

The Bronze Serpent Raised on a Staff Tradition

The story of Moses's raising a bronze serpent on a staff to heal those who would look upon it in faith (Numbers 21:8-9) is also attributed by scholars to an Elohist story preserved in the Jewish scriptures. Just as the compilers of the Hebrew Bible at Jerusalem came to see the northern Asherah traditions as unacceptable, so too they eventually rejected the bronze serpent as an idolatrous object. King Hezekiah "removed the high places [where Asherah's trees were venerated], and brake the images, and cut down the groves, and brake in pieces the brasen serpent that Moses had made: for unto those days the children of Israel did burn incense to it: and he called it Nehushtan"¹⁵ (2 Kings 18:4). In contrast, the people of the Book of Mormon did not view the Nehushtan as an object of veneration in its own right but perpetuated the Elohist symbolism of the Nehushtan as a symbol of repentance and faith (see also John 3:14, which

15. While the text in Numbers concerning Moses raising the bronze serpent is an Elohist text, "Nehushtan" (נְהוּשְׁטָן) 2 Kings 18:4 is a later, non-Elohist derogatory term meaning "a brazen thing, a mere piece of brass," which expresses the disdain in which the bronze image was held by the later southern editors.

— in the context of a discussion of belief/faith in Christ and saving the believer from perishing — identifies the “serpent” that Moses raised up as a symbol of Christ’s crucifixion). Unlike the Jews who rejected Lehi’s teachings, Lehi’s descendants explicitly recognize the serpent raised on a staff as a symbol of the Messiah who would be raised up on the cross to atone for the sins of mankind (2 Nephi 25:20; Helaman 8:14-15).

The Continuity from Joseph of Egypt through Lehi and the Book of Mormon Prophets

Let us go back before the time of the monarchy to the era of Moses and the Exodus of all the tribes from Egypt.

Joseph’s story begins in Genesis 37, where he is introduced as the beloved son of his father Jacob: “Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his children, because he was the son of his old age: and he made him a coat of many colours” (Genesis 37:3). Joseph’s older brothers respond with jealousy. Isolated by his brethren’s animosity, Joseph becomes a visionary, an interpreter of dreams who prophesies his own ascendancy over his older brothers:

And Joseph dreamed a dream, and he told it his brethren: and they hated him yet the more. And he said unto them, Hear, I pray you, this dream which I have dreamed: For, behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and, lo, my sheaf arose, and also stood upright; and, behold, your sheaves stood round about, and made obeisance to my sheaf. And his brethren said to him, Shalt thou indeed reign over us? or shalt thou indeed have dominion over us? And they hated him yet the more for his dreams, and for his words. And he dreamed yet another dream, and told it his brethren, and said, Behold, I have dreamed a dream more; and, behold, the sun and the moon and the eleven stars made obeisance to me. And he told it to his father, and to his brethren: and his father rebuked him, and said unto him, What is this dream that thou hast dreamed? Shall I and thy mother and thy brethren indeed come to bow down ourselves to thee to the earth? And his brethren envied him; but his father observed [Hebrew *shamar*, “give heed to”] the saying. (Genesis 37:5-11)

That their father believed what Joseph’s brothers more likely saw as the boasting of a prideful dreamer surely aggravated their dislike of Joseph. Eventually, they conspired against him and sold him to passing merchants, who eventually sold him in Egypt as a slave, where he again

demonstrated his inspired understanding of dreams by interpreting the dreams of a butler, a baker, and of Pharaoh himself (Genesis 39: 19–41).

Joseph eventually married an Egyptian woman, Asenath, who bore him two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh. It is noteworthy that Ephraim and Manasseh grew up speaking Egyptian as their mother tongue, a fact that echoes down to the time of their descendant Lehi, who taught his son to record the “knowledge of the Jews” in “the language of the Egyptians.” Ephraim and Manasseh also received the birthright blessing that had gone to Joseph instead of his eldest brother Reuben, as Joseph’s dream of many years before had prophesied (1 Chronicles 5:1): “For Judah prevailed above his brethren, and of him came the chief ruler; but the birthright was Joseph’s” (1 Chronicles 5:2). This birthright blessing was not that of rulership, for the line of kingship was given to Judah. What then was the “birthright” blessing? Simply this: It was through Joseph’s two offspring born in Egypt that the right to the Melchizedek Priesthood passed down. This is confirmed in two ways. The first, known to Latter-day Saints, is that the prophet Lehi, who was a descendant of Manasseh, held the Melchizedek Priesthood. The second, known to secular scholars, I will discuss shortly.

As a prophet of God, Joseph held the Melchizedek priesthood. He also prepared a record of his own experiences, a record that has not yet been made available, but which was in the hands of Joseph Smith, along with the Book of Abraham:

The public mind has been excited of late, by reports which have been circulated concerning certain Egyptian mummies and ancient records, which were purchased by certain gentlemen of Kirtland, last July. ... The record of Abraham and Joseph, found with the mummies, is beautifully written on papyrus, with black, and a small part red, ink or paint, in perfect preservation. The characters are such as you find upon the coffins of mummies — hieroglyphics, etc., with many characters of letters like the present (though probably not quite so square) form of the Hebrew without points.¹⁶

Although he did not translate and publish the Book of Joseph, Joseph Smith’s linking of the father of Ephraim and Manasseh to an Egyptian text has intriguing implications for Latter-day Saints. I explore some of these here.

16. Joseph Smith, Jr., “History of Joseph Smith,” in *The Latter-Day Saints’ Millennial Star*, vol. 15 (Liverpool, UK: Samuel W. Richards, 1853), 549–50.

Those Who Held the Melchizedek Priesthood

While the lesser or Aaronic Priesthood passed down by lineage, the higher or Melchizedek Priesthood operated differently. As the governing priesthood, it passed on to someone worthy of holding the keys of priesthood governance. For instance, Abraham obtained the right to the Melchizedek Priesthood even though his father had not held it. Abraham received this right from Melchizedek, the King of Salem (Abraham 1:2-5). Similarly, Moses received the Melchizedek Priesthood from his father-in-law Jethro, not from his own father (D&C 84:6).

We know the Melchizedek Priesthood was also held by the Nephites (Alma 13:10), having been held by father Lehi.

The Jewish apocryphal book of Jubilees and the Assumption of Moses, as well as Josephus (Ant. 16. 6. 2), identify the non-Zadokite priesthood of the Maccabees as belonging to the “priesthood of Melchizedek.” R. H. Charles states that the Maccabean high-priests co-opted the title “Priest of the Most High God” in imitation of Melchizedek:

Now the Maccabean high-priests were the first Jewish priests to assume the title “priests of the Most High God” — the title anciently borne by Melchizedek, and applied to the Maccabean high-priests in Jubilees, the Assumption of Moses, Josephus, and the Talmud. A kindred title of the same significance is applied according to a growing body of expositors to Simon the Maccabee in Psalms 110. In due accord with these facts our text (*T. Lev.* 8:14) declares that a new name should mark the new priesthood.¹⁷

Joshua Mathews makes this point even more strongly: “There is a textually recognizable and demonstrably distinct priestly succession — an order of Melchizedek — intended in the composition of the Pentateuch and continuing throughout the OT canon (Tanak).”¹⁸ Further, “The first matter to consider is the portrayal of Aaron in the Pentateuch. I am suggesting that Melchizedek initiates a priestly succession, or order, meant to be seen as an alternative priesthood to that

17. R. H. Charles, ed., *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament in English : with introductions and critical and explanatory notes to the several books*, vol. 2 (Oxford, UK: Oxford Clarendon Press, 1913), 289.

18. Joshua G. Mathews, *Melchizedek’s Alternative Priestly Order: A Compositional Analysis of Genesis 14:18-20 and Its Echoes Throughout the Tanak* (Bulletin for Biblical Research Supplement 8; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 2-3.

of Aaron and his successors.”¹⁹ Although Matthews here describes the priesthood of Melchizedek simply as an “alternative” to that of Aaron, he emphasizes that Exodus 18 contrasts Aaron and Moses’s non-Jewish father-in-law Jethro as a priest (Hebrew, *kohen*) who is superior to Aaron in his declaration of Yahweh’s role in rescuing Moses’s people from Egypt. Matthews also cites Carpenter²⁰ in support of Jethro’s priestly role, as when Jethro fulfilled Yahweh’s message to Pharaoh to permit Moses’s people to go into the wilderness to offer sacrifice to Yahweh (Exodus 5:3), and when he made a burnt offering and the promised sacrifices to Yahweh in behalf of the Israelites.

Joseph and Lehi as Elohist Prophets

Lehi learned of his roots in the northern kingdom when he obtained from Laban the genealogy of his ancestors. That his ancestors had arrived at Jerusalem as fleeing refugees from the north about 130 years earlier explains his apparent lack of knowledge of his own ancestral roots. Yet Lehi had clearly been socialized in the imagery of the northern kingdom. His knowledge included teachings of such northern prophets as Zenos, Zenock, and Esias (Helaman 8:20; 3 Nephi 10:16), whose teachings were not included in the Jewish scriptures compiled in Jerusalem. (In Helaman, the northern prophets’ names are notably listed first, followed by those of the southern prophets, Isaiah and Jeremiah.) Lehi’s northern heritage is especially evident in the ministry of angels, the role of visionary dreams, the imagery in these dream visions of the Tree of Life in his and his son Nephi’s lives, and the tradition of Nehushtan, the bronze serpent Moses raised on a staff and was remembered for centuries by the descendants of Lehi.

Conclusion

The Book of Mormon has a strong connection with the Elohist traditions of the Kingdom of Israel (as argued by John Sorenson), traditions largely lost in the Hebrew Bible as it was produced in Jerusalem. It clearly bears the imprint of the culture of the northern tribes in the prophetic traditions that Lehi followed.

19. Ibid., 80.

20. Eugene E. Carpenter, “Exodus 18: Its Structure, Style, Motifs and Functions in the Book of Exodus,” in *A Biblical Itinerary: In Search of Method, Form, and Content – Essays in Honor of George W. Coats*, ed. Eugene E. Carpenter (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 103.

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