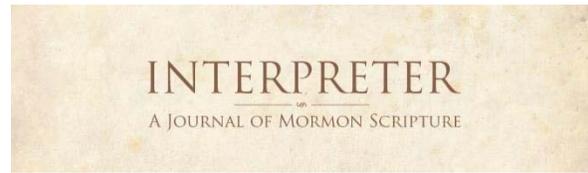




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A NOTE ON FAMILY STRUCTURE IN MOSIAH 2:5

Stephen D. Ricks

MOSIAH 2:5 provides the reader of the Book of Mormon with new insights about Israelite-Nephite family structure. In a passage set during what John A. Tvedtnes has persuasively argued is the Feast of Tabernacles,¹ we read: “And it came to pass that when they came up to the temple, they pitched their tents round about, every man according to his family, consisting of his wife, and his sons, and his daughters, and theirs sons and their daughters, from the eldest down to the youngest.”

The word “family” (understood in Modern English as a nuclear, two-generational arrangement—parents and children) is used here as a multigenerational structure—parents, children, grandchildren—and may be the equivalent of the biblical Hebrew word *bet-av/bet-ab*, “(extended) family.” But as Francis Andersen observes, “Since the scope of *bet-ab* is nowhere defined, its limits and typical size are not known.”² Still, Andersen notes that “the commonly accepted opinion is that it was an extended family, composed of all living persons, except married females, descended from a person still living, including the female slaves.”³ The “(extended) family” (*bet-av*) is

1 John A. Tvedtnes, “King Benjamin and the Feast of Tabernacles,” in *By Study and Also by Faith*, ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 2:197-237.

2 Francis Andersen, “Israelite Kinship Terminology and Social Structure,” *The Bible Translator* 20/1 (January 1969), 36–37.

3 Andersen, “Israelite Kinship Terminology,” 29-34.

thus multigenerational and includes all the living descendants of parents, possibly to the third or fourth generation.⁴

Whereas the modern Hebrew word *mishpachah* is translated in modern English as “family” and understood as a nuclear (two-generation) family, the biblical Hebrew *mishpachah* is to be understood as a multigenerational (possibly six-generation) family group, a “clan” or “phratry” that is even larger than the *bet-av* and was a subgroup of the tribe (Heb. *shebet*).⁵ The possessive adjective “their” in the phrase “their sons and their daughters” in Mosiah 2:5 may as easily refer to the sons and daughters of the sons and not of the offspring of the daughters since “a married woman joined her husband’s *bet-ab*.”⁶

To recapitulate, the idea of a nuclear, two-generation family is modern (in both English and Hebrew); the Israelite-Nephite family is multi-generational and indicated in Hebrew by *bet-av*, while the biblical Hebrew *mishpachah* is a six-generation “clan” or “phratry” and a subunit of the tribe (*shebet*).

Stephen D. Ricks completed his BA in Ancient Greek and MA in the Classics at Brigham Young University, and then received his PhD in ancient Near Eastern religions from the University of California, Berkeley and the Graduate Theological Union. While completing his doctoral work he spent two years studying at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. He is now professor of Hebrew and Cognate Learning at Brigham Young University where he has been a member of the faculty for over thirty years.

4 Cf. Karl Elliger, “Das Gesetz Leviticus 18,” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 67 (1955): 9; cf. Helmer Ringgren, “abh,” in ed. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, tr. John T. Willis (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), 1:9.

5 Andersen, “Israelite Kinship Terminology,” 29-34; cf. Hans-Jürgen Zobel, “mispahah,” in ed. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, tr. David Green (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 9:80-83; and Zobel, “sebet,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, tr. Douglas Stott, 14:306-8.

6 Andersen, “Israelite Kinship Terminology,” 37.

