

## Chapter One

# PROPHETS AND PROPHECY IN THE BOOK OF MORMON

## The Case of Samuel the Lamanite

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In 3 Nephi 8:3, Mormon almost casually mentions that people were waiting “with great earnestness for the sign which had been given by the prophet, Samuel, the Lamanite.” Although it seems almost a commonplace for Mormon to identify Samuel as a prophet, the word *prophet* is not actually all that common in the Book of Mormon. Because of this, Samuel’s identification as a prophet indicates something of his role in Lehiite civilization and in the broader Book of Mormon narrative.<sup>1</sup> This chapter explores how the Book of Mormon use of the word *prophet* derives from Old Testament religious thinking and how the Book of Mormon authors developed it. In the Old Testament, *prophet* does not refer to a wholly positive or righteous figure of divine leadership. The Hebrew Bible contains prophets who do not speak for the God of Israel or who are opposed to prophets such as Jeremiah. This ambiguity is present in the Book of Mormon, whose prophets remain outside the existing ecclesiological structures, but it is

lessened (there are no false prophets mentioned in the Book of Mormon, for example) and the Book of Mormon authors lean heavily into notions of future prophecy found in Deuteronomy 18. The ambiguity, the marginality, and the idea of future prophecy all play heavily into the presentation of Samuel the Lamanite.

It is interesting to consider who are named as “prophets” in the Book of Mormon and who does the naming. Many of the figures that Latter-day Saints consider to be prophets, such as Mormon and Alma, are never actually named as such.<sup>2</sup> The Book of Mormon instead uses ecclesiologically appropriate titles such as “high priest” for leaders of the church founded by Alma<sub>1</sub> (see Mosiah 23:16; 29:42) or “disciple” for the twelve leaders of the church founded by Jesus during his visit to the Americas.<sup>3</sup> The characterization of these figures as prophets has led to the coining of distinctive phrases like “prophet-king” for Benjamin<sup>4</sup> and “prophet-historian” for Mormon.<sup>5</sup> Neither of those terms appears in the text of the Book of Mormon. Even more intriguingly, perhaps, the word *prophet* in the Book of Mormon is not used as a specific reference to a hierarchical or ecclesiological office. When certain figures mentioned therein, either within Lehiite civilization or from the brass plates, are identified as prophets, it is not in regard to their position (actual or comparable) in the Nephite church.

I begin with a discussion of the use and concept of *prophet* in the Old Testament in order to show the variety and ambiguity of this term’s usage in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. This is followed by an analysis of how *prophet* is used in the Book of Mormon, showing that the term is rarely used for ecclesiological figures or for specific, named persons in the record. It is, in fact, not a primary term of use therein. Those described as *prophet* are often ambiguous figures in the Nephite record and in Nephite civilization itself. I will also discuss the notion of prophecy, especially future prophecy in the Book of Mormon, and consider how it plays out in the narrative of Samuel the Lamanite, using Samuel as a point of discussion for understanding Book of Mormon usage of the term *prophet* as a whole.

## “PROPHETS” AND “PROPHECY” IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Because the Book of Mormon derives from the religious worldview of the Old Testament, we can productively examine how concepts in the former are used within the confines of the latter. This analysis establishes a baseline from which the Book of Mormon authors and peoples can then be seen expanding and innovating their use of the term *prophet*. The term appears 328 times in the Old Testament. Compared to the size of the biblical record, that is not very many instances since, for example, *priest* appears 785 times and *king* almost 3,000 times. In the Old Testament, the word *prophet* often refers to specific spokesmen for the God of Israel, but this is by no means the only way it is used.

The word *prophet* in most English translations of the Bible translates the Hebrew word *nābî*, a word of uncertain derivation and etymology.<sup>6</sup> Samuel A. Meier, a specialist in Hebrew and Semitic languages, points out that the meaning and concept of “prophets” changed across the nearly one-thousand-year span of the Hebrew Bible, making it difficult to pin down specific criteria for an accurate definition.<sup>7</sup> Generally speaking, however, prophets are framed within the ancient Israelite tradition as those who present messages of the divine.<sup>8</sup> Importantly, prophets are often, but not always, messengers of the God of Israel. For instance, Jezebel, the Phoenician queen of Israel, is described as supporting prophets of both Baal<sup>9</sup> and Asherah (translated as “grove” in the King James Version)<sup>10</sup> in 1 Kings 18:19. Although the rogue prophet Balaam prophesies in the name of the God of Israel in Numbers 22–24, archaeologists have uncovered an Aramaic inscription with an oracle from Balaam in which he invokes other gods as the source of his prophecy.<sup>11</sup> In Jeremiah 27:9, Jeremiah includes prophets in a list of other ritual specialists, including diviners (*qosem*), dreamers (*holmah*), enchanters (*onan*), and sorcerers (*keshep*).<sup>12</sup> The inclusion of *prophet* in this list indicates that the conception of “prophet” in Jeremiah is not quite the same as it is sometimes understood in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints today.<sup>13</sup> *Prophet* in Jeremiah’s list does not refer to the righteous spokesman for the God of Israel, but to one particular class of ritual specialists among others.<sup>14</sup>

Of all the books in the Old Testament that discuss prophets, the largest percentage of references is in the book of Jeremiah.<sup>15</sup> Here, again, “prophets” are not positively valued, righteous characters. Instead, Jeremiah describes them as rivals to his claims to speak in the name of Jehovah.<sup>16</sup> The biblical book that uses the word *prophet* the most is thus also the book that preserves the most ambiguities about prophets in ancient Israel and Judah.

Nor is this ambiguity limited only to prophets of rival, non-Yahwistic religions. Even prophets of the God of Israel play a somewhat ambiguous role within the Hebrew Bible, and nowhere is that ambiguity more intriguingly displayed than in the case of Amos. Amos is from the kingdom of Judah in the south and is called to preach in the Northern Kingdom of Israel. He does so at the national shrine in Bethel. The priest of that shrine, Amaziah, tells him to go home and prophesy there. In Amos’s response to Amaziah, he famously states, “I *was* no prophet, neither *was* I a prophet’s son; but I *was* an herdman, and a gatherer of sycomore fruit” (Amos 7:14). The italicized words in the King James Version indicate they are not part of the original Hebrew, and so the verb *was* in the preceding passage, needed to facilitate the sense in English, was supplied by the translator. Although the KJV here uses the past tense, meaning that Amos is making a statement about his past life, other translations read differently.<sup>17</sup> Compare, for example, the New Revised Standard Version: “Then Amos answered Amaziah, I am no prophet, nor a prophet’s son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees.” In this reading of the Hebrew, Amos’s statement is not a temporal statement about what he was doing before coming to the Northern Kingdom of Israel, but an explicit refusal of his being identified as a prophet.<sup>18</sup> This denial suggests that *prophet* is not a word with wholly positive connotations for Amos.<sup>19</sup>

When analyzing the role of prophets in the Hebrew Bible, it is important to examine their actions, especially their prophesying. The verb *prophesy* (and its nominal form, *prophecy*) is not a common word in the Old Testament, appearing only 128 times. It is distributed relatively evenly therein, with the exception of Ezekiel and Jeremiah, where it appears 38 times in each. These two prophetic books account for more than half

of the biblical uses of this verb. As with “prophet,” we see that the act of prophesying is a matter of especial concern for Jeremiah.

The subjects of the verb *prophesy* are not always figures identified as prophets. Moses, the biblical prophet par excellence, is never the subject of this verb, for example. On the other hand, when Eldad and Medad prophesy in Numbers 11, Joshua seems to view this as somehow being related to Moses’s prophetic prerogatives (see Numbers 11:28).<sup>20</sup> King Saul prophesies as a sign of his being called to the kingship in 1 Samuel 10. Saul, however, is another case of the ambiguity of this term in the Hebrew Bible, since he also prophesies under the influence of the evil spirit (see 1 Samuel 18:10). With one exception, the only people who are subjects of the verb *prophesy* in 1 Samuel are Saul and his servants.<sup>21</sup> Likewise, 1 Kings 22 has an example of both the true prophet Micaiah (see v. 8) and Ahab’s myriad lying prophets prophesying in the name of Jehovah (see vv. 10–12).

Even with the clear endorsement of true prophecy through the God of Israel in the Bible, the act of prophesying continues to carry all the ambiguities of the broader prophetic phenomenon in the Old Testament. Jeremiah, for instance, contains a powerful indictment of what we would term false prophets. Of the thirty-eight times that *prophesy* is used in the Book of Jeremiah, twenty-three are identified as prophesying “lies” or words that the Lord did not send. And although Jeremiah is also the subject of *prophesy* in this book, in most instances this verb is used of his opponent. The book of Ezekiel follows this pattern as well, using *prophesy* to refer to the actions of both false prophets and true prophets (although, unlike Jeremiah, the balance here is more on the side of Ezekiel’s true prophecy).

Perhaps in recognition of this very ambiguity, the Hebrew Bible contains explicit instructions about differentiating between true and false prophets. In the Law, Deuteronomy 18:20–22 contains the following criteria for determining a true prophet from a false prophet:

But the prophet, which shall presume to speak a word in my name, which I have not commanded him to speak, or that shall speak in the name of other gods, even that prophet shall die. And if thou say in thine heart, How shall we know the word which the Lord hath

not spoken? When a prophet speaketh in the name of the Lord, if the thing follow not, nor come to pass, that *is* the thing which the Lord hath not spoken, *but* the prophet hath spoken it presumptuously: thou shalt not be afraid of him.

Note that the criteria here is based on the fulfillment of future prophecy. A prophet is true, according to the passage, if and only if his pronouncements about the future come true. This idea is made visible in one of Jeremiah's interactions with King Zedekiah near the end of the kingdom of Judah: "Where are now your prophets which prophesied unto you, saying, The king of Babylon shall not come against you, nor against this land?" (Jeremiah 37:19). Jeremiah castigates King Zedekiah with the recognition that the prophets who said the Babylonians were never going to conquer Judah were clearly wrong and so were not true prophets.

The idea of prophets and prophecy is a complex one in the Old Testament. The presence of criteria in Deuteronomy 18 for determining whether a prophet is true or false points to this ambiguity. As seen in the Hebrew Bible, prophets and those who prophesy are not exclusively righteous figures who lead God's people, which is how Latter-day Saints tend to use the word. Instead, *prophet* refers to a class of individuals often associated with diviners, who speak in the name of a divinity. This divinity is usually the God of Israel but can be another deity. In ancient Israel, prophets were complex figures who were as often as not on the margins of Israelite society. The Book of Mormon continues in this complexity, referring to various figures as prophets, few of whom have any specific association with the religious organizations among the Nephites.

## **"PROPHETS" AND "PROPHECY" IN THE BOOK OF MORMON**

Religious concepts in the Book of Mormon build from those in the Old Testament. In fact, the biblical ambiguity of *prophet* continues in the Book of Mormon. Although Book of Mormon authors do not associate prophets with other kinds of diviners as the Old Testament often does, they use *prophet* in three distinct ways. The first is in reference to literary

prophets (i.e., those who have their prophecies written down) and is used of both Lehiite prophets and prophets in the brass plates. The second use of *prophet* refers to an undifferentiated class of preachers who call the Lehiites to repentance. The third and smallest use refers to named individuals in Lehiite civilization; they are usually not part of the broader power structures in the church or the kingdom, but outsiders relative to the group to which they are preaching. Sometimes they are connected to Lehiite notions of future prophecy. Indeed, as we shall see, Samuel the Lamanite is especially paradigmatic of both the outsider perspective and the presentation of future prophecy.

As with the biblical record, the words *prophecy* and *prophecy* appear in the Book of Mormon in connection with those who are not identified or who do not self-identify as prophets. We find these words 167 times in the Book of Mormon. Fifty-five of those occurrences are in the small plates, once again unsurprisingly centered on the books of 1 and 2 Nephi. They appear 21 times in Mosiah, 35 in Alma, 23 in Helaman, 10 in 3 Nephi, 1 in 4 Nephi, 3 in Mormon, 12 in Ether, and 3 in Moroni. For example, although neither Lehi nor Nephi identifies Lehi as a prophet, Nephi describes his father prophesying a number of times in 1 and 2 Nephi.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, Nephi describes his own commentary on Isaiah as “a prophecy, according to the spirit which is in [him]” (2 Nephi 25:4).

The word *prophet(s)* appears 188 times in the Book of Mormon. Sixty-six instances occur in the small plates, with 35 in 1 Nephi alone. The word appears 53 times in Mosiah through Helaman and 44 times in 3 Nephi, the most of any single book in the Book of Mormon. It also appears a few times in Mormon, Moroni, and 4 Nephi and 17 times in the book of Ether. In many instances the word carries an undifferentiated sense, referring to “the prophets of old.”

TABLE 1. Occurrences of *prophet(s)* in the small plates of the Book of Mormon

| Book    | Total            | General Sense | Specific non-Lehite Prophet | Specific Lehite Prophet |
|---------|------------------|---------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1 Nephi | 35               | 14            | 21 <sup>23</sup>            | 0                       |
| 2 Nephi | 17 <sup>24</sup> | 12            | 5 <sup>25</sup>             | 0                       |
| Jacob   | 9                | 6             | 3 <sup>26</sup>             | 0                       |
| Enos    | 1                | 1             | 0                           | 0                       |
| Jarom   | 2                | 2             | 0                           | 0                       |
| Omni    | 0                | 0             | 0                           | 0                       |

The above chart makes it clear that there are no specific contemporaneous figures identified as “prophet” in the small plates. This is remarkable. It seems to suggest that however the various authors in the small plates saw themselves and the work they were doing, they did not carry the title of “prophet.” This may be a case of the term *prophet* having a specific meaning in Nephite usage, or perhaps even carrying an ambiguous sense, as we saw in the case of Amos.

Turning to the large plates, we find that Mormon’s abridgment does include specific references to Lehite prophets, but here there are surprisingly few.

TABLE 2. Occurrences of *prophet(s)* in the large plates of the Book of Mormon

| Book            | Total | General Sense | Specific Non-Lehite Prophets | Specific Lehite Prophets |
|-----------------|-------|---------------|------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Words of Mormon | 4     | 3             | 0                            | 1 <sup>27</sup>          |
| Mosiah          | 13    | 10            | 0                            | 3                        |
| Alma            | 17    | 10            | 2                            | 5                        |



|         |    |    |   |                 |
|---------|----|----|---|-----------------|
| Helaman | 23 | 12 | 3 | 8               |
| 3 Nephi | 44 | 36 | 5 | 3               |
| 4 Nephi | 1  | 1  | 0 | 0               |
| Mormon  | 1  | 0  | 0 | 1               |
| Ether   | 17 | 16 | 0 | 1 <sup>28</sup> |
| Moroni  | 2  | 2  | 0 | 0               |

Here, as in the small plates, it is clear that most of the references to prophets suggest that the term is used in an undifferentiated, general sense. There are only a few examples in which *prophet(s)* is used of specific individuals, and that category will be examined next.

## THE NONIDENTIFICATION OF PROPHETS IN THE SMALL PLATES

A close examination of the small plates shows that *prophet* is almost always used in a generic sense. Although a few specific non-Lehite individuals such as Zenos or Isaiah are identified as prophets, none of the authors identify themselves as prophets. Nephi is a king and Jacob is a priest (see 2 Nephi 6:2; 5:26), but they do not claim to be prophets or claim their father is a prophet.

One of the earliest specific uses of *prophet* in the Book of Mormon is in 1 Nephi 10:4, with an allusion to the tradition now found in Deuteronomy 18 that the Lord would raise up a prophet like unto Moses (see vv. 15, 18).<sup>29</sup> Lehi identifies this prophet with the Messiah, an identification that Jesus will affirm when he visits the Nephites (see 3 Nephi 20:23). Nephi explicitly identifies this prophet from Deuteronomy with “the Holy One of Israel” (1 Nephi 22:21).<sup>30</sup>

Apart from the Messiah as the “prophet like Moses,” Zenos is the first person explicitly identified as a prophet by a Book of Mormon author, in 1 Nephi 19:12.<sup>31</sup> In addition to Zenos, Nephi cites an unnamed prophet in 1 Nephi 19:11, 13–15. This prophet could be Zenos, or it could be Zenoch, Neum, or Isaiah, other figures mentioned by name in this chapter. This

chapter is largely a combination of previous prophetic statements. Nephi identifies Isaiah as a prophet in 1 Nephi 19:23. It thus appears that in Nephi's usage of the word, *prophet* refers primarily to figures who were found on the brass plates or who were living in Jerusalem contemporaneously with the Lehtes and is, therefore, a designation based on what Nephi finds in his scripture.<sup>32</sup>

Jacob continues this trend, referencing "the holy prophets who were before us" and "prophets of old" (Jacob 4:4, 13). In fact, Jacob serves as a valuable example of the intriguing Nephite differentiation between prophets and prophecy. Jacob observes that the Nephites "search the prophets, and . . . have many revelations and the spirit of prophecy" (v. 6). Note that *prophets* here refers to the written record of prophetic utterances, but the spirit of prophecy is something that Jacob and other readers of the prophecies experience in their own lives. The only person who self-identifies as a prophet in the small plates is Zenos, in Jacob's quotation from what is presumably Zenos's prophetic book (see Jacob 5:2). Zenos's famous allegory of the olive tree begins, "Hearken, O ye house of Israel, and hear the words of me, a prophet of the Lord."

This pattern—in which authors describe prophets from a distance rather than calling themselves by any discernible prophetic title—continues through the rest of the small plates. Just as Nephi and Jacob refuse to self-identify as prophets, Enos and Jarom do the same while stating there were many prophets (unnamed) among the people in their day (see Enos 1:22; Jarom 1:10–11). Given contemporary Latter-day Saint discourse, it is surprising that none of the writers of the small plates identify themselves or each other as prophets, especially given that they *do* occasionally portray themselves prophesying or living in a time rich with the spirit of prophecy.

Even more strikingly, although small plates authors never self-identify this way, Mormon describes the small plates as "a small account of the prophets, from Jacob down to the reign of this king Benjamin, and also many of the words of Nephi" (Words of Mormon 1:3). Here, once again, the prophets are primarily literary and largely in the past—that is, those who wrote or kept records.

## NAMED BOOK OF MORMON PROPHETS IN THE LARGE PLATES

To find a specific Lehiite named contemporaneously as a prophet, we need to look at Mormon's abridgment of the small plates. Even there, the list of named Book of Mormon prophets is not long. Abinadi, Alma<sub>2</sub>, Ammon, Nephi<sub>2</sub>, Samuel the Lamanite, and Ether are the only figures unique to the Book of Mormon who are identified within the text as prophets. This is not to say they are the only prophets among the Lehiites and Jaredites, as there are numerous anonymous prophets mentioned by authors in both Mormon's abridgment and the small plates. In this section I examine those persons specifically identified in the Book of Mormon as prophets in order to illuminate the contexts in which they are thus identified.

The first specific, contemporaneous person identified by a Lehiite as a prophet is Abinadi. Recounting the history and wickedness of his people, Limhi states, "And a prophet of the Lord have they slain; yea a chosen man of God, who told them of their wickedness and abominations, and prophesied of many things which are to come, yea, even the coming of Christ" (Mosiah 7:26).<sup>33</sup> Limhi's description of a prophet as one who testifies of wickedness and of the future (especially the incarnation of Jesus Christ) is central to how the Book of Mormon frames its understanding of the word *prophet*. It is also a distinctive innovation on biblical notions of prophecy.<sup>34</sup>

Amulek calls Alma<sub>2</sub> a prophet when he first meets him, saying, "I know that thou art a holy prophet of God, for thou art the man whom an angel said in a vision: Thou shalt receive" (Alma 8:20). According to Amulek's account to the people of Ammonihah in Alma 10, it is the angel who identifies Alma<sub>2</sub> as a prophet, telling him, "Thou shalt feed a prophet of the Lord; yea a holy man, who is a chosen man of God." Amulek frames Alma<sub>2</sub>'s prophetic calling in terms of his holiness and his preaching, which is something of how the generalized prophets are described in other parts of the Book of Mormon.

Ammon is somewhat vaguely identified as a prophet by King Lamoni's wife, as befitting her particular religious understanding: "The servants of my husband have made it known unto me that thou art a prophet of a holy God, and that thou hast power to do many mighty works in his name" (Alma 19:4). In disputing with his father, Lamoni extends this

identification to all of the Ammon's brethren (see 20:15). For King Lamoni and his wife, then, the prophetic gifts of Ammon are framed in terms of his ability to "do . . . mighty works"; that is to say, they stem from his access to divine miraculous power.

The people of Zarahemla debate whether or not Nephi<sub>2</sub> is a prophet in Helaman 9. Here it is important to note that for the people Nephi<sub>2</sub>'s status as a prophet depends on his identification of the assassin—in other words, it depends on his ability to utter correct future prophecy. Yet even after Nephi<sub>2</sub>'s prophecy proves to be true, the question of his prophethood still exercises many of the people, with some deciding that rather than being a prophet, he is a God. After he successfully petitioned the Lord to cause famine-ending rainfall, the people acknowledge him as "a great prophet, and a man of God" (Helaman 11:16–18). Unlike other figures discussed in this section, Nephi<sub>2</sub> has a role in the Nephite church (indeed, those who are converted by Samuel the Lamanite go to him to be baptized), but his prophetic identification is also tied to his ability to accurately prophesy of future events.

Mormon identifies Samuel the Lamanite as a prophet in 3 Nephi 1:9 and 8:3 and also in Mormon 2:10 (discussed later in this chapter). Mormon also says that Gidgiddoni and Lachoneus were "great prophets" among the Nephites, but he connects that status not to their leadership in the church but to their leadership in the army and government (see 3 Nephi 3:16–19).

The book of Ether is not directly about Lehiite culture, but because it is redacted by Moroni, it largely reflects Moroni's religious sensibilities. Most of the time in Ether, *prophet* is a generalized term referring (as elsewhere in much of the Book of Mormon) to those bringing a message from God. Moroni calls Ether "a prophet of the Lord" in Ether 12:2 and shows him preaching repentance. Because we have no sense of the religious or ritual environment among the Jaredites, we can say little to nothing about what Ether's being a prophet would have meant among the Jaredites.

These are all the named references to Book of Mormon figures as prophets. Considering all this evidence leads me to conclude that *prophet* does not appear to have been a dominant term of understanding among the authors of the small plates and Mormon. Indeed, prophecy in the Book of Mormon appears to be an outsider discourse. Although the outsider

status is different in various parts of that record, there is still something marginal about those who are identified as prophets or who identify others as prophets. Abinadi is not part of the priestly cadre among the people of Zeniff and needs to come to the people in disguise. Although he describes himself as wealthy, Amulek lives in Ammonihah, whose people explicitly disavow gospel knowledge, saying he “never [had] known much of the ways of the Lord” (Alma 10:5). King Lamoni’s wife is a Lamanite, and so it is difficult to tell what she might actually mean by *prophet* since we do not have complete evidence for the Lamanite religious tradition.<sup>35</sup>

So, rather than referring to the head of their church or to their primary spokesperson for God, the Nephites most often use the word *prophet* to refer to one among an undifferentiated group of persons who, often in the past, have spoken for God. There are a few occasions where the Book of Mormon refers to contemporaneous figures as prophets, but when they do, the word *prophet* is used by or refers to those who are on the margins of Nephite civilization. It also seems to have a strong connection to the prophet’s ability to tell the future. For the balance of this chapter, I examine the significance of these points in connection with Samuel the Lamanite.

## SAMUEL, A LAMANITE

The Book of Mormon makes Samuel’s marginal position vis-à-vis Nephite society clear in a number of instances. First, and probably most obviously, Samuel is identified and self-identifies as a Lamanite (see Helaman 13:2, 5). He cites his Lamanite origin as one of the reasons that the Nephites in Zarahemla are unwilling to listen to him: “And now, because I am a Lamanite, and have spoken unto you the words which the Lord hath commanded me, and because it was hard against you, ye are angry with me and do seek to destroy me, and have cast me out from among you” (14:10). Although his message of repentance infuriates the Nephites, Samuel’s status as a Lamanite exacerbates their reaction and leads directly to the Nephites in Zarahemla ostracizing him. As a Lamanite, Samuel is outside the cultural confines of his Nephite audience.

He is also physically an outsider—he comes from outside Zarahemla when he begins his preaching and returns there when he is done (see Helaman 16:7–8).<sup>36</sup> According to Mormon, Samuel is never heard from

again among the Nephites. It is clear that Samuel has no role or position in the Nephite church. He is not an ecclesiastical leader among the Nephites. Even following his preaching and prophesying, it is the local ecclesiastical leader, Nephi<sub>2</sub>, who baptizes the people and administers their entry into the church among the Nephites (see vv. 1–4).<sup>37</sup> Samuel is an outsider to the Nephite church, and his role as a prophet in the Book of Mormon reflects that, rather than reflecting an ecclesiastical leadership role. As noted above, *prophet* does not reflect a role of leader in the Book of Mormon, and Samuel's marginal status is not unusual as a prophet among the Nephites. It is, as we have seen, in line with how the word *prophet* is used in the Book of Mormon.

The Book of Mormon leans heavily into the notion from Deuteronomy 18 connecting prophecy to statements about future events. Everywhere Mormon identifies Samuel as a prophet, he is explicitly referring to his pronouncements about the future of Nephite civilization.<sup>38</sup> In the beginning of 3 Nephi, Mormon informs us, “And it came to pass that in the commencement of the ninety and second year, behold, the prophecies of the prophets began to be fulfilled more fully; for there began to be greater signs and greater miracles wrought among the people. But there were some who began to say that the time was past for the words to be fulfilled, which were spoken by Samuel, the Lamanite” (3 Nephi 1:4–5). Here again, there seems to be a sense of applying a version of the dictum in Deuteronomy 18:19–22 to the words of Samuel. Samuel's prophecy is intriguing, of course, because it contains a temporal aspect to its fulfillment (“five years more cometh,” Helaman 14:2).<sup>39</sup> In a later scene, certain Nephites even use this future bound to justify putting to death those who believe in these prophecies. It is in this context that Mormon first identifies Samuel the Lamanite as a prophet: “Now it came to pass that there was a day set apart by the unbelievers, that all those who believed in those traditions should be put to death except the sign should come to pass, which had been given by Samuel the prophet” (3 Nephi 1:9). Mormon discusses other prophets and the fulfillment of their prophecies in this section but mentions only Samuel by name.<sup>40</sup>

In the same way that Mormon mentions Samuel's future prophecies in connection with the birth of Jesus Christ, he again mentions them in

connection with the death of Jesus Christ. In the thirty-third year after the last sign, “the people began to look with great earnestness for the sign which had been given by the prophet Samuel, the Lamanite, yea, for the time that there should be darkness for the space of three days over the face of the land” (3 Nephi 8:3). The third time that Mormon calls Samuel a prophet is in connection with a prophecy being fulfilled in Mormon’s own time period. There Mormon describes how the Nephites’ actions in his day fulfill Samuel’s pronouncement: “And it came to pass that the Nephites began to repent of their iniquity, and began to cry even as had been prophesied by Samuel the prophet; for behold no man could keep that which was his own, for the thieves, and the robbers, and the murderers, and the magic art, and the witchcraft which was in the land” (Mormon 2:10).<sup>41</sup> It is clear that as Mormon frames Samuel’s prophetic mission, his focus is more on Samuel’s ability to produce future prophecy than on his preaching of repentance or his having any kind of ecclesiological leadership role.

The example of Samuel’s contemporary Nephi<sub>2</sub> further illustrates this. In the famous interaction with the murder of the chief judge, Nephi<sub>2</sub> is called a prophet a number of times, and it is always in regard to his ability to tell of hidden or future events.<sup>42</sup> After his pronouncements about coming calamities, some of those listening note that Nephi<sub>2</sub> knew everything that was going to befall them (see Helaman 8:8). These people then state, “Yea, and behold, if he had not been a prophet he could not have testified concerning those things” (v. 9). For these Nephites, Nephi<sub>2</sub>’s status as a prophet is fundamentally bound up with his ability to pronounce future events. This plays out further in the test of Seantum (the chief judge’s assassin), in which the people use Nephi<sub>2</sub>’s pronouncements to test whether he is a prophet. “Behold, now we will know of a surety whether this man be a prophet and God hath commanded him to prophesy such marvelous things unto us. Behold, we do not believe that he hath; yea, we do not believe that he is a prophet; nevertheless, if this thing which he has said concerning the chief judge be true, that he be dead, then will we believe that the other words which he has spoken are true” (9:2). Note that these people are essentially applying the criteria for determining true and false prophets from Deuteronomy 18:19–22.<sup>43</sup> Note also that for these

Nephites, Nephi<sub>2</sub>'s prophetic position derives from the fact that his prophecies proved true.

## CONCLUSION

Because Samuel the Lamanite is one of the few contemporaneous figures identified as a prophet in the Book of Mormon, the account of his preaching is useful for exploring scriptural and Book of Mormon notions of the prophetic mission and calling. The Book of Mormon reflects a religious thought-world deriving from the Old Testament, but it builds on that thought-world and develops its own distinctive perspective on Old Testament ideas. The Book of Mormon's notion of prophecy is an example of this. The term *prophet(s)* in the Old Testament refers to a wide variety of figures who were not all wholly marked as positive. The Book of Mormon continues in this vein, but while ambiguous aspects of the prophetic role persist, the Book of Mormon uses the term more positively. When describing specific individuals in Lehiite society, *prophet* is a marginal term, used by or of persons outside the ordinary ecclesiastical hierarchies that existed among the Nephites. As a Lamanite from outside Zarahemla, Samuel exemplifies this aspect of prophets in the Book of Mormon.

Additionally, although Old Testament prophets do much more than prophesy of future events, oracles plays a much more central role in the Book of Mormon understanding of prophets, seemingly influenced by laws in what is now Deuteronomy 18. In that chapter the test for true and false prophets is explicitly connected to a person's ability to produce verifiable future prophecy. Although he does not identify himself as a prophet, Nephi<sub>1</sub> clearly values Isaiah for his ability to utter future prophecy, about both the people of his day and Jesus. In a similar vein, Jacob's future prophecies form a point of contention between him and Sherem. Of those figures identified as prophets, Abinadi prophesies Noah's death and the fate of the priests (something Mormon makes clear). The Deuteronomistic criteria are clearly employed by Nephites concerning Samuel the Lamanite's contemporary Nephi<sub>2</sub> and are also visible in how Mormon refers to Samuel the Lamanite. Every time Mormon identifies Samuel the Lamanite as a prophet, it is in connection with a specific fulfillment of a prophecy.



In the end, the example of Samuel the Lamanite shows that the Nephite view of prophecy and prophets was a complex one, building on Old Testament ideas. Prophets were not the leaders of the Nephite churches. The Nephite conception of prophet was closely connected to ideas of future prophecy. This is both like and unlike modern Latter-day Saint understandings of prophets and prophecy and thus provides a valuable place for conversations about how the Lord speaks to all generations “according to their language, unto their understanding” (2 Nephi 31:3).

## NOTES

1. This study specifically concerns the identification of Samuel the Lamanite as a “prophet” in the Book of Mormon. While others have explored elements of his speech and prophecy, those considerations are outside the scope of the present study. See S. Kent Brown, “The Prophetic Laments of Samuel the Lamanite,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1, no. 1 (1992): 163–80; Donald W. Parry, “‘Thus Saith the Lord’: Prophetic Language in Samuel’s Speech,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1, no. 1 (1992): 181–83; Shon Hopkin and John Hilton III, “Samuel’s Reliance on Biblical Language,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 23 (2015): 31–52; John Hilton III, Sunny Hendry Hafen, and Jaron Hansen, “Samuel and His Nephite Sources,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 56, no. 3 (2017): 115–39.
2. Slippage on the usage of *prophet* is common in Latter-day Saint discourse. This is visible, for example, in the anonymously authored Book of Mormon Central KnoWhy “What Does the Book of Mormon Teach about Prophets?,” <https://knowhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/knowhy/what-does-the-book-of-mormon-teach-about-prophets>. That article makes nonscriptural differentiation between prophets as priesthood leaders in the modern Latter-day Saint sense and prophets in other senses using the rubric (P)rophet versus (p)rophet. Because of this, it draws conclusions about prophets based on assumptions that are not actually based on the Book of Mormon record. The modern Latter-day Saint usage of the word *prophet* simply does not map well to the use of the word in either the Old Testament or the Book of Mormon.
3. This includes Mormon. See 3 Nephi 5:13.
4. Some examples of the use of this phrase include Lawrence Cummins, “Scriptural Giants: Benjamin the Prophet-King,” *The Friend*, June 1988, <https://www>

- .[churchofjesuschrist.org/study/friend/1988/06/](http://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/friend/1988/06/); Neal A. Maxwell, “King Benjamin’s Manual of Discipleship,” *Ensign*, January 1992, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1992/01/>; Dallin H. Oaks, “Another Testament of Jesus Christ,” *Ensign*, March 1994, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1994/03/>; and Cecil O. Samuelson, “Appropriate Zeal,” *BYU Speeches Online*, September 7, 2010, <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/cecil-o-samuelson/appropriate-zeal/>.
5. The most obvious use of this particular phrase is in the introduction to the Book of Mormon. It shows up in other places, such as Hank R. Smith, “What Can the Book of Mormon Teach Us about Happiness?,” *Liahona*, February 2016, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/liahona/2016/02/>.
6. See Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 1:661–62, s.v. “נָבִיא” Hebrew *nābī’* has no direct cognates in other Semitic languages. See William L. Kelly, *How Prophecy Works: A Study of the Semantic Field of נָבִיא and a Close Reading of Jeremiah 1:4–19, 23:9–40 and 27:1–28:17* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2020). Kelly has a review of literature on the reception and interpretation of biblical prophecy on pages 20–22. See also the discussion about the difficulties in connecting this term to the literary prophets in Bruce Vawter, “Were the Prophets *nābī’*s?,” *Biblica* 66, no. 2 (1985): 206–20.
7. Samuel A. Meier, *Themes and Transformations in Old Testament Prophecy* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2009), 17. Meier suggests that admission to the divine council is one such criterion.
8. There is a Latter-day Saint discussion of this idea in Matthew O. Richardson, “The Prophet-Leader,” *Religious Educator* 9, no. 1 (2008): 69–81. For a specific Book of Mormon approach, see also Brent D. Fillmore, “With the Assistance of the Holy Prophets,” *Religious Educator* 6, no. 3 (2005): 118–27.
9. W. Herrmann, “Baal,” in Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter W. van der Hoorst, eds., *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 131–39.
10. N. Wyatt, “Asherah,” in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, 98–105.
11. There is an accessible discussion in Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, Dana M. Pike, and David Rolph Seely, *Jehovah and the World of the Old Testament* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2009), 134. For more in-depth scholarly discussion, see Jacob Hoftijzer, “The Prophet Balaam in a 6th Century Aramaic Inscription,” *The Biblical Archaeologist* 39, no. 1 (1976): 11–17; Jo Ann Hackett, “Some Observations

- on the Balaam Tradition at Deir 'Alla," *The Biblical Archaeologist* 49, no. 4 (1986): 216–22; Moshe Weinfeld, "The Balaam Oracle in the Deir 'Alla Inscription," *Shnaton: An Annual for Ancient and Near Eastern Studies* (1980/1981): 141–47 (Hebrew); Jo Ann Hackett, *The Balaam Text from Deir 'Alla*, Harvard Semitic Monographs 31 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1980); and Jacob Hoftijzer and Gerrit van der Kooij, eds., *The Balaam Text from Deir 'Alla Re-Evaluated: Proceedings of the Symposium Held at Leiden, 21–24 August 1989* (Leiden: Brill, 1991).
12. These ritual specialists are described in greater depth in Ann Jeffers, *Magic and Divination in Ancient Palestine and Syria* (Leiden: Brill, 1996). Page references are *qosem* (96–98), *holmah* (125–39), *onan* (78–80), *keshep* (65–69). She discusses prophets as a kind of oracular practitioner on pp. 81–95.
13. Robert L. Millet has laid out the position of ancient prophets as priesthood administrators in the modern Latter-day Saint sense. See Millet, "Prophets and Priesthood in the Old Testament," in *Sperry Symposium Classics: The Old Testament*, ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005), 48–68. This understanding of "prophet" underscores the arguments in the Book of Mormon Central article referenced in note 2 above.
14. For a discussion of the continuity between prophets and other diviners in ancient Israel, see Anne Marie Kitz, "Prophecy as Divination," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 65, no. 1 (2003): 22–42.
15. Of the 328 instances in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, 88 are from Jeremiah. Kelly notes, "One book in the Hebrew Bible, in fact, has more to say about prophets than any other, and that book is Jeremiah." Kelly, *Semantic Field*, 19.
16. Vawter, "Were the Prophets *nābī*'s?," 214–15.
17. See, for example, Göran Eidevall, *Amos: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 206, 208–9.
18. There has been much said about this passage, without any real consensus on an answer. See Vawter, "Were the Prophets *nābī*'s?," 208–9. See also Ziony Zevit, "A Misunderstanding at Bethel, Amos VII 12–17," *Vetus Testamentum* 25, no. 4 (1975), 783–90; and Terry Giles, "A Note on the Vocation of Amos in 7:14," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 111, no. 4 (1992): 690–92. This list could be multiplied (see the bibliography cited in Giles, "Note on the Vocation," no. 2).
19. Eidevall suggests that Amos is referring to not being one of the professional prophets active in both Israel and Judah. See Eidevall, *Amos*, 210. It is worth

- noting that, like Samuel the Lamanite, Amos comes from an outside people with a shared cultural and religious history in order to prophesy at Bethel.
20. Eldad and Medad are obliquely referenced as prophets in Moses's response to Joshua in Numbers 11:29.
  21. In 1 Samuel 10, Saul, upon meeting a company of prophets who are in the act of prophesying, is also induced to prophesy. Although Samuel (not the Lamanite) is identified as a prophet in 1 Samuel 3:20, he is not the subject of the verb *to prophesy*.
  22. See 1 Nephi 1:16, 18; 5:17, 19; 7:1; 8:38; 10:15; 19:21; 2 Nephi 1:6; 4:1.
  23. This includes Jesus and John the Baptist.
  24. This number excludes 2 Nephi 13:2 and 18:3, which come from Isaiah's writing.
  25. This includes John the Baptist.
  26. This is Zenos.
  27. The authors in the small plates.
  28. This is Ether, and so not a Lehiite, as such. I have included him in this category because he is not a prophet from the Israelite tradition.
  29. This passage is found alongside the same passage (vv. 20–22) as the law about future prophecy discussed earlier.
  30. Nephi quotes his father connecting the Holy One of Israel with the Messiah in 2 Nephi 1:10. Lehi and Nephi's explicit identification of the "prophet like Moses" as Jesus Christ is interesting alongside Nephi's own framing of himself in the mold of Moses. See Noel B. Reynolds, "Nephite Kingship Reconsidered," in *Mormons, Scripture, and the Ancient World: Studies in Honor of John L. Sorenson*, ed. Davis Bitton (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998), 151–89.
  31. For a discussion situating Zenos within the thought world of the Old Testament, see David R. Seely and John W. Welch, "Zenos and the Texts of the Old Testament," in *The Allegory of the Olive Tree*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and John W. Welch (Provo, UT: FARMS; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1994), 322–46. They suggest a *Sitz im Leben* for Zenos in the earliest stages of the Israelite monarchy (see pp. 326–28).
  32. Jeremiah is implicitly associated with prophets in 1 Nephi 5:13 and 7:14 and explicitly identified as a prophet by Nephi<sub>2</sub> in Helaman 8:20. Note that Jeremiah is associated here with the fulfillment of future prophecy by Nephi<sub>2</sub>. There is some connection between Jeremiah and the Deuteronomistic "prophet like Moses." See Benedetta Rossi, "Reshaping Jeremiah: Scribal Strategies and the

- Prophet like Moses,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 44, no. 4 (2020): 575–93.
33. “Man of God” is a collocation that appears in the Hebrew Bible and can be used as another way of referring to a prophetic figure, as in 1 Samuel 2:27. Limhi’s usage of this could reflect something of that. It is worth noting that the only figures who are identified in the Book of Mormon as a “man of God” or “men of God” are Abinadi, Alma<sub>2</sub>, the sons of Mosiah, and Nephi<sub>2</sub>. Comparison with the list of figures identified as “prophet” is fruitful.
  34. Alma<sub>2</sub> continues this interpretive strand in his sermon to the people of Zarahemla in which he recounts his father’s repentance after listening to Abinadi and then asks rhetorically, “And was he not a holy prophet?” (Alma 5:11).
  35. For an example of the difficulties with this even in the Nephite religious tradition, see Mark Alan Wright and Brant A. Gardner, “The Cultural Context of Nephite Apostasy,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 1 (2012): 25–55. One possible reconstruction of the Lamanite religious world in this time period, especially in regard to Abish, is found in Matthew L. Bowen, “Abish, Theophanies, and the First Lamanite Restoration,” *Religious Educator* 19, no. 1 (2018): 59–81.
  36. This is, of course, reminiscent of the Judahite Amos’s interactions at the Israelite shrine at Bethel.
  37. The anonymous author(s) of the KnoWhy at Book of Mormon Central identify Samuel the Lamanite as a (p)rophet and Nephi<sub>2</sub> as (P)rophet. Although Mormon clearly shows that Nephi<sub>2</sub> has an ecclesiastical role in Zarahemla and Samuel does not, both are called “prophet,” suggesting that Mormon is not using this word in an ecclesiological sense.
  38. There is a fourth potential reference to Samuel as a prophet in 3 Nephi 20:24, where Jesus speaks about all the “prophets from Samuel,” but the parallel reference in Acts 3:24, which clearly refers to the Old Testament prophet Samuel, suggests that the reference in 3 Nephi 20:24 likewise refers to that Samuel and not to Samuel the Lamanite.
  39. See Kimberly M. Berkey, “Temporality and Fulfillment in 3 Nephi 1,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 24, no. 1 (2015): 53–83.
  40. He mentions the other prophets in verses 13, 16, 18, 20, and 26.
  41. Mormon cites the fulfillment of prophecies by Samuel and Abinadi in Mormon 1:19, without specific reference to their calling as prophets.

42. This circumstance is discussed in Robert J. Matthews, "Patterns of Apostasy in the Book of Helaman," 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), 65–80.
43. Whether or not they are doing so in connection with actually living the law of Moses is impossible to determine from the text as we have it.