The Zoramite Separation: A Sociological Perspective

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The daily experiences and sociocultural realities of Book of Mormon peoples stand largely beyond our grasp. Few details besides those associated with important political, military, and religious events, rate even a passing notice in the sacred history. However, by applying norms of human social behavior to information preserved in the text, we can sketch a fuller picture of these peoples. A case in point is the Zoramites, a group that withdrew from the larger Nephite-Mulekite culture and, in time, came to oppose it with ferocious energy.

We first encounter the Zoramites when we learn that after being struck deaf and dumb, the antichrist Korihor sought refuge among them in Antionum. Hugh W. Nibley explained that Korihor "sought out a community of certain dissenters who were as proud and independent as himself."[1] But instead of finding safety, Korihor was "run upon and trodden down, even until he was dead" (Alma 30:59). In noting this, Mormon discloses that the Zoramites had "separated themselves from the Nephites" and were "led by a man whose name was Zoram" (Alma 30:59).

Time of the Zoramite Separation

We do not know exactly when the Zoramites separated from Nephite culture, only that Alma began his efforts to reclaim them in about 74 BC. By this time the Zoramites had built homes and synagogues and established themselves in Antionum. We do know that not too much time had elapsed since their separation because the people that Alma encountered in Antionum were of the same generation that left Zarahemla. Amulek's words to the Zoramites substantiate this: "I think that it is impossible that ye should be ignorant of the things which have been spoken concerning the coming of Christ, who is taught by us to be the Son of God; yea, I know that these things were taught unto you bountifully before your dissension from among us" (Alma 34:2; see 31:8—9). Amulek says that those in his audience, not their fathers or grandfathers, had been taught and then had dissented.

Amulek's claim that the word had been taught to the Zoramites "bountifully" may indicate that they were still in Zarahemla or its environs during the time of the extensive missionary labors that took place there in the seventh year of the reign of
the judges (ca. 85 BC). During that time 3,500 people joined the church (see Alma 4:5). But in the following year "there began to be great contentions among the people of the church; yea, there were envyings, and strife, and malice, and persecutions, and pride, even to exceed the pride of those who did not belong to the church of God. . . . And the wickedness of the church was a great stumbling-block to those who did not belong to the church; and thus the church began to fail in its progress" (Alma 4:9—10).

Mormon goes on to explain that Alma saw "great inequality among the people" in the land of Zarahemla (Alma 4:12), a troubling setback that prompted him to give up the judgment seat and devote himself entirely to preaching. As we will see, this inequality is the most likely cause of the Zoramite dissension. If so, the oppressed Zoramites probably would have left Zarahemla in the eighth or ninth year of the reign of the judges, when inequality and discrimination became significant problems.

The Question of Zoramite Origins

It is unclear whether or not the Zoramites were an ethnic element within the Nephite culture that traced its lineage back to the original Zoram, the servant of Laban. Even though the Book of Mormon usually delineates people as being either Nephites or Lamanites, both designations include additional groups: "The people which were not Lamanites were Nephites; nevertheless, they were called Nephites, Jacobites, Josephites, Zoramites, Lamanites, Lemuelites, and Ishmaelites" (Jacob 1:13).

It is possible to adduce evidence to support either side of the Zoramite origins question. Before he began to teach the Zoramites, Alma prayed, "Behold, O Lord, their souls are precious, and many of them are our brethren" (Alma 31:35). In what sense is the term brethren used here? Alma's statement could indicate that the Zoramites were not a uniformly ethnic group—that is, they could have been of mixed heritage, with some being Nephites ("brethren") and some being Mulekites. The statement could also indicate that most were ethnic Zoramites but that some Nephite sympathizers ("brethren") had dissented along with them. Another possible meaning is that they were all Zoramites by lineage but that some had previously been members of the church and were therefore considered "brethren" while others were not.

It is most probable, however, that the term Zoramite is used as an ethnic designation. For one thing, the Zoramite named Ammoron claims to be a descendant of the original Zoram (see Alma 54:23). It is true that aside from Ammoron (and by extension his brother Amalickiah), no other Book of Mormon personality with lineage through Zoram is noted in the text. And since the leader of the dissident group was named Zoram, it is possible that the people became known as Zoramites when they became his followers. Even so, this founder Zoram could have been an ethnic Zoramite named after his forefather,[2] or he may have adopted the name of his forefather when he attempted to unite the clan members
and sympathizers. The most compelling factor in favor of the ethnic origins view, however, is that throughout the Book of Mormon, ethnicity is very important to the people, as we will see later.

A Marginalized People

Another clue that leads us to suspect that the Zoramites were an ethnic group is found in what occurred after they separated from Zarahemla. The practices they adopted are indicative of a marginalized group that separates because of discrimination. In Alma 31:3 we learn that the Zoramites had "gathered themselves together in a land which they called Antionum." This indicates that rather than being an intact group that moved to a new place, the Zoramites were scattered throughout the land of Zarahemla and for some reason "gathered together" in Antionum.

That they named the place Antionum tells us it was either a new city or an existing city that they came to dominate and then renamed. In either case, they were looking for a new start, a place where they could establish their own rules and regulations. Notably, they did not follow the traditional Nephite practice of naming their city after their leader, Zoram (see Alma 8:7). This is the first indication that they had been discarding Nephite norms and consciously refusing to follow Nephite traditions.

The meaning of the name Antionum is not known, but given the focus that the Zoramite culture placed on wealth and materialism, it is interesting to note that when the Nephite system of exchange was standardized at the beginning of the reign of the judges, one of the gold measures was called an antion (equivalent to three shiblons of silver or to one and one-half measures of grain; see Alma 11:15, 19). While we do not know if there is a direct relationship between the words antion and Antionum, the prospect is intriguing.

Motivation for Separation

In her work *Commitment and Community*, sociologist Rosabeth Moss Kanter explains that separatist groups have traditionally been motivated by religious, politico-economic, or psychosocial reasons.[3] Although Kanter’s study focused on 20th-century American groups that endeavored to establish a utopian or communal society, the traits she identifies apply to any separatist group whether or not it establishes a communal system.

Kanter elaborates on the motivations that prompt groups to separate from a mainstream culture. She explains that religious separation usually takes place because of "a desire to live according to religious and spiritual values, rejecting the sinfulness of the established order." Politico-economic separatists are motivated by the "desire to reform society by curing its economic and political ills, rejecting the
injustice and inhumanity of the establishment." The separating party members have usually experienced the injustice themselves and subsequently reject it. Psychosocial groups separate because of "a desire to promote the psychological growth of the individual by putting him into closer touch with his fellows, rejecting the isolation and alienation of the surrounding society."[4]

Since Mormon's account of the Zoramites focuses on a report of their religious deviance, it may at first seem that the Zoramites separated for religious reasons. In this case we would expect religious ideas to permeate the culture and the newly established society to be grounded in and centered on regular if not daily religious practices and ideals. This is not the case. The Zoramites met once a week, offered up a rote prayer, and then "returned to their homes, never speaking of their God again until they had assembled themselves together again to the holy stand" (Alma 31:23). In addition, Alma saw that the hearts of the Zoramites were "set upon gold, and upon silver, and upon all manner of fine goods" (Alma 31:24). Yet most dissenting religious groups eschew materialism. This fact, combined with the Zoramites' limited religious life, suggests that religion was not the main motivation for the Zoramite separation.

There is also little evidence to support a separation due to psychosocial reasons. Psychosocial groups tend to remove themselves so their members can better nurture one another. Their focus is to separate from the predominant, repressive culture in order to build or strengthen the individual. The Zoramites displayed none of these traits. Instead of establishing a more equitable system that focused on nurturing one another, they not only marginalized the poor in their society (see Alma 32:3) but refused to care for others. For example, when the smitten antichrist Korihor sought refuge among them, he found no safety even though he professed a similar belief system, but was run down and killed (see Alma 30). The Zoramites clearly were not people who focused on overcoming the effects of psychological and social ills by caring for and nurturing the disadvantaged among them.

The most likely reason for their separation, then, entailed politico-economic considerations. Discontented because of their economic and social position within the Nephite culture, they gathered others of similar circumstances and banded together to establish a government and economy that favored them. In this case we would expect to find a new society that disavowed the old culture (including its religious and political systems) while disengaging or distancing itself in any way possible in order to create a distinct identity of its own—which is what we find in the account of the Zoramites.

This all brings us back to the point that ethnicity may have been a major reason behind the Zoramites' marginalization in Nephite society. The population of Zarahemla was largely a mixture of Mulekites and Nephites, with Nephites being a minority (see Mosiah 25:2). The Zoramites would have been a minority even among the Nephites, assuming that the people married chiefly within their respective ethnic groups. In a situation like this, the Zoramites, who traced their lineage from a servant who married one of Ishmael's daughters, would not have shared the same lineal descent from Lehi that other Nephites did. This may have
motivated the Nephites to marginalize the Zoramites, and in turn the more numerous Mulekites could have assumed this attitude when they began to adopt the Nephite culture. That the Mulekites and Nephites maintained their ethnic identities is affirmed by the fact that when Mosiah gathered them together to read them the record of Zeniff, they gathered in two bodies: the people of Zarahemla and the people of Nephi (see Mosiah 25:4). As we have already noted, earlier writers of the Book of Mormon combined smaller ethnic groups when chronicling events (see Jacob 1:13). It is likely that this practice was still occurring so that the gathered Nephites included Jacobites, Josephites, and Zoramites.

Stratification of society, despite all the ills it causes, has been a constant reality of civilization. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, in *The Communist Manifesto* in 1848, went so far as to claim that all of human history is a "history of class struggles."[5] The famous sociologist Max Weber identified three factors that contribute to social stratification: class, status, and party. Modern social scientists, in an effort to clarify Weber's original terms, renamed them property, prestige, and power.[6] President Ezra Taft Benson aptly summarizes these three p words with another: pride.[7]

It is interesting to note that usually education and ability play a part in class discrimination. However, when Alma addressed the Zoramite poor, he assumed they could read (see Alma 33:2—3, 12, 14). This is a revealing insight into both Zoramite and Nephite culture. Despite the fact that these people were poor and of the lowest social class, they were literate.

Given the Book of Mormon's emphasis on heritage, it is easy to see how lineage could have significantly contributed to a person's prestige. We are told that "the kingdom had been conferred upon none but those who were descendants of Nephi" (Mosiah 25:13). Whenever one genealogical line is the only one allowed to rule, that family holds a position of prestige as well as power. This is especially true when that ruling line is a minority, as the Nephites were among the Mulekites. Even among the people designated as Nephites, the blood descendants of Nephi were actually a minority. These people (those who followed Nephi) consisted of five ancestral lines: descendants of Nephi, Sam, Jacob, Joseph, and Zoram. However, in the first generation, Lehi counted the descendants of Sam with those of Nephi (see 2 Nephi 4:11), so Jacob identifies only four distinct Nephite clans: Jacobites, Josephites, Zoramites, and Nephites (see Jacob 1:13).[8] These designations were so important that hundreds of years later the people continued to identify themselves as members of these clans (see 4 Nephi 1:36).[9]

Mormon and his son Moroni stated that they were blood descendants of Nephi (see Mormon 1:5; 8:13), and Mormon further qualified that statement by declaring that he was "a pure descendant of Lehi" (3 Nephi 5:20). Amulek disclosed that he was a direct descendant of Nephi in order to establish his credibility before preaching to the people of Ammonihah (see Alma 10:2—3). Mormon also felt it important to acknowledge that Alma was a direct descendant of Nephi (see Mosiah 17:2). We are reminded in the heading to 3 Nephi that Helaman was a descendant of Nephi. Moreover, when the abandoned children of Amulon and the other priests of Noah
wanted to renounce their heritage, "they took upon themselves the name of Nephi, that they might be called the children of Nephi and be numbered among those who were called Nephites" (Mosiah 25:12). These expressions seem to be more than simple declarations of lineage. Being a Nephite, especially through direct lineal descent, obviously placed one in a position of prestige and authority.

The importance of lineage is compounded, as John L. Sorenson points out, by the fact that "the lineage founded by the original Nephi continued to hold the charter and sacred emblems of rulership over all Lehi’s descendants, which is precisely why rivals tried to kill off the line."[10] Thus we see that the problem of who has the right to rule is a major source of contention throughout the Book of Mormon.

Whenever differences in property, power, and prestige exist, societies become stratified, with the result that the people of low politico-economic standing frequently become marginalized. It is easy to see how, in a society that prized heritage, the descendants of a servant who was not a member of the founding family could have been discriminated against and how a charismatic leader like the later Zoram could have used this inequity to galvanize those people and entice them to dissent.

While acknowledging that the exact descent of the Zoramites is unclear,[11] Sorenson posits that "a reason for their split with the Nephites was evidently recollection of what had happened to their founding ancestor: Ammoron, dissenter from the Nephites and king of the Lamanites in the first century BC, recalled: 'I am . . . a descendant of Zoram, whom your fathers pressed and brought out of Jerusalem' (Alma 54:23)."[12] This statement indicates there was a tradition among the people that Zoram had been forced to accompany Nephi. Such a tradition could have been one of the rallying cries Zoram used to recruit his following.

**Distancing from Nephite Norms**

By noticing the way the Zoramites established their new culture, we find more clues indicating that the Zoramites were a marginalized group seeking to establish a society where they were favored. As the sociologist Christian Smith points out, "Groups construct their collective identities primarily by marking socially constructed symbolic boundaries that create distinction between themselves and others."[13] In forming their society, the Zoramites constructed distinctions that were built not on new ideals but on a foundation of anything anti-Nephite. In other words, their primary motivation seems to have centered on disallowing anything distinctively Nephite rather than on establishing something idealistic.

Even the Zoramites' perversion of religious practices demonstrated an attempt to place themselves in a polarized position to the Nephites. This perversion was so thorough that Alma and his brethren were astonished upon seeing it. The observation that these people did "worship after a manner which Alma and his brethren had never beheld" (Alma 31:12) indicates that the Zoramites did not
simply elaborate on Mulekite practices or revive differing religious traditions they were aware of from the past. Instead they invented new practices, and most of this inventing seems to have been an attempt to do what would most distinguish them from the Nephites or establish themselves as different and thus "better" than the Nephites.

Significantly, they no longer followed the law of Moses, nor did they believe in Jesus Christ. They had priests (see Alma 32:5), but we know nothing about how those priests functioned except that they had jurisdiction over the synagogues to the extent that they could control who worshipped and who did not. Instead of engaging in communal practices whereby priests officiated in behalf of a congregation worshipping together, the Zoramites apparently adopted an individualized mode of worship. One at a time the elite, arrayed in their "costly apparel, and their ringlets, and their bracelets, and their ornaments of gold, and all their precious things which they are ornamented with" (Alma 31:28), climbed to the top of their prayer tower (the Rameumptom), lifted their hands toward heaven, and loudly prayed. Of course, only the rich and well-costumed could stand on the platform and worship, thereby maintaining their image. We suspect that the poor were an embarrassment because they could not acceptably demonstrate supposed superiority to the Nephites.

Once atop the Rameumptom, each person repeated the same rote prayer:

"Holy, holy God; we believe that thou art God, and we believe that thou art holy, and that thou wast a spirit, and that thou art a spirit, and that thou wilt be a spirit forever. Holy God, we believe that thou hast separated us from our brethren; and we do not believe in the tradition of our brethren, which was handed down to them by the childishness of their fathers; but we believe that thou hast elected us to be thy holy children; and also thou hast made it known unto us that there shall be no Christ. But thou art the same yesterday, today, and forever; and thou hast elected us that we shall be saved, whilst all around us are elected to be cast by thy wrath down to hell; for the which holiness, O God, we thank thee; and we also thank thee that thou hast elected us, that we may not be led away after the foolish traditions of our brethren, which doth bind them down to a belief of Christ, which doth lead their hearts to wander far from thee, our God. And again we thank thee, O God, that we are a chosen and a holy people" (Alma 31:15—18).

More than words of praising God, these are anti-Nephite sentiments uttered in the form of a prayer. The expressions center on the "foolish" Nephites and claim that the Nephite traditions are corrupt, that the Nephite beliefs are childish, that the Zoramites rather than the Nephites are the chosen people, and that the Nephites will be cast down to hell. The people then thank their god for electing them over the Nephites.

As Kanter points out, separatist groups use such ideology to attach people to the new group while detaching them from the old group.[14] However, the new elite excluded the lower classes, who consequently did not achieve a strong emotional attachment to the new culture. Not surprisingly, when Alma and his brethren preached the gospel to this poor and oppressed class, they were not as hardened against the Nephites or as committed to the new religion as the elite were.
Also in counterpoint, the Nephite religion observed the law of Moses, which under prophetic interpretation pointed to the coming of Jesus Christ, while the Zoramite religion unabashedly eliminated Christ.[15] The religion of the Nephites encouraged people to pray anywhere and about all things that concerned them, a teaching that Amulek stressed to the Zoramites (see Alma 34:18—25), who offered a rote prayer only in their synagogue and only on the appointed day for worship (see Alma 31:14—23). The Nephite religion rejected idol worship, but the Zoramites reportedly worshipped dumb idols (see Alma 31:1). The Nephites had temples, sanctuaries, and synagogues built after the manner of the Jews (see Alma 16:13), but there is no mention of temples or sanctuaries among the Zoramites. The defining feature of their synagogues was the Rameumptom, the holy stand in the center of the synagogue with a platform high above the heads of the other worshippers (see Alma 31:13—14).

Such points of differentiation within the religion were a way for the Zoramites to distance themselves from the prevailing Nephite religion and culture. This distancing is typical of groups who become disaffected because of marginalization. This being the case, we would expect to find detaching mechanisms evident in many aspects of their culture besides religion. And in fact the Zoramite practice of gathering "themselves together on one day of the week, which day they did call the day of the Lord" (Alma 31:12), is one such detaching mechanism: the restructuring of time. Mormon's wording indicates they had purposely chosen a day for their Sabbath that was different from the Nephite Sabbath (see Alma 31:12).

Such restructuring of time is evident in separatist groups that Kanter studied. For example, Synanon, a group that began as a drug-rehabilitation center and later became a religious commune in Tomales Bay, California, carried out its work and self-improvement routines based on a 28-day cycle consisting of what they called "cubic" Twin Oaks, a utopian community located in rural Virginia, sets its own community time and begins the week on Friday. The now-disbanded Ba'hai commune of Cedar Grove, New Mexico, divided time into months comprising 19 days.[16] Members of Amish religious districts throughout the United States meet for worship services every other Sunday in an effort to establish a pace of life that is distinctly slower than the world around them.

Language may have been another cultural property the Zoramites sought to alter. They seem to have adopted or coined words that were not common among the Nephites. This is demonstrated by the fact that the word Rameumptom needed to be interpreted for readers (see Alma 31:21). Citing this example, Nibley suggested that the Zoramites had begun to develop "their own strange dialect,"[17] another distancing mechanism.

Continued Stratification

Sociologist James S. Coleman has observed that social classes tend to develop and maintain distinctive cultures typically consisting of styles of speech, etiquette, body language, dress, information, interests, and tastes.[18] Separatist groups alter
some or all of those features as they detach from the prevailing culture and establish themselves as a new culture. For example, some separatist groups adopt unisex dress standards hoping to end gender stratification, and many others rotate daily tasks and jobs so that no person becomes associated with a position that could foster perceptions or behavior reflective of prestige or inferiority. Other groups forbid some forms of stratification while consciously maintaining others they deem necessary to preserve their way of life. The Amish fit that last category; they maintain a distinct stratification based on age and gender even though they have eschewed stratification arising from such things as property, dress, or governing power outside the family.

Other groups that rebel against the perceived inequity of existing norms establish a new order only to change the criteria for stratification. The leaders of such groups take the position of the elite while most of their followers remain in the lower-class positions. Communism is an example. Under Communist rule the means of production are removed from the bourgeoisie, eliminating them from the position of privileged class. However, a privileged class and stratification within the society still exists. The new elite consists of members of the party and, more significantly, leaders of the party.

This is essentially what happened among the Zoramites. Instead of doing away with political and economic inequality, they established an elite class based on wealth. The new elite maintained a society built on discrimination, with the pariahs being the poor Zoramites instead of a separate ethnic group.

The people who found themselves doomed to lower-class status in the new land were laborers. Amulek's counsel to them to pray over their crops and flocks (see Alma 34:24—25) indicates they were farmers and shepherds—possibly the ones who grew the foodstuffs and provided meat for the wealthy. They built the synagogues used by the elite (see Alma 32:5), and they probably labored for the wealthy in other ways as well. Thus the elite were understandably angry with the missionaries and their new converts, since the resulting change in affairs, especially once the poor were cast out of the land, meant that the elite no longer had a lower class to serve them and provide for their needs (see Alma 35).

**Population of Antionum**

Although the size of the population in Antionum went unrecorded, the narrative provides some clues about its size. We learn, for example, that more than one synagogue served the city, and also that Alma took seven people with him to preach there: his sons Shiblon and Corianton; his former missionary companion, Amulek; the converted lawyer, Zeezrom; and Mosiah’s sons Ammon, Aaron, and Omner. (Except for Alma's sons and Amulek, these missionaries had at one time been disaffected with the church. Perhaps Alma chose them because they, like himself, could relate to a disaffected people.) Once in Antionum, the missionaries separated and went different ways to preach. The multiple synagogues and the
number of missionaries that Alma took with him indicate that the population of Antionum was not small.

Another defining feature of this population was that the people maintained an open society. Unlike the secretive and closed Gadianton society, the Zoramites allowed Alma and the other missionaries to live among them and to preach in their synagogues.

Despite the Zoramites' hatred toward them, demonstrated to its fullest extent in the binding and stoning of Shiblon (see Alma 38:4), they preached. We are also told that Corianton became proud and caught up in his own wisdom and that he abandoned the work to chase after a harlot (see Alma 39:3). Corianton's actions aggravated the ill feelings that the Zoramites had for the Nephites and made the work much more difficult for the missionaries (see Alma 39:11), but despite all this they taught without formal restrictions or prohibitions.

**The Missionary Message**

The record preserves details of Alma and Amulek's preaching, including doctrines taught. Despite initial setbacks, these doctrines were received by the lower classes, who had not become part of the mainstream Zoramite culture. Because the Zoramites had once known the doctrines of the gospel, Alma did not begin by teaching them basic principles, but instead encouraged them to put what they knew into practice—to act upon the "seed," or word of God, that they already possessed (see Alma 32). In developing his metaphor of the seed, Alma placed great emphasis on patience and diligence (see Alma 32:41—43), virtues they apparently had neglected before their dissent, resulting in failure to nurture the word. Accordingly, Alma promised that if this time they would nurture the word in patience and diligence, they would "hunger not, neither . . . thirst" (Alma 32:42). In other words, they would no longer feel the discontent that had driven them from their mother culture and the teachings of the gospel.

Alma then recalled the words of three prophets who had also experienced oppression and with whom these people were familiar: Zenos, Zenock, and Moses. Alma quoted Zenos's prayer: "Thou hast also heard me when I have been cast out and have been despised by mine enemies" (Alma 33:10). From Zenock he quoted, "Thou art angry, O Lord, with this people, because they will not understand thy mercies which thou hast bestowed upon them because of thy Son" (Alma 33:16). Alma reminded them that for delivering such a message, the people had cast Zenock out of their midst and stoned him. Alma also recalled the promise of healing from the time of Moses—that if the people looked to the brass serpent, they would live. But many of the Israelites who had been slaves—the lowest of social classes in Egypt—refused to look. Each of these accounts reinforced the testimony that despite the stratification that existed in Nephite society, despite the unfair circumstances and bitter injustices, if they would look to Jesus Christ he would heal them and help them.
Throughout their preaching, both Alma and Amulek demonstrated sympathy for the oppressed Zoramites but never encouraged them to run away or withdraw. The better course was to endure and to turn to Jesus Christ for help. Why did Alma not encourage the converted Zoramites to leave Antionum? We cannot be sure, but we do know that while Alma's primary motivation in reclaiming the Zoramites was his sorrow at their iniquity (see Alma 31:2), his concern also included the fear of an alliance between the Zoramites and the Lamanites (see Alma 31:4). Since the missionaries came to Antionum in part because they hoped to prevent such an alliance, they may have known that if the poor withdrew from the Zoramite social system, it could lead to a confederacy between the elite Zoramites and Lamanites. On the other hand, Alma may not have realized what the conversion of the poor class would do to the culture, and he may have encouraged the poor to remain because he thought they would be a good influence on the elite and an aid in further missionary efforts.

Whatever the reason, Alma never suggested that the oppressed Zoramites leave Antionum or rebel against the elite. Instead, he promised that if they would nourish the seed of the gospel, it would grow. "And behold, it will become a tree, springing up in you unto everlasting life. And then may God grant unto you that your burdens may be light, through the joy of his Son. And even all this can ye do if ye will" (Alma 33:23). While this advice was pertinent to their problem of overcoming or enduring the oppression they were experiencing in Antionum, it may have led them to reflect on their situation before they withdrew from Nephite culture. Perhaps Alma's words caused them to wonder how different their circumstances would have been had they remained in Zarahemla and stayed true to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In answer to a question about whether the Zoramites should believe in one God, Amulek testified that Christ would come and that the law of Moses (which the Zoramites had discarded) was designed to point them to the atonement (see Alma 34:14). After bearing testimony, Amulek concentrated most of his teaching on what the oppressed Zoramites must now do: repent, pray, and care for the needy (see Alma 34:17—28, 33—36).

It is interesting that Amulek instructed the oppressed poor to care for the needy. This seems to be a warning that they should not begin a new community (as was done before) that would merely change who the elite were. Rather, they were to always care for anyone in need, thus counteracting effects of a stratified society that marginalized segments of the population. Amulek then explained, "If ye do not remember to be charitable, ye are as dross, which the refiners do cast out, (it being of no worth) and is trodden under foot of men" (Alma 34:29).

Amulek admonished the people to "come forth and harden not your hearts any longer" (Alma 34:31). This reiterates the major theme of the missionary message—that despite offenses, persecution, and adversity, what matters most in life is not a person's station or situation but how a person reacts to it. The vital thing is to repent because "this life is the time for men to prepare to meet God" (Alma 34:32). According to Amulek, the Zoramite poor could not afford to wait until they were
free or wealthy or part of the elite to do what is good; rather, they needed to soften
their hearts, obey the commandments regardless of their circumstance in life, and
concentrate on the things of God now.

Amulek then closed with an admonition similar to Alma's. Rather than urge the
people to leave Antionum or to rebel against the elite, Amulek told them to be
patient and "bear with all manner of afflictions; that ye do not revile against those
who do cast you out because of your exceeding poverty, lest ye become sinners like
unto them; but that ye have patience, and bear with those afflictions, with a firm
hope that ye shall one day rest from all your afflictions" (Alma 34:40—41).

After preaching, Alma and Amulek and the other missionaries traveled to Jershon,
where the people of Anti-Nephi-Lehi lived. Their departure should have made the
ruling Zoramites happy: the offensive missionaries were gone. However, the "more
popular part of the Zoramites" were angry because the missionaries' message "did
destroy their craft" (Alma 35:3). This may indicate that the Zoramite belief system
was somehow holding the poor in check, that the teachings of Jesus Christ
convinced the oppressed Zoramites of the error of the belief system, and that they
were no longer willing to buy into the system and continue to serve the elite as
they had done. In their anger the ruling Zoramites identified those who believed the
missionaries and banished them from Antionum.[19] Once cast out, the displaced
Zoramites followed the missionaries to Jershon. When the people in Jershon
received the fugitives, the Zoramites grew angrier.

**The Ruling Zoramites Retaliate**

As we have seen, the Zoramite society had consciously and purposely constructed
social classes. Sociologists Michael L. Schwalbe and Douglas Mason-Schrock call
this process of constructing social class identity "subcultural identity work," and
they posit that such social construction consists of four elements: (1) creating
social representations, (2) coding or rule making that creates the identity, (3)
affirming or enacting and validating identity claims, and (4) policing or protecting
and enforcing the identity code.[20]

The Zoramites had defined a society in which the position of the upper classes was
dependent upon having a lower class to rule over. Thus the preaching of the
Nephite missionaries not only altered the Zoramites' craft and economic situation, it
challenged their carefully constructed identity. Their code had been broken, and
this necessitated policing in order to protect the identity of the group. Casting out
the believers was an act of both policing and of affirming the ruling class's position
as elites. But instead of solving the problem and returning the society to its norms,
that action further disrupted the society and intensified the hatred against the
meddlesome Nephites, who were directly responsible for upsetting the social order.

From this point on, the Zoramites who had not reconverted grew increasingly
wicked. Their hatred was fueled by a perception that the Nephite missionaries
destroyed their comfortable way of life. The fact that the poor Zoramites were being sheltered by the people of Jershon became a rallying cry for war. The vindictive Zoramites sought allies among hostile Lamanites and turned their efforts to subjugating the Nephites. It is easy to imagine them saying, "If they had left us alone, we would have left them alone. But they didn't!"

In the end, the missionaries may have questioned what they had done. They went to Antionum to reclaim the Zoramites, but in the process some of the Zoramites became even more hateful than before and formed an alliance with the hostile Lamanites to wage war against the Nephites. In fact, so intense was the Zoramites' hatred for the Nephites that the Lamanites later appointed them to be chief captains and leaders of their armies (see Alma 43:44). The very situation the missionaries had hoped to avoid became a reality: the Zoramites and Lamanites joined forces. As feared, this alliance proved disastrous. For many years to come, the Zoramites continued to be a terrible threat to the Nephites—not only because of their extreme hatred but also because the Zoramites knew "the strength of the Nephites, and their places of resort, and the weakest parts of their cities" (Alma 48:5).

Lessons from the Zoramites

While it is impossible to ascertain the historical and sociological dynamics of the Zoramites in full, when we combine the details in the record it becomes apparent that the Zoramites were a people marginalized by the Nephite-Mulekite culture. Among other lessons, their story shows us what can happen when a society is stratified in a way that disadvantages and oppresses the lower class. Such mistreatment apparently caused the Zoramites to leave the church and to withdraw to Antionum, where they attempted to establish their own religion and culture. It follows that the antipathy engendered by the original marginalization intensified when the Nephites challenged the very foundation of the new society by preaching religious doctrines that the Zoramites had already rejected. At this point the apostate Zoramites turned from their attempt to establish a separate culture and began to war against their mother culture. This demonstrates a major Book of Mormon theme: people who at one time have the gospel and then turn from it become the most embittered enemies of the people of the church and of God.

This transition from quiescent dissidents to spiteful, aggressive enemies forms a powerful study of human nature. These sobering realities underscore the importance of prophetic teachings calculated to promote unity, equality, community, and other Zionlike qualities that lead to being one in Christ (see Mosiah 23:7; 4 Nephi 1:17; and Doctrine and Covenants 38:25—27). Seeing the Zoramite narrative in this fuller perspective, we are powerfully reminded of one of the reasons prophets such as Alma have consistently warned, "Will you persist in turning your backs upon the poor, and the needy, and in withholding your substance from them?" (Alma 5:55).


[9] Mark Davis and Brent Israelsen point out, however, that because of the frequent assimilation of one ethnic group into another, "the national character became one of culture, religion, and disposition, rather than of race or ancestry" (Mark Davis and Brent Israelsen, "International Relations and Treaties in the Book of Mormon" [Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1980], 9). Therefore it is difficult to determine how or on what basis the people at the time of Mormon determined these clans.


[16] See Kanter, Commitment and Community, 41.


[19] Many thanks to S. Kent Brown for the insight that the fact the Zoramite leaders were able to "[find] out privily the minds of all the people" (Alma 35:5) without resorting to intimidation reinforces the argument that these people were a distinct clan. A familial relationship would encourage this kind of trust and accessibility to people whereas a mixed-clan community would not.