

HEAVEN COUNTS

Sacred Numbers
in the
Book of Mormon

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INTRODUCTION



WHEN NOAM, OUR ELDEST SON, WAS GETTING READY TO TAKE HIS DRIVING test, I started thinking about the car I could buy him. One day, on my way home from work, I thought a good first car might be a Mehari. The Mehari was a beach car produced in 1968 by the French carmaker Citroën. It was a two-seater with a plastic body and no electronics; it was easy to drive and easy to repair. It was also very fashionable in the seventies. At university, a friend of mine had one, and everyone thought he was so cool. It would be a good choice, although it would be very difficult to find one in good condition, since Citroën ended its production in 1987.

As I was thinking about how to find one, a Mehari suddenly cut me off. It was so unexpected that instead of irritating me, it made me laugh. Was it a sign from heaven? I don't think so. I could have come across ten Mehari on the previous day and noticed none of them. I saw the one I did because I was thinking about it at that precise moment.

We hear only what we are prepared to hear and see only what we are prepared to see. Which raises a genuine question: Do we see things because they exist, or do we see them because we want to see them? This question, which at first glance seems philosophical, is not at all so in the spiritual realm. It is a question I have asked myself regularly while writing this book on sacred numbers in the Book of Mormon.

Some of the examples I give might be the result of chance or of my desire to give meaning to something that has none. However, there are two major arguments against these possibilities: first, the fact that the same research done on other books, whether from Joseph Smith's time or our own, whether spiritual or secular, yields no similar results. Secondly, the quantity and complexity of the examples found in the Book of Mormon defy all laws of probability. When several examples of sacred numbers are found in almost every chapter of the Book of Mormon, chance is no longer an option; another explanation must be found.

Just as we unconsciously express our culture in all we write or say, referring to an advertisement, a historical event, or the lyrics of a song, if the Book of Mormon is what it claims to be—an ancient Semitic text—then ancient Jewish culture must shine through in every line. Nephi lived at a time when culture was mostly transmitted orally, practically limited to the Torah. Young people studied it assiduously in the synagogue, learning long passages by heart. If Nephi really existed, being the most Jewish of the authors of the Book of Mormon, the influence of his culture should be found in the background, not obviously (which would be suspicious) but more as a subtle pattern.

So, perhaps it is not our imagination that perceives echoes of the Torah in Nephi's words when he sees his family as a little Israel separating itself from a wicked people,³ fleeing into the desert with riches of their persecutors,⁴ offering sacrifices after three days,⁵ wandering there for many years,⁶ being miraculously saved from famine,⁷ receiving instructions on a mountain,⁸ arriving at the Red Sea and able to cross only thanks to the hand of God,⁹ and finally reaching their promised land.

Did Nephi see the tree of his father's dream as the tree of the Garden of Eden? Did he see himself, like his ancestor Joseph, as his father's favorite son, the obedient younger brother hated by his older brothers to the point that they wanted to kill him? Did he see himself returning to his father's tent laden with game after the story of the broken bow as Joseph, Pharaoh's intendant, forgiving his brothers and saving his family from starvation? Did he see himself in front of Laban, like David facing Goliath¹⁰ when they both took up their enemy's sword to cut off their head? Did the thought of reliving the feat of this young hero, celebrated by all Israel, give him courage?¹¹

IMAGINATION OR CULTURE?

Over the last few decades, a great deal of research has been carried out by people on Hebrew culture in the Book of Mormon: things like chiasms, parallelisms, the origin of names, structural markers, the social roles of men and women, the legal system, commercial practices, religious festivals, and so forth.

This book is not a scholarly work. My style is simple, with minimal references, to keep the focus on the core message. I write as one observer addressing another, inviting reflection and offering a fresh perspective that experts may have overlooked.

My work focuses on a very specific aspect of Hebrew culture in the Book of Mormon that, according to my knowledge, has not yet been researched. It started when I was writing a book on the house of the Lord. In one of the chapters, I was working on the symbolism of sacred numbers. Wanting to give some examples not only from the Bible but also from the Book of Mormon, I began to pay more attention in my daily reading to the potential use of Hebrew sacred numbers that serve to reinforce a message.

Knock and it shall be opened unto you. Passages read dozens of times suddenly took on a new meaning. Until that day, I had always thought that when Laman and Lemuel rebelled, Nephi systematically lectured them, as in the following passage:¹²

[...] **how is it that ye** are so hard in your hearts, and so blind in your minds [...]?

How is it that ye have not hearkened unto the word of the Lord?

How is it that ye have forgotten that ye have seen an angel of the Lord? Yea, and

how is it that ye have forgotten what great things the Lord hath done for us [...]? Yea, and

how is it that ye have forgotten that

the Lord is able to do all things. . . .¹³

Notice that the expression “How is it that ye. . .” was repeated exactly five times. Then consider that in ancient Hebrew culture the number five represents the hand of God. With those two pieces, we understand that Nephi is not so much blaming his brothers for rebelling as he is telling them that he doesn’t understand how they cannot see the hand of God that has helped them overcome every single difficulty. This assumption is confirmed by the words that follow these five repetitions: “the Lord is able to do all things.”

When Mormon asserts that the devil would have no power over us if we strove to be like Captain Moroni, he positions Moroni as a model to follow. Thus, in three consecutive verses, Mormon lists all the qualities of this great war leader:

And Moroni was a strong and
a mighty **man**; he was
a **man** of a perfect understanding; yea,
a **man** that did not delight in bloodshed;
a **man** whose soul did joy in the liberty [...] Yea,
a **man** whose heart did swell with thanksgiving to his God [...]
a **man** who did labor exceedingly for the welfare and safety of his people. Yea, and he was
a **man** who was firm in the faith of Christ. . . .¹⁴

Mormon attributes seven qualities to Moroni, each introduced by the same words: *a man*. In ancient Hebrew culture, the number seven symbolizes divine wholeness. This means that Mormon insists on the fact that an accomplished and complete man of God is above all (1) strong, (2) intelligent, (3) pacifist, (4) free, (5) grateful, (6) industrious, and (7) firm in his faith. By structuring his message in this way, Mormon is probably asking us the question: “What about you? Which of these qualities should you develop to be a more complete creation of God?”

So, I put aside my thoughts on the temple for a while to devote myself fully to this book. As the book took shape and as I talked about it to others, the most recurrent question I was asked by my somewhat incredulous reviewers was: “Is this really in the Book of Mormon? Didn’t you remove or add anything?” I understand these questions. And I understand those doubts. The structure of some of these passages is simply incredible.

Modern readers often view numbers merely as data, but the authors of these texts were part of a symbolic culture that used repetitions and numbers the way a poet uses rhymes. For them, numbers were qualitative before being quantitative; they were used not merely to count reality, but to interpret it. Reading the Book of Mormon can be challenging for those unfamiliar with it. Repetitions can seem excessive and strange. However, if these repetitions are deliberate structures inherent to an ancient culture, then what was once seen as a difficulty can become an exciting quest for hidden treasures.

My objective is not to explain how numbers functioned within the spiritual grammar of ancient Hebrew, but rather to encourage readers to

relearn how to see. My intention is not to provide a spiritual interpretation of each numerical structure, but rather to share the personal insights that led me to believe that these structures are intentional and subtly indicate additional meanings within the text.

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I cannot forget my father, Marcel Kahne. Thank you, Dad, for introducing me to the research of these extraordinary men and women, and for sharing with me, and those who wanted to listen, all that you discovered in the course of your two translations of the Book of Mormon into French. For your first translation, you used index cards, a tape recorder and a typewriter; the second time, you were assisted by a computer and software to ensure the consistency of the translation.

It remains for me to say that I am not a professor of theology, archaeology, or anthropology. Nor do I have a PhD in Egyptology or Mesoamerican culture. I do, however, have a master's degree in linguistics and a PhD in social psychology, both of which give me a particular affection for words and people's behavior and a certain rigor in my research. On top of this, I inherited from my father the Jewish culture I carry in my name and in my blood, as well as through the history of the more than eighty members of my family who were murdered during the Shoah in Auschwitz and Birkenau. This heritage gives me a different view of the world.

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3. Egyptian slavery in the first case, assassination attempts on his father in the second.
 4. For Israel, silver and gold objects taken from their Egyptian masters and neighbors, to melt down and make objects of worship. For the Lehtes, bronze plates and Laban's sword.
 5. Compare Exodus 3:17 and 1 Nephi 2:6–7.
 6. Israel for forty years, the Lehtes for eight years.
 7. Heavenly manna for the people of Israel, Nephi's broken bow for the Lehtes.
 8. Moses on Mount Sinai, Nephi on a mountain where he had never set foot.

9. Water separation in the first case, shipbuilding in the second.
10. “Laban and his fifty, yea, or even than his tens of thousands” (1 Nephi 4:1).
11. See Grant Hardy, *The Annotated Book of Mormon* (Oxford University Press, 2023).
12. In order to make the use of sacred numbers in the Book of Mormon more visual, words repeated to form a sacred number will be bolded and aligned on the same tab. If multiple sacred numbers are used in the same verses, multiple tabs will be used, one per sacred number. This will allow the reader to easily understand which word composes which sacred number by observing their respective alignment.
13. 1 Nephi 7:8–12, emphasis added. To shorten the footnotes, “emphasis added” will not be used from here on.
14. Alma 48:11–13. In French, the word *mighty* is positioned after the expression *a man*, thus making seven perfect repetitions of the expression, perhaps as in “reformed Egyptian.”

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A CULTURE OF SYMBOLS



SINCE THE BEGINNING OF TIME, HUMANKIND HAS USED SYMBOLS TO interpret the world and give meaning to life. Symbols have many advantages over words. They can more easily convey complex ideas to a diverse audience. Faced with a symbol, each person takes away a message that is both common and different, information that both unifies the group and meets individual needs. Show twenty people the image of a forest and you will get twenty different descriptions, although each one will describe a forest. Each symbol therefore carries a multitude of meanings that, through their recurrent use over time, converge into a common understanding, adopted by popular culture.

The more these symbols are used, the more their meaning is shared, and the more they reinforce a group's cultural identity. In Hebrew culture, a culture of symbols par excellence, clothing accessories such as the *kippah* (the skullcap worn by men), *payes* (locks of hair on the sides of the head), or *sheitels* (the wig worn by some Orthodox married women) are symbols that reinforce the feeling of belonging to the same community. And sometimes, these symbols don't even have to be visible, only presupposed—like circumcision.

Symbols are omnipresent in Hebrew culture, in art, in architecture, and in religious and social rituals. Adam, Melchizedek, or Elijah are names as much as titles, conveying specific meanings and symbolism. In the sky, the moon represents femininity and the power of creation, while the stars represent infinity. In nature, the fig tree symbolizes fertility; grapes, milk,

and honey symbolize abundance; the olive tree symbolizes longevity; and the mountains symbolize the sacred, where heaven and earth meet. Among animals, the dove symbolizes purity, innocence, and peace; the lion symbolizes strength, power, and royalty; and the lamb symbolizes innocence.

As for colors, white symbolizes purity; blue, the color of heaven, symbolizes the divine. In the body, blood symbolizes life and death. The head symbolizes dignity. The heart symbolizes the center of thoughts and feelings. The kidneys symbolize descent. As for shapes, the square symbolizes stability, the measurable, the limited, and the temporality; the circle symbolizes infinity, eternity, perfection, and movement. The circle thus represents the heavens and the universe, and the square represents the earth. By extension, the circle represents the spirit, while the square represents the body.

Even condiments have meaning. For example, salt symbolizes preservation and consequently covenants. Yes, almost everything in Hebrew culture is a symbol.

Having said this, it would be wrong to oppose symbols in favor of words. Symbols reinforce or inflect the meaning of the medium conveying it, they don't replace them.

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