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## Some Aspects of Nephite Kingship

Author(s): John A. Tvedtnes

Source: *The Most Correct Book: Insights from a Book of Mormon Scholar*

Published: Salt Lake City; Cornerstone Publishing, 1999 (1st Edition)

Page(s): 187-193

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## SOME ASPECTS OF NEPHITE KINGSHIP

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*Behold, it is not expedient that we should have a king; for thus saith the Lord: Ye shall not esteem one flesh above another, or one man shall not think himself above another; therefore I say unto you it is not expedient that ye should have a king. Nevertheless, if it were possible that ye could always have just men to be your kings it would be well for you to have a king.  
(Mosiah 23:7-8)*

From the beginning, righteous Nephite leaders refused kingship when offered by the people. Nephi wrote of those who followed him into the wilderness to escape persecution by his brothers Laman and Lemuel, “And it came to pass that they would that I should be their king. But I, Nephi, was desirous that they should have no king; nevertheless, I did for them according to that which was in my power” (2 Nephi 5:18).<sup>1</sup>

Though Nephi declined the royal title, his brother Jacob later spoke to the people of “my brother Nephi, unto whom ye look as a king or a protector” (2 Nephi 6:2). Ultimately, the people had their way and got a king. Jacob noted, “Now Nephi began to be old, and he saw that he must soon die; wherefore, he anointed a man to be a king and a ruler over his people now, according to the reigns of the kings” (Jacob 1:9).

Things did not always go well in the land of Nephi. There were frequent attacks by the Lamanites, and the Nephite kings were obliged to lead their people in battle (Jacob 7:24; Enos 1:24;

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<sup>1</sup> Ironically, Laman and Lemuel accused Nephi of wanting to “make himself a king and a ruler over us” (1 Nephi 16:38).

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Jarom 1:7, 9; Omni 1:2, 10). In these difficult circumstances, King Mosiah (the first of that name) led a group of his people out of the land and came to the land of Zarahemla, where he was made king (Omni 1:12-13).

### *MOSIAH BECOMES KING IN ZARAHEMLA*

The circumstances surrounding Mosiah's ascension to the throne of Zarahemla are unusual. The land of Zarahemla was already inhabited by a people whom we know as the Mulekites, who already had a leader named Zarahemla (Omni 1:14-18), who was a descendant of Mulek, son of Zedekiah, the last king of Judah (Mosiah 25:2; Helaman 6:10; 8:21). Despite his royal heritage, "the people of Zarahemla, and of Mosiah, did unite together; and Mosiah was appointed to be their king" (Omni 1:19).

What prompted Zarahemla to yield his claim to kingship to Mosiah? We cannot be certain, but there are several possibilities.

While Zarahemla's people evidently had no written records, Mosiah possessed records that had been handed down from the time of Nephi, who had lived in Jerusalem during the reign of Zarahemla's ancestor Zedekiah. Indeed, "Zarahemla did rejoice exceedingly, because the Lord had sent the people of Mosiah with the plates of brass which contained the record of the Jews" (Omni 1:14). Possession of the records may have given Mosiah a claim to leadership.

Mosiah, like his grandson of the same name, had the ability to translate ancient records and was able to read the account of the Jaredites found inscribed on a large stone (Omni 1:20-22). He may have possessed the interpreters later held by the second Mosiah, which made him a seer (Mosiah 8:13-18). This may have strengthened his leadership position.

Mosiah evidently possessed the sword of Laban, which was passed down in the Nephite royal family (2 Nephi 5:14; Jacob

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1:10; Words of Mormon 1:13; Mosiah 1:16).<sup>2</sup> The possession of this artifact, brought to the New World from the ancient Israelite capital of Jerusalem, may well have suggested to Zarahemla that Mosiah should rule the people.

Another possible factor in Zarahemla's acceptance of Mosiah as king may lie in the fact that Mosiah's ancestor, Lehi, had been brought to the New World by the Lord and given a "land of promise" (1 Nephi 5:4). The major territory settled by Lehi's family comprised the lands of Nephi (which the Lamanites took from the Nephites) and Zarahemla, which were in what came to be known as the "land southward." In Helaman 6:10, we read:

Now the land south was called Lehi and the land north was called Mulek, which was after the son of Zedekiah; for the Lord did bring Mulek into the land north, and Lehi into the land south.

The northern territories had previously been occupied by the Jaredites, and it "was discovered by the people of Zarahemla, it being the place of their first landing. And they came from there up into the south wilderness" (Alma 22:30-31). From this, it seems that the Mulekites were brought into the land northward but that at least a part of them, under the leadership of Zarahemla, moved southward and settled in territory the Lord had allotted to Lehi's posterity. This may have been another factor in Zarahemla's decision to accept Mosiah as king over their two peoples.

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<sup>2</sup> That the sword of Laban was a symbol of royalty among the Nephites has been discussed by several scholars. See Todd R. Kerr, "Ancient Aspects of Nephite Kingship in the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1/1 (Fall 1992):85-118; Brett L. Holbrook, "The Sword of Laban as a Symbol of Divine Authority and Kingship," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2/1 (Spring 1993): 39-72; Daniel N. Rolph, "Prophets, Kings, and Swords: The Sword of Laban and Its Possible Pre-Laban Origin," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2/1 (Spring 1993): 73-79.

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### ***THE SERVICE OF NEPHITE KINGS***

In ancient monarchies the king had absolute power. His word was the word of the gods and he held the power of life and death over his subjects. Such was not the case among the Nephites. The pattern had been begun by Nephi who, when pressed to become king, observed that he “did for them according to that which was in my power” (2 Nephi 5:18).

Nephi’s descendants followed the pattern of service to the people, both in leading the people in battle, as we have noted earlier, and in assisting them in the construction of temples and other public buildings. Three Nephite kings reigned in the city of Zarahemla, passing the office from father to son. These were Mosiah, Benjamin, and another Mosiah.

Mormon wrote that “king Benjamin was a holy man, and he did reign over his people in righteousness” (Words of Mormon 1:17). Nearing the end of his days, Benjamin assembled his people to announce his retirement and to appoint his son Mosiah as king. The marvelous discourse he delivered to his people reflects the nature of Nephite kingship:

I have not commanded you to come up hither that ye should fear me, or that ye should think that I of myself am more than a mortal man. But I am like as yourselves, subject to all manner of infirmities in body and mind; yet I have been chosen by this people, and consecrated by my father, and was suffered by the hand of the Lord that I should be a ruler and a king over this people . . . to serve you with all the might, mind and strength which the Lord hath granted unto me. I say unto you that as I have been suffered to spend my days in your service, even up to this time, and have not sought gold nor silver nor any manner of riches of you . . . And even I, myself, have labored with mine own hands that I might serve you, and

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that ye should not be laden with taxes, and that there should nothing come upon you which was grievous to be borne. (Mosiah 2:10-12, 14)

He went on to stress that he considered that his service to the people had also been service to God, “your heavenly King” (Mosiah 2:16-19).

### ***ABOLITION OF THE NEPHITE MONARCHY***

Nephite kingship came to an end in the days of Benjamin’s son Mosiah. His four sons had gone up to the land of Nephi to preach to the Lamanites, so he could not appoint one of them as his successor (Mosiah 29:1-9). He proposed to “newly arrange the affairs of this people” by allowing the people to appoint judges to govern them (Mosiah 29:10-12, 25-26).

But there were two other factors behind Mosiah’s decision to abolish the monarchy, and both were related to the recent arrival in Zarahemla of the Nephites who had been living in the land of Nephi (Mosiah 22:13-14; 24:25). Their last king, Noah, was a very wicked man who imposed heavy taxes on the people in order to support his opulent lifestyle (Mosiah 11:3-11). Mosiah told the people,

Therefore, if it were possible that you could have just men to be your kings, who would establish the laws of God, and judge this people according to his commandments, yea, if ye could have men for your kings who would do even as my father Benjamin did for this people—I say unto you, if this could always be the case then it would be expedient that ye should always have kings to rule over you. And even I myself have labored with all the power and faculties which I have possessed, to teach you the commandments of God, and to establish peace throughout the

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land. (Mosiah 29:13-14)

But he noted “how much iniquity doth one wicked king cause to be committed, yea, and what great destruction,” and admonished the people to “remember king Noah, his wickedness and his abominations” and the bondage that resulted therefrom (Mosiah 29:17-18; see also verses 21-24).

In addition, Mosiah evidently had in mind the wickedness of the Jaredite kings. He had recently translated that record (Mosiah 28:11-18). Indeed, he had entrusted it, along with all the Nephite records, to the keeping of the younger Alma—who became the first chief judge under the new system—just prior to announcing that he would allow the people to elect their own leaders (Mosiah 28:20).

That Mosiah had the wicked Jaredite kings in mind is evidenced in Mosiah 29:7, where he says, “And who knoweth but what my son, to whom the kingdom doth belong, should turn to be angry and draw away a part of this people after him, which would cause wars and contentions among you.” Aside from the Book of Ether, which recounts the history of the Jaredites, this is the only place in the Book of Mormon where the idiom “draw away . . . people” is used. Throughout Ether, we read of usurpers to the throne who “drew away” people in a revolt against the current monarch (Ether 7:4, 15; 9:11; 10:32). Though Mosiah mentioned wicked king Noah by name, he never gave explicit examples from Jaredite history. But his use of this idiom suggests that it was in his mind as he proposed the abolition of the Nephite monarchy.

### *CONCLUSION*

The establishment of kingship began and ended with a protest from the Nephite leader. Nephi declined the title “king” and Mosiah, the last of the royal line, announced that it would henceforth be abolished. With the sole exception of Noah, all of the Nephite kings named in the Book of Mormon served their people

## CONCLUSION

well and were righteous men. The example of service set by such men as Nephi, Benjamin, and the two Mosiahs, can guide us in our own callings in life.