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### Kings and Judges in the Bible and the Book of Mormon

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

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

Page(s): 194–197

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## KINGS AND JUDGES IN THE BIBLE AND THE BOOK OF MORMON<sup>1</sup>

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*Let us appoint judges, to judge this people according to our law; and we will newly arrange the affairs of this people, for we will appoint wise men to be judges, that will judge this people according to the commandments of God. (Mosiah 29:11)*

Both the Bible and the Book of Mormon mention rule by kings and judges. The office of judge existed in the time of Moses, who had commanded “the judges of Israel” to slay a group of sinners (Numbers 25:5). The mosaic law provided for judges to “hear the causes between your brethren,” making “diligent inquisition” of witnesses, and settling every “controversy between men” (Deuteronomy 1:5; 16:18; 19:17-19; 21:1-2; 25:1-2). Judges in the time of Joshua are listed with the elders and officers (Joshua 8:33; 23:2; 24:1).

### ***JUDGES AMONGST THE ISRAELITES***

After Joshua’s death, “the Lord raised up judges, which delivered them . . . out of the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge” (Judges 2:16-19). “The Lord raised up a deliverer to the children of Israel, who delivered them . . . and he judged Israel, and went out to war” (Judges 3:9-10). From this, it appears that the principal role of these judges was to deliver Israel from their enemies (Judges 3:15, 31; 6:14; 10:1; 11:1; 13:5).

But the judges also performed other functions. Deborah,

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<sup>1</sup> Originally published in the *Provo Sun*, June 28, 1998.

## JUDGES AMONGST THE ISRAELITES

for example, was a prophetess as well as a liberator (Judges 4:4, 6), and “the children of Israel came up to her for judgment” (Judges 4:5). That the judges did not function only in wartime is suggested by the length of their tenure, ranging from six to 23 years (Judges 10:2-3; 12:7, 9, 11, 13; 15:20, 31).

### ***THE TRANSITION TO KINGS***

The transition from judges to kings began in the time of Gideon, also called Jerubbaal. After he had successfully freed Israel from its enemies, “the men of Israel said unto Gideon, Rule thou over us, both thou, and thy son, and thy son's son also,” but Gideon declined (Judges 8:22-23). Later, his son Abimelech convinced the people of Shechem to make him king (Judges 9:1-6, 18), and he “reigned three years over Israel” until he was slain (Judges 9:22).

Some years later, the last of the judges, the prophet Samuel, acceded to the wishes of the people and anointed Saul to be their “captain” (Hebrew *nagid*, “commander”). Like the judges before him, he was to lead Israel’s army (1 Samuel 9:16; 10:1). Saul was subsequently replaced by David, who was also anointed to be “captain” (1 Samuel 13:14; 2 Samuel 5:2; 11:2).

### ***THE OFFICE OF “JUDGE” UNDER THE KINGS***

The office of judge did not disappear with the monarchy, however. Judges are noted from the time of the Judean kings David (1 Chronicles 23:4; 26:29), Solomon (2 Chronicles 1:2), and Jehoshaphat (2 Chronicles 19:5-6). The close tie between kings, judges, and other officers is evident from the fact that the title “judges” sometimes parallels “kings” and “princes” (Psalms 2:10; 148:11; Isaiah 40:23; Hosea 7:7; 13:10-11; Zephaniah 3:3).

After the Babylonian captivity, Jews returning to Jerusalem re-established the office of judge (Ezra 10:14), in accord with the promise made through Isaiah, “And I will restore thy judges as at the first, and thy counselors as at the beginning” (Isaiah 1:26).



### ***JUDGES AMONGST THE NEPHITES***

The last Nephite king, Mosiah, may have had this same passage in mind when he replaced the monarchy with a system of higher and lesser judges (Mosiah 29:11-13, 28-29) who would be chosen by the people (Mosiah 29:39-42; Alma 62:47; Helaman 1:13; 2:2; 6:15).

Some critics of the Book of Mormon, believing that Joseph Smith was its author, have protested that the Nephite judges presided at trials, while the biblical judges governed the people. It is true that some Book of Mormon references to the judges mention judicial proceedings and sentencing of criminals (Alma 10:13-14; 11:1-5; 3 Nephi 6:23), and that judges and lawyers are sometimes mentioned together (Alma 10:27, 29; Alma 14:2, 5, 18, 23-27). But we saw earlier that the biblical judges also heard legal cases. Moreover, the Nephite judges, like those of the Bible, also had administrative responsibilities.

In Alma 30:29, we find a man being brought for trial before “the chief judge who was governor over all the land.” Alma 50:39 speaks of a man who “was appointed chief judge and governor over the people.” We also read that “Pacumeni was appointed, according to the voice of the people, to be a chief judge and a governor over the people” (Helaman 1:13). From this, it appears that the Nephite judges were also governors, as were the judges of the Bible. For this reason, the Book of Mormon frequently speaks of “the *reign* of the judges.” Moreover, one of their responsibilities, like that of the biblical judges, was to direct the wars against their enemies.

The chief Nephite military leaders were “appointed by the chief judges and the voice of the people” (Alma 46:34; 3 Nephi 3:17). From Alma 60:1, it is clear that “the chief judge and the governor over the land” was one of “those who have been chosen by this people to govern and manage the affairs of this war.” Indeed, of Alma, the first Nephite judge, we read that “being the chief judge and the governor of the people of Nephi, therefore he

## JUDGES AMONGST THE NEPHITES

went up with his people, yea, with his captains, and chief captains, yea, at the head of his armies, against the Amlicites to battle” (Alma 2:16). The actions of the Nephite chief judge Lachoneus in 3 Nephi 3 suggest that he provided leadership in both military and civil affairs.

### *CONCLUSION*

The Nephite judges were probably patterned after the judges of the Bible, fulfilling the same functions as their predecessors. The only difference between them is chronological. The earlier judges preceded the establishment of the Israelite monarchy, while the Nephite monarch, having seen the bad results of the wicked king Noah (Mosiah 29:18) decided to abolish the hereditary office in favor of the earlier position of judge, allowing the people to select their own leaders.