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Source: *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Fall 1992), pp. 85-118

Originally Published by: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS)

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Ancient Aspects of Nephite Kingship in the Book of Mormon

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Introduction

Ancient Near Eastern civilizations held conflicting views of their kings. In Mesopotamian and Egyptian societies, royalty constituted the primary form of government, and kings were revered "as being the adopted offspring of deity."¹ Other cultures, however, displayed less favorable attitudes toward kingly rule. The Israelites, for example, not only rejected the theory of divine kingship,² but viewed monarchy as a potentially oppressive institution only tolerated by God and usually "demanded" by those in society bent on mimicking neighboring

¹ Stephen D. Ricks, "The Ideology of Kingship in Mosiah 1–6," in John W. Welch, ed., *Reexploring the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1992), 115.

² See, e.g., Dale Patrick, *Old Testament Law* (Atlanta: Knox, 1985), 120 (Israelite law reduced kings "to a concession and subordinated them to the law imposed upon the entire people").

nations.³ Indeed, Samuel voiced much contempt for monarchs when he warned that Israel would some day “cry out” after its king confiscated its land and property and carried off its sons to war (1 Samuel 8:11–18).

The writings of King Mosiah in the Book of Mormon evidence a similar ambivalence toward kingship. In Mosiah 29, King Mosiah declares:

Now I say unto you, that because all men are not just it is not expedient that ye should have a king or kings to rule over you. . . . Ye cannot dethrone an iniquitous king save it be through much contention, and the shedding of much blood. For behold, he has his friends in iniquity, and he keepeth his guards about him; and he tearth up the laws of those who have reigned in righteousness before him; and he trampleth under his feet the commandments of God. (Mosiah 29: 16, 21–22)

Although a few of Mosiah’s statements reflect Old Testament suspicion toward monarchy, Mosiah himself could not deny that kingship, endowed on certain men in certain circumstances, could form an effective system of government. Mosiah even admitted:

If it were possible that you could have *just men* to be your kings, . . . 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. (Mosiah 29:13)

The questions Mosiah begs us to ask are (1) what was meant by “just men,” and (2) what did King Benjamin “do” that made his reign so admirable? This report explores possible answers to those questions, examining Nephite and other ancient dynasties in hopes of delineating the royal attributes and functions capable of justifying Mosiah’s argument for perpetual monarchy.

³ 1 Samuel 8:19: “Nevertheless the people refused to obey the voice of Samuel; and they said, Nay; but we will have a king over us”; 1 Samuel 8:22: “And the Lord said to Samuel, Hearken unto their voice, and make them a king.”

Admittedly, such an investigation is somewhat problematic. Ancient accounts of monarchs are few in number and provide only a glimpse into the scope and framework of kingly rule. The Book of Mormon, for instance, describes only a handful of Nephite kings in pertinent detail.⁴ Nevertheless, there is sufficient evidence to support at least a few conclusions. First, “just” Nephite kings, like many of their Old World counterparts, performed three functions vital to societal well-being—military commander-in-chief, chief judge over the legal system, and leader of the national religion.⁵ Second, Nephite kings, with the exception of Noah, followed King Benjamin’s example of treating the crown as an instrument of royal servitude and stewardship, as opposed to dominion and oppression.

Guardian of the People

Ancient nations could not establish internal peace or stability without first securing their borders and maintaining national security. Effective military leadership by the king, therefore, was vital to the society’s well-being. Whether Nephite or Near Eastern, ancient kings fulfilled their duty as guardian of the nation by personally commanding military forces in time of war, and by supervising building and storage activities designed to strengthen national security.

Chieftain Warrior

One of the most important roles of the Hebrew king “was that of being a leader in war. That is to say, primarily it was his duty to defend his people from aggressive action on the part of their neighbors.”⁶ Hebrew kingship initially developed because

⁴ These kings include Nephi, Benjamin, Mosiah₂, Zeniff, and Noah. Only limited references are made to other kings, such as Mosiah₁.

⁵ In Israel, “the king functions as judge and military leader as the anointed of God: he is consecrated to the service of God in obedience to His Torah.” Erwin I. J. Rosenthal, “Some Aspects of the Hebrew Monarchy,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 9 (1958): 6. “That the Hittite king was not only leader in war and supreme judge but also chief priest of the national cults, is well established.” O. R. Gurney, “Hittite Kingship,” in S. H. Hooke, ed., *Myth, Ritual, and Kingship* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1958), 105.

⁶ Aubrey R. Johnson, “Hebrew Conceptions of Kingship,” in Hooke, ed., *Myth, Ritual, and Kingship*, 205. See also C. R. North, “The Religious Aspects of Hebrew Kingship,” *Zeitschrift für die Alttesta-*

of pressing needs for military leadership in Israel's territorial scuffles with surrounding nations.⁷ As the Lord told Samuel, "I will send thee a man [Saul] out of the land of Benjamin, and thou shalt anoint him to be captain over my people Israel, that he may save my people out of the hand of the Philistines" (1 Samuel 9:16).

Many Israelite kings rose to national prominence because of their superior feats in battle and spent much energy in waging war against Israel's enemies. Saul, for example, broke out of obscurity by "attracting the attention of the people by his prowess in arms against the Ammonites, as a result of which they took him to Gilgal and formally made him king."⁸ Similarly, David first found favor in the people's eyes by slaying the Philistine giant Goliath in battle (1 Samuel 17), and then spent many years fighting and subduing the Philistine, Moabite, Syrian, Edomite, and Ammonite armies (2 Samuel 8–10).⁹

In the New World, Jaredite monarchs endured countless security problems and military campaigns. Jaredite history, in fact, was characterized by one "fierce and unrelenting struggle for power" after another.¹⁰ Beginning with Corihor's rebellion against his king-father Kib (Ether 7:4–5), rivals to the throne often withdrew into the wilderness to gather materials and

mentliche Wissenschaft (1932): 9: "Kingship in Israel . . . was primarily military."

⁷ See Ze'ev W. Falk, *Hebrew Law in Biblical Times* (Jerusalem: Wahrmann, 1964), 44: "The resistance to the Philistine rule called for a national leadership"; North, "The Religious Aspects of Hebrew Kingship," 9: "1 Sam. 8:5–20 shows that 'the immediately pressing need [in Israel] was for a war-king and administrative head rather than for a priest-king' "; Rosenthal, "Some Aspects of the Hebrew Monarchy," 3: "Philistine encroachment necessitated a more permanent and comprehensive national leadership which could guarantee a settled life in peace and independence"; K. W. Whitelam, *The Just King* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1979), 68: "the all-imposing Philistine threat necessitated a unification of hitherto disparate groups that needed a central authority if they were to survive." See also 1 Samuel 8:2: people demanded a king to "go out before us, and fight our battles."

⁸ Erwin R. Goodenough, "Kingship in Early Israel," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 48 (1929): 169, 186 (citing 1 Samuel 11).

⁹ See Johnson, "Hebrew Conceptions of Kingship," 205.

¹⁰ Hugh W. Nibley, *The World of the Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980), 192.

manpower sufficient to challenge the crown.¹¹ “When the aspirant to the throne finally becomes strong enough to dispose of his rivals by assassination, revolution, or a pitched battle, the former bandit and outlaw becomes king and has to deal in turn with a new crop of rebels and pretenders.”¹²

To survive such hostile political environments, Jaredite monarchs became masters of strategy and secrecy, as well as fearless combatants on the battlefield.¹³ Because ancient Asiatic tradition viewed every war as a “personal combat between two kings, it was customary for [Jaredite kings and their rivals] to challenge each other to single combat.”¹⁴ Thus, scenes of “Shiz and Coriantumr hacking away at each other” in a great and final battle should come as no surprise.¹⁵

Enemy encroachment also contributed to the establishment of Nephite monarchy. At the time Nephi was appointed king (2 Nephi 5:18–19), Lamanite hatred toward the Nephites was strong (2 Nephi 5:14), and Nephi’s subjects turned to him for protection.¹⁶ As Jacob noted, the Nephites “loved Nephi exceedingly, he having been a great protector for them, having wielded the sword of Laban in their defence, . . . Wherefore, the people were desirous to retain in remembrance his name” (Jacob 1:10–11).

King Benjamin also rose to power and influence during a period of “serious war and much bloodshed between the Nephites and the Lamanites” (Omni 1:24). Each time the

¹¹ See also Ether 7:14–16; 8:2–4; 10:8–10; 10:14–15; 10:31–32.

¹² Nibley, *The World of the Jaredites*, 193.

¹³ Many Jaredite kings relied upon secret oaths and combinations to overthrow or preserve power, as illustrated in the “Salome Episode,” in which the daughter of Jared asked, “is there not an account concerning them of old, that they by their secret plans did obtain kingdoms and great glory?” (Ether 8:9).

¹⁴ Nibley, *The World of the Jaredites*, 230. Nibley also reminds us that “what the Jaredite kings did was a conscious imitation and unbroken continuation of the ways of the ‘ancients’ ” in central Asia. *Ibid.*, 222.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 230 (citing Ether 15:28–32). See also Ether 7:9 (Shule gave battle unto Corihor); 7:15–16 (Noah gave battle unto Shule); 7:21 (Shule did slay Cohor); 9:27 (Heth slew his father with his own sword); 10:15 (Levi did make war against the king); 10:32–33 (Com went to battle against the king Amgid); 11:15 (mighty man battles Moron); 13:16 (Coriantumr was studied in all the arts of war and gave battle to all challengers); 14:11–12 (Coriantumr fought with Lib).

¹⁶ 2 Nephi 6:2: “my brother Nephi, unto whom ye look as a king or a protector, and on whom ye depend for safety.”

“armies of the Lamanites came down out of the land of Nephi, to battle against his people . . . king Benjamin gathered together his armies, and he did stand against them; and he did fight with the strength of his own arm, with the sword of Laban” (Words of Mormon 1:13). King Benjamin’s military generalship, as well as his personal combat skills on the battlefield, gave the Nephites serious advantage over the Lamanites, insomuch that King Benjamin drove the Lamanites out of the land of Zarahemla (Omni 1:24).¹⁷

Equally impressive were King Zeniff’s heroics while defending his kingdom against Lamanite invasion. Zeniff protected his people not only by setting “guards round about the land, that the Lamanites might not come upon [them]” (Mosiah 10:2), but also by sending out spies into enemy territories to discover Lamanite movements and preparations for war (Mosiah 10:7). When the Lamanites finally attacked, Zeniff led virtually the *entire* male population into battle, including all old and “young men that were able to bear arms” (Mosiah 10:9). Zeniff emphatically noted, “even I, in my old age, did go up to battle against the Lamanites” (Mosiah 10:10). Thus, although Zeniff’s people went “up in the strength of the Lord to battle” (Mosiah 10:10), victory was due in no small part to King Zeniff’s tactical prowess and battlefield valor.

Building Activities

Commanding armies and chariotry in the field was only one aspect of the king’s duty to protect the nation. Standing armies demanded food, clothing, weapons, and appropriate training. Positions of strategic importance (such as national borders) also required physical reinforcement against enemy attack. As a result, procurement of munitions and fortification of cities and borders were vital components to any national security program.

History attests to the military and political significance of royal building projects. Assyrian kings, for instance, “constantly founded new cities and peopled them with prisoners of war” pursuant to a policy of forced urbanization.¹⁸ These building

¹⁷ See also Words of Mormon 1:14: “And in the strength of the Lord they did contend against their enemies, until they had slain many thousands of the Lamanites.”

¹⁸ A. Leo Oppenheim, “A Bird’s-Eye View of Mesopotamian Economic History,” in K. Polanyi, C. M. Arensberg, H. W. Pearson, eds.,

activities pacified and secured regions surrounding the nation “by enabling pressure to be exerted upon unstable population elements and by securing the trade routes.”¹⁹ In Egypt, the Pharaoh commanded the construction of “large fortified cities and fortresses in the eastern Delta.”²⁰ This effort protected the area from attacks by surrounding enemies who “usually attacked the small, unprotected settlements, while avoiding the larger fortified cities.”²¹ Despite their nomadic traditions, Jaredite kings also paused from their expansive military campaigns to engage in building activities.²² Not to be outdone by their own neighbors, many Hebrew kings built “fortifications at strategic points throughout the realm” while developing and maintaining a standing military force.²³ “The biblical texts state that Solomon rebuilt and fortified the cities of Gezer, Hazor, Lower Beth-Horon, Baalath and Tamar among others, in addition to building store-cities and cities for his chariots and horses” (1 Kings 9:15–19; 10:26).²⁴ David and Solomon also built a network of fortresses along the Gulf of Aqaba and the Red Sea to secure vital highways and trade routes.²⁵

Nephite kings supervised similar building and fortification programs. A formidable challenge to King Nephi after fleeing from the Lamanites (2 Nephi 5:5–8) was to cause his “people to be industrious, and to labor with their hands” (2 Nephi 5:17). Nephi taught his people “to build buildings, and to work in all manner of wood, and of iron, and of copper, and of brass, and

Trade and Market in the Early Empires (New York and London: 1965), 36 (cited in G. W. Ahlstrom, *Royal Administration and National Religion in Ancient Palestine* [Leiden: Brill, 1982], 1).

¹⁹ Ahlstrom, *Royal Administration and National Religion in Ancient Palestine*, 1.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² The book of Ether, for example, reports that Coriantum (Ether 9:23), Shez (Ether 10:4), and Morianton (Ether 10:12) built up large and mighty cities. Nibley points out that one of the greatest paradoxes of history “is that the nomads of the [Asiatic] steppes were perhaps the greatest builders of all time, though their normal type of ‘city’ was ‘more suggestive of an ordo-like tent-city than a town in the usual sense.’ ” Nibley, *The World of the Jaredites*, 227.

²³ Johnson, “Hebrew Conceptions of Kingship,” 205.

²⁴ Ahlstrom, *Royal Administration and National Religion in Ancient Palestine*, 36–37.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 38–39.

of steel, and of gold, and of silver, and of precious ores" (2 Nephi 5:15). In time, the Nephites became exceedingly rich "in fine workmanship of wood, in buildings, and in machinery, and also in iron and copper, and brass and steel, making all manner of tools of every kind to till the ground, and weapons of war" (Jarom 1:8). King Noah even built towers, "many elegant and spacious buildings," and an elaborate system of vineyards (Mosiah 11:8–14). He also contributed "all manner of fine work within the walls of the temple" (Mosiah 11:10).

Nephite kings were quick to put scientific know-how to military use. Nephite metal technology, for example, allowed Nephi to arm his forces with many swords made after the manner of the sword of Laban (2 Nephi 5:14).²⁶ Nephite armories contained various weapons, such as "the sharp pointed arrow, and the quiver, and the dart, and the javelin" (Jarom 1:8). Zeniff's band possessed a similarly impressive array of weapons, including bows, arrows, swords, cimeters, clubs, slings, and "all manner of weapons which [the Nephites] could invent" (Mosiah 9:16).

Nephite kings employed the nation's building capabilities to fortify cities and lands against repeated Lamanite attacks (Jarom 1:7). It is significant that the first item on King Zeniff's agenda after obtaining permission from the Lamanite king to possess the land of Lehi-Nephi was to "build buildings, and to *repair the walls* of the city" (Mosiah 9:8). In the end, Nephite defense forces, armed with a wide array of weapons and occupying fortified strategic positions, became formidable obstacles to marauding Lamanite armies. Having been prepared by their kings, the Nephites did not allow the Lamanites to "prosper" against them, and became "conquerors" over them (Jarom 1:9; Jacob 7:25; Mosiah 11:18–19).

It should be noted that royal building programs served numerous nonmilitary functions as well. Temple building, for example, centralized national religious worship and legitimized the royal office.²⁷ For this reason, Nephi built a temple "after the manner of the temple of Solomon" shortly after his people separated from the Lamanites (2 Nephi 5:16). Moreover,

²⁶ Zeniff also caused "that there should be weapons of war made of every kind, that thereby [he] might have weapons for [his] people" (Mosiah 10:1).

²⁷ Ahlstrom, *Royal Administration and National Religion in Ancient Palestine*, 2.

building and urbanization policies extended “the arm of central administration . . . throughout the country making the different groups of people aware that they were united.”²⁸

Civil Servant

Because civilizations were destroyed by forces from within as well as outside their borders, ancient kings were expected “not only to safeguard the liberty of the state [from foreign attack], but also to defend the rights of his individual subjects.”²⁹ The ancient “king was commissioned to preserve the life of the nation by the practice of justice, for only by justice is order in the land and harmony among the peoples maintained.”³⁰ To maintain that “practice of justice,” ancient kings assumed important judicial and administrative duties.

Judge

Kings in the ancient Near East served as judges or chief judges of the people. In Babylon, “the office of king . . . essentially [was] to be understood as the office of judge.”³¹ Hammurabi, who described himself as the “just king,” provided a glimpse into the notion of a judge-king:

May the king who shall be [raised up] in the land observe the just words which I have inscribed on my monument; may he not alter the judgement of the land which I have judged and the decisions of the land which I have decided nor mar my carved figures.

If that man has authority and so is able to give justice to the land, let him give heed to the words which I have inscribed on my monument, that that monument may show him custom [and] rule, the

²⁸ Ibid., 37.

²⁹ Johnson, “Hebrew Conceptions of Kingship,” 207. See also Whitelam, *The Just King*, 17: “Clearly the function of the king was twofold: to ensure the safety of his people by ‘force of arms’ against internal threat of rebellion or external threat of invasion and to ensure the ‘well-being’ of the nation through the establishment of justice.”

³⁰ Helen A. Kenik, “Code of Conduct for a King: Psalm 101,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 95 (1976): 391, 395. Kenik also notes that the essential theme of Psalm 101 is “peace and order among the people living in the ‘city of Yahweh,’ made possible by the practice of justice.” Ibid., 393.

judgment of the land which I have judged [and] the decisions of the land which I have decided, that he may so give justice to his dark-haired folk, that he may judge their judgments [and] decide their decisions.³²

In another Babylonian text, King Nebuchadnezzar II is shown performing similar functions as judge:

He was not negligent in the matter of true and righteous judgment, he did not rest night or day, but with council and deliberation he persisted in writing down judgments and decisions arranged to be pleasing to the great lord, Maduk, and for the betterment of all the peoples and the settling of the land of Akkad.³³

Judicial responsibilities similarly were included in the job descriptions of other Near Eastern kings. Legend has it that Krt's inability to perform vital judicial functions almost cost him his throne,³⁴ and the king in Ugarit was the "focal point of the legal system" and "performed the function of judge."³⁵

The king's duties and responsibilities as judge in ancient Israel are much harder to delineate and the subject of intense debate. Some commentators contend that the king was the supreme judge, and that his "function as ruler was essentially to act as judge."³⁶ Other scholars disagree, asserting that "until very late in the period of the kings, the Israelite state had so little to do with the practical administration of the law that one can

³¹ Hans J. Boecker, *Law and the Administration of Justice in the Old Testament and Ancient East* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1980), 25.

³² *Code of Hammurabi*, Epilogue, 75–95.

³³ Whitelam, *The Just King*, 21 (citing Lambert, "Nebuchadnezzar King of Justice," 1, 8).

³⁴ Whitelam, *The Just King*, 25: "By slow degrees thou art growing old, And in the sepulchral cave thou wilt abide. Thou hast let thy hands fall into error. Thou dost not uphold the case of the widow, Nor decide the suit of the oppressed. Sickness is as thy bedfellow, Disease as thy concubine. Descend from thy rule that I may become king, From thy government that I may be enthroned."

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.

³⁶ Boecker, *Law and the Administration of Justice in the Old Testament and Ancient East*, 41 (citing I. Benzinger, *Hebraische Archäologie* [1927]: 278).

scarcely attribute to it any essential part in the actual making of the law."³⁷

The more correct view probably lies between the two extremes; although Israel's king often made himself available to serve as a judge, his legal jurisdiction and power was surprisingly limited. Royal judicial power was not allowed to trample the authority originally "reserved to the local courts" or other legal institutions, and jurisdiction over many common matters remained with the premonarchical form of judiciary.³⁸ Family law, for example, fell under the jurisdiction of the *paterfamilias*. Councils of elders usually handled town disputes, and local priests assumed authority over cases too difficult for the town council.³⁹ Moreover, although royal courts may have been available to lower courts in an advisory capacity, the monarchy never established "itself as a superior court to which appeal could be made against decisions of the city courts."⁴⁰ Israel's kings were given little original jurisdiction, except for authority over matters involving interests of the crown.⁴¹ Most biblical accounts depict the crown exercising judicial authority

³⁷ Ibid., 41 (citing Alt, "The Origins of Israelite Law," in *Essays on Old Testament History and Religion* [Oxford, 1966], 101).

³⁸ See Whitelam, *The Just King*, 69; Macholz, "Die Stellung des Königs in der Israelitischen Gerichtverfassung," *ZAW* 84 (1972): 177. Falk also notes that the "introduction of the monarchy did not bring about the abolition of the former democratic institutions. The temple of Jerusalem carried on the amphictyonic tradition of the tribes of Israel. So did the prophets, who emphasized the kingdom of God and the obligations of the temporal king towards the people." Falk, *Hebrew Law in Biblical Times*, 46–47.

³⁹ Whitelam, *The Just King*, 46. Boecker also notes that the advent of Israelite kingship did not effect a tremendous reorganization of the law. Boecker, *Law and the Administration of Justice in the Old Testament and Ancient East*, 43.

⁴⁰ Macholz, "Die Stellung des Königs in der Israelitischen Gerichtverfassung," 177 (cited in Boecker, *Law and the Administration of Justice in the Old Testament and Ancient East*, 43).

⁴¹ Aubrey Johnson contends that the story of the woman of Tekoa (2 Samuel 14:1–20), whom Joab sent to David to plead in parable fashion the cause of Absalom, "affords a clear indication of the right of appeal to the king which was enjoyed by even the humblest in the land." Johnson, "Hebrew Conceptions of Kingship," 206. It must be noted, however, that this was a dispute clearly involving the royal household, as Absalom had been implicated in the death of David's son.

only over military cases, matters involving the royal household, or actions arising in the capital city of Jerusalem.⁴²

Admittedly, the concept of ancient kings as trustworthy and diligent judges exist only in theory.⁴³ There is much evidence that the exercise of royal judicial power was not as smooth or idealistic as ancient records would have us believe. For example, it may not be realistic to believe that, as a practical matter, “any oppressed man who has a cause” had access to King Hammurabi’s ear, or even to “the temple at Esargila where the stele was erected.”⁴⁴ In addition, some commentators believe that the “prologue-epilogue framework” found in Babylonian and other Near Eastern law codes simply assured the population (and subsequent readers) that the king had upheld his duty to judge with fairness.⁴⁵ Such commentaries perhaps said little about how the law really was enforced or administered.

Finally, even though the book of Psalms expresses a favorable opinion of kingship, the judicial conduct of several Jewish kings often fell short of the ideal.⁴⁶ Like many other ancient rulers, David and Solomon used monarchical judicial authority to “legitimize political machinations advantageous to the crown.”⁴⁷ But whatever the distinction between royal

⁴² Boecker, *Law and the Administration of Justice in the Old Testament and Ancient East*, 42–43. Boecker relies upon 1 Samuel 22:6–19 as an example of royal jurisdiction over military forces, and 2 Samuel 19:16–24 as an example of the king’s judicial authority over his household and administration.

⁴³ Some commentators warn that many descriptions of kings set forth only the “ideal” version of monarchy. See, e.g., Whitelam, *The Just King*, 18.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 22 (emphasis added).

⁴⁵ See, e.g., J. J. Finkelstein, “Ammisaduqa’s Edict and the Babylonian Law Codes,” *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 15 (1961): 103 (cited in Whitelam, *The Just King*, 22–23).

⁴⁶ Psalms 72:1–4 reads, “Give the king thy judgments, O God, and thy righteousness unto the king’s son. He shall judge thy people with righteousness, and thy poor with judgment. The mountains shall bring peace to the people, and the little hills, by righteousness. He shall judge the poor of the people, he shall save the children of the needy, and shall break in pieces the oppressor.”

⁴⁷ Whitelam, *The Just King*, 89, 118–21, 165; 2 Samuel 1:1–16, execution of Amalekite was for political reasons, to remove any question of David’s complicity in Saul’s death; 2 Samuel 4, execution of murderers of Ishbaal dispelled suspicions regarding David’s connection with the crime; 2 Samuel 3:6–39, David refused to punish Joab for the murder of Abner, an

judgeship in practice and theory, it appears that ancient kings were expected to make at least a good faith effort to exercise judicial authority in the proper manner.

The Book of Mormon contains few extensive accounts describing the judicial activities of kings.⁴⁸ The story of Abinadi's trial before King Noah, however, is an exception and provides a glimpse at the scope of royal judicial authority in ancient Nephite society.⁴⁹ An understanding of the king's role as judge in ancient Israel also explains some of the oddities associated with Abinadi's trial (Mosiah 12–18).

As explained in Mosiah 12, King Noah's subjects charged Abinadi with two counts of false prophecy—one against the people, and the other against the king (Mosiah 12:9–10). Although King Noah coordinated most of the trial⁵⁰ and pronounced the final verdict against Abinadi, Noah's priests also exercised much power over the proceedings. In fact, Noah's first act after receiving custody of Abinadi was to command "that the priests should gather themselves together that he might hold a council with them what he should do" (Mosiah 12:17). The priests eventually exercised significant control over the trial, raising additional accusations on their own initiative and conducting the actual examination of Abinadi.⁵¹ At one point, the priests even countermanded Noah's decision to release Abinadi (after he successfully defended himself against

influential member of the Saulide faction; 1 Kings 1; 2:13–15, 28–35, 36–46, Solomon may have had Adonijah, Joab, and Shimei killed by contrived judicial murder in order to preserve the image of a just king.

⁴⁸ The book of Ether makes only passing references to certain Jaredite kings "executing" judgment throughout the land (Ether 7:1, 11, 24, 27; 9:21; 10:11). Unfortunately, the exact details of "executing judgment" are never spelled out.

⁴⁹ For a detailed explanation of Abinadi's trial, see John W. Welch, "An Ancient Legal Setting for the Book of Mormon" (unpublished manuscript), 31–85.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 42; King Noah convened the court and had sufficient authority to command the priests to follow his orders.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 43. See also Mosiah 12:19: "And they began to question him, that they might cross him, that thereby they might have wherewith to accuse him"; Mosiah 17:7–8: "Abinadi, we have found an accusation against thee, and thou art worthy of death. For thou hast said that God himself should come down among the children of men."

accusations of blasphemy), and then carried out Abinadi's execution by fire.⁵²

That Noah shared jurisdiction with his priests is not surprising given the limited judicial role kings played in ancient Israel. Israel's king seldom participated in everyday judicial matters because his jurisdiction was confined to military disputes, the rights and obligations of the royal family, and cases arising in the capital city. Similarly, King Noah participated in Abinadi's trial probably because the case arose in the capital city and involved charges of lying against the king (and his household).⁵³ Because the claims against Abinadi also involved priestly matters (i.e., the charge of false prophecy against the *people*), King Noah could not adjudicate the case without respecting the jurisdiction of his priests. Noah's numerous strategy sessions with his priests evidences unfamiliarity with judicial procedure and precedent, perhaps further indicating that Noah "was not regularly involved in judicial affairs."⁵⁴ The role of priests at Abinadi's trial, therefore, was as much a matter of practical necessity as legal formality.

All of this says nothing, of course, as to the motives behind King Noah's participation in Abinadi's trial. Given his wicked disposition, Noah cared more about ridding himself of the prophet-antagonist Abinadi than discharging his judicial duties over matters reserved to the king.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, Abinadi's trial provides some evidence that royal judicial authority in Nephite society, at least in theory, did not extend to everyday proceedings and was limited to matters pertaining to the military, royal household, or capital city.

Civil Administrator

Even in ancient times, the legal needs of large populations were too burdensome for one supreme judge. Moses, for example, became "so oppressed by the duty of hearing all the

⁵² Mosiah 17:11–12: "And now king Noah was about to release him, . . . But the priests lifted up their voices against him, and began to accuse him, saying; He has reviled the king. Therefore, the king was stirred up in anger against him, and he delivered him up that he might be slain."

⁵³ Welch, "An Ancient Legal Setting for the Book of Mormon," 45.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁵⁵ It was not uncommon in ancient Israel for monarchs to use their judicial authority for their own political purposes. See pp. 96–97 above.

cases brought before him” that he teetered on the point of physical collapse, forcing the appointment of a lower “system of judges for the people, in which Moses [would] still hear the most important cases, but [would] be relieved of the great mass of minor ones.”⁵⁶ Thus, in addition to hearing their own cases, ancient kings were forced to appoint (and monitor) other judicial and law enforcement officials working to ensure peace and order throughout the realm.

The foundation of Israel’s judicial system was established during Moses’ time. Saul, Israel’s first monarch, built upon this early administration by appointing priests and herdsmen as permanent officials to the crown.⁵⁷ By the time of David’s reign, the crown presided over a sophisticated and centralized legal system, complete with its own military leaders, judges, recorders, spokesmen, priests, scribes, and chief rulers.⁵⁸ During the Solomonic period, Israel’s judicial structure also included royal administrators and tax collectors:

So king Solomon was king over all Israel. And these were the princes which he had; Azariah the son of Zadok the priest, Elihoreph and Ahiah, the sons of Shisha, *scribes*; Jehoshaphat the son of Ahilud, the *recorder*. And Benaiah the son of Jehoiada was *over the host*; and Zadok and Abiathar were the *priests*: And Azariah the son of Nathan was *over the officers*: and Zabud the son of Nathan was *principal officer*, and the king’s friend: And Ahishar was *over the household*: and Adoniram the son of Abda was *over the tribute*. (1 Kings 4:1–6)

The presence of legal officials and administrators under the command of Nephite kings is less apparent. The Book of Mormon contains no long lists of legal officials like those found in the Bible. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to assume that

⁵⁶ Goodenough, “Kingship in Early Israel,” 179 (citing Exodus 18:13–27).

⁵⁷ Whitelam, *The Just King*, 72 (citing 1 Samuel 14, 22:9 and 21:8).

⁵⁸ Boecker, *Law and the Administration of Justice in the Old Testament and Ancient East*, 38 (citing 2 Samuel 8:16–18; 20:23–26). Another list of high ranking officials in David’s administration is found in Ahlstrom, *Royal Administration and National Religion in Ancient Palestine*, 28–29.

Nephite kings in fact presided over some form of judicial administration. That the king was not the sole judge in Nephite society is clearly evidenced by Abinadi's trial, during which Nephite priests exercised jurisdiction over matters not involving the crown. King Noah, furthermore, could not have established and administered his oppressive taxation system without the aid of numerous collectors and administrative officials.⁵⁹ Finally, the book of Mosiah frequently speaks of kings having "charge concerning all the *affairs of the kingdom*" (Mosiah 1:15; 6:3). Such extensive responsibilities most likely required assistance from a corps of civil servants.

Lawgiver

Effective administration of the law was and still "is the process whereby law is made to function equitably. . . . It involves supervision, adjustment, amendments."⁶⁰ As nations grew and developed, modifications to the practice of law and justice became inevitable. Consequently, it was not unusual for ancient kings to issue proclamations or to promulgate specific laws in their capacity as heads of the legal system.⁶¹

Jewish kings often established new laws affecting Israel's armed forces, system of taxation, and supply of forced labor.⁶² David, for instance, issued new regulations regarding the distribution of military booty (1 Samuel 30:23–25), and King Zedekiah issued a proclamation freeing all slaves within Israel's borders.⁶³ King Amaziah's execution of the servants who killed his father was also promulgated "in the standard form of a royal decree."⁶⁴ Finally, in addition to reforming Jewish religious practices, King Jehoshaphat established a national system of

⁵⁹ Mosiah 11:6–13 (taxes levied upon the people supported Noah's wickedness and idolatry, and financed construction of his many spacious buildings and palaces); Ether 10:4–8 (a large civil service probably was required to operate Riplakish's extensive taxation and prison systems).

⁶⁰ E. A. Speiser, "Early Law and Civilization," *Canadian Bar Review* 31 (1953): 874 (cited in Whitelam, *The Just King*, 20).

⁶¹ According to Falk, *Hebrew Law in Biblical Times*, 28, "From time to time there was probably need [in ancient Israel] for new political and administrative rules."

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ For an in-depth discussion, see Whitelam, *The Just King*, 212–16 (citing Jeremiah 34:8–9).

⁶⁴ MacKenzie, "The Forms of Israelite Law," 152 (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation) (cited in Whitelam, *The Just King*, 215).

legal administration, including judges, priests, judicial officers, chief priests having jurisdiction over “matters of the Lord,” and other rulers exercising authority over matters of the king (2 Chronicles 19:5–11).⁶⁵

Nephite accounts provide healthy evidence of royal proclamations.⁶⁶ King Benjamin instructed his son Mosiah to make a “proclamation throughout all [the] land” of Zarahemla ordering the people to gather together to witness Mosiah’s selection as successor to the crown (Mosiah 1:10). Likewise, King Limhi “sent a proclamation among all his people, that thereby they might gather themselves together to the temple, to hear the words which he should speak unto them” (Mosiah 7:17). More significantly, King Mosiah “established laws, and they were acknowledged by the people; therefore they were obliged to abide by the laws which he had made” (Alma 1:1). King Mosiah even authorized Alma to “establish churches throughout all the land of Zarahemla” (Mosiah 25:19–24), and enacted judicial improvements rivaling Jehoshaphat’s reform. After convincing his people to abolish the monarchy, Mosiah issued royal edicts appointing a system of judges in its place (Mosiah 29:41–47). A chief judge presided over the judges in the land, and all judges, whether higher or lower, were held accountable if they did not judge “according to the law” (Mosiah 29:28–29, 42).

This is not to say that Nephite kings were lawgivers in the strictest sense. Mosiah’s laws, for example, “probably did not make radical changes in the substantive rules of the Law of Moses. . . . Nephite judges [were still instructed] to ‘judge according to the laws . . . given [by their] fathers,’ and twenty-two years later the Nephites were still ‘strict in observing the

⁶⁵ For a general discussion of the many judicial reforms set in motion by Jehoshaphat, see Whitlam, *The Just King*, 185–206.

⁶⁶ The Book of Mormon also describes Lamanite and Jaredite kings issuing decrees and proclamations of law. See Alma 23:1–3: “the king of the Lamanites sent a proclamation among all his people, that they should not lay their hands on Ammon, or Aaron, or Omner, or Himni, nor either of their brethren who should go forth preaching the word of God, . . . Yea, he sent a decree among them, that they should not lay their hands on them to bind them, or to cast them into prison”; Ether 7:24–25: King Shule “did execute a law throughout all the land, which gave power unto the prophets that they should go whithersoever they would.”

ordinances of God, according to the law of Moses.' ”⁶⁷ A Nephite king was obliged to deliver “the laws ‘which the Lord commanded him to give unto the people,’ ” and empowered to make only those procedural changes necessary for the enforcement and execution of the *substantive* law.⁶⁸ Nephite kings, therefore, generally were viewed as messengers rather than drafters of the law.

It should be noted that a few distant civilizations *did* view the monarch as the actual source and originator of law. In ancient Babylon, King Hammurabi drafted the laws of the kingdom as he explained in his Code:

In the days to come, for all time, let the king who appears in the land observe the words of justice which *I wrote on my stela*; let him not alter the laws of the land which *I enacted*, the ordinances of the land which *I prescribed*; let him not rescind *my statutes*!⁶⁹

Additionally, Egyptian society viewed its pharaohs as Gods or the offspring of deity.⁷⁰ This divine nature enabled the Egyptian pharaoh to promulgate law, as “the law was merely his formally expressed will.”⁷¹

The Book of Mormon, on the other hand, seems to square with the presumption in ancient Israel against the creation of new substantive legislation. “Though commissioned by God to administer justice, Israelite kings were not, at least in theory, to act as legislators.”⁷² “The law was not the creation of kingship, but its basis and pre-requisite.”⁷³ As one commentator explains, “not only is Moses denied any part in the formulation of the Pentateuchal laws, no Israeli king is said to have authored a law code, nor is any king censured for doing so. The only legislator

⁶⁷ John W. Welch, “The Law of Mosiah,” in Welch, ed., *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, 158–59 (citing Mosiah 29:25, Alma 30:3).

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* (citing Helaman 4:22).

⁶⁹ *Code of Hammurabi* (emphasis added) (cited in Whitelam, *The Just King*, 207).

⁷⁰ See also Ricks, “The Ideology of Kingship in Mosiah 1–6,” 115.

⁷¹ Edgerton, “The Government and the Governed in the Egyptian Empire,” *JNES* 6 (1947): 154 (cited in Whitelam, *The Just King*, 209).

⁷² Falk, *Hebrew Law in Biblical Times*, 45 (citing 2 Samuel 14:17).

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 20.

the Bible knows is God; the only legislation is that mediated by a prophet (Moses and Ezekiel)."⁷⁴

Religious Leader

The third, but by no means the least, area of royal responsibility concerned religious practices.⁷⁵ That ancient kings were associated with national cultic activities should come as no surprise. In Jewish society, "Hebrew tradition did not distinguish between norms of religion, morality and law. As befitting their common divine origin, man was bound to obey all of them with equal conscientiousness."⁷⁶ Because of this overlap of temporal and spiritual biblical law, "it stands to reason that the consecrated king, . . . is responsible for all functions and institutions of the religious state."⁷⁷ Even in the Hittite nation, where a distinction between religious norms and the law was made, kings still played critical religious roles. The Hittites believed that their kings "became priest[s] of the Gods at [their] accession to the throne. . . . Thus the offices of kingship and priesthood were inseparable, whether at a local or a national level."⁷⁸

Regardless of form, religious worship inevitably involved political overtones, over which a monarch had much control. When a society accepted God as ruler of the nation, religion became "an expression of the life of a community, and therefore constituted a part of the political system."⁷⁹ Thus, whatever the initial expectations of ancient Near Eastern kingship, it is clear that the functions of monarchs never were "confined to generalship in war and a partial exercise of civil jurisdiction."⁸⁰

⁷⁴ Moshe Greenberg, "Some Postulates of Biblical Criminal Law," in Menahem Haran, ed., *Yehezkel Kaufmann Jubilee Volume: Studies in Bible and Jewish Religion* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1960): 11 (cited in Whitelam, *The Just King*, 209).

⁷⁵ See, e.g., North, "The Religious Aspects of Hebrew Kingship," 8: "Kingship in the ancient East, like early kingship generally, was largely dominated by religious ideals."

⁷⁶ Falk, *Hebrew Law in Biblical Times*, 19.

⁷⁷ Rosenthal, "Some Aspects of the Hebrew Monarchy," 16.

⁷⁸ Gurney, "Hittite Kingship," 105.

⁷⁹ Ahlstrom, *Royal Administration and National Religion in Ancient Palestine*, ix.

⁸⁰ North, "The Religious Aspects of Hebrew Kingship," 10.

Near Eastern histories contain numerous reports of monarchs playing important religious roles. The Hittite king, for example, presided over ceremonies and festivals consisting “invariably of sacrifices and libations to a long series of deities, accompanied by music and formal utterances and actions by subordinate classes of priests.”⁸¹ The number of Hittite tablets (located in the royal archives of Hattusas) “devoted to the priestly functions of the king is enormous.”⁸²

Jewish kingship also had its own religious associations and responsibilities, resulting in tremendous influence over the worship of Yahweh. “The royal administration included the organization of the clergy as well as the civil service. Occupying the role of the ancient tribal chief, the king was *ex officio* master of the cult (1 Samuel 13:9). Hence, the clergy were considered to be part of the civil service, appointed and dismissed by the king.”⁸³

Additionally, Hebrew kings often led the nation in worship on important occasions, as evidenced by David escorting the Ark of the Covenant to a new resting spot in the holy temple.⁸⁴ On that occasion, King David filled the leading religious role by “wearing a linen ephod, beginning and ending the procession with an act of sacrifice, dancing wildly before the Ark as it is borne along, and finally, when it has reached its destination, following up the concluding sacrifice by pronouncing a blessing upon the people in the name of Yahweh.”⁸⁵ Similar events occurred at Solomon’s dedication of the temple (1 Kings 8). Solomon not only blessed the people, but also “proceeded to offer prayer in intercession for both the dynasty and the nation, and then, rising to his feet, again pronounced words of blessing over the assembled worshippers.”⁸⁶

The many sacral aspects of Nephite kingship are similarly evident. Some Nephite kings were “anointed” or “consecrated” before assuming the royal office (Jacob 1:9; Mosiah 6:3), symbolizing divine approval of, and association with, the new

81 Gurney, “Hittite Kingship,” 106.

82 *Ibid.*, 105.

83 Falk, *Hebrew Law in Biblical Times*, 50.

84 See Rosenthal, “Some Aspects of the Hebrew Monarchy,” 16. See also Aubrey R. Johnson, *Sacral Kingship in Ancient Israel* (Cardiff: Univ. of Wales, 1967), 13.

85 Johnson, “Hebrew Conceptions of Kingship,” 212 (citing 2 Samuel 6).

86 *Ibid.*, 212–13.

king.⁸⁷ After coronation, Nephite kings were given charge over “all the affairs of the kingdom,” and received possession of the brass plates, the sword of Laban, and the liahona (Mosiah 1:15–16). Possession of the royal genealogy, staff, and sphere identified the holder as a spiritual leader and guardian of the faith.⁸⁸ This perhaps explains why Mormon described King Benjamin, among other things, as a “holy man” who worked “with the assistance of the holy prophets” to establish peace in the land, and who spoke “the word of God with power and with authority” (Words of Mormon 1:16–18).

Nephite kings also exercised much influence over the organization of religious worship, sometimes to the detriment of the national faith. King Noah, for example, “put down all the priests . . . and consecrated new ones in their stead” willing to implement his wicked agenda (Mosiah 11:5). On a more positive note, however, both Nephi and Benjamin consecrated righteous priests and appointed religious teachers throughout the kingdom (2 Nephi 5:26; Mosiah 6:3). Moreover, King Mosiah authorized Alma to “establish churches throughout all the land of Zarahemla; and gave him power to ordain priests and teachers over [the] church” (Mosiah 25:19). When the church came under much criticism and persecution, King Mosiah even sent out a proclamation “throughout the land round about that there should not any unbeliever persecute any of those who belonged to the church of God” (Mosiah 27:2).

Mediator of Covenant

Another important religious function of the king, at least in Israel, was to act as mediator of the covenant between God and the people.⁸⁹ The importance of covenants in ancient times cannot be overemphasized. By making pledges in ritual situations, the people hoped to secure “for themselves a

⁸⁷ See also 2 Samuel 5:3 (David anointed king over Israel).

⁸⁸ Stephen D. Ricks, “The Coronation of Kings,” in Welch, ed., *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, 124–25.

⁸⁹ Rosenthal argues that the king’s part in covenant making should not be overrated, as it is obvious “that the head of the people should be instrumental in so vital a matter.” Rosenthal, “Some Aspects of the Hebrew Monarchy,” 14. However, Widengren insists that the “king’s function as the mediator of the covenant between Yahweh and his people Israel” was most important and often neglected; see Geo Widengren, “King and Covenant,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 2 (1957): 1.

peaceful, harmonious, and wholesome existence. They enter once again into the order in which man lives in accord with God and with his fellow man within the divine plan.”⁹⁰

The Hebrew covenant ceremonies began with the Sinai Covenant mediated by Moses. As Exodus 24 explains, Moses convened the people and read the book of the covenant, after which the people replied, “All that the Lord hath said will we do, and be obedient” (Exodus 24:1–7). The Bible also reports covenant renewal rituals at Shechem (Joshua 24) and at Mizpah (1 Samuel 10),⁹¹ both of which included the same components as the ceremony at Sinai: “i) a leader; ii) an assembly of the people; iii) a document of a legal nature; iv) the public reading of this document; v) the writing of the contents; [and] vi) the cultic act.”⁹² Although many early ceremonies were conducted by prophets like Moses and Joshua, the Hebrew king played the main ceremonial role in the act of covenant making once the Hebrew nation embraced monarchy.⁹³ “Not only is it [the king] who convokes the assembly, but it is he also who reads out to it the words of the book of the law, which is the basis of the covenant.”⁹⁴

Not surprisingly, Nephite kingship was “inextricably connected” with covenants.⁹⁵ King Benjamin’s speech, for example, illustrates royal mediation of covenants and contains the six ceremonial components found in biblical texts. King Benjamin “made a proclamation throughout all the land, that the people gathered themselves together throughout all the land” (Mosiah 2:1). After the people assembled, King Benjamin gave a public address concerning God’s commandments (Mosiah 2:1; 4:4). Although King Benjamin’s speech may not have referenced legal documents like the stone tablets at Sinai, it is clear that King Benjamin admonished obedience to a particular body of Nephite legal and religious law:

And now, my brethren, I would that ye should do
as ye have hitherto done. As ye have kept *m*y

⁹⁰ Kenik, “Code of Conduct for a King: Psalm 101,” 398.

⁹¹ For a detailed discussion, see Zafrira Ben-Barak, “The Mizpah Covenant—The Source of the Israelite Monarchic Covenant,” in *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 91 (1979): 30.

⁹² Ben-Barak, “The Mizpah Covenant,” 31.

⁹³ Widengren, “King and Covenant,” 3, 19.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁹⁵ Ricks, “The Ideology of Kingship in Mosiah 1–6,” 116.

commandments, and also the *commandments of my father*, and have prospered, and have been kept from falling into the hands of your enemies, even so if ye shall keep the *commandments of my son*, or the *commandments of God which shall be delivered unto you by him*, ye shall prosper in the land, and your enemies shall have no power over you. (Mosiah 2:31)

The reduction of King Benjamin's remarks to writing also parallels Israelite covenant patterns. Because the entire Nephite nation could not physically hear the address from the tower, King Benjamin caused "that the words which he spake should be *written* and sent forth among those that were not under the sound of his voice" (Mosiah 2:8). King Benjamin also ordered the inscription of "the names of all those who had entered into a covenant with God to keep his commandments" (Mosiah 6:1).

At the conclusion of King Benjamin's speech, the people expressed their desire "to enter into a covenant" with God, saying:

And we are willing . . . to be obedient to his commandments in all things that he shall command us, all the remainder of our days, that we may not bring upon ourselves a never-ending torment, as has been spoken by the angel, that we may not drink out of the cup of the wrath of God. (Mosiah 5:5)

The actual act of entering into the covenant was symbolized by various cultic activities, constituting the final component of the covenant ceremony. First, the entire assembly "cried [out] with one voice, saying: Yea, we believe all the words which thou hast spoken unto us; and also, we know of their surety and truth, . . . And we are willing to enter into a covenant with our God to do his will" (Mosiah 5:2, 5). King Benjamin then reaffirmed the assembly's decision and gave his people a new name:

Ye have spoken the words that I desired; and the covenant which ye have made is a righteous covenant.

And now, because of the covenant which ye have made ye shall be called the children of Christ, his sons, and his daughters; for behold, this day he hath spiritually begotten you; for ye say that your hearts are changed through faith on his name; therefore, ye

are born of him and have become his sons and his daughters. (Mosiah 5:6–7)

Finally, the Nephites brought firstlings of their flocks to the great assembly to perform “sacrifice[s] and burnt offerings according to the law of Moses” (Mosiah 2:3).

When compared to King Benjamin’s speech, King Mosiah’s address to the Mulekites suddenly takes on the appearance of another covenant making ceremony. As reported in Mosiah 25, King Mosiah gathered his people together (Mosiah 25:1) and read to them the “records of Zeniff” (Mosiah 25:5), as well as the “account of Alma and his brethren” (Mosiah 25:6). After Mosiah “had made an end of reading the records, his people who tarried in the land were struck with wonder and amazement” (Mosiah 25:7). They then “raise[d] their voices and [gave] thanks to God” (Mosiah 25:10), and “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). The scene even culminated in a ritualistic act, when “Alma did go forth into the water and did baptize them” (Mosiah 25:18).

Table 1 (see pp. 110–11) compares Benjamin’s and Mosiah’s covenant ceremonies with very similar rituals in the Old Testament:⁹⁶ This comparison suggests that Nephite kings not only mediated national covenant-making ceremonies, but also followed the six-step pattern inherited from their Israelite forefathers.

Teacher

After mediating the covenant between God and the people, righteous Nephite kings taught the people how to uphold their sacral obligations. The Book of Mormon, in fact, often equates the office of king with teacher.⁹⁷ Whether Jewish kings performed a similar function in ancient Israel is of much debate. 2 Chronicles 17:7–9 provides some evidence of teaching by a monarch:

Also in the third year of his reign he [Jehoshaphat] sent to his princes, even to Ben-hail,

⁹⁶ The analysis and chart of the biblical ceremonies originally was completed by Ben-Barak, “The Mizpah Covenant,” 32.

⁹⁷ See 2 Nephi 5:19; Mosiah 2:29.

and to Obadiah, and to Zechariah, and to Nethaneel, and to Michaiah, to teach in the cities of Judah.

And with them he sent Levites, even Shemaiah, and Nethaniah, and Zebadiah, and Asahel, and Shemiramoth, and Jehonathan, and Adonijah, and Tobijah, and Tob-adonijah, Levites; and with them Elishama and Jehoram, priests.

And they taught in Judah, and had the book of the law of the Lord with them, and went about throughout all the cities of Judah, and taught the people.

But while the king may be charged with the “reading” and teaching of the torah,⁹⁸ it is “not the same as being himself . . . the teacher, the instructor. The king only acts as reader.”⁹⁹ Indeed, “whenever the reading of the Torah is mentioned, either as a command (Deut. 27) or as part of a ceremony (2 Kings 23), the king, as before Moses and Joshua, *reads*; he *never teaches* or expounds. This is so because the accredited teachers of the Torah were none other but the levitical priests.”¹⁰⁰

Nephite kings also delegated their fair share of teaching duties to subordinate priests and teachers. Nephi instructed Jacob to teach the people the words of Isaiah (2 Nephi 6–24), and both Benjamin and Mosiah appointed priests and teachers to instruct the people according to the law (Jarom 1:11; Mosiah 2:4; 6:3; 25:19).¹⁰¹ Nevertheless, Nephite kings often were found personally teaching throughout the realm. Although King Benjamin “caused” that his sons should be taught in the “language of his fathers”—and most certainly the affairs of the kingdom (Mosiah 1:2)—he also “*taught* them [his sons] concerning the records which were engraven on the plates of brass” (Mosiah 1:3). This suggests that King Benjamin played an active role in the spiritual training of his successors/sons, even though other portions of their schooling may have been delegated to someone else.

⁹⁸ See also Widengren, “King and Covenant,” 16; Rosenthal, “Some Aspects of the Hebrew Monarchy,” 16.

⁹⁹ Rosenthal, “Some Aspects of the Hebrew Monarch,” 16.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁰¹ Teachers in some Lamanite societies also were appointed by the crown (Mosiah 24:1–6).

| | Sinai | Shechem |
|-----------------------|--|--|
| Components | Exodus 24 | Joshua 24 |
| Leader | Moses | Joshua |
| Assembly | read in the audience of the people (7) | gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem (1) |
| Legal Document | book of the covenant (7) | set them a statute and an ordinance (25) |
| Public Reading | read in hearing of the people | said unto the people (22) |
| Writing | wrote all the words of the Lord (4) | wrote the words in the book of the law of God (26) |
| Cultic Act | built an altar (4) | took a stone and set it under an oak by the sanctuary of the Lord (26) |

Table 1: Benjamin's and Mosiah's covenant ceremonies compared with Old Testament rituals.

| Mizpah 1 Samuel 10 | Benjamin Mosiah 1-6 | Mosiah Mosiah 25 |
|---|---|--|
| Samuel | Benjamin | Mosiah |
| called people together unto the Lord at Mizpeh (17) | the people gathered themselves throughout all the land (2:1) | caused that all the people should be gathered together (1) |
| manner of the kingdom (25) | mine, my father's, my son's and God's commandments (2:31) | |
| told the people the manner of the kingdom (25) | opened his mouth and began to speak (4:4; cf. 2:9) | read and caused to be read (5) |
| wrote it in a book (25) | words which he spake should be written (2:8) | |
| laid it up before the Lord (25) | sacrifices and ordinances according to law of Moses (2:3); names recorded (6:1) | baptism (17) |

More significantly, some Nephite monarchs attested to their own teaching efforts. In his address at Zarahemla, King Benjamin stated, “[I] have taught you that ye should keep the commandments of the Lord, in all things which he hath commanded you” (Mosiah 2:13). King Mosiah also left no doubt as to his own attempts to teach his subjects:

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 land, that there should be no wars nor contentions, no stealing, nor plundering, nor murdering, nor any manner of iniquity. (Mosiah 29:14)

Compared to their Hebrew counterparts, some Nephite monarchs appear to have been the more active teachers.

Some Important Differences

What emerges from the foregoing examination is a model of Nephite kingship fashioned in large part after the three roles characteristic of Israelite and other ancient monarchies—general, judge, and priest. This tripartite division of royal responsibility became an integral feature of Nephite law and government, and continued to exist even during the reign of Nephite judges. Alma the Younger, in fact, divided up the powers of the chief judge into three distinct offices; chief judge over the people (Alma 4:17), the office of high priest (Alma 4:18), and chief captain of the Nephite armies (Alma 16:5).¹⁰²

On a cautionary note, however, one should not assume too much uniformity among ancient monarchs. Kings in different societies tended to carry out their military, legal, and religious duties in diverse ways, oftentimes to further personal agendas or meet special societal needs. The following summarizes just a few of the apparent differences between Nephite and other ancient monarchies in an effort to paint a more accurate picture of Nephite kingship.

Restraining Military Power

Nephite kings exercised much restraint in military affairs. Despite substantial weaponry and manpower at their disposal,

¹⁰² See Welch, “An Ancient Legal Setting for the Book of Mormon,” 24.

Nephite kings engaged in armed conflict only as a matter of defense. There is little evidence of Nephite kings deploying armed forces in pursuit of any offensive gains. To the contrary, the Book of Mormon portrays Nephite kings *standing against* rather than stalking Lamanite armies (Words of Mormon 1:13; Mosiah 10:9). This defensive posture not only kept Nephite armies out of long military engagements, but served to free time for other matters of the crown, such as judicial or religious duties.

This aspect of Nephite monarchy stands in stark contrast to the use of military power by other Old World monarchs. The reigns of most Jaredite kings, for example, were consumed in civil war, or by military campaigns against foreign attack. Before everything else, Jaredite kings were leaders and combatants on the battlefield, and had little time or energy for other concerns of the realm.¹⁰³

Less Bureaucracy and Political Fanfare

Compared to other Old World governments, Nephite monarchical rule appears less extravagant and bureaucratic. According to biblical accounts, both David and Solomon presided over a large body of administrative officials and an entourage of household servants (2 Samuel 8:16–18; 20:23–26; 1 Kings 4:1–6). Moreover, the extensive taxing power of Jewish and other Near Eastern monarchs carried with it much bureaucratic baggage (and greater burdens on the community).

It appears that the royal courts and households of Nephite kings (such as Benjamin and Mosiah) did not rise to the size and splendor of those found in the ancient Near East. Perhaps more important, many Nephite kings (such as Benjamin) never taxed their subjects, nor “sought gold nor silver nor any manner of riches” through the powers of the crown (Mosiah 2:12). Granted, King Noah relied upon substantial taxes and a large royal court to accumulate riches, vineyards, elaborate palaces, and other forms of wealth to support himself, his wives, and his concubines (Mosiah 11:4–16). But King Noah’s reign appears to be the exception to the Nephite rule, and simply illustrates that power always is subject to abuse.

¹⁰³ Nibley, *The World of the Jaredites*, 226.

Delivering Laws

Nephite kings, like kings in ancient Israel, never acted as legislators or drafters of the law. Rather, Nephite kings publicized and enforced the laws that God already had revealed.¹⁰⁴ The Nephite king, therefore, was bound to the law like anyone else, and was authorized to make only the minor procedural changes required by a growing community. A wicked Nephite king, in fact, was branded as one who “teareth up the laws of those who have reigned in righteousness before him; and . . . trampleth under his feet the commandments of God” (Mosiah 29:22).

Such was not the case in other ancient civilizations. As previously noted, King Hammurabi was quick to claim original draftsmanship of his Code.¹⁰⁵ Moreover, because of an alleged divine origin, Egyptian Pharaohs lived above the law, and were empowered to make substantive promulgations at will.¹⁰⁶ Finally, many Jaredite kings were laws unto themselves, ruling their kingdoms according to their own desires (see, e.g., Ether 10:5).

Religious Participation

Although most ancient kingships were linked in some way to the national cult, not every ancient king actively participated in religious activities. Some kings merely *symbolized* divine office or power,¹⁰⁷ while other monarchs (most notably Jaredite kings) were too preoccupied with military engagements or civil strife to become involved with religion. In Nephite society, however, kings (such as Benjamin) frequently ventured beyond any symbolic religious function to *personally* teach the people concerning God’s commandments (Mosiah 1:3; 2:13; 29:14).

Noble Servitude

Perhaps the most admirable feature of Nephite kingship is not found in any specific feat or accomplishment, but in the

¹⁰⁴ See, e.g., Helaman 4:22.

¹⁰⁵ See Whitelam, *The Just King*, 207.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 209.

¹⁰⁷ For example, Hittite kings were believed to become “priest[s] of the Gods” at the time of accession to the throne. Gurney, “Hittite Kingship,” 105.

manner in which royal duties and obligations were carried out. To be sure, most Nephite kings rendered extremely diligent and selfless service to their people.

The Nephites were not alone in stumbling upon the notion of “kingly service.” The same concept earlier was “epitomized by the Macedonian philosopher-king Antigonos Gonatas (320–239 BCE) in his rebuke to his son concerning the oppression of citizens: ‘Do you not understand, my son, that our kingdom is held to be a noble servitude?’ ”¹⁰⁸ A similar episode is reported in 1 Kings 12, where King Rehoboam faced a popular rebellion caused by heavy taxation. When asked to give counsel regarding the matter, Rehoboam’s elders answered, “If thou wilt be a servant unto this people this day, and wilt serve them, and answer them, and speak good words to them, then they will be thy servants for ever” (1 Kings 12:7).¹⁰⁹ The basic message conveyed during the crisis was this—“the king who financially exploits his subjects is destined to fail.”¹¹⁰

The Deuteronomic view of royalty also stresses the importance of royal service and condemns a monarch’s exploitation of his subjects. According to Deuteronomy, the king is not to “make himself a magnificent pomp, harem, or treasury” at the expense of his subjects.¹¹¹ Rather, the king must diligently read the book of law “all the days of his life: that he may learn to fear the Lord his God, to keep all the words of this law and these statutes . . . That his heart be not lifted up above his brethren” (Deuteronomy 17:19–20). In this way, Deuteronomy “emphasizes the limitations placed upon the king rather than his powers,” and reminds the royal house that it is “subject to the rule of law and bound to respect the ancient equality of the people.”¹¹²

Arguably more than any other ancient text, the Book of Mormon stands as a testament to the virtues of noble servitude. If there is a single renowned characteristic of Nephite kings such as Benjamin, it is an unflinching devotion and service to all members of the realm. As shown in his prefatory remarks before the gathering at the temple, King Benjamin never viewed his

¹⁰⁸ Moshe Weinfeld, “The King as the Servant of the People: The Source of the Idea,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 33 (1982): 190.

¹⁰⁹ For a more in depth discussion, see *ibid.*, 190–93.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 192–93.

¹¹¹ Goodenough, “Kingship in Early Israel,” 202 (citing Deut. 17:14–20).

¹¹² Falk, *Hebrew Law in Biblical Times*, 44, 48.

kingship with pomposity, nor did he believe he was above the law:

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; and have been kept and preserved by his matchless power, to serve you with all the might, mind and strength which the Lord hath granted unto me. (Mosiah 2:10–11)¹¹³

Humility and meekness not only motivated the king to perform royal service to others, but hopefully evoked a reciprocal sense of duty and loyalty in the hearts of the people. As Benjamin reminded his congregations, “Behold, ye have called me your king; and if I, whom ye call your king, do labor to serve you, then ought not ye to labor to serve one another?” (Mosiah 2:18)

King Benjamin’s exemplary military, civic, and religious service is not disputed. As previously noted, Benjamin stood against the Lamanites in battle, “and he did fight with the strength of his own arm” (Words of Mormon 1:13). After securing the nation from outside attack, Benjamin labored “with all the might of his body and the faculty of his whole soul” to cease the “contentions among his own people,” mainly by punishing false Christs and false prophets “according to their crimes” (Words of Mormon 1:12, 15–16, 18). Finally, at the end of his reign, King Benjamin publicly reported the successful administration and enforcement of the law, without even a hint of oppression or exploitation:

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;

¹¹³ See also Mosiah 2:26: “And I, even I, whom ye call your king, am no better than ye yourselves are; for I am also of the dust.”

Neither have I suffered that ye should be confined in dungeons, nor that ye should make slaves one of another, nor that ye should murder, or plunder, or steal, or commit adultery; nor even have I suffered that ye should commit any manner of wickedness,

• • •
 And even I, myself, have labored with mine own hands that I might serve you, and that ye should not be laden with taxes, and that there should nothing come upon you which was grievous to be borne. (Mosiah 2:12–14)

It is not a coincidence that King Mosiah, another righteous king, made a similar accounting to the Nephites at the end of his reign,

And even I myself have labored with all the power and faculties which I have possessed, . . . to establish peace throughout the land, that there should be no wars nor contentions, no stealing, nor plundering, nor murdering, nor any manner of iniquity;

And whosoever has committed iniquity, him have I punished according to the crime which he has committed, according to the law which has been given to us by our fathers. (Mosiah 29:14–15)¹¹⁴

Conversely, King Noah illustrates the antithesis of the noble king-servant. Not only did King Noah fail to protect his kingdom from Lamanite attack (Mosiah 11:17), he enacted burdensome taxes “to support himself, and his wives and his concubines; and also his priests, and their wives and their concubines; . . . in their laziness, and in their idolatry, and in their whoredoms” (Mosiah 11:4–7). Instead of administering peace and order throughout the land, King Noah built spacious palaces and “placed his heart upon his riches, . . . and spent his time in riotous living” (Mosiah 11:8–9, 14).

In sum, it appears that Nephite society assessed their kings in terms of humble service to the kingdom. A monarch such as Noah, who did little for anyone except himself, was viewed “as

¹¹⁴ See also Mosiah 6:7: “And king Mosiah did cause his people that they should till the earth. And he also himself did till the earth, that thereby he might not become burdensome to his people, that he might do according to that which his father had done in all things.”

a tyrant who was seeking for gain, yea, for that lucre which doth corrupt the soul" (Mosiah 29:40). On the other hand, kings possessing the Benjamin-like attitude of noble servitude were embraced by their subjects, insomuch as the people would "esteem [the just king] more than any other man" (Mosiah 29:40).¹¹⁵

Conclusion

Nephite monarchs, like other ancient kings, were charged with a host of military, civic, and religious responsibilities. The proper discharge of such duties not only secured the well-being of the nation, but generated the respect for the crown necessary for a stable and loyal kingdom. With one main exception—King Noah—Nephite kings performed their three-fold mission with a degree of dedication and moral accountability perhaps unmatched by any other Old World ruler. Based on the Benjamin model of kingship, Mosiah had good reason to sanction perpetual monarchy.

¹¹⁵ See also Jacob 1:10: "The people having loved Nephi exceedingly, he having been a great protector for them, . . . and having labored in all his days for their welfare."