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Noel B. Reynolds

Brigham Young University - Provo, nbr@byu.edu

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NEPHITE KINGSHIP RECONSIDERED

Noel B. Reynolds¹

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While previous attempts to understand Nephite kingship have emphasized perceived continuities with Old Testament Davidic monarchy and its rituals, I would like to expand this effort by calling attention to discontinuities that point to the uniqueness of the Nephites' situation. Lehi clearly aligned himself with that tradition of purists that believed it necessary to go out of Egypt or even Jerusalem when these were dominated by evil, to find a place where they could serve God in righteousness. The evils of a corrupt Jerusalem were associated closely with the corruptions of the Judahite regime. Nephi pointedly chose not to teach his descendants the ways of the Jews, while preserving for them the writings of Israel's prophets.² But not all Lehi's

¹ The author gratefully acknowledges the essential contributions to this project of his research assistant, Victoria Andrews, a graduate student at Union Theological Seminary and of FARMS for the funding that made her assistance possible. Several individuals have provided important commentary and criticism which has enriched and hopefully strengthened this paper, including especially John W. Welch and, appropriately, John L. Sorenson. While their comments have been most helpful, they may not yet be satisfied with the conclusions advanced below.

² "For I, Nephi, have not taught them many things concerning the manner of the Jews; for their works were works of darkness, and their doings were doings of abominations" (2 Nephi 25:5).

children accepted his preference for righteousness and hardship in the desert to wealth and comfort in the great city. Laman and Lemuel and their adherents saw nothing wrong with the public morality of Jerusalem's Jews as justified by their adherence to the law of Moses.

In this paper I will extend and update my previous efforts to understand the political dynamic of the Book of Mormon by looking at four themes or issues that can be developed from the text itself. The first is an expansion of earlier treatments of the contradictory political ideologies of the Nephites and Lamanites, which informed relations between these two groups across their thousand-year history. The second is an exploration of the historical possibility that Nephi may never, in fact, have been anointed as king of the Nephite people, which raises in turn a possible need to reassess the character of Nephite kingship. The third section brings together the many ways in which Nephi implicitly and explicitly compares himself to Moses, illuminating the Nephite regime by pointing to a preferred older and even more authoritative model of Israelite rulership. The final section offers an interpretation of the crucial confrontation between Nephi and his jealous brothers in 1 Nephi 17, in which Nephi represents Laman and Lemuel as having committed themselves to his rulership, even according to the rituals of their own preferred Judahite model. Together, these four studies may help us better understand the character of the Nephite regimes and the degree to which they continued ancient Israelite patterns or purposely diverged from them in innovative ways.

The Political Argument of the Small Plates

The political sub-text of Nephi's writings has been identified previously.³ Through a thousand years of Nephite history, both Nephite dissidents and Lamanite invaders would accuse the Nephite rulers of usurping the right to rule which belonged to Laman and Lemuel, the elder sons of Lehi, and to their descendants (Alma 54:17). For the aggrieved parties, the offense arose from a series of incidents when Nephi "took the lead of their journey in the wilderness" and while crossing the sea, and again "in the land of their first inheritance" when he led a small group away—"robbing" them of the brass plates, the Liahona, and the sword of Laban (See Mosiah 10:12–13). Nephi himself reports their complaint: "Our younger brother thinks to rule over us; and we have had much trial because of him; wherefore, now let us slay him, that we may not be afflicted more because of his words. For behold, we will not have him to be our ruler; for it belongs unto us, who are the elder brethren, to rule over this people" (2 Nephi 5:3). Nephi's separate colony had come under Lamanite attack during his own lifetime, during the same period in which he was writing the small plates (2 Nephi 5:28–34). And he had been shown in vision the future demise of his own descendants at the hands of the Lamanites (1 Nephi 12:19–23).⁴

³ Noel B. Reynolds, "The Political Dimension in Nephi's Small Plates," *BYU Studies*, 27 No. 4, (Fall, 1987), 15-37. John L. Sorenson noted the similarity to the lineage histories of the Guatemala highland Indians that were used to confer "legitimacy and sanctity on the rulers" (*An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon*, SLC: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1985, 50–51). See Sorenson's extended comparison of these histories with the Book of Mormon in his "The Book of Mormon as a Mesoamerican Record," in Noel B. Reynolds, ed., *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins*, FARMS, Provo, 1997.

⁴ Richard L. Bushman, "The Lamanite View of Book of Mormon History," in *By Study and Also by Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley on the Occasion of his Eightieth Birthday*, 27 March 1990, II:52–72, edited by John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks, FARMS and Deseret Book Co., develops this Lamanite ideology further in the context of the full range of Lamanite relationships with the Nephites.

Nephi's followers and descendants desperately needed a justification of the legitimacy of their own government to counter the ideology of the Lamanites, and even Nephite dissidents.

While Nephi's primary purpose in writing was "to persuade our children, and also our brethren, to believe in Christ, and to be reconciled to God" (2 Nephi 25:23), his secondary purpose was to demonstrate for all time that his position of leadership in the family of Lehi was legitimate. Nephi had seen the future and knew that the future integrity of Nephite society would depend on the ability of his descendants to understand and believe in the correctness of the religious and political institutions and traditions that defined their independence from the Lamanite regimes.

The authority of Nephi and his successors was established on three grounds. First, the Lord had chosen Nephi for the role and designated him "a ruler and a teacher over [his] brethren" (1 Nephi 2:22). The angel of the Lord had personally informed Laman and Lemuel of this divine appointment, explaining that the reason they had not been chosen was "because of [their] iniquities" (2 Nephi 3:29). Nephi had also been filled with the power of God on various occasions (2 Nephi 1:26–27). Second, Laman and Lemuel had acquiesced in Nephi's role as ruler and teacher, going to him for explanations of Lehi's vision and bowing down before him on various occasions (1 Nephi 7:20, 15:1–16:5, 16:24, 17:55). Third, Father Lehi had given the leadership to Nephi formally and even his first blessing (if the eldest did not hearken to him), commanding the brothers not to rebel against Nephi any more, for the Spirit of the Lord was in him and "opened his mouth to utterance that he could not shut it" (2 Nephi 1:24–29). The implicit argument of the small plates is that Laman and Lemuel had on various occasions known that Nephi's authority to rule was from God and that they had acknowledged this in word and

deed on those occasions. Consequently, their ultimate rebellion against Nephi and their accusations against him as a usurper were intentional lies, denying their own experience and breaking their own solemn agreements.

Nephi's small-plates account was written in such a way as to emphasize the miraculous experiences by which Laman and Lemuel had been brought at certain points to know the truth of these things and of the power of the Lord by which Lehi and Nephi spoke. For it was ultimately this Spirit of the Lord in them which had legitimized their ruling position to their own satisfaction. By contrast, Laman and Lemuel rebelled and justified their claims to authority on the familiar ground of an inherited right to rule, which fit well with the Davidic or Judahite monarchical tradition of their own times. Nephi asserted instead a prophetic calling and appointment, evidenced by the power of God given to him, appealing to the older Israelite tradition featuring Joseph, Moses, and Samuel. It was a contest between the claims of inherited royal right and divine prophetic calling, a contest that necessarily put religious claims at the center of the dispute. Specifically, the revelation of Christ to Lehi and Nephi was inextricably linked to Nephi's political claims. The two were based on the same revelations. The logic was simple: if God had chosen Nephi, as he and Lehi claimed, then Christ would also come. But by classic *modus ponens* implication, the reverse was also true. If Nephi's prophecies of Christ were false, so were his claims to divine authority to rule. Thus, the Nephite dissidents who would reject these prophecies would simultaneously reject the legitimacy of their own political regime. Four hundred years later, the apostate Zoramite Ammoron begins his letter to the Nephite leader Moroni by recounting the ancient litany of wrongs that Nephi committed against Laman and Lemuel, "robbing them of their right to the government when it rightly belonged unto

them,” and also of pressing his own ancestor Zoram and bringing him out of Jerusalem (Alma 54: 17, 23). Simultaneously, Ammoron denies the god that Moroni accuses him of having rejected (Alma 54: 21).

The small plates were written late in Nephi’s life. He began their writing thirty years after leaving Jerusalem (2 Nephi 5:28–30), had completed only 27 chapters ten years later (2 Nephi 5:34), and had finished his writings and turned them over to his younger brother Jacob fifteen years after that (Jacob 1:1). These political issues were fully developed before this record was started. The need to justify and legitimate the Nephite political regime was both clear and pressing.

The small plates report a series of events which cumulatively make it clear why Nephi could rightfully lead Lehi’s posterity. When Lehi first led the family into the wilderness at God’s command, Laman and Lemuel murmured, regretting the loss of their wealthy position in Jerusalem, being “like unto the Jews who were at Jerusalem, who sought to take away the life of [Lehi]” (1 Nephi 2:13). But Nephi did not rebel, and seeking the Lord in prayer, was visited by the Spirit and told that he “would be made a ruler and a teacher over [his] brethren” (1 Nephi 2:16–22). Again, directed by God, Lehi sent his sons back to Jerusalem to obtain the lineage records and scriptures held by Laban. Laman and Lemuel refused, but Nephi accepted the call and led the others in that quest, succeeding alone after their initial group efforts failed. In the process, an angel of God appeared to the four brothers, interrupting Laman and Lemuel’s physical beating of the younger two, and informing them of Nephi’s future position as their ruler and teacher.

Again, Lehi sent his sons back to Jerusalem to enlist Ishmael and his family, that there

might be wives for Lehi's sons. The mission succeeded as Ishmael accepted Lehi's prophetic call to flee out of Jerusalem with his family. Lehi was not the only prophet announcing the impending doom of Judah's capital, and in a story not told, Nephi convinced the patriarch Ishmael to abandon all and flee with them into the wilderness. They were not far into the journey before the rigors of desert travel brought Ishmael's sons and Laman and Lemuel to their civilized senses. Grasping the seriousness and even insanity of this life-changing flight, they made a stand and insisted on returning to the good life in Jerusalem and the protection of the Judahite regime there. Angered by Nephi's exhortations to be faithful to their mission, they seized and bound him with the intent to leave him to die. But God intervened again, miraculously loosing Nephi from his bands (1 Nephi 7). The rebellion was quelled, and the reader is now alerted to the tension between those who put their trust in the Judahite regime and the prosperous life in Jerusalem, and those who accept the cries of various prophets denouncing Jerusalem for its wickedness and announcing its imminent destruction.

Lehi was given a great vision of God's saving plan for his children, the report of which left Laman and Lemuel questioning and doubting (1 Nephi 15). But Nephi sought clarification in prayer, and was carried by the Spirit of the Lord into a high mountain where he was shown the same vision, or even a more extensive version, which enabled him upon his return to explain all things to his questioning brothers (1 Nephi 10–16:5). Thus Nephi became their teacher, at their own request, when they told him "the Lord maketh no such thing known unto us" (1 Nephi 15:9). During their subsequent wilderness travels a food crisis occurred, and Nephi was divinely guided to find the wild game that saved their lives (1 Nephi 16:18–32). Ishmael's death triggered another crisis in which Laman and Lemuel again enlisted Ishmael's sons in a plot to kill both

Nephi and Lehi, because of their sufferings in the wilderness and because Nephi, the younger brother, had usurped the position of ruler and teacher, and because “he has thought to make himself a king and a ruler over us, that he may do with us according to his will and pleasure” (1 Nephi 16:35–38). This early murmuring formulated the basic elements of the Lamanite tradition that lasted a thousand years. The threatening disaster was averted as “the voice of the Lord came and did speak many words unto them, and did chasten them exceedingly” (1 Nephi 16:39). In the process, we are allowed to glimpse both the corruption and the attraction of the Davidic monarchy. Kings “do with” their subjects “according to [their] own will and pleasure.” Rather than seeing this as a reason to condemn wicked Jerusalem and its corrupted monarchy, Laman and Lemuel see it as a motivation to assert their own rights to rule against Nephi’s divine appointment.

After nearly a decade spent in crossing the Arabian Peninsula and arriving at a fertile oasis on the southern coast, Nephi received the command to build a ship with his brothers’ help. Again they rebelled, and, angered by Nephi’s exhortations and call to repentance, they moved to kill him by throwing him “into the depths of the sea” (1 Nephi 17:48). Again, miraculously, Nephi was filled with the power of God to such an extent that the older brothers were frightened into obeying him, and they “fell down before me, and were about to worship me” (1 Nephi 17:55).

Finally, in crossing the ocean, the impious revelries of Laman and Lemuel led Nephi, in his tenuous role as ruler and teacher, to rebuke and admonish them, to which they responded by lashing him to the mast. But God responded again to their rebellion, this time with a storm that threatened to capsizes them. After several days, and faced with the prospects of such a death, they

released Nephi, who prayed and gained relief from the storm and power to guide the ship directly to the promised land (1 Nephi 18). The hand of God in these events was not hidden. He had openly appointed and supported Nephi against older brothers, who clearly deserved their demotion and humiliations. Their father Lehi, the only possible source for their own claimed authority, had affirmed Nephi's claims over theirs and enjoined them on his deathbed not to rebel against Nephi, but to obey him (2 Nephi 1:24, 28). And so it was that "the words of the Lord had been fulfilled unto my brethren, which he spake concerning them, that I should be their ruler and their teacher. Wherefore, I had been their ruler and their teacher, according to the commandments of the Lord, until the time they sought to take away my life" (1 Nephi 5:19).

Nephi's Kingship Ambiguous

Some time after the arrival in the promised land, Nephi led those who would follow him away from "the land of their first inheritance" into the wilderness, to a place which they called Nephi, at the wish of his people, who also "did take upon them to call themselves the people of Nephi" (2 Nephi 5:8–9). After some time, in which they had settled themselves, established defenses and an economy, and even built a temple, Nephi reports that it came to pass that his people "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" (1 Nephi 5:18).

This chapter (2 Nephi 5) provides several major insights into the Nephite regime. The chapter opens with a description of the resurgent conflict between Nephi and his older brethren in the land of their first inheritance. Like Moses and his father Lehi before him, Nephi was warned by the Lord that he "should depart from them and flee into the wilderness, and all those who should go with me" (2 Nephi 5:5). We already know from 1 Nephi 17 that Nephi endorses

Joshua's account of the conquest of Canaan in which there was no compromise with the local population. "And after they had crossed the river Jordan he did make them mighty unto the driving out of the children of the land, yea, unto the *scattering them to destruction*" (2 Nephi 17:32). This conquest had come only after the Lord had straitened the sometimes-rebellious Israelites "with his rod" and "because of their iniquity" (1 Nephi 17:31, 41–42). But after centuries in their promised land, the Israelites "have become wicked, yea, nearly unto ripeness" and Nephi knows the day is coming "that they must be destroyed" and "led away into captivity" (1 Nephi 17:43). In Nephi's record, Laman and Lemuel complain that it would have been better to have died before coming "out of Jerusalem than to have suffered these afflictions" (1 Nephi 17:20) implicitly evoking comparison between his brothers and the complaining Israelites who told Moses "for it had been better for us to serve the Egyptians, than that we should die in the wilderness (Exodus 14:12). Laman and Lemuel are also like the wicked Jews at Jerusalem who sought Lehi's life and who accommodate themselves to that same comfortable life-style that puts personal comfort ahead of a rigorous righteousness. Nephi makes it clear that the general principle involved cuts against the unrighteous, whether they be pagans or Israelites. "Behold, the Lord esteemeth all flesh in one; he that is righteous is favored of God.... [The Lord] raiseth up a righteous nation, and destroyeth the nations of the wicked. And he leadeth away the righteous into precious lands, and the wicked he destroyeth" (1 Nephi 17:35, 37–38). This tradition of separating the righteous from the wicked continued strong in Nephite culture as we see Alma centuries later calling the Nephites: "come ye out from the wicked, and be ye separate, and touch not their unclean things" for "the names of the wicked shall not be mingled with the names of my people" (Alma 5:57).

2 Nephi 5 can also be read as a summary account of Nephi's reign in that it recounts the Nephites' founding as a separate people at the Lord's command, their faithfulness to "the commandments of the Lord in all things," their economic fortunes as a people, the list of sacred objects in the ruler's possession, their defense measures, their city and temple building, the establishment of their teachers and priests, and the variety of official records that had been written. In this sense it resembles Benjamin's testament in Mosiah 1–6 on the occasion of Mosiah's coronation, and also the testament of Moses as presented in Deuteronomy.

Clearly, Nephi had been the ruler, and would continue in that role. What is left unclear is whether he ever finally accepted the formal designation and rights of a king. Or was his reluctance as emphatic as that of Alma, the repentant priest/leader, who when "the people were desirous that Alma should be their king," replied chiastically:

"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" (Mosiah 23: 6–7).

Obviously, Alma was more determined in this matter, as his adamant refusal, no doubt greatly reinforced by the evils suffered under King Noah, led soon thereafter to the abandonment of traditional kingship as practiced among the larger Nephite society. Nephi himself could not have been so implacably opposed to monarchy, as he personally consecrated his own successor a king. But even Alma believed monarchy was beneficial "if it were possible that you could always have just men to be your kings" (Mosiah 23: 8). Nephi had not known "the iniquity of King Noah and his priests" (Mosiah 23:9), and his reluctance was based on more personal reservations.

The odd, and even problematic, aspect of Nephi's story is that he gives no account of his own anointing as king over the Nephite people. How was he chosen? By whom was he anointed? The proper ritual installation of a king is the most obvious historical justification for his legitimate rule. But Nephi passes this over in silence. Modern readers have generally assumed that Nephi was the first and founding king in a four-hundred-year succession of Nephite monarchs. But the evidence for this is problematic. Nephi's silence on this score, in a writing that carefully marshals every available argument for the legitimacy of his rule, raises serious questions about this assumption.

If Nephi never records his own kingship as a fact, where do we as modern readers get the idea that he was the first Nephite king? Several statements, which turn out on reflection to be ambiguous, seem to have led to this widespread assumption. The germ of such an idea is first planted in the reader's mind by the accusation of Laman and Lemuel noted above, in which they suspect Nephi of having monarchical ambitions. Whereas Nephi quotes the Lord and an angel to his readers affirming that Nephi will be made "a teacher and a ruler" over his brethren, they sometimes get this phrasing right (1 Nephi 16:37) but on one occasion distort it as "make himself a *king* and a ruler over us" (1 Nephi 16:38). While we cannot know for sure whether the term *king* derives originally from their own imaginations and suspicions, reflecting more what they would have been thinking had they been in Nephi's position, or if it reflects actual language used by Nephi, it does not seem to accurately reflect Nephi's way of thinking or writing about these matters. And even Nephi's language attributes the term to them as something they speculate is in his intentions, rather than something they have heard him say—"he has *thought* to make himself a king and a ruler over us" (1 Nephi 16:38). We should also remember that the terms *king* and

ruler are not equivalent terms, as the latter is much broader and could also apply to a “judge” or a “leader.” For example, on the advice of his father-in-law Jethro, Moses appointed “rulers of thousands, rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties, and rulers of tens” (Exodus 18:17). King Mosiah instituted a system of “judges to rule over them,” as the kings had done to that point (Mosiah 29:41). The phrase “a king and a ruler” is first applied officially to Nephi’s successor (Jacob 1:9).

It may be that Nephi answers the kingship question for us in the comment: “I did for [my people] according to that which was in my power” (2 Nephi 5:18). Was it in Nephi’s power to make himself a king? Nephi had led his people from place to place and through the wilderness. He had established a people, provided for their defense, consecrated priests and teachers, taught them the material arts, and even built a sanctuary or temple for their worship of God. But all of these things could be done by a prophet/ruler without the additional prerogatives of royal rule. We cannot conclude from what Nephi did for his people that he had taken the monarchical role. Moses had done all this and much more.

Before dying, Lehi may have structured a situation in which Nephi could not become a king under any recognized model. Lehi was God’s prophet and the ruler of his own people and could therefore have chosen a king to rule in his stead, as did Samuel anciently for Israel. But Lehi was not inspired in that direction. Rather, he chose to perpetuate the status quo, making one final appeal to his rebellious older sons to accept the younger Nephi’s leadership. Lehi promised these sons his “first blessing,” appropriate to their first-born status, if they would follow Nephi, who spoke by the power of the Spirit of God. Otherwise, the first blessing would go to Nephi (2 Nephi 1:24–29). But who would adjudicate? Who would decide when the time came? It was an

impossible situation. Each party was left to judge its own cause. Nephi judged his brothers not to have accepted his leadership—they were plotting to assassinate him—and, being divinely warned of the plot, struck off on his own. The conflict would never be adequately resolved between their descendants.

Nephi could be recognized as the legitimate ruler of the Nephite people. He was chosen by God. He was blessed with the spirit of prophecy. And he had plausible claim to his father's first blessing.⁵ But could he anoint himself king? Not by any known precedent. So he did for his people “according to that which was in [his] power” (2 Nephi 5:18). And, being the recognized prophet, he could anoint kings as his successors. While this Israelite model may explain Nephi's reluctance or even inability to assume the monarchical role, it apparently posed no obstacle for the first Lamanite kings or for Zeniff's son Noah. The Lamanites seem to have installed a very different system of tributary kings appointed by the superior monarch—not by a prophet (Mosiah 24: 2–3)—more like the system that appears to have prevailed in ancient Mesoamerica. At no time do we see the Nephites using a multi-layered or federal system with subordinate kings.

While it becomes clear centuries later that the kingship is always passed down to descendants of Nephi in preference to any of the people of Zarahemla (Mosiah 25: 13), Jacob's

⁵ While Nephi provides almost no information on Sam, other than that Lehi blessed him to share the inheritance of Nephi, there is some ambiguity about him and Lehi's first blessing. For Lehi includes Sam with the older brothers when he tells them, “If ye will hearken unto [Nephi] I leave unto you a blessing, yea, even my first blessing. But if ye will not hearken unto him I take away my first blessing, yea, even my blessing, and it shall rest upon him” (2 Nephi 1:28–29, 4:11). Of the sons listed in this promise, only Sam did hearken to Nephi. Did he thereby receive the first blessing and not Nephi? In the absence of other clarification or evidence, I assume that Nephi in his terse report did not intend to imply that Sam had inherited a birthright that would include the right to rule.

account of the succession gives no hint that rulership passed from Nephi to a son, or even a brother or other close relative, as the patterns of Nephite and Lamanite kingship would later require, and as Israelite kingship had previously established. Rather, Nephi “anointed *a man* to be a king and a ruler over his people now, according to the reigns of the kings” (Jacob 1:9). The phrasing of Jacob’s sentence could be read to indicate that in this anointing, Nephi was initiating “the reigns of the kings.”

This passage is written by Nephi’s younger brother Jacob some time after the succession it describes and possibly even many decades after Nephi’s death. This passage can be read quite differently, depending on whether the reader assumes Nephi was first king. But see what happens with the passage if one does not make that assumption. Jacob’s reference to “the reigns of the kings” (Jacob 1: 9) becomes retrospective and divides the reign of Nephi from those of his successors, who were kings. Nephi is revered and loved “exceedingly” for “having been a great protector” of the people and “having labored in all his days for their welfare” (10)—but no mention is made of having been their king. Compare the emphasis on this role in comparable passages describing kings Mosiah₁, Benjamin, and his son, Mosiah₂. The people called Nephi’s successors “second Nephi, third Nephi, and so forth, according to the reigns of the kings” without any indication that the first Nephi was also a king. This was done to honor Nephi’s name, “let them be of whatever name they would” (11). Jacob survived several of Nephi’s successors and in his subsequent writing turns first to iniquities that arose among the people “under the reign of the second king” (15), which, if we maintain the chronology suggested in verse 11, would be the king known as third Nephi. This interpretation also maintains and separates these unfortunate events even a more plausible distance from the righteousness

described during Nephi's reign.

One sentence which might be read as a definite indication that Nephi had served his people in the monarchical role states twice that on the large plates "should be engraven an account of the reign of the kings" (1 Nephi 9:4). We should not make anything of the word *reign* as it is used as a synonym for *regime*, as is evident when Mormon chronicles the commencement of "the *reign* of the judges" and the ending of "the *reign* of the kings over the people of Nephi" (Mosiah 29: 44, 47). One could also ask how Nephi could know there would be kings if he himself had declined acclamation to that position. But knowledge of the future seems already to be doubly implied in the same sentence. Nephi uses the plural term *kings* twice, and even assuming he was the first king, no second appeared until twenty years after he wrote this line. The term "should be engraven" also refers to the future. It is thus reasonable to assume that this sentence is based on Nephi's knowledge of the future through prophecy, for he had been shown the future of his own people and of the Lamanites, to his great sorrow (1 Nephi 12:1–3). If so, it has no bearing on our question. This interpretation would seem to be reinforced by his statement of the future of the two records he initiated:

Wherefore, I, Nephi, did make a record upon the other plates, which gives an account, or which gives a greater account of the wars and contentions and destructions of my people. And this have I done, and commanded my people what they should do after I was gone; and that these plates should be handed down from one generation to another, or from one prophet to another, until further commandments of the Lord. (1 Nephi 19:4.)

Another sentence which might be read as definite indication of Nephi's kingship occurs in Jacob's first recorded address to the Nephites. He provides his own *bona fides* for such

sermonizing by citing his own ordination and his “having been consecrated by. . .Nephi, unto whom ye look *as a king* or a protector, and on whom ye depend for safety” (2 Nephi 6:2). But even here Jacob does not say Nephi was king—only that he was looked upon *as a king*. The ambiguity of the characterization is further emphasized by Jacob’s provision of an alternate characterization—*or a protector*. We are reminded of Oliver Cromwell, who as Lord Protector of England, exercised most of the powers we associate with the monarchy. It may also be worth noting that the conjunction *or* is sometimes used in the Book of Mormon to supply a corrected or improved word choice. Writers in metal did not have erasers.

Scholars have recognized that Jacob’s sermon (2 Nephi 6–10) contains the typical elements of a covenant speech, and that some features link it to the Israelite autumnal festivals.⁶ Because such speeches were sometimes associated with coronations, Welch speculated that Jacob’s speech might have been selected for inclusion at this point in the small plates because it was delivered at the coronation of Nephi. Thompson points out that while the ten-year time difference makes this coinnection uncertain, it is still useful to see Jacob’s sermon serving the purposes of the annual festival and covenant renewal speech. This point remains equally valid, whether or not Nephi was actually coronated. For the covenant is with the Lord, and the primary purpose of the sermon is to point the people to him, the true king. Jacob’s use of Isaiah emphasizes this point. Whether or not the sermon was delivered at the coronation of Nephi or at some annual renewal or festival, it is likely that this particular sermon set a pattern for the

⁶ See John M. Welch, “The Temple in the Book of Mormon,” in *Temples of the Ancient World*, edited by Donald W. Parry, Deseret Book, 1994, 334–336 and John S. Thompson, “Isaiah, The Israelite Autumnal Festivals, and the covenant Speech of Jacob in 2 Nephi 6–10,” in *Isaiah*.....1997.?????????

Nephites by bringing a festival required by the law of Moses into full integration with the gospel of Jesus Christ as revealed to Nephi and Jacob. The new covenant and the old function seamlessly together, with the blessing of the revered Isaiah. This text must have been considered a milestone in Nephite thought and ritual and deserved to be included in the sacred history of that people.

While Nephi may not have been formally installed as a king, he clearly performed the important functions served by kings in the world known to the Nephites. That world would have included their memories and the brass plates accounts of the kingdom of Judah, the Lamanite monarchies—which receive some descriptive attention later in the book—and whatever other unmentioned peoples the Nephites might have known as geographical neighbors. If, as John L. Sorenson has so ably argued, the Nephite homeland was in Mesoamerica, the Nephites would have been surrounded by monarchical societies.⁷ Consequently, whether or not Nephi was formally installed as a king, his role would have been best explained to outsiders in the language of kingship, even though he may have declined to appoint himself to that position.

We are left with a widespread assumption about the Book of Mormon which cannot be supported conclusively from a reading of the text. If anything, the text may tilt against the assumption. At best, the textual support for Nephi's kingship is ambiguous. In what follows, I will examine the background of tradition and expectations from Israel and Judah that would have provided important context for Nephi's beliefs, actions, and statements for whatever additional probabilities these might provide for or against Nephi's kingship. What we will see is that Nephi's writings implicitly appeal to patterns of Israelite rulership that could provide precedent

⁷ See generally, John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon*.

for his rule without the formality of a royal anointing. The systematic and extensive character of this appeal as it is embedded in the text suggests that Nephi needed this kind of precedent, which in turn suggests that he was not an anointed monarch.

Monarchy in Ancient Israel

Ancient Israel, as described in the biblical record, was plagued with ambivalence about the role of human kings. On all accounts, Israel was founded under the direction of prophet/rulers, called by God, and without any right of passing their position on to their sons. For a long interim Israel was ruled, at least intermittently by judges, who also seemed to operate with much more limited powers than those enjoyed by neighboring monarchs. Kingship was unequivocally and problematically introduced at the time of Saul. In the centuries since Moses, Israel had had no earthly king. Rather, the Lord (Yahweh) was Israel's king: "I am the Lord, your holy one, the creator of Israel, your king" (Isaiah 43:15). All Israelites owed their full allegiance to him. Righteousness was equated with obedience to his commandments. And he was their king by covenant, made with all the people at Sinai: "When Moses commanded us a law, as a possession for the assembly of Jacob. Thus the LORD became king in Jesh'urun, when the heads of the people were gathered, all the tribes of Israel together" (Deuteronomy 33:4–5, *RSV*).⁸

The people's demand of Samuel to provide them with a human king was not interpreted so much as a rejection of him as prophet/ruler or judge as it was a rejection of the Lord as their king. "It is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king. As they have

⁸ Most translations and commentaries agree that Yahweh is the subject of verse five, although the *KJV* calls Moses king. No other texts refer to Moses in monarchical terms.

done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are doing to you” (1 Samuel 8:7–8). Both were offended. But the Lord instructed Samuel to acquiesce in the popular request, and to anoint as king the man the Lord would select (1 Samuel 8–10). In spite of the clearly articulated evils that kingship would bring on Israel (1 Samuel 8:10–18), the Lord gave his divine sanction to the people’s requested monarchy, establishing it with a prophetic anointing (1 Samuel 10:1), miraculous events, and the provision of “regulations of the kingship” which were explained to the people, written on a scroll, and deposited in a sacred place “before the Lord” (1 Samuel 10:25).

Israelite history provided the Nephites with multiple models of rulers, including the prophet/rulers—Moses, Joshua, Samuel, and the other judges—and the royal dynasty of David, who had also been selected by God through his servant Samuel to replace the wayward Saul. By the time of Mosiah₁ and Benjamin, when the Nephites and Mulekites merged in Zarahemla, Nephite kingship had reabsorbed the priestly and prophetic functions. Mosiah₁ and Benjamin served both as prophets and kings. They received marvelous revelations in the service of their people. And there was every expectation that their eldest sons would inherit the kingship. But the gap in the record between the plates of Mormon (the lost 116 pages) and the small plates deprives us of any adequate explanation of how the recombination of these two functions came about. Clearly, Nephi had separated them before his death. The political rule, including custodial responsibility for maintaining the large plates, was assigned to a man he had chosen and anointed to be king. But the prophetic and priestly duties were passed, with the small plates, to Nephi’s younger brother Jacob, and from him possibly to his descendants, down to the time that

they turned the plates over to Mosiah.⁹ It is worth noting that the mere fact that the Nephites had become monarchists seemed to facilitate their peaceful merger with the people of Zarahemla, whose ancestor was Mulek, himself a son of Zedekiah, king of Judah. For reasons not mentioned, neither this Davidic ancestry, nor prior possession of the land was sufficient for Zarahemla to be selected as the obvious candidate to be king over the newly joined peoples.

Nephi, himself, seems to have served his people as a Moses or a Samuel. The fact that he composed the small plates near the end of his life in such a way as to repeatedly call attention to this comparison could be taken as strong evidence that Nephi did avoid formal assumption of the kingly office. It may likewise be significant that his small plates make no positive references or allusions to David or Solomon. The most direct references are by Jacob in which David and Solomon are blamed for their abominable practices in having many wives and concubines. Pointedly, in the next verse, Jacob cites the sins of the Jews in Jerusalem as the Lord's reason for leading Lehi out that he "might raise up...a righteous branch from the fruit of the loins of Joseph" (Jacob 2:24–5). Lehi and Nephi repeatedly justified their flight from Jerusalem in similar terms, though Laman and Lemuel insisted that Jerusalem was a righteous city and that their father was tragically mistaken to abandon it for the wilderness. Other references to the Davidic dynasty in the Book of Mormon are incidental and have no implications for the issues under consideration here.

Nephi's extensive quoting from Isaiah serves this same political agenda quite nicely. For Isaiah is a southern prophet that accepts the Davidic tradition only as the monarchy operates faithfully within the theology of Zion as understood by the traditional Jerusalem cult, which saw

⁹ See Jarom 1:2, Omni 1:11, and Words of Mormon 1:10.

Yahweh as Israel's only king and the one in whom total reliance must be placed for protection. Ben Ollenburger distinguishes the political traditions of David and Zion.¹⁰ In his analysis of Isaiah he finds the political sensibility and rhetoric to be thoroughly rooted in the ultimate and pervasive kingship of Yahweh: "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that ...saith unto Zion, Thy God reigneth" (Isaiah 52:7).¹¹ By the time of the Assyrian conquest, Isaiah sees Israel's king and the Jerusalem establishment as the enemies of Zion, who refuse to trust in Yahweh, and forge a protection alliance with Egypt, rejecting their true king in the process. As Ollenburger further argues, "There is precious little evidence from chapters 1–39 that Isaiah based any hope for salvation on YHWH's promises to the Davidic house."¹² Rather, Isaiah criticizes "the practice of kingship in Judah since it is arrogant in its refusal to accord Yahweh his exalted status," choosing instead to rely upon armaments and foreign alliances, rather than trusting in Yahweh (Isaiah 2:8; 7:9; 28:16; 30:1–5, 16; and 31:1–3).¹³

The similarity between the ancient exodus of Israel from Egypt and the experience of Lehi and his people was explicitly recognized by Nephi at the time and by Limhi and Alma in later centuries (1 Nephi 17:19–44, Mosiah 7:19–20, Alma 36:28–29). The irony by which Nephi identifies Jerusalem with oppressive Egypt is denied by Laman and Lemuel. Clearly indicating that they understand the implied comparison of their situation to ancient Israel (and thereby Lehi

¹⁰ Ben C. Ollenburger, *Zion, The City of the Great King: A Theological Symbol of the Jerusalem Cult*, Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1987.

¹¹ Isaiah 52:7 is invoked several times in the Book of Mormon (1 Nephi 13:37, Mosiah 12:21, 15:14, 3 Nephi 20:36).

¹² *op. cit.*, 125.

¹³ 131.

and Nephi to Moses), they affirm the righteousness of the people of Jerusalem: “We know that the people who were in the land of Jerusalem were a righteous people; for they kept the statutes and judgments of the Lord, and all his commandments, according to the law of Moses; wherefore, we know that they are a righteous people; and our father hath judged them, and hath led us away...” (1 Nephi 17:22).

In these comparisons, both Lehi and Nephi can be seen as Moses figures. This comparison has been developed by previous writers¹⁴ and can be extended significantly with the following composite list which focuses specifically on Nephi as a Moses figure. As I have demonstrated elsewhere, it is reasonable to believe that the version of Genesis available to the Nephites in the brass plates was like the *JST* version.¹⁵ Accordingly, I will include some comparisons from that text as well. While there are enormous differences in the experiences of Moses and Nephi, the mature Nephi has chosen to tell his story in such a way that over twenty explicit and implicit points of comparison stand out.

1. Both Moses and Nephi flee into the wilderness after killing a public figure who is portrayed as repressive or even criminal. This flight serves to prevent detection.
Exodus 2:12 and 1 Nephi 4:18.
2. Moses was “caught up into an exceedingly high mountain” to receive comprehensive revelation that would both ground and guide his prophetic career

¹⁴ See S. Kent Brown, “The Exodus Pattern in the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies* 30/3 (Summer 1990):111–126, and Noel B. Reynolds, *supra* note 1, at p. 33. See also George S. Tate, “The Typology of the Exodus Pattern in the book of Mormon,” in *Literature of Belief: Sacred Scriptures*, edited by N. Lambert, Provo, Religious Studies Center, 1981, 245–62.

¹⁵ Noel B. Reynolds, “The Brass Plates Version of Genesis,” in *By Study and Also by Faith*, 1990, II:136–173.

(Moses 1:1). Nephi, after praying to know the things his father had seen, “was caught away...into an exceedingly high mountain,” where he also received this same kind of fundamental revelation (1 Nephi 11:1).

3. As a result of these great visions, both Moses and Nephi prophesied a future scattering and destruction of their own people, because of wickedness. Both also prophesied a latter-day restoration (Deuteronomy 4:26–30, 1 Nephi 12:19–23, 13:30, 34–42).
4. Moses spoke with and even saw God face to face (Exodus 33:11, Numbers 12:8, Moses 1:2, 31). The Spirit of the Lord which caught Nephi up into the mountain and narrated the first part of his vision may well have been Jesus Christ, which is suggested when he vanishes without explanation at the very point in the narrative when Jesus Christ appears in the vision and is replaced for the remainder by an unnamed angel as narrator. In a later recounting, which seems to be an expansion of part of this same vision, Nephi reports how the voices of both the Father and the Son spoke to him in alternation to provide detailed doctrinal explanation for the baptism of Jesus by John (2 Nephi 31: 4–15). Either this same experience or some other is implied when Nephi reports that Jesus has “redeemed my soul from hell,” which phrasing is used by Lehi in conjunction with the further claim to have “beheld his glory” (2 Nephi 33:6, 1:15). This interpretation is reinforced when the same language is used a third time in Jacob’s blessing when Lehi says he knows that Jacob is redeemed and has beheld the Redeemer’s glory (2 Nephi 2:3–4). In the same language, Nephi had explained his delight in Isaiah as one who had seen

the Redeemer, “even as I have seen him” (2 Nephi 11:2).

5. It should be noted of both Moses and Nephi that their respective calls to be God’s prophet and the leaders of his people were unexpected in terms of high birth, office, or other social or natural distinction. Moses was a refugee from Egypt and a shepherd in Midian. Nephi was the youngest son of Lehi, a refugee from Jerusalem (Moses 1:6, 26, Exodus 3:1, 1 Nephi 2:19–24).
6. In their founding visions, both Moses and Nephi were shown the future peoples of the world and the Lord’s purposes for them (Moses 1:8, 27–30; 1 Nephi 11–14).
7. In both cases the people are led out of wicked places, Egypt and Jerusalem (Exodus 3:10, 12:51, 1 Nephi 2, 1 Nephi 17:43). Though Nephi did not lead Lehi’s family in their original exodus, he does appear to be the leader when they return the second time and lead Ishmael’s family out of Jerusalem down to Lehi’s wilderness camp (1 Nephi 7). He is clearly in charge as they build the ship and cross the ocean.
8. Moses invoked the power of God to lead his people miraculously through the Red Sea (Exodus 14:13–22). Similarly, with divine direction and aid, Nephi led his people in building a ship and crossing the sea, during which crossing his prayers persuaded the Lord to end the typhoon and carry them safely on their journey (1 Nephi 17–18). The language Nephi uses to describe this incident evokes the Red Sea crossing of Moses: “And all that night the Lord drove the sea back with a strong east wind” (Exodus 14:21). Nephi relates “there arose a great storm, yea, a great and terrible tempest, and we were driven back upon the waters for the space

of three days” (1 Nephi 18:13).

9. Both Moses and Nephi lead their people safely to a promised land (Numbers 13, Deuteronomy 1, 1 Nephi 19:25). The difference is that Moses is not permitted to enter.
10. The travels through the wilderness under Moses and Nephi also are described with several general and specific similarities. Both entailed years of difficult desert conditions. In both cases, the people suffered and murmured against their leaders, thinking fondly of the more comfortable lives they had left behind: “It had been better for us to serve the Egyptians, than that we should die in the wilderness” (Exodus 14:12). Similarly, Laman and Lemuel proclaimed that “it would have better that they had died before they came out of Jerusalem than to have suffered these afflictions” (1 Nephi 17:20).¹⁶
11. These murmurings became severe on several occasions in both exodus stories, to the point that there was an apparent attempt on Moses’s life at least once, and on Nephi’s several times (Exodus 17:4, Numbers 14:5–10, 1 Nephi 7:16, 16:37, 17:48, 2 Nephi 5:3).
12. The stories of murmuring end in some reconciliation with God after his power is manifest in some divine act.
13. Both Moses and Nephi were accused of usurping leadership with thoughts of self-promoted grandeur. The rebels Korah, Dathan, and Abiram asserted the holiness

¹⁶ Cf. Exodus 2:14, 5:21, 15:11, 16:3, Numbers 14:2, 20:3, and 1 Nephi 3:28, 7:6, 7:16–19, 16:20, 16:38, 17:20–22.

of the congregation of Israel and asked Moses and Aaron, “wherefore then lift ye up yourselves above the congregation of the Lord?” and accused Moses of bringing them into the wilderness to make himself “altogether a prince over” them (Numbers 16:3, 13). When attempting to stop a fight between two Hebrews, “[Moses] asked the one in the wrong, ‘Why are you hitting your fellow Hebrew?’ The man said, ‘Who made you *ruler and judge* over us?’” (Exodus 2:3–4). Like the Israelites who challenged the rulership of Moses, Laman and Lemuel accuse Nephi of thinking to make himself “a king and a ruler” over them (1 Nephi 16:38).

14. In each account the Lord provides divine means for guiding the people through the wilderness. For ancient Israel this was in the form of a pillar of light by night, and a cloud by day (Exodus 13:21–22). For Lehi’s party it was the Liahona (1 Nephi 16:10, 16, 28–31; 18:21–22).
15. Both accounts tell of the dangers of starvation and of food provided through divine intervention (Exodus 16:2–16, 1 Nephi 16:30).
16. In the Exodus account, when Moses came down from Sinai with the tablets, “his face was radiant, and they were afraid to come near him” (Exodus 34:29–30). Similarly, when Nephi was threatened by his brothers, he was “filled with the power of God” and warned them not to touch him lest God smite them and they “wither even as a dried reed” (1 Nephi 17:48, 52). This incident was resolved when the Lord told Nephi to touch his brothers that he might shock them. Being physically shaken by this touch, they acknowledged that it was “the power of the

Lord” that had shaken them (1 Nephi 17:53–55).

17. Both Moses and Nephi provided their people with founding texts that provided religious and prophetic guidance for centuries. The five books of Moses have their parallel in Nephi’s large and small plates. Both established the record-keeping traditions that enabled their peoples to benefit from centuries of prophecy and religious history.
18. Moses and Nephi both built sanctuaries. The tabernacle of Moses provided the basic model for Solomon’s temple, which in turn was the model for Nephi’s temple in the western hemisphere (Exodus 25–7, 36–9; 2 Nephi 5:16).
19. Moses consecrated his brother Aaron and Aaron’s sons to be priests to administer religious matters for the Israelites (Exodus 28–29, Leviticus 8, Numbers 8). Nephi consecrated his brothers Jacob and Joseph to “be priests and teachers over the land of [his] people” (2 Nephi 5:26).
20. Moses gave Israel the Ten Commandments and the Law of Moses as given to him by God on Sinai (Exodus 20:2–17). Similarly, Nephi provided his people with a new law that was given to him by God. Nephi received the gospel or “doctrine of Christ” from the Father and the Son as they spoke to him on the mountain, explaining repentance, the baptisms of water and of fire and the Holy Ghost, faith in Jesus Christ, and enduring to the end, as prerequisites to receiving eternal life (2 Nephi 31).¹⁷ Furthermore, Nephi explicitly taught his people that this new law

¹⁷ I interpret the events detailed in 2 Nephi 31 as an expanded version of the vision Nephi reported earlier in 1 Nephi 11. See further Noel B. Reynolds, “The Gospel of Jesus Christ as Taught by the Nephite Prophets,” *BYU Studies* 31 (Summer 1991): 34.

superseded the law of Moses, which they would only need to observe until Christ came into mortality (2 Nephi 5:10, 11:4, 25:24–7).¹⁸

21. Just as Moses “laid his hands” on Joshua to be his successor as leader of Israel (Deuteronomy 34:9), so Nephi anointed “a man” to be king and ruler after him (Jacob 1:9). Nephi’s spiritual role was passed on to his brothers Jacob and Joseph, “who had been consecrated priests and teachers of this people, by the hand of Nephi” (Jacob 1:18).

While some of these parallels are weaker than others, the obviousness and importance of the strong ones supports the view that all were intended by Nephi. Many of these comparisons between Nephi and Moses could be drawn between Moses and Lehi as well. But this only emphasizes Nephi’s role as a Moses, because the small plates show Nephi inheriting the role of his father. After Lehi, only Nephi could be counted on to carry out the essential missions commanded by the Lord during the wilderness travels of Lehi’s band of exiles. And by the time they reach the ocean, the Lord gives the commandment to build the ship to Nephi directly.

In 2 Nephi charge of Lehi’s infant children is passed to Nephi, who will care for them in place of Lehi. Lehi explicitly recognizes the Lord’s blessing of Nephi to become the leader of his people. 2 Nephi then unfolds a pattern of events that shows Nephi playing the role played by Lehi in 1Nephi, just as his younger brother Jacob assumes the role of teacher first held by Nephi. The Lord warns Nephi to take those who will follow him and depart from his brethren, who are

¹⁸ While it has been convincingly demonstrated that the Nephite lists of crimes reflect the law of ancient Israel, it is not really clear what Nephi means by “the law of Moses.” He could mean more or less than students of the Old Testament might expect (See *e.g.*, John W. Welch, “Series of Laws in the Book of Mormon,” Provo, UT: FARMS, 1987).

plotting to kill him, and flee into the wilderness, echoing the earlier divine warning to Lehi to leave Jerusalem. Nephi has received the same visions his father received in the first account. And in 2 Nephi, Jacob reports that he has now seen those same things in vision (2 Nephi 6:8–9). Both Moses and Lehi are types for Nephi. How could the legitimacy of his rule be more solidly established?

The Uncoronation of Nephi

I have already pointed out the oddity of the absence of any reference to Nephi's coronation and official installation as a king. I want now to explore the possibility that Nephi tells the story of the building of the ship in such a way as to evoke the sense of a coronation in the tradition of the Davidic kings, which ironically would require Laman and Lemuel, supporters of the Judahite model of monarchy, to be faithful servants of their king Nephi. In this way, the story provides a linchpin of Nephi's case for the legitimacy of Nephite government.

I have shown elsewhere how all of 1Nephi can be understood as two parallel structures, each built around three stories that are directly paired with each other. Each of these parallel halves centers on its chief story chiastically, and these two stories are paired. Obtaining the brass plates is the central story of the first half, which parallels the story of the building of the ship in the second half. Each of these stories is also structured as a long and elaborate chiasm. The brass plates story focuses on the most egregious example of the murmuring of Laman and Lemuel--that being immediately after they have been rebuked and taught by an angel. The ship-building story focuses on Nephi's only detailed response to that murmuring.¹⁹ The chiastic

¹⁹ See diagrams and more complete explanations of this structural analysis in Noel B. Reynolds, "Nephi's Outline," *BYU Studies* 20 (Winter 1980): 131–49, which is conveniently reprinted in Noel B. Reynolds, ed., *Book of Mormon Authorship*, Provo: Religious Studies

structure of the story testifies of its importance and probable role in the oral tradition of the early Nephites.

I Nephi 17:7–18:4

Verse Content

7	A	Nephi is summoned to the mountain where he speaks to the Lord.
8	B	Nephi is told to construct a ship after the manner the Lord will show him.
9	C	The Lord showed Nephi where to find ore to make tools.
11	D	The Lord had miraculously blessed them in the wilderness that they might know it was the Lord that delivered them. And Nephi kept the commandments and exhorted his brethren to faithfulness.
16	E	Nephi's brethren murmur against him and withhold their labor from him.
19	F	Nephi is exceedingly sorrowful.
20	G	Nephi's brethren present the details of their case against him and their father.
22	H	Nephi's brethren defend the Jews at Jerusalem for their righteousness.
23	I	Although the Lord by miracles led "our fathers," the Israelites, out of Egypt through the wilderness to the promised land, they hardened their hearts and reviled against both Moses and God.
31	J	God blesses the righteous and destroys the wicked. He esteems all flesh in one. Whoever is righteous is favored of the Lord.

36	J*	The Lord blesses the righteous and destroys the wicked. He loves whomever will have him to be their God.
40	I*	Even though the Lord loved "our fathers" and covenanted with them and led them out of Egypt and straitened them by miraculous means in the wilderness, still they hardened their hearts and reviled against both Moses and God.
43	H*	Nephi prophesies the destruction of the Jews at Jerusalem for their wickedness.
44	G*	Nephi presents the case against his brethren.
47	F*	Nephi's soul is rent with anguish.
48	E*	Nephi's brethren are angry with him, but he commands them not to withhold their labor from him.
52	D*	The Lord miraculously shocks Nephi's brethren that they might know the Lord is their God. Nephi tells them to obey specific commandments.

Center, 1982, 53–74, and reprinted by FARMS, 1996. The chiasm included here updates the analysis published earlier.

- 1 C* The Lord showed Nephi how to work timbers for the ship.
- 2 B* Nephi had built the ship after the manner the Lord had shown him.
- 3 A* Nephi goes to the mount often to pray to the Lord.

The Lamanite complaint can be answered indirectly by telling these stories in such a way that the actions of Laman and Lemuel refute the Lamanite ideology. All great literature recognizes the tension between speech and deed, and the priority of deed as an indicator of truth. The tension between the two creates ironic insights into truth. 1 Nephi 17 is told in such a way as to evoke several kinds of rituals known to every Israelite. These evocations refute Laman and Lemuel's account of these events, and they reinforce Nephi's account, making of chapter 17 one of the most potent elements of 1 Nephi interpreted as a political tract. Ancient year rites present the king in a duel with the powers of evil, with his life at stake. At the end he is acclaimed the ruler of the new age. Coronation rituals are associated as well.²⁰ This classic ritual is suggested unmistakably in the description of the framing incidents of the story beginning with the dramatic attempt of Laman and Lemuel to kill Nephi by throwing him into the depths of the sea, and ending with these two falling down before Nephi to worship him (1 Ne 17:48, 55).

John A. Tvedtnes has abstracted a general account of the Feast of Tabernacles, which can also be associated with coronations, as reported in less complete form at different points in the Old Testament.²¹ Many of these ritual elements can be found in Nephi's story as suggested below:

1. The ritual takes place at a cultic site. Nephi's account begins and ends with the reference to the mountain where Nephi goes to communicate with God. The temple was often

²⁰ CWHN 6:296.

²¹ *By Study and Also by Faith*, "King Benjamin and the Feast of Tabernacles," 2:220–21.

thought of as the mountain of the Lord.

2. The ritual address of the leader commonly included the following elements which are present in direct form or in allusions in Nephi's speech to his brothers in the verses indicated parenthetically (1 Nephi 17:23–47): a) Law of Moses (22) and blessings and cursings (35, 38); b) exhortation to love, fear and serve God (44–47, 49–52, 15); c) recounting of God's deliverance of the fathers, particularly from Egypt (23–35, 41–42); d) reference to God's role as creator and source of all (36); e) call to assist the needy (20–21); g) blessing the people (53–54); and h) additions as particularly needed (35–43). Of the items on Tvedtnes's list, only (f), the paragraph of the king is missing. But, of course, if this is not an actual coronation, that paragraph cannot be included. The passage only evokes one for the Israelite mind. Yet by the time this story is written, Nephi, the aging Nephite ruler, is the living exemplar of the requirements laid out in that famous paragraph. He was "a brother Israelite," and was not making the people go back to Egypt (or Jerusalem) to enhance his wealth. He did not take many wives (as far as the text reveals), and he did "not accumulate large amounts of silver and gold." He was careful to study and follow the God-given law and did not consider himself better than his brothers or use his position to build personal power or wealth (Cf. Deuteronomy 17:14–20).
3. God covenants with the people that, if they will obey him (40, 13–14), they will be prosperous and live long in the land (13) and other items not duplicated in 1 Nephi 17.
4. The people in turn covenant to be God's servants and obey him (15). The speech is written down (as Nephi records his), and other symbolic acts occur, but not here. Nor does 1 Nephi 17 contain allusions to the festival's altar building, sacrifices, music and

dance, or blowing of trumpets.

5. The coronation ritual additionally stressed that God is the true king (39), that he chooses the earthly king (44) who must be approved by the people (55), anointed, and given charge (53).

In addition to these rituals, the account of Nephi's shipbuilding is also written so as to evoke the famous passage in which the kingship is passed from David to his son Solomon, in the context of instructions to Solomon for building the temple (1 Chronicles 28–29). The divine charge for Solomon to build the temple is couched in a divine reassurance that David and Solomon are a divinely blessed royal dynasty, to last forever (1 Chronicles 28:4–8). The instructions for the building are given to David “by the spirit” (28:12, 19), and the Lord provided him with willing and skillful workers (28:21). David encouraged Solomon, reassuring him that the Lord would not fail him, but would bless him to finish the work (28:20). And all the Israelites came forward to give rich contributions for the building (29:6–9), and “bowed low and fell prostrate before the Lord and the king” (28:20). They acclaimed Solomon king (29:23–24), “and the Lord magnified Solomon exceedingly in the sight of all Israel” (29:25).

Similarities and contrasts call attention to the role of Laman and Lemuel as subjects to Nephi and simultaneously to their deep unwillingness to accept that role, even though it was mandated by God, conditional upon their own faithfulness. Like David and Solomon with their temple, Nephi was also shown how to build his ship by the Lord (1 Nephi 17:8). The Lord also provided Nephi with laborers, but they were initially unwilling to labor (18), criticizing both Nephi and his father. They certainly did not buy into any notion that Nephi and his descendants should be their rulers. The Lord did bless Nephi to be able to complete the work, and had to fill Nephi with a

powerful spirit to compel the brothers' cooperation. At the end, both Laman and Lemuel "fell down before [Nephi]" (55) and were about to worship him. Here we have Laman and Lemuel virtually acclaiming Nephi king, and that because of the power of God they could not help but recognize in him. Ingeniously, Nephi has invoked the Davidic model of inherited rulership, which Laman and Lemuel must use to legitimate their political claims, to present the historical moment in which they acclaimed him! So even though they reject Nephi's appeal to the models of Moses and Samuel, and turn to Davidic dynasty, their conduct on that occasion further legitimates Nephi's leadership role.

All the descendants of Lehi knew that they had come from the land of Jerusalem, which was far away across the western sea. So the inescapable question arises as to how they got a ship to come to this new land. The tradition of the Lamanites does not deal with these particulars. The answer would itself be fatal to that tradition. And so their tradition focuses on charges of usurpation. Nephi's account of how the ship was built, like the account of the acquiring of the brass plates, must be a centerpiece in the Nephite tradition. It is unanswerable. Each of these stories deals with inescapable historical questions. The plates exist; their origin must be explained. They are in a new world; that transoceanic voyage needs to be explained. The historical account in each case vindicates Nephi's legitimate authority as a ruler and teacher over his brethren. And by their actions in worshiping Nephi, they acclaimed his leadership in the manner of Israel with David and Solomon. Again, it is Laman and Lemuel—and not Nephi—that admire Judahite monarchy. But this only intensifies the condemnation of their later rebellions that emerges from Nephi's story. They are refuted by their own actions, standards, and ideology, as well as by his.

Conclusion

The political sub-text of Nephi's writings is even richer and more pervasive than previously realized. Nephi's justification of his and all subsequent Nephite rule consists in showing that he was appointed ruler and teacher by God, that Laman and Lemuel themselves had accepted and known that, and that father Lehi had officially endorsed that arrangement in his final blessings. Nephi further identified his rule with Moses and the earlier non-monarchical model of Israelite government, while his brothers appear to have preferred the personal rule of the Davidic dynasty. This background and a close reading of textual references raises serious and systematic doubts about whether Nephi was actually ever installed as a king. If not, the first generation of Nephites lived under a prophet-leader like Moses and Samuel, and only moved to kingship at the end of his life. But as later Nephite kings made clear, they had not adopted the attitudes of Lamanite kings, did not see themselves as "entitled to the gratitude and obedience of the populace," but only saw themselves "acting as an agent of superior command," as agents of God who was the true king of this people by covenant.²² Because Laman and Lemuel and their heirs could make no credible claim to such divine appointments, they claimed the right to rule as a matter of inheritance from their father as eldest sons. The Lamanite kings and their tributary Nephite king Noah, who have not been examined in this study, seem to be styled on the common model rejected in Nephite tradition, and like King David's successors, dissolved religion into politics.²³

²² See George E. Mendenhall, *The Tenth Generation: The Origins of the Biblical Tradition*, chapter 1 (*Early Israel as the Kingdom of Yahweh*), Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973, pp. 1–31 for an excellent description of the differences in Israelite theories of kingship. This reference is from page 30.

²³ Mendenhall, 16.

But that is a story for another day.