

# Nephite Kingship Reconsidered

Noel B. Reynolds

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 the tradition of purists that believed it necessary to go out of Egypt or even Jerusalem when these societies were dominated by evil to find a place where they could serve God in righteousness. The evils of a corrupt Jerusalem were closely associated 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.<sup>1</sup> But not all Lehi's 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 forms of 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 section is an expansion of earlier treatments of the contradictory Nephite and Lamanite political ideologies that informed relations between these two groups across their thousand-year history. The second section explores the historical possibility that Nephi may never have been anointed king of the Nephite people, an issue that suggests a 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 subtext of Nephi's writings has been identified previously.<sup>2</sup> Through a thousand years of Nephite history, both Nephite dissidents and Lamanite invaders accused Nephite rulers of usurping the right to rule that belonged to Laman and Lemuel, the elder sons of Lehi, and to their descendants (see 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," 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 and the right of ruling Lehi's descendants (see Mosiah 10:12–16). 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 came under Lamanite attack in his own lifetime, during the same period in which he was writing the small plates (see 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 (see 1 Nephi 12:19–23).<sup>3</sup> In view of these circumstances, 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.

Although 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), a secondary purpose appears to have been to demonstrate for all time that his ruling position in the family of Lehi was legitimate. Nephi had seen the future and knew that the 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" (1 Nephi 3:29). Nephi's role as leader seemed divinely confirmed on various occasions when he was filled with the power of God (see 2 Nephi 1:26–7). Second, Laman and Lemuel had acquiesced to Nephi's role as ruler and teacher, going to him for explanations of Lehi's vision and bowing down before him on several occasions (see 1 Nephi 7:20; 15:1–16:5; 16:24; 17:55). Third, father Lehi had formally given to Nephi the leadership and even his first blessing (if the eldest son did not hearken to Nephi), commanding the brothers not to rebel against Nephi anymore, for the Spirit of the Lord was in him and "opened his mouth to utterance that he could not shut it" (see 2 Nephi 1:24–9). The implicit argument of the small plates is that Laman and Lemuel knew on various occasions that Nephi's authority to rule was from God and that they acknowledged this in word and deed on those occasions. Consequently, their ultimate rebellion against Nephi and their accusations that he was a usurper were based on intentional lies that denied their own experience and broke their own solemn agreements.

Nephi's small-plates account emphasizes the miraculous experiences by which Laman and Lemuel were brought at certain points to know the truth of Lehi's and Nephi's teachings and the power of the Lord by which they spoke. Indeed, it was ultimately the Spirit of the Lord in them that legitimized their ruling position to their own satisfaction. By contrast, Laman and Lemuel 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 and appealing to the older Israelite tradition featuring similar events in the lives of 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 claims to authority were based on the same revelations. The logic was simple: if God had chosen Nephi, as Nephi and Lehi claimed, then Christ would come as prophesied. 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. For example, four hundred years after Nephi's time, the apostate Zoramite Ammoron begins his letter to the Nephite leader Moroni with the familiar accusation that "your fathers did wrong their brethren, insomuch that they did rob them of their right to the government when it rightly belonged unto them" (Alma 54:17). The letter concludes in a similar vein, preceded by a different accusation—that Ammoron's ancestor Zoram was "pressed and brought out of Jerusalem" (verse 23). Moreover, Ammoron in effect denies the god that Moroni accuses him of having rejected (see verse 21).

The small plates were written late in Nephi's life. He began writing them thirty years after leaving Jerusalem (see 2 Nephi 5:28–30), completed only twenty-seven chapters ten years later (see verse 34), and finished his writings and turned them over to his younger brother Jacob fifteen years after that (see Jacob 1:1). The aforementioned

political issues were fully developed before this record was undertaken. The need to justify and legitimate the Nephite political regime was both clear and pressing.

The small plates report a series of events that 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. They were "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 upon seeking the Lord in prayer, he was visited by the Spirit and told that he would "be made a ruler and a teacher over [his] brethren" (see verses 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 his brothers 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 (see 1 Nephi 3).

Lehi again sent his sons back to Jerusalem, this time to enlist Ishmael and his family so that Lehi's sons might have wives. The mission succeeded: the Lord softened Ishmael's heart, and he and his family accepted Lehi's prophetic call to flee Jerusalem (see 1 Nephi 7:5). But they were not far into the journey before the rigors of desert travel brought Ishmael's sons and Laman and Lemuel to their citified senses. Grasping the seriousness and seeming 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 intention of leaving him to die. But God intervened again, miraculously loosing Nephi from his bands (see 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 remarkable vision and great understanding of God's saving plan for his children, the report of which left Laman and Lemuel questioning and doubting (see 1 Nephi 15:7). Nephi, however, sought clarification in prayer and was carried by the Spirit of the Lord to a high mountain where he was shown the same vision, or perhaps a more extensive version of it, which later enabled him to explain many things to his questioning brothers (see 1 Nephi 10:1–16:5). 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 (see 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. Laman and Lemuel resented their sufferings in the wilderness and felt that Nephi, the younger brother, had usurped the position of ruler and teacher and "thought to make himself a king and a ruler over us, that he may do with us according to his will and pleasure" (see verses 35–8). This early murmuring formulated the basic elements of the Lamanite tradition that lasted a thousand years. The threatening disaster was averted when "the voice of the Lord came and did speak many words unto them, and did chasten them exceedingly" (verse 39). This incident provides a glimpse of both the corruption and the perverse attraction of the Davidic monarchy that empowered kings to "do with [their subjects] according to [their] own will and pleasure" (verse 38). Rather than seeing this as a reason to condemn wicked Jerusalem and its corrupted monarchy, Laman and Lemuel saw it as a motivation to assert their own rights to rule against Nephi's divine appointment.

After spending nearly a decade crossing the Arabian Peninsula and then arriving at a fertile oasis on the southern coast, Nephi received the command to build a ship with his brothers' help. Again Laman and Lemuel 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 [Nephi], and were about to worship [him]" (verse 55).

Finally, while the company crossed the ocean, the impious revelries of Laman and Lemuel led Nephi, in his tenuous role as ruler and teacher, to rebuke and admonish them, an act they responded to by binding him with cords. But God again quelled their rebellion, this time with a storm that threatened to capsize the ship. After several days, and faced with the prospect of such a death, they released Nephi, who by praying gained relief from the storm and power to guide the ship directly to the promised land (see 1 Nephi 18). The hand of God in these events was not hidden; he openly appointed and supported Nephi against his older brothers, who clearly deserved their demotion and humiliations. Lehi, the only possible source for their own claimed authority, affirmed Nephi's claims over theirs and enjoined them on his deathbed not to rebel against Nephi but to obey him (see 2 Nephi 1:24, 28). And so it was that, in Nephi's words, "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" (2 Nephi 5:19).

### **The Question of Nephi's Kingship**

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

Second 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 would go with [him]" (verse 5). We already know from 1 Nephi 17 that Nephi endorsed 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*" (verse 32). This conquest had come only after the Lord had, "because of their iniquity," straitened the sometimes rebellious Israelites "with his rod" (verse 41; see verses 31, 42). But after centuries in their promised land, the Israelites had "become wicked, yea, nearly unto ripeness," and Nephi knew the day was coming "that they must be destroyed" and "led away into captivity" (verse 43). In Nephi's record, Laman and Lemuel's complaint that "it would have been better that [the women] had died before they came out of Jerusalem than to have suffered these afflictions" (verse 20) implicitly evokes comparison between Laman and Lemuel and the complaining Israelites who told Moses that "it had been better for us to serve the Egyptians, than that we should die in the wilderness"<sup>4</sup> (Exodus 14:12). Laman and Lemuel are also like the wicked Jews at Jerusalem who sought Lehi's life and accommodated themselves to that same comfortable lifestyle that puts personal comfort ahead of 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, 37-8). This tradition of separating the righteous from the wicked continued strong in Nephite

culture. For example, centuries later Alma called the Nephites to “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).

Second Nephi 5 can also be read as a summary account of Nephi’s reign because 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” (verse 10), their economic fortunes as a people, the list of sacred objects in their 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 whether his reluctance in this regard was as emphatic as that of Alma, the repentant priest-leader who, when “the people were desirous that Alma should be their king,” replied in chiasmic form:

**A Behold, it is not expedient that we should have a king;**  
**B for thus saith the Lord:**  
**C Ye shall not esteem one flesh above another,**  
**C 'or one man shall not think himself above another;**  
**B' therefore I say unto you**  
**A' it is not expedient that ye should have a king.**  
**(Mosiah 23:7)**

Obviously, Alma was more determined in this matter than was Nephi. Alma’s adamant refusal to be king, no doubt greatly reinforced by the evils suffered under King Noah, soon led to the abandonment of traditional kingship as practiced among the larger Nephite society. Nephi himself could not have been so implacably opposed to monarchy, for he personally consecrated his own successor a king. But even Alma believed that monarchy was beneficial “if it were possible that ye could always have just men to be your kings” (Mosiah 23:8). Nephi had not known “the iniquity of king Noah and his priests” (verse 9), so 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, yet Nephi passes over this 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 recorded 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 upon reflection turn out to be ambiguous, seem to have led to this widespread assumption. The germ of this idea is first planted in the reader’s mind by Laman and Lemuel’s accusation that Nephi has monarchical ambitions. Whereas Nephi quotes the Lord and an angel to affirm to his readers that he will be made “a ruler and a teacher” over his brethren (see 1 Nephi 2:22; 3:29), Laman and Lemuel on one occasion distort this phrasing to mean that Nephi intends to “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 ambitions, reflecting more what they would have thought had they been in Nephi’s position, or whether it reflects actual language Nephi used, the term does not seem to accurately reflect Nephi’s way of thinking or writing about these matters. Indeed, Nephi’s language attributes the term not to what he said but to

Laman and Lemuel's speculation about his intentions: "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; the latter is much broader and could also apply to a judge or a leader. For example, Moses appointed "rulers of thousands, and rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties, and rulers of tens" (Exodus 18:21). King Mosiah instituted a system of ruling judges to replace the kingship (see Mosiah 29:41). The phrase *a king and a ruler* is first applied officially to Nephi's successor (see 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, who was not a king, 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 Samuel had done for Israel anciently. 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 firstborn status, if they would follow Nephi, who spoke by the power of the Spirit of God. Otherwise, the first blessing would go to Nephi (see 2 Nephi 1:24–9). But who would adjudicate? Who would decide who had the rightful claim to the first blessing? 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.

The legitimacy of Nephi's position as ruler of the Nephite people was, from an objective standpoint, firmly established: he was chosen by God, he was blessed with the spirit of prophecy, and he had plausible claim to his father's first blessing.<sup>5</sup> 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). As the recognized prophet, it was within his power to 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—one of tributary kings appointed by the superior monarch, not by a prophet (see 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 multilayered or federal system with subordinate kings.

While it becomes clear in the Book of Mormon that centuries later the kingship is always passed down to descendants of Nephi in preference to any of the people of Zarahemla (see Mosiah 25:13), Jacob's account of the succession gives no hint that rulership passed from Nephi to a son or even to 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 can be read as indicating that in this anointing Nephi was initiating "the reigns of the kings."

This passage, written by Nephi's younger brother Jacob some time after the succession it describes and possibly even many decades after Nephi's death, can be read quite differently, depending on whether the reader assumes

that Nephi was the first Nephite king. If one does not make that assumption, Jacob's reference to "the reigns of the kings" becomes retrospective and divides the reign of Nephi from those of his successors, who were kings. Nephi was revered and loved "exceedingly" by his people for "having been a great protector" of them and for "having labored in all his days for their welfare" (Jacob 1:10)—but no mention is made of his having been their king. Compare the emphasis on kingship in comparable passages describing Kings Mosiah<sub>1</sub>, Benjamin, and his son Mosiah<sub>2</sub>. In honor of Nephi, the people called his successors "second Nephi, third Nephi, and so forth, according to the reigns of the kings. . . , let them be of whatever name they would" (verse 11). The text gives us no indication that the first Nephi was also a king. 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" (verse 15), who, according to the chronology suggested in verse 11, would be the king known as third Nephi. This interpretation also maintains and separates these unfortunate events at a more plausible distance from the righteousness described during Nephi's reign.

Passages that might be read as indicating that Nephi had served his people in the monarchical role state twice that on the large plates "should be engraven an account of the reign of the kings" (1 Nephi 9:4) and that the small plates contain an account of Nephi's "reign and ministry" (1 Nephi 10:1). We should not make anything of the word *reign*, which evidently is used as a synonym for *regime*, as it is 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 subscribing to the view that Nephi was a king might ask how, if this was not the case, Nephi could have known there would be kings, for he himself had declined acclamation to that position. But knowledge of the future seems to be doubly implied in 1 Nephi 9:4, where Nephi uses the plural term *kings* twice; and even if he was the first king, no successor appeared until fifteen or even twenty-five years after he wrote this line. The phrase *should be engraven* also refers to the future. It is thus reasonable to assume that 1 Nephi 9:4 is based on Nephi's prophetic knowledge of the future, for to his great sorrow, he had been shown the fate of his own people and the Lamanites (see 1 Nephi 12:1–3). This interpretation—that 1 Nephi 9:4 refers to the future reign of kings and does not imply Nephi's kingship—seems reinforced by Nephi's 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 that might seem to be an indication of Nephi's kingship occurs in Jacob's first recorded address to the Nephites. Jacob provides *bona fides* for his 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. For example, because such speeches were sometimes associated with coronations, John W. Welch speculates 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.<sup>6</sup> John S. Thompson points out that while the ten-year time span between the events in 2 Nephi 5 and the beginning of Jacob's sermon in chapter 6 makes this connection uncertain, it is still useful to see Jacob's sermon as

characteristic of the annual festival and covenant renewal speech.<sup>7</sup> This point remains equally valid whether or not Nephi was actually coronated. The chief models for such covenant renewal texts (Joshua 24, Exodus 19–24, and Deuteronomy) are all premonarchical. 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 in 2 Nephi 7–8 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 it set a pattern for the Nephites by fully integrating a festival required by the law of Moses with the gospel of Jesus Christ as revealed to Nephi and Jacob. The new and old covenants function seamlessly together, with the implied blessing of the revered Isaiah. This text must have been considered a milestone in Nephite thought and ritual and therefore 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 that his people associated with kingship. They were familiar with kingly rule because of their memory of the Old World order, their knowledge of the brass plates accounts of the kingdom of Judah, and their experiences with 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.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, Nephi’s 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.

The widespread assumption that Nephi was a king cannot be supported conclusively from a reading of the text. If anything, the Book of Mormon text may tilt against that assumption, and 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 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. By all accounts, Israel was founded under the direction of prophet-rulers who were called by God and who could not rightfully pass their position on to their sons. For a long interim Israel was ruled at least intermittently by judges who seemed to have operated 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 after Moses, Israel 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: “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 Revised Standard Version).<sup>9</sup>

The people’s demand that Samuel 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 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 New International Version). Both

Samuel and the Lord were offended, but the Lord instructed Samuel to acquiesce to the popular request and to anoint as king the man whom the Lord would select (see verses 8–10). In spite of the clearly articulated evils that kingship would bring on Israel (see verses 10–18), the Lord gave his divine sanction to the people's requested monarchy, establishing it with a prophetic anointing, 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 NIV).

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 Mosiah<sub>1</sub> and Benjamin, when the Nephites and Mulekites merged in Zarahemla, Nephite kingship had reabsorbed the priestly and prophetic functions. Mosiah<sub>1</sub> 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 (due to the loss of 116 manuscript pages) deprives us of any adequate explanation of how the functions of prophets and kings came to be recombined. 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, while 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.<sup>10</sup> The mere fact that the Nephites had become monarchists seemed to facilitate their peaceful merger with the people of Zarahemla, whose ancestor was Mulek, a son of Zedekiah, king of Judah. For reasons not mentioned in the Book of Mormon, neither this Davidic ancestry nor prior possession of the land was sufficient grounds for Zarahemla to be selected as king over the newly joined peoples.

Nephi 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 he did not formally assume the kingly office. It may likewise be significant that Nephi's small plates make no positive references or allusions to David or Solomon. The most direct references to them are by Jacob, who blames David and Solomon for their abominable practice of having many wives and concubines. In the next verse, Jacob pointedly cites the sins of the Jews in Jerusalem as the Lord's reason for leading Lehi out of that land so that he "might raise up . . . a righteous branch from the fruit of the loins of Joseph" (see 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 was a southern prophet who accepted the Davidic tradition only insofar as the monarchy operated faithfully within the theology of Zion as understood by the traditional Jerusalem cult, which saw Yahweh as Israel's only king and the one in whom total reliance must be placed for protection. Ben C. Ollenburger distinguishes the political traditions of David and Zion.<sup>11</sup> 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).<sup>12</sup> By the time of the Assyrian conquest, Isaiah saw Israel's king and the Jerusalem establishment as the enemies of Zion, who refuse to trust in Yahweh and who forge a protective 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 Yahweh's promises to the

Davidic house.” Accordingly, Isaiah criticized “the practice of kingship in Judah since it [was] arrogant in its refusal to accord Yahweh his exalted status.”<sup>13</sup> Judah chose to rely on armaments and foreign alliances rather than trust in Yahweh (see Isaiah 2:8; 7:9; 28:16; 30:1–5, 16; 31:1–3).<sup>14</sup>

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 (see 1 Nephi 17:19–44; Mosiah 7:19–20; Alma 36:28–9).<sup>15</sup> Thus both Lehi and Nephi can be seen as Moses figures. This comparison has been developed by previous writers<sup>16</sup> and can be extended significantly with the following composite list that 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 similar to the version in the Joseph Smith Translation.<sup>17</sup> 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 chose to tell his story in such a way that more than twenty explicit and implicit points of comparison stand out.

1. Both Moses and Nephi fled into the wilderness after killing a public figure who is portrayed as repressive or even criminal. Their flight prevented their being detected (see Exodus 2:11–15; 1 Nephi 4:18, 38).
2. Moses was “caught up into an exceedingly high mountain” to receive comprehensive revelation that would both ground and guide his prophetic career (Moses 1:1). Nephi, after praying to know the things his father had seen, was also “caught away . . . into an exceedingly high mountain” where he 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 of their people (see Deuteronomy 4:26–31; 1 Nephi 12:19–23; 13:30; 34–42).
4. Moses spoke with and even saw God face-to-face (see Exodus 33:11; Numbers 12:8; Moses 1:2, 31). The “Spirit of the Lord” that caught Nephi up into the mountain and narrated the first part of his vision may well have been Jesus Christ. This identification is suggested when the guide 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 (see 1 Nephi 11:1, 12, 21). 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 (see 2 Nephi 31: 4–15). Either this same experience or some other is implied when Nephi reports that Jesus “hath redeemed my soul from hell” (2 Nephi 33:6), phrasing used by Lehi in conjunction with the further claim to have “beheld his glory” (2 Nephi 1:15). This interpretation is reinforced by use of the same language a third time when Lehi, in blessing his son Jacob, says he knows that Jacob is redeemed and has beheld the Redeemer’s glory (see 2 Nephi 2:3–4). Moreover, Nephi notes that Isaiah 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 fourth son of Lehi and a refugee from Jerusalem (see 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 (see Moses 1:8, 27–30; 1 Nephi 11–14).
7. Both Moses and Nephi were major figures in leading people out of wicked places, Egypt and Jerusalem (see 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 appears to have been the leader when they returned the second time to Jerusalem and led Ishmael's family from there to Lehi's wilderness camp (see 1 Nephi 7). He was clearly in charge as they built the ship and crossed the ocean.
8. Moses invoked the power of God to lead his people miraculously across the Red Sea (see 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 (see 1 Nephi 17–18). The language Nephi used to describe this incident evokes Moses' parting of the Red Sea: "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). Moses relates, "And all that night the Lord drove the sea back with a strong east wind" (Exodus 14:21 NIV).
9. Both Moses and Nephi led their people safely to a promised land (see Numbers 13; Deuteronomy 1; 1 Nephi 19:25). The difference is that Moses was not permitted to enter.
0. The wilderness travels of Moses and Nephi and their peoples also are described with several general and specific similarities. For example, both entailed years of difficult desert conditions, and in both cases the people suffered and murmured against their leaders, thinking fondly of the more comfortable lives they had left behind. The children of Israel lamented, "It had been better for us to serve the Egyptians, than that we should die in the wilderness" (Exodus 14:12), whereas, Laman and Lemuel proclaimed that "it would have better that [the women] had died before they came out of Jerusalem than to have suffered these afflictions" (1 Nephi 17:20).<sup>18</sup>
1. These murmurings became severe on several occasions in both exodus stories, to the point that there was an apparent attempt on Moses' life at least once, and on Nephi's life several times (see Exodus 17:4; Numbers 14:5–10; 1 Nephi 7:16; 16:37; 17:48; 2 Nephi 5:3).
2. The stories of murmuring often end with some form of reconciliation taking place between God and those involved after his power is manifested in a divine act (see, for example, Exodus 17:1–7; Numbers 14–16; 20:1–13; 21:5–9; 23; 1 Nephi 3:28–31; 7:6–22; 17–18).
3. Both Moses and Nephi were accused of usurping leadership and being driven by thoughts of self-promoted grandeur. The rebels Korah, Dathan, and Abiram asserted the holiness 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 2:13–14 NIV; emphasis added). Like the Israelites who challenged the rulership of Moses, Laman and Lemuel accused Nephi of thinking to make himself "a king and a ruler" over them (1 Nephi 16:38).

4. In each account the Lord provided 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 (see Exodus 13:21–2). For Lehi’s party it was the Liahona (see 1 Nephi 16:10, 16, 28–31; 18:21–2).
5. Both accounts tell how starvation was averted when food was provided through divine intervention (see Exodus 16:2–16; 1 Nephi 16:30).
6. 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 NIV). 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), whereupon they were afraid to touch Nephi “for the space of many days” (verse 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 (see verses 53–5).
7. Moses and Nephi furnished 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. These texts established the record-keeping traditions that enabled the people to benefit from centuries of recorded prophecy and religious history.
8. 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 (see Exodus 25–7, 36–9; 2 Nephi 5:16).
9. Moses consecrated his brother Aaron and Aaron’s sons to be priests with authority to administer religious matters for the Israelites (see Exodus 28–9; Leviticus 8; Numbers 8). Likewise, Nephi consecrated his brothers Jacob and Joseph to “be priests and teachers over the land of [his] people” (2 Nephi 5:26).
0. Moses gave Israel the Ten Commandments and the law of Moses as given to him by God on Sinai (see 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” (2 Nephi 31:2), from the Father and the Son as they spoke to him on the mountain and explained that repentance, the baptisms of water and of fire and the Holy Ghost, faith in Jesus Christ, and enduring to the end are prerequisites to receiving eternal life (see 2 Nephi 31).<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, Nephi explicitly taught his people that this new law superseded the law of Moses, which they would need to observe only until Christ came into mortality (see 2 Nephi 5:10; 11:4; 25:24–7).<sup>20</sup>
1. 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 (see 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 support the view that Nephi included all of them intentionally. Many of these comparisons between Nephi and Moses could be drawn between Moses and Lehi as well. But this correlation further emphasizes Nephi’s role as a Moses, because the small plates show that Nephi inherited 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 reached the ocean, the Lord gave the commandment to build the ship directly to Nephi.

This transition of leadership is clearly demonstrated in 2 Nephi. For example, Lehi explicitly recognized the Lord's blessing of Nephi to become the leader of his people (see 2 Nephi 1:24–9), and charge of Lehi's youngest children, Jacob and Joseph, was passed to Nephi, who was to care for them in place of Lehi (see 2 Nephi 2:3; 3:25). A pattern of events then unfolds, showing Nephi in the prophet-leader role played by Lehi in 1 Nephi and his younger brother Jacob assuming the role of teacher first held by Nephi. The Lord warned Nephi to take those who would follow him and depart from his brethren, who were plotting to kill him, and flee into the wilderness (see 2 Nephi 5:4–5), echoing the earlier divine warning to Lehi to leave Jerusalem (see 1 Nephi 2:1–2). As in 1 Nephi, where Nephi receives the same visions his father received, in 2 Nephi Jacob also sees those same things in vision (see 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 in the Book of Mormon to Nephi's coronation and official installation as a king. Now I would like to explore the possibility that Nephi told 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, a tradition that, ironically, would have required Laman and Lemuel, supporters of the Judahite model of monarchy, to be faithful servants of their king Nephi. In this way the story is a linchpin in Nephi's case for the legitimacy of Nephite government.

In an earlier paper, I discussed how all of 1 Nephi can be understood as two parallel structures, each built around three stories that are directly paired with each other.<sup>21</sup> For instance, obtaining the brass plates is the central story of the first half of 1 Nephi, an episode that parallels the story of the building of the ship in the second half. Significantly, each of these stories is also structured as a long and elaborate chiasm. The brass plates story focuses on the most egregious example of Laman and Lemuel's murmuring—that being immediately after they were rebuked and taught by an angel. The ship-building story focuses on Nephi's only detailed response to that murmuring, and the chiasmic structure of this story testifies of its importance and probable role in the oral tradition of the early Nephites.

**A Nephi is summoned to the mountain, where he speaks to the Lord (17:7).**

**B Nephi is told to construct a ship after the manner the Lord will show him (17:8).**

**C The Lord shows Nephi where to find ore to make tools (17:10).**

**D The Lord will miraculously bless them in the wilderness so they will know it was he who delivered them. Nephi keeps the commandments and exhorts his brethren to faithfulness (17:12–15).**

**E Nephi's brethren murmur against him and withhold their labor from him (17:17–18).**

**F Nephi is exceedingly sorrowful (17:19).**

**G Nephi's brethren present the details of their case against him and their father (17:19–21).**

**H Nephi's brethren defend the Jews of Jerusalem for their righteousness (17:22).**

**I Although the Lord by miracles led "our fathers," the Israelites, out of Egypt and through the wilderness to the promised land, they hardened their hearts and reviled against both Moses and God (17:23–30).**

**J God blesses the righteous and destroys the wicked. He "esteemeth all flesh in one." Whoever is righteous is favored of the Lord (17:31–5).**

**J' The Lord blesses the righteous and destroys the wicked. He loves whoever will have him to be their God (17:36–40).**

**I' Even though the Lord loved "our fathers," covenanted with them, 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 (17:40–2).

H' Nephi prophesies the destruction of the Jews of Jerusalem for their wickedness (17:43).

G' Nephi presents the case against his brethren (17:44–6).

F' Nephi's soul is rent with anguish (17:47).

E' Nephi's brethren are angry with him, but he commands them not to withhold their labor from him (17:48–9).

D' The Lord miraculously shocks Nephi's brethren so they will know the Lord is their God. Nephi tells them to obey specific commandments (17:53–5).

C' The Lord shows Nephi how to work timbers for the ship (18:1).

B' Nephi builds the ship after the manner the Lord has shown him (18:2).

A' Nephi often goes to the mount to pray to the Lord (18:3).

(1 Nephi 17:7–18:4)

The Lamanite complaint against Nephi's ruling authority can be answered indirectly by these stories, which Nephi tells in such a way that Laman and Lemuel's actions refute the Lamanite ideology. All great literature recognizes the tension between speech and deed as well as the priority of deed as an indicator of truth. This tension creates ironic insights into truth. The events recounted in 1 Nephi 17 are crafted so as to evoke several kinds of rituals known to every Israelite. These evocations refute Laman and Lemuel's account of those same events and reinforce Nephi's account, making chapter 17 a kind of political tract and as such one of the most potent elements of 1 Nephi. For example, ancient Israelite year-rites presented the king in a duel with the powers of evil, with his life at stake. At the end he was acclaimed the ruler of the new age. Coronation rituals were associated with these events.<sup>22</sup> In 1 Nephi 17 this classic ritual is suggested unmistakably in the descriptive framework of the story that begins with the dramatic attempt of Laman and Lemuel to kill Nephi by throwing him into the depths of the sea and that ends with their falling down before Nephi to worship him (see verses 48, 55).

John A. Tvedtnes has abstracted a general account of the ancient Israelite Feast of Tabernacles, a celebration that was associated with coronations, which are reported in less complete form at different points in the Old Testament.<sup>23</sup> In the five items that follow, I note the correspondences between the ritual elements of the Feast of Tabernacles as identified by Tvedtnes and many aspects of Nephi's account in 1 Nephi 17:7–18:4:

1. The ritual takes place at a cultic site. Nephi's account begins and ends with the reference to a mountain where Nephi goes to communicate with God (see 1 Nephi 17:7; 18:3). In lieu of a temple—often thought of as “the mountain of the Lord”—ancient Israelites resorted to the sanctuary of a mountaintop for worship and other matters of ritual significance.
2. The ritual address of the leader commonly included eight elements, seven of which are directly present or alluded to more vaguely in Nephi's speech—or are implied in the framing context of his speech—to his brothers in 1 Nephi 17:23–47: (a) the law of Moses (verse 22) and the blessings and cursings associated with it (verses 35, 38); (b) an exhortation to love, fear, and serve God (verses 15, 44–7, 49–52); (c) a recounting of God's deliverance of the fathers, particularly from Egypt (verses 23–35, 41–2); (d) reference to God's role as creator and source of all good things (verse 36); (e) a call to assist the needy (verses 20–1); (g) a blessing to the people (verses 53–4); and (h) additions as particularly needed (verses 35–43). Of the items on Tvedtnes's list, only *f*, the “Paragraph of the King,” is missing in Nephi's speech. If the occasion for his speech was not an actual coronation, then of course that paragraph would not have been included. I only want to point out how the passage evokes a coronation for the Israelite mind. Yet by the time this story was written, Nephi, the aging Nephite ruler, was the living exemplar of the requirements laid out and stipulated in Deuteronomy 17:14–20. For example, he was “a brother Israelite” (verse 15 NIV) who did not take many wives (as far as the text reveals), and he did “not accumulate large amounts of

silver and gold” (verse 17 NIV). Rather, 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.

3. God covenants with the people that if they will obey him they will be prosperous and live long in the land (1 Nephi 17:13–14, 35–40) and receive other blessings not duplicated in 1 Nephi 17.
4. The people in turn covenant to be God’s servants and to obey him (1 Nephi 17:15). The ruler’s speech is written down (as Nephi does in his record). Other symbolic acts occur that are not mentioned in 1 Nephi 17, nor does the passage contain allusions to other activities typically associated with the festival: building an altar, making sacrifices, expressing joy through music and dance, or the blowing of trumpets.
5. The coronation ritual additionally stressed that God is the true king (1 Nephi 17:39) and that he chooses the earthly king (verse 44), who must be approved by the people (verse 55), anointed, and given charge (verse 53).

It appears that in addition to suggesting these rituals, the account of Nephi’s shipbuilding was 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 (see 1 Chronicles 28–9). 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 that will last forever (see 1 Chronicles 28:4–8). The instructions for the building were given to David “by the spirit” (see verses 12, 19), and the Lord provided him with willing and skillful workers (see verse 21). David encouraged Solomon, reassuring him that the Lord would not fail him but would bless him to finish the work (see verse 20). All the Israelites came forward to give rich contributions for the building of the temple (see 1 Chronicles 29:6–9) and “bowed low and fell prostrate before the Lord and the king. . . . Then *they acknowledged Solomon son of David as king a second time*, anointing him before the Lord to be ruler and Zadok to be priest. So Solomon sat on the throne of the Lord as king in place of his father David. He prospered and all Israel obeyed him. All the officers and mighty men, as well as *all of King David’s sons, pledged their submission to King Solomon*” (1 Chronicles 29:20, 22–4 NIV; emphasis added).

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. Just as the Lord showed David and Solomon how to build their temple, he also showed Nephi how to build his ship (see 1 Nephi 17:8). The Lord also provided Nephi with laborers, but they were initially unwilling to labor (see verse 18). They criticized both Nephi and his father, and they certainly did not buy into any notion that Nephi and his descendants should be their rulers. The Lord blessed Nephi to be able to complete the work, even filling him with a powerful spirit to compel his brothers’ cooperation. Ultimately, Laman and Lemuel “fell down before [Nephi]” (verse 55) and were about to worship him; they virtually acclaimed Nephi king because of the undeniable power of God. Thus, in his record Nephi ingeniously invoked the Davidic model of inherited rulership (which Laman and Lemuel used to legitimate their own political claims) to present the historical moment in which they acclaimed him! So even though they rejected Nephi’s appeal to the models of Moses and Samuel and turned to the Davidic dynasty for validation of their political claims, their conduct on the occasion just described further legitimated Nephi’s leadership role.

Because all of Lehi’s descendants knew they had come from the land of Jerusalem far away across the western sea, an inescapable question arises: how did they obtain a ship to come to their new land? The tradition of the Lamanites apparently did not deal with this question, for the answer would have been fatal to that tradition. Thus

their tradition focused on charges of usurpation against the Nephites. On the other hand, Nephi's account of how the ship was built, like the account of acquiring the brass plates, must have been a centerpiece in the Nephite tradition. In fact, both of these accounts deal with inescapable historical questions: the plates exist; their origin must be explained. The Nephites 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, as does Laman and Lemuel's attempt to worship him—an action that essentially acclaimed his leadership in the manner of the Israelites with David and Solomon. From a modern viewpoint, the fact that Laman and Lemuel—and not Nephi—admired Judahite monarchy only intensifies the condemnation of their later rebellions. In Nephi's account they are refuted by their own actions, standards, and ideology, as well as by his.

## Conclusion

The political subtext 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 knew and, on occasion, accepted that; and that father Lehi had officially endorsed that arrangement in his final blessings. Nephi further identified his rule with Moses and the earlier nonmonarchical model of Israelite government, while his two brothers appear to have preferred the kingly rule of the Davidic dynasty and its pattern of inherited kingship. A close reading of the text with this background in mind raises serious and systematic doubts about whether Nephi was actually ever installed as a king. If he was not, the first generation of Nephites lived under a prophet-leader like Moses or Samuel and did not move to kingship until the end of Nephi's life. As later Nephite kings made clear, they had not adopted the attitudes of Lamanite kings and did not see themselves as "entitled to the gratitude and obedience of the populace"; rather, they saw themselves "acting as an agent of superior command," as agents of God, who was the true king of this people by covenant.<sup>24</sup> Because Laman and Lemuel and their heirs could make no credible claim to such divine appointments, they claimed that the right to rule was a matter of inheritance and that they, as the eldest sons, were rightfully entitled to it.<sup>25</sup> Subsequent centuries of Nephite and Lamanite struggles testify to the foresight and importance of Nephi's early efforts to provide a justification for the Nephite regime by calling attention to pre-monarchical models from ancient Israel and demonstrating repeatedly the Lord's direct involvement in its formation, in spite of the contrary efforts and views of Lehi's oldest sons.

## Notes

Noel B. Reynolds is professor of political science at Brigham Young University and president of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies.

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1. "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 25:2).
2. See my article "The Political Dimension in Nephi's Small Plates," *BYU Studies* 27/4 (1987), 15–37. John L. Sorenson noted the similarity between Nephi's writings and the lineage histories of the Guatemalan highland Indians that were used to confer "legitimacy and sanctity on the rulers" (see his *An Ancient*

*American Setting for the Book of Mormon* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1985], 50–1). See Sorenson's extended comparison of these histories with the Book of Mormon in his "The Book of Mormon as a Mesoamerican Record," in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1997), 391–521.

3. Richard L. Bushman develops this Lamanite ideology further in the context of the full range of Lamanite relationships with the Nephites (see his "The Lamanite View of Book of Mormon History," in *By Study and Also by Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley*, ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990], 2:52–72).
4. All biblical references are to the King James Version unless otherwise noted.
5. Nephi provides almost no information on Sam. He does say that Lehi blessed Sam to share the inheritance of Nephi (see 2 Nephi 4:11), but it is not clear how Lehi's first blessing applies specifically to Sam. 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 1:28–9). Of the sons listed in this promise, only Sam hearkened 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.
6. See John W. Welch, "The Temple in the Book of Mormon," in *Temples of the Ancient World*, ed. Donald W. Parry (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1994), 328, 334–6.
7. See John S. Thompson, "Isaiah 50–51, the Israelite Autumn Festivals, and the Covenant Speech of Jacob in 2 Nephi 6–10," in *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Donald W. Parry and John W. Welch (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1998), 124–7.
8. See, generally, Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*.
9. Most Bible translations and commentaries agree that Yahweh is the subject of verse 5, although the KJV calls Moses king. No other texts refer to Moses in monarchical terms.
0. See Jarom 1:2; Omni 1:11; Words of Mormon 1:10.
1. See Ben C. Ollenburger, *Zion, the City of the Great King: A Theological Symbol of the Jerusalem Cult* (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1987).
2. Isaiah 52:7 is invoked several times in the Book of Mormon (see 1 Nephi 13:37; Mosiah 12:21; 15:14; 3 Nephi 20:36).
3. Ollenburger, *Zion*, 125, 131.
4. See *ibid.*, 131.
5. It is interesting to note that Laman and Lemuel, although they rejected Nephi's identification of Jerusalem with oppressive Egypt, seem to have clearly understood the implied comparison of their situation to ancient Israel (and thus the comparison of Lehi and Nephi to Moses). This is evident when 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).
6. See S. Kent Brown, "The Exodus Pattern in the Book of Mormon," *BYU Studies* 30/3 (1990): 111–26; my "Political Dimensions," 33–4; and George S. Tate, "The Typology of the Exodus Pattern in the Book of Mormon," in *Literature of Belief: Sacred Scripture and Religious Experience*, ed. Neal E. Lambert (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1981), 245–62.
7. See my "The Brass Plates Version of Genesis," in *By Study and Also by Faith*, ed. Lundquist and Ricks, 2:136–73.

8. Compare Exodus 2:14; 5:21; 15:11; 16:3; Numbers 14:2; 20:3; 1 Nephi 3:28; 7:6, 16–19; 16:20, 38; 17:20–2.
9. I interpret the events detailed in 2 Nephi 31 as an expanded version of the vision Nephi reported earlier in 1 Nephi 11. See my “The Gospel of Jesus Christ as Taught by the Nephite Prophets,” *BYU Studies* 31 (summer 1991): 34.
0. While it has been convincingly demonstrated that the Nephite lists of crimes (compare Mosiah 2:13 and Alma 23:3) 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, for example, John W. Welch, “Series of Laws in the Book of Mormon” [FARMS, 1987]).
1. See diagrams and more complete explanations of this structural analysis in my “Nephi’s Outline,” *BYU Studies* 20 (winter 1980): 131–49, which is conveniently reprinted in Noel B. Reynolds, ed., *Book of Mormon Authorship: New Light on Ancient Origins* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, 1982; reprint, Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1996), 53–74. The chiasm included in the present study updates my analysis published earlier.
2. See Hugh W. Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 296.
3. See John A. Tvedtnes, “King Benjamin and the Feast of Tabernacles,” in *By Study and Also by Faith*, 2:220–1.
4. George E. Mendenhall, *The Tenth Generation: The Origins of the Biblical Tradition* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 30. See chap. 1, “Early Israel as the Kingdom of Yahweh,” for an excellent description of the differences in Israelite theories of kingship.
5. 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 (see *ibid.*, 16). But that is a story for another day.