

Number 24

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Mormon 6:11 "all my people save it were twenty and four of us"

Consider the significance of the number twenty-four in ancient Israel and in the Book of Mormon. Certain numbers were clearly meaningful in antiquity: seven was the number of spiritual perfection (as in the seven seals in the book of Revelation); twelve was a governmental number (as with the twelve tribes, twelve apostles). The number twenty-four, being a multiple of twelve, was associated with heavenly government, especially priestly judgment and temple service.¹

At Qumran, judicial disputes were brought before a court called "the council of the community."² This deliberative body was composed of two panels of twelve, twelve priests and twelve laymen, for a quorum of twenty-four judges. These judges "give light by the judgment of the Urim and Thummim."³

In the New Testament apocalypse, the book of Revelation, twenty-four elders judge the world. These twenty-four elders are mentioned twelve times in the book (Revelation 4:4, 10; 5:5, 6, 8, 11, 14; 7:11, 13; 11:16; 14:3; 19:4).

In Rabbinic Judaism, local courts having jurisdiction over most capital cases consisted of twenty-four (or twenty-three) judges. These "small sanhedrins" were composed of two panels, one for the defense and the other for the prosecution (the odd number twenty-three prevented a tie vote and was a minimum quorum requirement). If one of the judges had to leave the trial, "it had to be ascertained if twenty-three . . . would be left, in which case he might go out; if not, he might not depart."⁴

How far back can such duodecimal courts be found? The following evidence exists: Moses established courts in each of the twelve tribes (see Deuteronomy 16:18). Jehoshaphat appointed "Levites, priests and elders" as judges (2 Chronicles 19:8); related literature from Qumran assumes there were twelve in each group.⁵ The apocalyptic idea of God being surrounded by a body of elders when he judges the world is at least as old as Isaiah 24:23.

Twenty-four courses of priests continuously operated Davidic tabernacle and Solomonic temple services (see 1 Chronicles 24:3-18), and when David appointed his prophetic cantors, he established twenty-four orders, each with twelve members (see 1 Chronicles 25:1-31). Thus, although we have no direct evidence of duodecimal courts in preexilic Israel, the indirect evidence along with the postexilic sources give that number presumptive significance in Lehi's day and before.

Turning to the Book of Mormon, we see that twenty-four has remarkably similar significance:

1. Apparently there were twenty-four judges on King Noah's court, since Noah and his priests kidnapped twenty-four Lamanite daughters (see Mosiah 20:5). Alma's dismissal would have left twenty-three priests on the court, in addition to Noah.

2. There were twenty-four survivors of the final destruction of the Nephites who witnessed the judgment of God upon this people (see Mormon 6:11, 15, 22). There were other survivors (see Mormon 6:15), but the twenty-four

apparently stood as a body of special witnesses. This number may have been coincidental, but nevertheless it was significant enough to be specifically mentioned.

3. Particular mention is made of the number of the gold plates of Ether, probably because their number was twenty-four (see Mosiah 8:9; Alma 37:21; Ether 1:2). These plates were seen as a record of the “judgment of God upon those people (Alma 37:30). Their contents were brought “to light” by the use of two seer stones (Mosiah 28:13-16; Alma 37:21-25).

4. God’s heavenly court, which passed judgment upon Jerusalem (see 1 Nephi 1:13), consisted of twelve members (see 1 Nephi 1:10).

5. Like the twelve apostles, the twelve Nephite disciples (for a total of twenty-four) will act as judges in the final judgment of the world (see 3 Nephi 27:27).

6. Perhaps it is not coincidence that Mormon, the “idle witness” (Mormon 3:16), was given charge of the legal records at age twenty-four (see Mormon 1:3), and that Helaman I and II were about that age when they were given the records too.

7. We can also note that the Jaredite king Orihah, whose single recorded virtue was that he “did execute judgment upon the land in righteousness all his days” (Ether 7:1), had twenty-three sons (see Ether 7:2).

8. The text of the governmental oath of the Nephite chief judge to “judge righteously” happens to be reported in the account of the twenty-fourth year of the reign of Judges (Alma 50:39-40).

Prophets, judges, witnesses, God’s tribunal, God’s judgment, the Urim and Thummim, and heavenly righteous government are all elements of what Baumgarten calls “duodecimal symbolism.”⁶ These elements appear with remarkable consistency associated with the number twenty-four in the texts of the Book of Mormon.

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Footnotes

1. Ethelbert W. Bullinger, *Number in Scripture: Its Supernatural Design and Spiritual Influence* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1894; reprinted Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel, 1967), 264.

2. 1QS 8:1.

3. Peshier on Isaiah 54:11-12, tr. Joseph Baumgarten, “The Duodecimal Courts of Qumran, Revelation, and the Sanhedrin,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 95 (1976): 59-78, quote on p. 63.

4. Babylonian Talmud *Sanhedrin* 37a (the Mishnah lists decisions that require confirmation by the Urim and Thummim, *Shebuoth* 2:2).

5. 1QM 2:1-3; Temple Scroll.

6. Baumgarten, “The Duodecimal Courts,” 65.