

# Kingship, Coronation, and Covenant in Mosiah 1–6

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The first six chapters of Mosiah also portray for us the succession of Mosiah<sub>2</sub> to the Nephite throne. To a striking degree, many features of this coronation ceremony reflect aspects of ancient Israelite culture. A close look at these correspondences shows how faithfully the Book of Mormon depicts Old World practices and beliefs.

## Kingship

### The Meaning of Kingship

Although kingship is a political institution whose origins are lost to history, nearly every ancient and medieval civilization had a king who was believed to have been appointed by heaven. The Egyptians held that kingship had existed as long as the world itself; to the Sumerians, this form of rule was a gift from the gods. The Israelites also believed that the king was appointed and adopted by God and that “he mediated between God and the people and represented them before each other.”<sup>1</sup> Although the Nephite king was never viewed as a divine being (which would be inconsistent with Deuteronomy 17:15), he was closely connected with God in the sense that, as an intermediate, he too modeled and represented God to his people (as in Mosiah 2:19).

In the ancient view of God’s conferral of governmental power upon the king, the traditional code of royalty—which stipulates that the monarch receive sacred names and powers—allows him to stand in the place of God before his people. That ceremony “contained in particular the ancient titles and sovereign rights and duties conferred on Pharaoh by the god, in brief, the king’s authority to rule as the surrogate of the god.”<sup>2</sup> In the case of Benjamin’s speech, a similar ideology is to an extent operational: Benjamin conferred upon Mosiah, and also upon the people, a new name (see Mosiah 5:8); he entrusted Mosiah with other insignia of his royal office (see Mosiah 1:15–16); and he mentioned Mosiah’s right and duty to deliver to his people the commandments of God and to lead them in the ways of peace and well-being (see Mosiah 2:31; see also 5:5).

If the king represented the person of God, he also embodied the will and word of God or, in other words, the law of God. According to Moshe Weinfeld, “Law is embodied in the person of the king. The king is ‘the living law.’”<sup>3</sup> Similarly, a strong element in Benjamin’s discourse is his role as an example. At several important junctures in the speech, Benjamin cites his own behavior or function as a role model to the people, thus embodying the principles of divine righteousness that were incumbent upon his people to obey. For example, if Benjamin had labored to serve other people, then how much more should they do likewise (see Mosiah 2:18).

### The role of king in Hebrew times

was based on two covenants which defined the duties of the crown towards God and towards the people. The king’s relationship to the divinity was conceived as that of a vassal towards his overlord. He was installed in the office by divine election, on condition that he remain loyal to God and keep his laws (II *Sam.* xxiii 5; *Ps.* cxxxii 12). The other covenant defined the king’s obligations towards the nation and fulfilled the function of a modern constitution (II *Sam.* iii 21, v 3; II *Chron.* xxiii 3). The various conditions were probably recited at the accession to the throne.<sup>4</sup>

In the cases of Benjamin's and Mosiah's kingships, we see clearly that they both stood between God and the people (see Mosiah 2:31; 5:5) and that the king was one who acted as a vassal or steward over God's people (see Mosiah 1:10) and who accepted the king's commands by way of covenant (see Mosiah 5:5).

In Israel, kingship came to be a vital element of the society's organization through the four hundred years leading up to Lehi's departure from Jerusalem. In the American promised land, among the Nephites, Lamanites, and people of Zarahemla, kings were again an essential part of political life for many centuries. Mosiah 1–6 gives us some of the clearest information on the ideals of royal government in the Book of Mormon. For example, as a practical matter, the ancient king had two fundamental obligations, namely, to maintain peace and to establish justice. "Clearly, the function of the king was twofold: to ensure the safety of his people by 'force of arms' against [the] internal threat of rebellion or external threat of invasion and to ensure the 'well-being' of the nation through the establishment of justice. This dual function of the king as both warrior and judge is evident throughout the ancient Near East."<sup>5</sup> These two roles transcended the particular form of rulership in Israel or in the ancient world and endured from era to era: Whether an early judge or a later monarch in Israel, the ruler "was the leader in the Holy War chosen by Yahweh. He was also the man who had been given wisdom to act as a Judge of the people: to see that honesty flourishes in the kingdom."<sup>6</sup> As Falk has observed, the Hebrew king was responsible for the "functions of judicial and political administration"; he acted as judge and was also "called upon to fulfill a political task, in the course of which he also took upon himself the religious functions"; and he was "commissioned by God to administer justice."<sup>7</sup> Benjamin clearly filled these perennial roles: as warrior, he had led the Nephites into victorious battle against invading troops and quelled rebellion in his own lands (see Words of Mormon 1:12–16); as judge, it is evident that he had established justice and enforced the laws against slavery, murder, theft, adultery, and "any manner of wickedness" (Mosiah 2:13); and as religious leader, he received revelation from God and inspired his people in righteousness.

Especially prominent in the ancient meaning of kingship was the king's domestic role as the one in society primarily responsible for the internal peace, fairness, and equity within his realm. This royal function stands out in several Old Testament texts. For example, as Keith Whitelam remarks on Psalm 72: "The whole psalm is a testimony to the importance of the ideal of monarchical judicial administration which guarantees both the cosmic harmony, fertility and prosperity of the nation."<sup>8</sup> Thus to Benjamin is attributed primary credit for the condition of peace in his land: "by laboring with all the might of his body and the faculty of his whole soul," he and his prophets were able to "establish peace in the land" (Words of Mormon 1:18).

Whitelam identifies additional points as being common to the ancient Near Eastern and Israelite royal ideologies, especially that the ideal king was often concerned with providing for the needs of the poor and the underprivileged.<sup>9</sup> It is on this point that Benjamin focuses his personal emphasis: just as God is kind and generous to all individuals who are impoverished beggars in the sight of God (see Mosiah 4:21), so too Benjamin expresses deep concern and takes specific steps to see that the poor and the underprivileged in his kingdom are cared and provided for (see Mosiah 4:14, 22–23).

## **Choosing the King**

The Book of Mormon presents a pattern of choosing kings that matches customs in ancient Israel. In Israel, as in the ancient Near East generally, kingship was a divine election. It was considered necessary that God choose the man to be king. Thus Solomon, not his older brother Adonijah, succeeded his father David as king, since, as Adonijah himself said, "it [the kingship] was [Solomon's] from the Lord" (1 Kings 2:15).<sup>10</sup> Following this pattern of

divine election of the king, King Benjamin believed that God had called Mosiah, his son: “On the morrow I shall proclaim . . . that thou art a king and a ruler over this people, *whom the Lord our God hath given us*” (Mosiah 1:10).

In Israel, the eldest son of the king usually became the next ruler, although the king was not obligated to choose him if he believed God desired otherwise. Jehoshaphat gave the kingdom to Jehoram “because he was the firstborn” (2 Chronicles 21:3). However, at a later time Joachaz succeeded Josiah even though Joachaz had an older brother (see 2 Kings 23:31, 36). The Book of Mormon does not say whether Mosiah was Benjamin’s firstborn son, though this was probably the case since his name is given first in the list of names of Benjamin’s sons (see Mosiah 1:2).

In Israel, both Solomon and Jotham became king while their fathers were still alive, because their fathers were old or ill (see 1 Kings 1:32–40; 2:1–10; 2 Kings 15:5). This is also apparently why Benjamin installed Mosiah when he did: “[Benjamin] waxed old, and he saw that he must very soon go the way of all the earth; therefore, he thought it expedient that he should confer the kingdom upon one of his sons” (Mosiah 1:9). After he “had consecrated his son Mosiah to be a ruler and a king over his people, . . . king Benjamin lived three years and he died” (Mosiah 6:3, 5).

### **The King as Guardian of the Covenant of the Lord**

The king in the ancient Near East was obliged to maintain justice generally and to protect the rights of the weakest members of society. King Benjamin did not discuss this responsibility directly, but it is implied at several points in his sermon that he understood and observed the principle of protecting the rights of the weak (for example, see Mosiah 2:17–18; 4:13–16, 24).

The king in Israel had an added responsibility of acting as guardian of the covenant between the Lord and his people—a concept that seems to have no parallel among neighboring peoples. He was expected to be an obedient follower of God and to lead his people in obeying this covenant. As guardian of the covenant and of the law, the Israelite king took “special measures in his capacity of teacher of the torah, being the highest responsible authority in all matters appertaining to the department of the law.”<sup>11</sup>

Kingship and covenant are also closely connected in Mosiah 1–6. Benjamin’s command to his son to prepare for this grand occasion had two parts to it—to proclaim his son the new king and to “give this people a name” (Mosiah 1:11; see 1:10). The name was “the name of Christ”; this was to be accepted by all “that have entered into the covenant with God that [they] should be obedient unto the end of [their] lives” (Mosiah 5:8). In Mosiah 2:13, Benjamin clearly declares ways in which he had discharged his obligations as teacher and administrator in all matters of law.

Kingship and the covenant of the people with God are again combined in Mosiah 6:3. After Mosiah had been consecrated king, he “appointed priests to teach the people, that thereby they might hear and know the commandments of God, and to stir them up in remembrance of the oath [or covenant] which they had made.” The record notes that following Benjamin’s death, Mosiah very strictly observed the covenant and the commandments that his father had passed on to him (see Mosiah 6:6).

### **Coronation**

The coronation of the king is the most important ritual act associated with kingship in the ancient Near East. A comparison of Mosiah 1–6 with coronation ceremonies recorded in the Old Testament and with such rites among

other ancient Near Eastern peoples reveals striking parallels.

### The Sanctuary as the Site of the Coronation

A society's most sacred spot is the location where the holy act of royal coronation takes place. For Israel, the temple was that site. So we read that during his coronation Joash stood "by a pillar [of the temple], as the manner was" (2 Kings 11:14). However, the temple had not been built when Solomon became king, so he was crowned at Gihon (see 1 Kings 1:45). The priest Zadok took "out of the tabernacle" the horn containing oil with which he anointed Solomon (1 Kings 1:39). Thus scholars have concluded that the covenants made in connection with Israelite coronations were "made in the Temple. . . . The king went up into the House of Yahweh, he had his place by, or on, the pillar . . . and he concluded the covenant before Yahweh."<sup>12</sup>

In the case of Mosiah, all the people gathered at the temple at Zarahemla, the site chosen for the consecration of Mosiah as king (see Mosiah 1:18). The Nephite formalities, as had been the case in ancient Israel, took place in stages: "the coronation ceremony was divided into two parts, the anointing in the sanctuary and the enthronement in the royal palace."<sup>13</sup> Mosiah was first designated king in a private setting, presumably at the royal palace (see Mosiah 1:9–12), and then presented to the people in the public gathering at the temple (see Mosiah

### The Royal Dais

Benjamin had a tower constructed from which he spoke and, presumably, presented Mosiah to the people (see Mosiah 2:7). Not only was the king crowned in the temple, but in a specific place within the temple complex. In 2 Kings 11:14 we read that at the time of his coronation, King Joash "stood *by a pillar* (Hebrew *'al ha-'ammûd*), as the manner was" (emphasis added). The preposition *'al* can be translated "by," but it is much more often rendered "on" or "upon." Similarly, in 2 Kings 23:3, when King Josiah rededicates the temple, he gathers all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem and reads the law before all the people. He then stands "by" or "on the pillar"—*'al ha-'ammûd*—and makes a covenant to keep all the commandments.

Commenting on the pillars in 2 Kings, Gerhard von Rad wrote, "It is certainly to be understood in any case that the place where the king stood was a raised one. The king would have had to be visible to the crowd which had gathered for the solemnities, so that one may probably think of some"<sup>14</sup> Geo Widengren added:

We therefore conclude that at least towards the end of the pre-exilic period, but possibly from the beginning of that period, the king when reading to his people on a solemn occasion from the book of the law and acting as the mediator of the covenant making between<sup>15</sup>

In confirming the Old Testament documentation of the use of the dais, the Mishnah also supports the evidence found in the Book of Mormon. In view of these considerations, one can conclude that Benjamin's tower was more than just a way to communicate to the people—it was part of an Israelite coronation tradition in which the king stands on a platform or pillar at the temple before the people and before God.

### Installing in Office with Insignia

At the coronation of Joash, Jehoiada the priest conferred upon him two objects, called the *nēzer* and the *'ēdūt*. The meaning of the first term is certain; it means "crown" (2 Kings 11:12). What *'ēdūt* means is far less certain. Von Rad connected the *'ēdūt* with the idea of covenant and also with the Egyptian protocol that were given to the

Pharaoh upon his ascent to the throne.<sup>16</sup> In other words, it refers to a list of laws or regulations by which the king ‘ēdūt refers to the whole law. Ringgren cites Psalm 132:12 to support this claim:

If your sons keep my covenant and my testimonies [‘ēdōtai] which I shall teach them, their sons also for ever shall<sup>17</sup>

The king, as possessor of the law, would then “read out to the assembly the commandments of the book of the covenant and then . . . make the covenant between Yahweh and his people.”<sup>18</sup> In like manner, Benjamin told his sons, including Mosiah, his successor, “I would that ye should keep the commandments of God, that ye may prosper in the land according to the promises which the Lord made unto our fathers” (Mosiah 1:7). Thus not only may Mosiah’s receipt of the law as part of the regalia of kingship be similar to the procedure at the coronation of the kings in Israel, but the purpose for

The royal documents were the most important records in the kingdoms of the ancient world, and a sword was a frequent sign of kingship in Europe and Asia. In addition, from early modern times at least back to the Roman Empire, an orb or ball was commonly held in the hand of Old World rulers; although the Bible does not mention such an object, it still might have been part of the Israelite set of artifacts copied from their neighbors.

With the transfer of power, Benjamin gave Mosiah similar objects. He passed on the official records of the people (the plates of brass and the plates of Nephi), the sword of Laban, and the miraculous ball (called the director or Liahona; see Mosiah 1:15–16).

## Anointing

To anoint the king with oil was a significant part of coronation ceremonies in ancient Israel and in the ancient Near East generally. The Bible records the anointing of six kings: Saul, David, Solomon, Jehu, Joash, and Jehoahaz.<sup>19</sup> “The anointing is a ritual religious act, which marks the candidate for kingship as the Lord’s elected.”<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the name Messiah, which was used to refer to several of the kings of Israel, means “anointed,” no doubt referring to the rite of anointing the king during his installation as<sup>21</sup>

Following Benjamin’s address and the renewal of the covenant by the people, Benjamin “consecrated his son Mosiah to be a ruler and a king over his people” (Mosiah 6:3). In the Book of Mormon the verb *to consecrate* occurs mostly in connection with priests or teachers (see 2 Nephi 5:26; Mosiah 11:5; 23:17; Alma 4:4, 7; 5:3; 15:13; 23:4), but also appears in three instances in association with kings: (1) Benjamin says that he was “consecrated” to be king by his father (Mosiah 2:11), (2) Mosiah was “consecrated” by Benjamin his father (Mosiah 6:3), and (3) Amlici was “consecrate[d]” by his followers to be their king (Alma 2:9).

The verb *to anoint* is more commonly used in the Book of Mormon record with the setting apart of kings. Nephi “anointed” his successor (Jacob 1:9); interestingly, the word is used nine times in the Jaredite record, perhaps in a formulaic fashion (see Ether 6:22, 27; 9:4, 14–15, 21–22; 10:10, 16). In the Bible, only the verb to anoint (from the root \*MŠH) is used exclusively with reference to kings. In the enthronements of both Solomon (see 1 Kings 1:34, 39) and Joash (see 2 Kings 11:12) an anointing occurs. Furthermore, Saul, David, Jehu, and Jehoahaz were all anointed. The verb *to consecrate* (from the root \*QDŠ) is restricted to priests in the Old Testament. The two terms are similar but not identical in meaning. *To anoint* means to set apart by applying oil to the body, specifically the head, and *to consecrate*, a more general term, means to make holy. Consecrating could be done by anointing, but is

not limited to it. It is possible that the consecration of Mosiah included anointing, which would have been in accordance with the practices in ancient Israel and the ancient Near East.

## Presentation of the New King

Mosiah is presented to the people as their king in Mosiah 2:30. In 1 Kings 1:34, 39, Solomon is presented to the people, “and they blew the trumpet; and all the people said God save king Solomon.” At the coronation of Joash “the princes and the trumpeters [were] by the king, and all the people of the land rejoiced, and blew with trumpets” (2 Kings 11:14).

One reason for the public proclamation of the new king was to avoid disputes over the throne. In fact, it is most likely that we have detailed accounts concerning the coronation of Solomon and Joash specifically because both kingships were challenged. Despite his father’s efforts, the Assyrian Esarhaddon had serious problems with his brothers who also wanted to be king. With this in mind, Benjamin’s statements immediately following the presentation of his son take on new meaning: “If ye shall keep the commandments of my son, or the commandments of God which shall be delivered unto you by him, ye shall prosper in the land, and your enemies shall have no power over you. But, O my people, beware lest there shall arise contentions among you, and ye list to obey the evil spirit, which was spoken of by my father Mosiah” (Mosiah 2:31–32). The use of the word *contention* is significant. A quick study of its context in the Book of Mormon reveals that it is often tied to wars and that the principal cause of those wars was dissension and rebellion against the king by individuals. Hence the need for public designation of the king.

As Nibley has pointed out, there is a twist in the Nephite enthronement ceremony, for although Mosiah was proclaimed king, more attention is devoted to God as king. Benjamin repeatedly reminds the people that he too is human (see Mosiah 2:11, 26) and that God is the real king (see Mosiah 2:19). The idea of God-as-king is frequently found in the Old Testament, especially in Psalms. As a final part of the proclamation of the coronation of the new king, “in a fresh act of the drama,” the king himself would next speak; “claiming the authority of a divine revelation made to him, he proclaims to the city and to the world (in a more or less threatening speech) the nature of the overlordship which has been conferred upon him.”<sup>22</sup> At this point, the people respond by accepting the king’s declarations (see Mosiah 4:2; 5:2–4), and their acclamation “signals the people’s approval and contributes to the reciprocal feeling of closeness between the king and his citizens.”<sup>23</sup> The public proclamation of the kingship of

## Receiving a Throne Name

In many societies, a king received a new name or throne name when he was crowned king. Several Israelite kings had two names, a “birth name” and a throne name. It may be that all the kings of Judah received a new name when they came to the throne. During the “royal protocol Yahweh addresses the king in direct speech, calls him his son, invests him with sovereign rights, confers upon him his coronation name, and so on.”<sup>24</sup> During the Middle Kingdom period, each king of Egypt had no less than five names and received a throne name at the time he became king. Kings in Mesopotamia also received a new name. All Parthian kings (in ancient Iran) assumed the same throne name, Arsak, at their crowning—a fact that has made it hard for historians to identify one

Use of the same royal title also marks the early Nephite kings. Jacob wrote, “The people having loved Nephi exceedingly, . . . Wherefore, the people were desirous to retain in remembrance his name. And whoso should reign in his stead were called by the people second Nephi, third Nephi, and so forth, according to the reigns of the kings; and thus they were called by the people, let them be of whatever [original] name they would” (Jacob 1:10–11).

While it is true that we do not know that this new name was given to the rulers over the Nephites as part of the coronation rite, there is every reason to expect that it was.

## Divine Adoption of the King

Based on relating various Psalms (2, 89, 110) or passages in Isaiah (9:6–7) to the coronation, many scholars include as part of the enthronement procedure the divine adoption of the king.

As “son” of God, the king belongs to the sphere in which God in a specific manner manifests his fatherly concern and exercises fatherly authority. Both a privilege and an obligation are thus involved. As “son”, the king enjoys divine protection and help. This feature is found in all the most important texts. As “son”, the king also participates in the power of God and exercises delegated divine power. His sovereignty on earth is a replica of that of God in heaven (Ps 89 and 110). But divine sonship also implies filial obedience, although this *sine qua non* for the legitimacy of the king.<sup>25</sup>

Typically, Latter-day Saints have interpreted these passages as referring to Christ. In them the king is called a son of God. In one passage, however, the Lord through Nathan the prophet, referring directly to Solomon, declares, “I will be his father, and he shall be my son” (2 Samuel 7:14). Benjamin’s actual bestowal of the name on the people is recorded in Mosiah 5:6–12. Note particularly verse 7:

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

Again we can find a similar idea in the enthronement of Joash: “And Jehoiada made a covenant between the Lord and the king and the people, that they should be the Lord’s people” (2 Kings 11:17). What was once reserved for kings at coronation has now been extended in Nephite culture to the people generally. These last two themes—new name and divine adoption—are included in the coronation ritual and further confirm the ancient antecedents of King Benjamin’s address.

## The Assembly of Mosiah 1–6 as a Covenant Renewal Ceremony

From the Old Testament it appears that the Feast of Tabernacles was the time when the Israelites renewed their covenant with God, which is what the Nephites appear to have been doing in the assembly reported in Mosiah 1–6. Six elements of covenant renewal can be found in Exodus, Deuteronomy, and Joshua. Interestingly, each of these features is found in Mosiah 1–6 (see table 1 and its comparisons of Mosiah 1–6 and Old Testament covenant passages). Those six elements are as follows:

Table 1 **Treaty/Covenant Pattern in the Old Testament and in Mosiah**

Elements	Exodus 19:3b–8	Exodus 20–24	Deuteronomy	Joshua 24	Mosiah 1–6
Preamble	19:3b	20:1	1:5 (1:1–5)	24:2a (24:1–2a)	2:9c
Antecedent History	19:4	20:2	1:6–3:29	24:2b–13, 16b–18a	2:9b–25–3
Terms of the Covenant	19:5–6	20:3–23:19	chapters 4–26	24:14, 18b, 23	2:22, 4:6–8
Formal Witness	19:8	24:3	31:19	24:16a, 19a, 21–23	5:2–3

Blessings and Curses	19:5	23:20–33	27:9–28:68	24:19b–20	5:9–
Recital of the Covenant and Deposit of the Text	19:7	24:4–8	27:1–8; 31:9; 24–26	24:25–27	(2:8,

## 1. Preamble

In ancient treaties, the preamble contains the name, as well as other titles and attributes, of the suzerain making the treaty. The passages in the Bible that deal with the renewal of the covenant sometimes introduce God as the maker of the covenant: “And God spake all these words saying . . .” (Exodus 20:1). At other times, a prophet is introduced to act for God: “And Joshua said unto all the people, Thus saith the Lord God of Israel . . .” (Joshua 24:2). Similarly, Benjamin’s covenant assembly in the book of Mosiah begins, “And these are the words which [Benjamin] spake and caused to be written, saying . . .” (Mosiah 2:9). Although Benjamin is speaking, he is clearly acting as the mouthpiece of God.

## 2. Review of God’s Relations with Israel

This part of the typical Hittite treaty acknowledges the past kindnesses that had been shown by the suzerain toward his vassal, providing the rationale for the great king’s appeal (this generally comes in the succeeding treaty section, which contained specific stipulations) to his vassal to render future obedience in return for past benefits. At this point in the covenant renewal, according to the instances in the Bible, the people hear of God’s mighty acts on behalf of his people Israel. For example, “Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bare you on eagle’s wings, and brought you unto myself” (Exodus 19:4; compare Exodus 20:2; Joshua 24:12–13). The Mosiah passage includes a long account of the past relations between King Benjamin and his people and uses the thanks the people owe him for his contributions to their welfare as an *a fortiori* argument for the greater thanks they owe to God.

## 3. Terms of the Covenant

In the Hittite treaties, this section includes the specific obligations that the vassal had to his overlord. Each of the biblical covenant passages stipulates the commandments that God expects his people Israel to keep. A prime example is in Exodus 20–23, where God first briefly lists the Ten Commandments (see Exodus 20:3–17) and then spells out in greater detail what the people are to obey (see Exodus 21:1–23:19). Benjamin’s address also contains numerous commandments or stipulations required of the people.

## 4. Formal Witness

The Hittite treaties contain clauses in which the gods are invoked to witness and act as guarantors of the treaties. At one time in the Old Testament, an object, a particular stone, is made witness to the covenant, “for it hath heard all the words of the Lord which he spake unto us: it shall be therefore a witness unto you, lest ye deny your God” (Joshua 24:27). In general, though, the people themselves were the witnesses; for instance, they say “All that the Lord hath spoken we will do” (Exodus 19:8). Following King Benjamin’s address, the people express their desire “to enter into a covenant with [their] God to do his will, and to be obedient to his commandments” (Mosiah 5:5). They further witness their willingness to obey by allowing their names to be listed among those who have “entered into a covenant with God to keep his commandments” (Mosiah 6:1).

## 5. Blessings and Cursings



The end of a biblical covenant ceremony often contains a list of curses and blessings for those who enter into the covenant. For example:

Cursed be the man that maketh any graven or molten image. . . . And all the people shall answer and say, Amen. Cursed be he that setteth light by his father or his mother. And all the people shall say, Amen. (Deuteronomy 27:15–16)

Blessed shalt thou be in the city, and blessed shalt thou be in the field. Blessed shall be the fruit of thy body, and the fruit of thy ground, and the fruit of thy cattle. (Deuteronomy 28:3–4)

The curses and blessings in Benjamin’s speech are also implied rather than stated outright:

And . . . whosoever doeth this shall be found at the right hand of God. . . . And now . . . whosoever shall not take upon him the name of Christ must be called by some other name; therefore, he findeth himself on the left hand of God. (Mosiah 5:9–10)

## 6. Reciting and Depositing the Covenant

The Bible frequently mentions that the covenant was read aloud: “And he [Moses] took the book of the covenant, and read in the audience of the people” (Exodus 24:7). Other passages mention that the covenant was written and put in a safe and sacred place: “And Joshua wrote these words in the book of the law of God, and took a great stone, and set it up there under an oak, that was by the sanctuary of the Lord” (Joshua 24:26). The words of King Benjamin were written and sent out among the people, not only so they could study and understand what had gone on, but also as a permanent record of the assembly (see Mosiah 2:8–9). At the end of Benjamin’s address, when all the people expressed a willingness to take upon themselves Christ’s name, their names were recorded (Mosiah 6:1).

### From Dust to Exaltation

The ideology of kingship in ancient Israel extended beyond coronation rituals and covenant patterns. Biblical scholars have found that the ideas associated with becoming a king or a queen also came to serve as religious images, symbolizing the ascent of mortal beings from dust to exaltation.

“Recent studies,” according to Walter Brueggemann, “have suggested an intersection in the motifs of covenant-making, enthronement, and resurrection.”<sup>26</sup> Just as mortal kings were created out of the dust of the earth and yet could be elevated by God to become a leader in Israel, so all human beings could be raised from their mortal state to resurrected glory.

Thus, in Israelite thought, “the motifs of covenant-renewal, enthronement, and resurrection cannot be kept in isolation from each other but they run together and serve to illuminate each other.”<sup>27</sup> And with this matrix in mind, it becomes all the more significant that Benjamin intertwines the themes of dust, kingship, covenant, enthronement, and resurrection throughout his speech.

The use of the word *dust* is a first important indicator of the possible presence of royal language. In a telling declaration, God told the Israelite king Baasha that divine power had raised him to kingship from the dust: “Since I exalted you out of the dust and made you leader over my people Israel . . .” (1 Kings 16:2, translation by author; see

also the combination of dust and kingship in 1 Samuel 2:6–8; Psalm 113:7). Brueggemann argues that the creation account and Adam's elevation from the dust should be understood as having enthronement overtones, for Adam "is really being crowned king over the garden with all the power and authority which it implies."<sup>28</sup> Thus it is significant that King Benjamin began his royal speech by reminding his people that he too was "of the dust" (Mosiah 2:26) and was dependent on God for his power, that he had been "suffered by the hand of the Lord . . . [to] be a ruler and a king over this people" (Mosiah 2:11).

The operative vehicle that takes any man from the dust and installs him in a position of authority or favor is the power of covenant. Hence, texts that speak of being in the dust can refer to situations in which the covenant relationship between Jehovah and the king or his people has been broken (see Psalm 7:6), while its opposite, coming to life, is connected with making and keeping the covenant. In the case of Benjamin's people, they first viewed themselves as "even less than the dust of the earth" (Mosiah 4:2), but through the force and effect of their covenant they became spiritually begotten, born, free, and positioned on the right hand of God (see Mosiah 5:7–10). It was the covenant that raised them from the dust, both ceremonially and spiritually.

The idea that God elevates the righteous king from the dust brings with it two counter sides. First is the realization that if the king is wicked the Lord will utterly sweep away the ruler who breaks the covenant, returning him to the dust and sweeping him out of the house (compare 1 Kings 16:3). Similarly, Benjamin warns his people against breaking their covenant. He takes it for granted throughout his speech that mortals owe to God everything that they have and are (see Mosiah 2:20–25), and therefore it is to be expected that they will be returned to the dust, utterly blotted out, driven away, and cast out if they are not true and faithful to their God (see Mosiah 5:11, 14).

Another motif that frequently occurs in connection with the ascension of a righteous king is the presumption that one king "can be raised from the dust to power only when the alternative rulers are sent to the dust."<sup>29</sup> Thus the Psalmist prays in a royal setting, "May his foes bow down before him, and his enemies lick the dust" (Psalm 72:9, translation by author; see also Micah 7:17; Isaiah 49:23). This imagery is sometimes "extended so that the whole people now share in the promise and hope of the royal tradition," as when Isaiah prophesies that the people of Israel will be raised to power as their enemies are brought low in the dust (see Isaiah 25:10–12; 26:5–6). Benjamin seems attuned to this motif as well when he assures the ascendance of his son Mosiah by promising and instructing his people that "your enemies shall have no power over you" (Mosiah 2:31), and that the "enemy to all righteousness" (Mosiah 4:14) shall have "no place in you" (Mosiah 2:36), if they would obey Mosiah as king.

The ultimate victory over one's enemy, of course, is found in overcoming death through the resurrection of the dead. Here, also, the theme of rising from the dust becomes important in scripture: "Awake and sing, ye that dwell in the dust" (Isaiah 26:19); "many . . . that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt" (Daniel 12:2). John H. Hayes has argued that New Testament texts about resurrection draw on enthronement imagery.<sup>30</sup> Brueggemann extends that argument into the Old Testament: "The resurrection of Israel is in fact the enthronement of Israel among the nations"; by building "an anthropology out of royal ritual," the ancient prophets affirmed "that man is bound for kingship."<sup>31</sup> With equal confidence, King Benjamin took the symbols and promises of royal ritual and extended them to the common people in his domain. He delivered to them great promises of joy and confidence (see Mosiah 3:3–4), assuring them that the dead will rise (see Mosiah 3:5, 10) and that the righteous will be lifted up and "brought to heaven" (Mosiah 5:15).

No one seems to dispute Brueggemann and others in their assertion that themes of kingship, covenant-making, rising from the dust, coronation, and resurrection were closely linked in the minds of ancient Israelites and early Christians, even though their findings have been detected and assembled only from bits and pieces in scattered texts throughout the Bible. Thus it may come as an unexpected verification that all their findings are illuminated and strongly exemplified in a single text—the Book of Mormon. Indeed, Benjamin’s speech may be the best royal and religious text that shows both king and common folk in relation to each of the elements in the precise set of interconnected themes of kingship, coronation, covenant, and being raised from the dust to eternal life.

### Conclusion

As Hugh Nibley has noted on numerous occasions, one of the best means of establishing a text’s authenticity lies in examining the degree to which it accurately reflects in its smaller details the milieu from which it claims to derive. The Book of Mormon claims to derive from ancient Israel. The extent to which it correctly mirrors the culture of the ancient Near East in matters of religious practice, manner of life, methods of warfare, as well as other topics (especially those that were either unknown or unexamined in Joseph Smith’s time), may provide one of the best tests of the book’s genuineness. In this study, we have found numerous elements in the ancient ideology of kingship, coronation, and covenant making that are reflected accurately in Benjamin’s speech. This sermon ranks as one of the most important in scripture. It serves to fulfill one of the primary purposes of the Book of Mormon by placing central focus and highest importance on the life, mission, atonement, and eternal reign of the heavenly King, Jesus Christ, the Lord God Omnipotent.

### Notes

1. Ze’ev W. Falk, *Hebrew Law in Biblical Times: An Introduction* (Jerusalem: Wahrmann, 1964), 45.
2. Gerhard von Rad, “The Royal Ritual in Judah,” in *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays*, trans. E. W. Trueman Dicken (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), 225.
3. Moshe Weinfeld, “The King as Servant of the People: The Source of the Idea,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 33/1–2 (1982): 189.
4. Falk, *Hebrew Law*, 45–46.
5. Keith W. Whitelam, *The Just King: Monarchical Judicial Authority in Ancient Israel* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1979), 17.
6. Hamish F. G. Swanston, *The Kings and the Covenant* (London: Burns & Oates, 1968), 169.
7. Falk, *Hebrew Law*, 43–45.
8. Whitelam, *The Just King*, 29.
9. See *ibid.*
10. See Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961), 1:100. Adonijah’s statement in 1 Kings 2:15 should be compared with David’s in 1 Chronicles 28:5: “And of all my sons, (for the Lord hath given me many sons,) he hath chosen Solomon my son to sit upon the throne of the kingdom of the Lord over Israel.”

11. Geo Widengren, "King and Covenant," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 2/1 (1957): 17.
12. *Ibid.*, 3.
13. Von Rad, "The Royal Ritual in Judah," 223.
14. *Ibid.*, 224.
15. Widengren, "King and Covenant," 10.
16. See Von Rad, "The Royal Ritual in Judah," 224–29.
17. See Helmer Ringgren, *Israelite Religion*, trans. David E. Green (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 223–24; Aubrey R. Johnson, *Sacral Kingship in Ancient Israel* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1967), 67 n. 2.
18. Widengren, "King and Covenant," 7.
19. Saul (1 Samuel 10:1); David (2 Samuel 5:3); Solomon (1 Kings 1:39); Jehu (2 Kings 9:6); Joash (2 Kings 11:12); Jehoahaz (2 Kings 23:30). In addition, it is recorded in 2 Samuel 19:10 that the upstart Absalom was anointed to be king.
20. Zafrira Ben-Barak, "The Mizpah Covenant (I Sam 10:25)—The Source of the Israelite Monarchic Covenant," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 91/1 (1979): 38.
21. See Ernst Kutsch, *Salbung als Rechtsakt im Alten Testament und im Alten Orient* (Berlin: Töpelmann, 1963), 52–63. According to later Jewish legend, *Apocalypse of Moses* 9:3, cited in *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament in English*, ed. R. H. Charles (Oxford: Clarendon, 1976), 2:143, the idea of anointing began with the first man. According to this story, when Adam was 930 years old, he knew that his days were coming to an end. He therefore implored Eve, "Arise and go with my son Seth near to paradise, and put earth upon your heads and weep and pray to God to have mercy upon me and send his angel to paradise, and give me of the tree out of which the oil floweth, and bring it (to) me, and I shall anoint myself and shall have rest from my complaint."
22. Von Rad, "The Royal Ritual in Judah," 229.
23. Ben-Barak, "The Mizpah Covenant," 38.
24. Von Rad, "The Royal Ritual in Judah," 229.
25. Tryggve N. D. Mettinger, *King and Messiah: The Civil and Sacral Legitimation of the Israelite Kings* (Lund: Gleerup, 1976), 291–92.
26. Walter Brueggemann, "From Dust to Kingship," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 84/1 (1972): 1.
27. *Ibid.*, 1.
28. *Ibid.*, 12.
29. *Ibid.*, 8.

30. See John H. Hayes, "The Resurrection as Enthronement and the Earliest Church Christology," *Interpretation* 22 (1968): 333-45.

31. Brueggemann, "From Dust to Kingship," 13, 17.