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King, Coronation, and Covenant in Mosiah 1-6

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Abstract: The first six chapters of Mosiah are remarkable in several ways. They contain King Benjamin's farewell address, one of the most memorable sermons we have on record. They also give us a picture of how Mosiah succeeded his father, Benjamin, to the Nephite throne. Many features of the ceremony that was involved reflect the traditions of ancient Israelite culture. First is the significance of the office of king. Second is the coronation ceremony for the new king. The details of this ceremony have parallels in Israel and other ancient Near Eastern societies and even in other parts of the world. Finally, the order of events reported in these chapters reflects the "treaty-covenant" pattern well known in ancient Israel and the ancient Near East. My discussion of these three sets of features will show how faithfully the Book of Mormon reflects these Old World practices and beliefs.

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Kingship

The Meaning of Kingship. Nearly every ancient and medieval civilization had a king, who it was believed had been appointed by heaven. Kingship is a political institution whose origins are lost to history. The Egyptians believed that kingship had existed as long as the world itself; to the Sumerians, this form of rule was a gift of the gods. 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. In the American promised land, among the Nephites, Lamanites, and people of Zarahemla,

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kings were again an essential part of political life for centuries. Mosiah 1–6 gives us some of the clearest information on the ideals of royal government in the Book of Mormon.

Choosing the King. The Book of Mormon presents a pattern for choosing kings that matches customs in ancient Israel. 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). The Nephite 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, as noted above, Solomon succeeded David even though Solomon was not the eldest son. The Book of Mormon does not say whether Mosiah was Benjamin’s firstborn son, although this probably was 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 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). Then, 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).

Conflicting Views of Kingship. In Mesopotamia and Egypt, kingship was the only form of government, as far as we know. The king there was viewed as descended from a god, or at least he had been adopted as an offspring of deity. To the writers of history in those lands, no other type of rule was conceivable.

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On the other hand, in Israel, while the king was ruler “by the grace of God,” an alternative view recognized the dangers of kingship. When the Israelites demanded of the prophet Samuel, “Make us a king to judge us like all the nations,” Samuel painted a grim picture of what would happen under a king:

He will take your sons, and appoint them for himself, for his chariots, and to be his horsemen; and some shall run before his chariots. And he will appoint him captains over thousands, and captains over fifties; and will set them to ear [plant] his ground, and to reap his harvest, and to make his instruments of war, and instruments of his chariots. And he will take your daughters to be confectionaries, and to be cooks, and to be bakers. And he will take your fields, and your vineyards, and your oliveyards, even the best of them, and give them to his servants. And he will take the tenth of your seed, and of your vineyards, and give to his officers, and to his servants. And he will take your menservants, and your maidservants, and your goodliest young men, and your asses, and put them to his work. He will take the tenth of your sheep: and ye shall be his servants. And ye shall cry out in that day because of your king which ye shall have chosen you; and the Lord will not hear you in that day (1 Samuel 8:11-18).

The Nephites were torn between the same conflicting views of kings. Benjamin’s description of how he ruled could hardly contrast more with Samuel’s description:

[I] have not sought gold nor silver nor any manner of riches of you; neither have I suffered that ye should be confined in dungeons, nor that ye should make slaves one of another. . . . And even I, myself, have labored with mine own hands that I might serve you, and that ye should not be laden with taxes, and that there should nothing come upon you which was grievous to be borne (Mosiah 2:12-14).

Mosiah followed his father Benjamin in farming “the earth, that thereby he might not become burdensome to his people” (Mo-

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siah 6:7). He took great pains to avoid abusing the royal power. Yet, near the end of his reign, Mosiah gives the most damning criticism to be found anywhere in scripture on the perils of kingship: "Because all men are not just it is not expedient that ye should have a king or kings to rule over you. For behold, how much iniquity doth one wicked king cause to be committed, yea, and what great destruction!" (Mosiah 29:16–17; see all of 29:5–36).

The King as Guardian of the Covenant of the Lord. The king in the Near East was obliged to maintain justice generally and to protect the rights of the weakest members of society. Benjamin does not discuss this responsibility directly, but several points in his sermon imply that he understood and abided by 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 to obey the covenant.

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 the son the new king, and to "give this people a name" (Mosiah 1:10–11). 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).

The association of the two concepts in the agenda indicates that they were linked in Nephite thinking. 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

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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). Gihon was made sacred by the presence of the Ark of the Covenant (which contained the sacred objects from Moses' day) within the special tabernacle that David had made to shelter it. The priest Zadok took "out of the tabernacle" the horn containing oil, from which he anointed Solomon (1 Kings 1:39). In the Nephite case, the temple at Zarahemla was the site chosen for Benjamin's address to the people and for the consecration of his son Mosiah as king (see Mosiah 1:18).

Installing in Office with Insignia. At the coronation of Joash, Jehoiada the priest conferred upon him two objects, called the *nezer* and the *'edut*. The meaning of the first term is certain; it means *crown* (2 Kings 11:12). What *'edut* means is far less certain. It may have been a piece of writing that affirmed the king's adoption by God and promised the new king victory over his enemies, as Psalm 2:7-9 suggests, or it may have been a document that the ruler was to wear containing the basic terms of Yahweh's covenant with the house of David (the line of the kings).

The transfer of power to Mosiah involved something similar. Benjamin gave him certain objects. He passed on the official

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records of the people (the plates of brass and the plates of Nephi), the sword of Laban, and the miraculous ball, called also the director or Liahona (see Mosiah 1:15–16). Of course, 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, an orb or ball was commonly held in the hand of Old World rulers, from early modern times at least back to the Roman Empire. 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.

Anointing. To anoint the king with oil was a significant part of the coronation ceremonies in ancient Israel and in the ancient Near East generally. The Bible records the anointing of six of the kings: Saul, David, Solomon, Jehu, Joash, and Jehoahaz. 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.

The Hittites, a northern neighbor of the Israelites, also had a ceremony that included anointing the king with oil. Although there is no clear evidence that the Egyptian king was anointed when he became king, he apparently was anointed every morning before entering the temple to perform daily chants.

Following Benjamin's address and the people's renewal of the covenant, Benjamin "consecrated his son Mosiah to be a ruler and a king over his people" (Mosiah 6:3). The context does not indicate whether this "consecration" included anointing. However, some ritual act was evidently involved, and back almost at the beginning of Nephite history, Jacob indicates that the coronation included anointing. He reported that his brother Nephi, the first king, "began to be old, and he saw that he must soon die; wherefore, he anointed a man to be a king and a ruler over his people now, according to the reigns of the kings" (Jacob 1:9). "According to the reigns of the kings" clearly refers to the pattern of kingship in Judah, with which Nephi was personally familiar.

Receiving a Throne Name. In many societies, a king received

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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 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. Each Parthian king (in ancient Iran) assumed the same throne-name, "Arsak," at his crowning, a fact that has made it hard for historians to identify one ruler from another.

Use of the same royal title marks the early Nephite kings. Jacob wrote that, "The people having loved Nephi exceedingly . . . wherefore, the people were desirousto 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 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.

The Assembly of Mosiah 1-6 as a Covenant Renewal

Mosiah 1-6 mentions several interesting features of this assembly: the pilgrimage of whole families to the temple site, the sacrifice of animals, and the people's dwelling in tents. These elements are so typical of the Israelite Feast of Tabernacles that they strongly suggest to me that the events recorded in these chapters took place during a Nephite observance of that festival. From the Old Testament, it seems most likely that the Feast of the Tabernacles was when the Israelites renewed their covenant with God, and that appears to be what the Nephites were doing in the assembly reported in Mosiah 1-6.

Six elements of covenant renewal can be found in Exodus, Deuteronomy, and Joshua: (1) the king/prophet gives a preamble that introduces God as the one making the covenant or that introduces his prophet as spokesman for God; (2) the king/

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prophet gives a brief review of God's relations with Israel in the past; (3) the king/prophet notes the terms of the covenant, listing specific commandments and obligations that God expected Israel to keep; (4) the people bear witness in formal statements that they accept the covenant; (5) the king/prophet lists the blessings and curses for obedience or disobedience to the covenant; and (6) the king/prophet makes provisions for depositing a written copy of the covenant in a safe and sacred place and for reading its contents to the people in the future.

In addition, the ideal was that the new king take office before the death of the old one, and this transfer of power was connected with the ceremony where the people make or renew their covenant with God. Interestingly, each of these features is found in Mosiah 1–6 (see Table 1).

1. *Preamble.* The passages in the Bible dealing with the renewal of the covenant sometimes introduce God as the maker of the covenant: "God spake all these words saying . . ." (Exodus 20:1). At other times, a prophet is introduced to act for God: "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: "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. In fact, a sizable part of his address consists of words that had been made known to him "by an angel from God" (Mosiah 3:2).

2. *Review of God's Relations with Israel.* At this point in the covenant renewal, according to the Bible, the people hear of God's mighty acts on behalf of his people Israel. For example, Jehovah says through Moses, "Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bare you on eagles' wings, and brought you unto myself" (Exodus 19:4; cf. Exodus 20:2; Joshua 24:11–23). The Mosiah passage includes a long account of the past relations between King Benjamin and his people (Mosiah 2:9–19).

3. *Terms of the Covenant.* Each of the biblical covenant passages

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states 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 (Exodus 20:3–17) and then spells out in greater detail what the people are to obey (Exodus 21:1 – 23:19). Benjamin’s address also contains numerous commandments; for example, “Believe in God. . . . Believe that ye must repent of your sins and forsake them, and humble yourselves before God; and ask in sincerity of heart that he would forgive you” (Mosiah 4:9–10).

4. *Formal Witness*. One time in the Old Testament, an object, a particular stone, was 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 biblical covenants often contains a list of curses and blessings for those who enter into the covenant: “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 27:15–17). “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).

More often the Old Testament just implies the curses and blessings: “Joshua said unto the people, . . . If ye forsake the Lord, and serve strange gods, then he will turn and do you hurt, and consume you, after that he hath done you good” (Joshua 24:19–20). The curses and blessings in Benjamin’s speech are also

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implied rather than stated outright: “Whosoever doeth this shall be found at the right hand of God. . . . 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: “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: “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 of the people expressed a willingness to take upon themselves Christ’s name, their names were recorded (Mosiah 6:1).

Hugh Nibley has noted that one of the best means of establishing a text’s authenticity is to examine the degree to which it accurately reflects in its details the culture from which it claims to derive. The Book of Mormon claims to derive from ancient Israel. Mosiah 1–6 reflects in considerable detail the Israelite customs and beliefs that we know are part of the process of choosing and placing a new king on the throne.

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Table 1

Treaty/Covenant Pattern in the Old Testament and in Mosiah

Elements	Ex. 19: 3b-8	Ex. 20-24	Deut.	Josh. 24	Mosiah 1- 6
Preamble	Ex. 19:3b	Ex. 20:1	Deut. 1:5 (Deut. 1:1-5)	Josh. 24:2a (Josh. 24:1-2a)	Mosiah 2:9a (Mosiah 1:1-2:9a)
Review of God's Relations with Israel	Ex. 19:4	Ex. 20:2	Deut. 1:6- 3:29	Josh. 24:2b-13, 16b, 17- 18a	Mosiah 2:9b-21, 23-24a, 25-30
Terms of the Covenant	Ex. 19:5-6	Ex. 20:3- 23:19	Deut. 4- 26	Josh. 24:14, 18b, 23	Mosiah 2:22, 24b, 31-41; 4:6-30
Formal Witness	Ex. 19:8	Ex. 24:3		Josh. 24:16a, 19a, 21-23	Mosiah 5:2-8
Blessings and Curses		Ex. 23:20- 33	Deut. 27:9-28:68	Josh. 24:19b-20	Mosiah 5:9-15 (3:24-27)
Reciting and Depositing of the Covenant	Ex. 19:7	Ex. 24:4-8	Deut. 27:1-8; 31:9, 24- 26	Josh. 24:25-27	(Mosiah 2:8, 9a) Mosiah 6:1-3, 6