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The Ideology of Kingship in Mosiah 1–6

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Chapter 31

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Mosiah 1:10 "I shall proclaim unto this my people out of mine own mouth that thou art a king and a ruler over this people, whom the Lord our God hath given us."

A vital feature of almost every ancient and medieval society was divine kingship, that is, rule by god-appointed kings. This was true of Egyptian and Mesopotamian cultures, as well as of Israelite, Nephite, and Lamanite societies during much of their history. Only recently have scholars noted a common pattern in the ideology of kingship in Israel and the rest of the ancient Near East. Interestingly, we now find in the Nephite ideology of kingship, elements of which are recorded in Mosiah 1-6, striking parallels to the kingship ideology in Israel and elsewhere in the ancient Near East.

Four of the most significant features follow:

1. *Accession to the Throne.* The king in ancient Israel was deemed chosen by God in that his accession showed God's choice. Similarly, Benjamin affirmed that Mosiah was chosen by the Lord to succeed him when he said: "On the morrow I shall proclaim unto this my people out of mine own mouth that thou art a king and a ruler over this people, whom the Lord our God hath given us" (Mosiah 1:10; see also 2:11, 30).

The eldest son of the king in ancient Israel was generally entitled to the throne (see 2 Chronicles 21:3), although he does not always seem to have been obligated to do so (see 2 Kings 23:31, 36; 2 Chronicles 11:21-22). It is never explicitly stated that Mosiah was Benjamin's firstborn son, but this seems likely, since his name is given first among the names of Benjamin's sons (see Mosiah 1:2).

In early Israel both Solomon and Jotham became king while their fathers were still alive and ruling (see 1 Kings 1:32-40; 2:1-10; 2 Kings 15:5). Three years before he died, Benjamin too installed his son Mosiah as king (see Mosiah 6:5): "[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). During these three years, Benjamin and his son may have administered the kingdom jointly.

2. *Ambivalent View of Kingship.* In Mesopotamian and Egyptian societies, kingship was the primary form of government, and the king was viewed as being divine or at least as being the adopted offspring of deity. In Israelite and Nephite societies, however, the king did not view himself as divine, and kingship itself was viewed rather ambivalently. Benjamin clearly stated at the beginning of his address, "I have not commanded you to come up hither . . . that ye should think that I of myself am more than a mortal man" (Mosiah 2:10). Further, while both the Old Testament and the Book of Mormon note that there are very positive aspects of kingship (see 1 Samuel 12:12-15; Mosiah 29:13-15), they also observe that there are negative and even dangerous features of it (see 1 Samuel 8:11-18; Mosiah 29:16-17).

3. *The King as Protector of the Weak.* Kings in the ancient Near East, including Israel, were obligated to maintain justice and to protect the rights of the weakest members of society. Indeed, these qualities were invariably mentioned in descriptions of good kings. In his address, Benjamin detailed his efforts to maintain justice during his rule: "Neither have I suffered that ye should be confined in dungeons, nor that ye should make slaves one of another, nor that ye should murder, or plunder, or steal, or commit adultery" (Mosiah 2:13). Benjamin further told his people that their concern for the poor and the needy was essential to retain a remission of their sins (see Mosiah 4:26): "Ye will not suffer that the beggar putteth up his petition to you in vain, and turn him out to perish" (Mosiah 4:16).

4. *The King and the Covenant of the Lord.* Unlike kings of other peoples of the ancient Near East, the king in Israel had the responsibility of acting as the guardian of the covenant between the Lord and his people. The king in ancient Israel was one "from among the people of Yahweh who, because of the singular privilege of being anointed to kingship, bore a special responsibility of guardianship for the faith of the nation."¹

In a similar manner, kingship and covenant are inextricably connected in Benjamin's speech (see Mosiah 2:29-30). Benjamin commanded his son to gather the people together in order that he might proclaim his son king and "give this people a name" (Mosiah 1:10-

11). This "name" is "the name of Christ," 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). Much of Benjamin's address is concerned with admonishing the people to keep the covenant. Kingship, covenant, and the observance of commandments are again connected in Mosiah 6:3 which states that Benjamin 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 which they had made."

It is impossible to understand ancient Near Eastern cultures and societies without appreciating their attitude toward kingship. The king in Israel was central; he had both sacral and political roles. Many customs defined the king's roles and duties. As the foregoing examples from Benjamin's speech illustrate, this rich and complex ideology is accurately reflected in the Book of Mormon.

Based on research by Stephen D. Ricks, August 1987.

Footnotes

1. Helen A. Kenik, "Code of Conduct for a King: Psalm 101," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 95 (1976): 391.