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A Proposed Kinship between Alma₂ and Nephihah

Brant A. Gardner

Abstract: *The Book of Mormon presents a wealth of important information related to how we should understand our lives and relationship with God. Frustratingly, it leaves unwritten a large body of information that we would like to know. This note tries to read between the lines to suggest the reason Nephihah became chief judge after Alma₂ abdicated that position.*

At the beginning of the book of Alma, Alma₂ is both the chief judge and the chief high priest. In the beginning of his ninth year as chief judge (ninth year of the reign of the judges, Alma 4:11), Alma₂ relinquished the chief judge seat and retained the position of chief high priest (Alma 4:17–18). The seating of the next chief judge is described, but with perhaps confusing details:

And he [Alma₂] selected a wise man who was among the elders of the church, and gave him power according to the voice of the people, that he might have power to enact laws according to the laws which had been given, and to put them in force according to the wickedness and the crimes of the people. Now this man's name was Nephihah, and he was appointed chief judge; and he sat in the judgment-seat to judge and to govern the people. (Alma 4:16–17)

The appointment of Nephihah followed two procedures. First, Alma₂ selected him. Second, the voice of the people gave him power. Richard Bushman once tried to examine the Book of Mormon for political principles that might hold lessons for our modern Republic.

Instead, he found a very different type of political system.¹ He noted the differences between succession under the Judges and what might have been expected of the Republicanism of Joseph's time:

The Nephite government was no more resistant to monarchy in practice than it was in theory, and in fact came to occupy the very middle ground which, according to the Boston orator, could not exist. The institution of judgeships, rather than beginning a republican era in Book of Mormon history, slid back at once toward monarchy. The chief judge much more resembled a king than an American president. Once elected, he never again submitted himself to the people. After being proclaimed chief judge by the voice of the people, Alma enjoyed life tenure. When he chose to resign because of internal difficulties he selected his own successor (see Alma 4:16). That seems to have been the beginning of a dynasty. In the next succession, the judgeship passed to the chief judge's son and thence "by right" to the successive sons of the judges (see Alma 50:39; Helaman 1:13). Although democratic elements were there—the judges were confirmed by the voice of the people—the "reign of the judges," as the Book of Mormon calls the period, was a far cry from the republican government Joseph Smith knew. Life tenure and hereditary succession would have struck Americans as only slightly modified monarchy.²

1. Richard L. Bushman, *Believing History: Latter-day Saint Essays*, comp. and ed. Reid L. Neilson and Jed Woodworth (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 25.

I decided to examine the political principles embodied in the Book of Mormon and make some application to our Revolution and Constitution. I thought this would be simple enough because of the switch from monarchy to a republic during the reign of Mosiah. I was sure that somewhere in Mosiah's statements I would find ideas relevant to the modern world. With that in mind, I accepted the invitation to talk, but not until a few months before I was to appear did I get down to work. To my dismay I could not find what I was looking for. Everything seemed just off the point, confused and baffling. I could not find the directions for a sound republic that I had expected.

2. Richard L. Bushman, "The Book of Mormon and the American Revolution," *BYU Studies* 17 no. 1 (1977): 14–15, byustudies.byu.edu/article/the-book-of-mormon-and-the-american-revolution. See also Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness*:

As Bushman noted, political positions appear to have been for life and were transmitted through genealogical lines. In this case, Alma₂ first selects Nephiah and then presents him for the voice of the people. This brings up the question of why Alma₂ selected Nephiah for chief judge. The text does not tell us. I suggest that Alma₂ made the selection, and it was seen as acceptable by the voice of the people because it also followed the tradition of genealogical transmission.

Mormon's edited text has ample evidence that positions would pass from father to son. The book of Omni indicates that passing the small plates to a brother rather than a son was a legitimate option. Amaron passed the responsibility for the small plates to his brother, Chemish (Omni 1:8). Chemish passed the plates to his son, Abinadom (Omni 1:10). The small plates typically passed from father to son, but brother to brother was an option.³ In the large plate tradition, Helaman₁ passed the plates to his brother, Shiblon (Alma 63:1).

Nephiah passed the position of chief judge to his son, Pahoran (Alma 50:39–40). That information was written right after Mormon noted that Alma₂ passed the large plates to his son Helaman₁. The principle of heredity of position worked in both the recordkeeper and ruler lines. With the principle of heredity established with the second generation, might it not have also worked when Alma₂ selected Nephiah?

The best textual evidence that Nephiah was related to Alma₂ is the subtle fact that no book is named for Nephiah. I have argued that book names change when dynasties change.⁴ That is the reason that the book of Lehi covered around four hundred years of rulers without a name change. The books of Mosiah, Alma, and Helaman all have recordkeepers who write without a change in the book name.

If we can accept that premise, then Nephiah must have been part of Alma₂'s dynasty rather than an unrelated ruler who should have then had a separate book. We know who Alma₂'s sons were. I therefore

Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 3: 486–90.

3. The first transmission of records to a brother was Nephi to Jacob. However, that example is not precisely the same, as Nephi split his two record traditions, with the large plates going to his unnamed son and the small plates going to Jacob.
4. Brant A. Gardner, "Labor Diligently to Write: The Ancient Making of a Modern Scripture," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 35 (2020): 37–45, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/labor-diligently-to-write-the-ancient-making-of-a-modern-scripture-1.

propose that Nephiah was Alma₂'s brother, probably a younger brother. Thus, it was the same family and same dynasty. It followed the allowable precedent of transmission of responsibility to a brother that we saw with Amaron and Chemish. When we get a new dynasty book, it is with Helaman₂, Alma₂'s grandson. The reason for the return to Alma₂'s lineage was the violence that removed all of Pahoran's sons, creating a need to find a new chief judge who was not in a direct line with Pahoran. Helaman₂ was second cousin to Pahoran's sons, and perhaps that relationship was sufficient to see Helaman₂ as the next chief judge but sufficiently distant that a new dynasty name and book began.

As a proponent of a Mesoamerican setting for the Book of Mormon, I note that among both the Maya and the later Mexica, there is evidence that rulership might pass to a brother and then from the brother's son for the next ruler.⁵ For the Maya, the rulership of Palenque passed from K'inich Kan B'alam II to his brother K'inich K'an Joy Chitam II. K'inich K'an Joy Chitam II was captured, and ten years later, Kinich Ahkal Mo' Naab' III ascended to the throne. His father was likely K'inich K'an Joy Chitam II's brother.⁶

Susan Gillespie describes the pre-Columbian visual representation of the kinship among the Aztec kings:

Each king takes the office of the dead king who preceded him and thereby replaces and replicates him. . . . Because of sibling relationships, some of the kings appear in the same generation, drawn together by this horizontal link.⁷

The sixth, seventh, and eighth Mexica kings were Axayacatl, Tizoc, and Ahuitzotl, frequently considered to be brothers.⁸

If Mesoamerica is the proper physical and cultural background for the Book of Mormon, the argument that Nephiah was Alma₂'s brother becomes even stronger.



5. I thank Kerry Hull for pointing me to these cases.

6. See Simon Martin and Nikolai Grube, *Chronicle of the Maya Kings and Queens: Deciphering the Dynasties of the Ancient Maya* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000), 168–72.

7. Susan D. Gillespie, *The Aztec Kings: The Construction of Rulership in Mexica History* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1989), 13.

8. Gillespie, *The Aztec Kings*, 14.

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