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Deuteronomy 17:14–20 as Criteria for Book of Mormon Kingship

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DEUTERONOMY 17:14–20 AS CRITERIA FOR BOOK OF MORMON KINGSHIP

Taylor Halverson

Abstract: Deuteronomy 17:14–20 represents the most succinct summation in the Bible of criteria for kingship. Remarkably, the Book of Mormon narrative depicts examples of kingship that demonstrate close fidelity to the pattern set forth in Deuteronomy 17 (e.g., Nephi, Benjamin, or Mosiah II) or the inversion of the expected pattern of kingship (e.g., king Noah). Future research on Book of Mormon kingship through the lens of Deuteronomy 17:14–20 should prove fruitful.

Likely the most succinct set of verses in the Bible that express God's expectation for a king¹ are found in Deuteronomy 17:14–20.² These verses, I argue, are crucial criteria for understanding Book of Mormon kingship.³

1. Much has been written about kingship in the Bible. An exhaustive bibliography here is unwarranted, though several recent or relevant reads include Shawn Flynn, *YHWH is King: The Development of Divine Kingship in Israel* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2014); David T. Lamb, *Righteous Jehu and his Evil Heirs: The Deuteronomists Negative Perspective on Dynastic Succession* (Oxford, 2005) and Jamie A. Grant, *The King as Exemplar: The Function of Deuteronomy's Kingship Law in the Shaping of the Book of Psalms* (SBL, 2004).

2. Daniel I. Block, "The Burden of Leadership: The Mosaic Paradigm of Kingship (Deuteronomy 17:14–20)," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 162 (2005): 259–278; Karl W. Weyde, "The Narrative of King Solomon and the Law of the King: On the Relationship between 1 Kings 3–11 and Deuteronomy 17:14–20," *Enigmas and Images: Studies in Honor of Tryggve N. D. Mettinger*, ed. Göran Eidevall and Blazenka Scheuer (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 75–91.

3. And much has been written on Book of Mormon kingship. Here are a few pieces to begin with: Todd R. Kerr, "Ancient Aspects of Nephite Kingship

¹⁴ When thou art come unto the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee, and shalt possess it, and shalt dwell therein, and shalt say, I will set a king over me, like as all the nations that are about me; ¹⁵ Thou shalt in any wise set him king over thee, whom the LORD thy God shall choose: one from among thy brethren shalt thou set king over thee: thou mayest not set a stranger over thee, which is not thy brother. ¹⁶ But he shall not multiply horses to himself, nor cause the people to return to Egypt, to the end that he should multiply horses: forasmuch as the LORD hath said unto you, Ye shall henceforth return no more that way. ¹⁷ Neither shall he multiply wives to himself, that his heart turn not away: neither shall he greatly multiply to himself silver and gold. ¹⁸ And it shall be, when he sitteth upon the throne of his kingdom, that he shall write him a copy of this law in a book out of that which is before the priests the Levites: ¹⁹ And it shall be with him, and he shall read therein all the days of his life: that he may learn to fear the LORD his God, to keep all the words of this law and these statutes, to do them: ²⁰ That his heart be not lifted up above his brethren, and that he turn not aside from the commandment, to the right hand, or to the left: to the end that he may prolong his days in his kingdom, he, and his children, in the midst of Israel.

I interpret these passages as a set of God-decreed kingly dos and don'ts. I'll begin with the don'ts:

1. Don't acquire many horses (don't raise a military) (v. 16).
2. Don't return the people to Egypt (don't return people to the house of bondage/apostasy) (v. 16).
3. Don't acquire many wives (v. 17).⁴

in the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1/1 (1992): 85–118; Gordon C. Thomasson, "Mosiah: The Complex Symbolism and Symbolic Complex of Kingship in the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2/1 (1993): 21–38; Val Larsen, "Killing Laban: The Birth of Sovereignty in the Nephite Constitutional Order," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 16/1 (2007): 26–41, 84–85; Stephen D. Ricks, "Kingship, Coronation, and Covenant in Mosiah 1–6," in *King Benjamin's Speech: "That Ye May Learn Wisdom,"* edited by John W. Welch and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998), 233–275.

4. Robert Boylan noted for Deuteronomy 17:16–17 that "the Hebrew verb *RBH has the nuance of growing exponentially, not just lineally, with respect to something (cf. the same form of the verb used in Deuteronomy 17:16–17 in Exodus 1:10, 12; Deuteronomy 8:13[x2]; Psalms 49:17; Proverbs 29:16; Isaiah 40:29; 55:7; Dan 11:39; Hosea 12:2). As one lexicon puts it, the hi. הָרַב most often means *make*

4. Don't seek after silver and gold (v. 17).

What should the king be doing with all his time and influence?

1. Have a copy of the scriptures (v. 18).
2. Read the scriptures every day (v. 18).
3. Teach the scriptures (vs. 19–20).
4. Do not lift yourself up above your brethren (v. 20).

Remarkably, God doesn't want a human king to do *any* of the things we typically associate with leaders. Rather, God simply wants a leader who is a lover of scripture. Why? Because God himself is the king. As Jacob so beautifully records, "For he that raiseth up a king against me shall perish, *for I, the Lord, the king of heaven, will be their king*, and I will be a light unto them forever, that hear my words" (2 Nephi 10:14, emphasis added).

numerous or *multiply*. These forms especially portray the abundance of God's giving and the fullness of his mercy: in the promise to multiply the patriarchs into a great nation (Genesis 17:2, 20; 22:17; 26:4; 48:4; Exodus 32:13; Leviticus 26:9; Deuteronomy 1:10; 7:13), in the multiplication of signs and wonders to his glory and the destruction of Egypt (Exodus 7:3), and in his gracious redemption (Psalms 78:38; Isaiah 55:7). Conversely, Israel and all humanity stand before God continually multiplying sin, wickedness, and rebellion (Genesis 3:16; Ezra 10:13; Ezekiel 16:25, 26, 29). The remedy for the human malady is not found in multiplying possessions (as the Hebrew kings attempted, cf. Deuteronomy 17:16–17). Rather, God must wash and cleanse the sinner thoroughly (רָבָה, NIV wash away all; Psalms 51:2 [4]). Then the sinner may understand, along with the poet David, how God stoops down to make the righteous great (רָבָה, 2 Samuel 22:36 || Psalms 18:35 [36]). The hi. רָבָה can also mean *many* or *increase*, like the many gardens of Israel divinely destroyed by blight and mildew (Amos 4:9; NIV reads the proposed emendation הַרְבֵּיתִי, "many times I struck"), or the increase that comes from saving money little by little (Proverbs 13:11). Here רָבָה is to be understood as a gradual or steady increase, or larger sums compared to multitudes. See further הַרְבֵּיתִי. The hi. רָבָה + לֵ + inf can mean *do something frequently, copiously, continually*. For example, Hannah prayed continually to the Lord for a son (1 Samuel 1:12; NIV kept on), the woman of Tekoa begged David to prevent continued killing of her family (2 Samuel 14:11; NIV adding to the destruction), King Manasseh provoked God's wrath with the continual practice of evil (2 Kgs 21:6 || 2 Chronicles 33:6), as did Amon his son (2 Chronicles 33:23) and all the people of Judah (36:14). Even as the Leviathan (#4293) does not "keep begging" for mercy (Job 41:3 [40:27]), so the Lord has stopped listening to the continual prayers of his people (Isaiah 1:15). Yet if the wicked repent, stop doing wrong, and learn to do right, God will copiously pardon (Isaiah 55:7; NIV freely pardon) — just as he has done continually throughout Israelite history (Psalms 78:38; NIV time after time he restrained his anger).⁷ VanGemeren, W. (Ed.). (1997). *New international dictionary of Old Testament theology & exegesis* (Vol. 3, pp. 1038–1039). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House."

There is no need to replace God on the divine throne of kingship with some fallible human king. Unfortunately, humans have masterly usurped God's role and power as king. The Book of Mormon narrative is driven, in part, by this very pressing question, "Who is to be the king?" How that question was asked and answered contributed to significant portions of Book of Mormon narrative production.⁵

What is so striking about the seven verses quoted earlier is that expressions of Book of Mormon kingship align so well with this rubric for kingship. For those who seek to argue that Joseph Smith was the imaginative and enterprising author of the Book of Mormon, I find difficult to believe that Joseph Smith was so versed in the Bible that he could correctly identify *the only seven consecutive verses in the entire Bible where God lays out his dos and don'ts for kingship* and then build a book of hundreds of thousands of words that contains kingship narratives that seem to be strong examples and counter examples of what happens when kings do or do not fulfill God's expectations.

Here are some compelling examples of how well the Book of Mormon represents God's expectations for kingship as set forth in Deuteronomy 17.⁶

5. The same question of "Who is to be king?" dominates and influences significant portions of the Hebrew Bible and not just the narrative sections. The question and potential answers to "Who is to be king?" shows up in the Pentateuch (Torah), Prophets (Nevi'im), and the Writings (Ketuvim).

6. Due to the way I formatted the tables, seeking to provide a representative scripture for each element of the Deuteronomy 17:14–20 pattern for each Nephite leader discussed, a challenge arose. In some instances, the lack of a scripture is taken as evidence for the pattern. For example, there are no scriptures that show Nephi seeking silver and gold for personal gain. Therefore, I do not have a scripture to demonstrate the pattern element "Don't seek after silver and gold."

Nephi Evaluated Against Deuteronomy 17

| Don't | How did Nephi do? Exemplary king |
|--|---|
| Deuteronomy 17:16 <i>Don't acquire many horses (don't raise a military).</i> | 2 Nephi 5:14; 2 Nephi 4:34 <i>There is no mention of Nephi seeking after horses, though he did arm his people to defend themselves from enemies. But his trust was not the arm of flesh but in the Lord.</i> |
| Deuteronomy 17:16 <i>Don't return the people to Egypt (don't return people to the house of bondage/apostasy).</i> | 1 Nephi 18:22 <i>Nephi led the people into a new Promised Land, just as Moses had done.</i> |
| Deuteronomy 17:17 <i>Don't acquire many wives.</i> | 1 Nephi 16:7 <i>Nephi did not seek after additional wives.</i> |
| Deuteronomy 17:17 <i>Don't seek after silver and gold.</i> | 1 Nephi 18:25 <i>Nephi did seek after silver and gold but only with the intent to support his society, not to empower or ingratiate himself.</i> |
| Do | How did Nephi do? Exemplary king |
| Deuteronomy 17:18 <i>Have a copy of the scriptures.</i> | 1 Nephi 3:24 <i>Nephi obtained the scriptures from Laban.</i> |
| Deuteronomy 17:19 <i>Read the scriptures every day.</i> | 2 Nephi 25:26 <i>Nephi was quite motivated about the scriptures, so likely he was a regular reader.</i> |
| Deuteronomy 17:19 <i>Live and teach the scriptures.</i> | 1 Nephi 19:23–24 <i>Nephi lived and taught the scriptures.</i> |
| Deuteronomy 17:20 <i>Do not lift yourself up above your brethren.</i> | 1 Nephi 17:55; 2 Nephi 5:19–20 <i>Nephi did not lift himself up above his people. In fact, he rejected the title of kingship.</i> |

In summary, Nephi fulfills God's expectations of kingship in an exemplary fashion.

Benjamin Evaluated Against Deuteronomy 17

| Don't | How did Benjamin do? Exemplary king |
|--|---|
| Deuteronomy 17:16 <i>Don't acquire many horses (don't raise a military).</i> | Words of Mormon 13–14 <i>King Benjamin protected his people from enemies and apparently had a military, but his trust was not the arm of flesh but in the Lord.</i> |
| Deuteronomy 17:16 <i>Don't return the people to Egypt (don't return people to the house of bondage/apostasy).</i> | Words of Mormon 15–18 <i>King Benjamin did not lead people to apostasy.</i> |
| Deuteronomy 17:17 <i>Don't acquire many wives.</i> | <i>King Benjamin did not seek after additional wives.</i> [There are no scriptures indicating that King Benjamin sought additional wives.] |
| Deuteronomy 17:17 <i>Don't seek after silver and gold.</i> | Mosiah 2:12, 14 <i>King Benjamin did not seek after the wealth of the world.</i> |
| Do | How did Benjamin do? Exemplary king |
| Deuteronomy 17:18 <i>Have a copy of the scriptures.</i> | Mosiah 1:2–3 <i>King Benjamin had the scriptures.</i> |
| Deuteronomy 17:19 <i>Read the scriptures every day.</i> | <i>Likely.</i> [There is no specific scripture indicating that King Benjamin read the scriptures daily. However, the thrust of this prescription in Deuteronomy is that the king should be a scribe. King Benjamin, according to the Book of Mormon record, appears to have thoroughly immersed his life in the scriptures.] |
| Deuteronomy 17:19 <i>Live and teach the scriptures.</i> | Mosiah 1:2–3; 2:9–11 <i>King Benjamin lived and taught the scriptures to his sons and to his people.</i> |

| Do | How did Benjamin do? Exemplary king |
|--|--|
| Deuteronomy 17:20 <i>Do not lift yourself up above your brethren.</i> | Mosiah 2:10–11 <i>King Benjamin did not lift himself up above his people.</i> |

Like Nephi, Benjamin fulfills God's expectations of kingship in an exemplary fashion.

King Noah Evaluated Against Deuteronomy 17

| Don't | How did Noah do? Disastrous king |
|--|---|
| Deuteronomy 17:16 <i>Don't acquire many horses (don't raise a military).</i> | Mosiah 11:18–19 <i>Noah raised a military; he put his trust in the arm of flesh, not in God who is the divine warrior!⁷</i> |
| Deuteronomy 17:16 <i>Don't return the people to Egypt (don't return people to the house of bondage/apostasy).</i> | Mosiah 11:2; 19:28; 21:3–5 <i>Noah led the people into apostasy and bondage.</i> |
| Deuteronomy 17:17 <i>Don't acquire many wives.</i> | Mosiah 11:2 <i>Noah had many wives and concubines.</i> |
| Deuteronomy 17:17 <i>Don't seek after silver and gold.</i> | Mosiah 11:3–4 <i>Noah sought the gold and silver of the people for his own purposes.</i> |
| Do | How did Noah do? Disastrous king |
| Deuteronomy 17:18 <i>Have a copy of the scriptures.</i> | Mosiah 11:27, 29 <i>Noah was apparently ignorant of scriptures.</i> |
| Deuteronomy 17:19 <i>Read the scriptures every day.</i> | <i>Noah gave that role to the priests.</i> [No scripture indicative that Noah had any awareness of scripture. Instead the priests are the primary agitators in the trial of Abinadi, misusing scripture to attempt to trap Abinadi.] |

7. Some examples of scriptures expressing the divine warrior theme include: Exodus 15: 1–7; 2 Samuel 22; Psalm 18; Habakkuk 3. A representative scholarly work on the divine warrior motif in scripture is Charlie Trimm, *YHWH Fights for Them! The Divine Warrior in the Exodus Narrative* (Gorgias Press: Piscataway, NJ, 2014).

| Do | How did Noah do? Disastrous king |
|--|---|
| Deuteronomy 17:19 <i>Live and teach the scriptures.</i> | No. [Noah did not live or teach the scriptures. In fact, the priests, to whom he delegated his role as scribe, appear to be familiar with scripture but they misuse scripture in an attempt to destroy Abinadi.] |
| Deuteronomy 17:20 <i>Do not lift yourself up above your brethren.</i> | Mosiah 11:9–12; 19:6–11 <i>Noah lifted himself up above the people.</i> |

Noah was a spectacular failure in living as God expected kings to live. In fact, it is striking how distinctly opposite all Noah's actions were from God's ideal for kingship as set forth in Deuteronomy 17:14–20.

Mosiah II Evaluated Against Deuteronomy 17

| Don't | How did Mosiah II do? Exemplary king |
|--|--|
| Deuteronomy 17:16 <i>Don't acquire many horses (don't raise a military).</i> | Mosiah 29:14 <i>Mosiah II protected his people from enemies and apparently had a military, but his trust was not in the arm of flesh but in the Lord.</i> |
| Deuteronomy 17:16 <i>Don't return the people to Egypt (don't return people to the house of bondage/apostasy).</i> | Mosiah 29:33–37 <i>Mosiah II did not lead people to apostasy.</i> |
| Deuteronomy 17:17 <i>Don't acquire many wives.</i> | <i>Mosiah II did not seek after additional wives.</i> [There are no scriptures indicating that Mosiah II had or sought after additional wives.] |
| Deuteronomy 17:17 <i>Don't seek after silver and gold.</i> | Mosiah 27:2–5 <i>Mosiah II did not seek after the wealth of the world.</i> |

| Do | How did Mosiah II do? Exemplary king |
|--|---|
| Deuteronomy 17:18 <i>Have a copy of the scriptures.</i> | Mosiah 28:11, 17 <i>Mosiah II had the scriptures. It was the writings/scriptures that likely helped convince him to get rid of kingship.</i> |
| Deuteronomy 17:19 <i>Read the scriptures every day.</i> | Mosiah 28:10–13 <i>Likely.</i> |
| Deuteronomy 17:19 <i>Live and teach the scriptures.</i> | Mosiah 25:4–7, 14; 28:14, 17–18 <i>Mosiah II lived and taught the scriptures to his sons and to his people.</i> |
| Deuteronomy 17:20 <i>Do not lift yourself up above your brethren.</i> | Mosiah 29: 32, 40 <i>Mosiah II did not lift himself up above his people.</i> |

Like Nephi and Benjamin, Mosiah II fulfills God’s expectations of kingship in an exemplary fashion.

I believe that the Book of Mosiah was constructed as a sandwich narrative: good king [Benjamin], then bad king [Noah], then good king [Mosiah II]. This narrative structure highlights why Mosiah II recognized the problem of kingship. Kingship was a major factor in Nephite conflict, suffering, and apostasy. Mosiah II therefore was motivated to disband kingship. Ironically much of historical backdrop for the Book of Alma and the Book of Helaman revolves around people fighting for a return to kingship while others fight to avoid kingship.

Conclusion

If Joseph Smith was the putative author of the Book of Mormon, it is incredibly remarkable that he had prescience enough to construct kingship narratives that so unfailingly adhered to or perfectly disagreed with what God expected of a king as expressed in Deuteronomy 17:14–20. Future studies could take each leader from the Book of Mormon and hold them up to the standard of Deuteronomy 17:14–20. The comparisons and contrasts among Book of Mormon leaders as to how well they fulfilled God’s expectations of leaders will likely prove enlightening.⁸

8. Robert Boylan applied this approach to Jacob: “Deuteronomy 17:14–20 seems to be the scriptural basis of much of Jacob’s comments in Jacob 1–3. For instance, the screed on polygyny seems to be informed by Deuteronomy 17:17

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regarding David and Solomon having ‘many’ wives and concubines (Jacob 2:24).”

