

# INTERPRETER



A JOURNAL OF LATTER-DAY SAINT  
FAITH AND SCHOLARSHIP

Volume 59 · 2023 · Pages 281 - 292

## **Nephi Wanted to Be a Prophet Like Moses, Not a King Like David**

Taylor Halverson

Offprint Series

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ISSN 2372-1227 (print)  
ISSN 2372-126X (online)

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# NEPHI WANTED TO BE A PROPHET LIKE MOSES, NOT A KING LIKE DAVID

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Taylor Halverson

**Abstract:** *While David is frequently held up as the standard for great kings in the Old Testament, examination of Nephi’s writings shows that he sought to imitate Moses the prophet rather than David the king. In fact, he never even mentions David. Relative to two major theological movements in Jerusalem in his day, “Zion theology,” in which David was the great hero, and “Deuteronomistic theology,” in which Moses was the hero, we see that Nephi was more aligned with Deuteronomistic theology, which was also more consistent with views in the Northern Kingdom, where Nephi’s ancestry originated.*

David and Moses are the two most frequently named humans in the Old Testament. David (the most oft-named) was the great unifying king of Israel’s golden age, the political leader that successive generations of Israelites yearned to have lead Israel again, and the proto-typical messianic (anointed) ruler who subdues all foes while ushering in an era of peace. Moses (the second-most named) was the great law giver who, by the marvelous power of God, led the covenant people to salvation in the Promised Land.

If we ask the question “Which Old Testament character did Nephi most aspire to be like?” a strong argument could be made for Moses, while a tantalizing parallel argument could be made that Nephi did *not* want to be a king like David.

How did Nephi narrate his character like Moses? I’ll consider only a few examples.<sup>1</sup>

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1. For a full list of ways in which Nephi was like Moses, see Noel Reynolds, “The Israelite Background of Moses Typology in the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies* 44, no. 2 (2005), 5–23; see also the excellent study on Nephite kingship, Noel Reynolds “Nephite Kingship Reconsidered,” in *Mormons, Scripture, and the Ancient World:*

## Nephi Wanted to Be a Prophet Like Moses

First, Nephi, just like Moses, regularly went into a high mountain to receive instructions for his people.

And it came to pass that after I, Nephi, had been in the land of Bountiful for the space of many days, the voice of the Lord came unto me, saying: Arise, and get thee into the mountain. And it came to pass that I arose and went up into the mountain, and cried unto the Lord. (1 Nephi 17:7)

And it came to pass that I, Nephi, did go forth up into the top of the mountain, according to the directions which were given upon the ball. (1 Nephi 16:30)

For it came to pass after I had desired to know the things that my father had seen, and believing that the Lord was able to make them known unto me, as I sat pondering in mine heart I was caught away in the Spirit of the Lord, yea, into an exceedingly high mountain, which I never had before seen, and upon which I never had before set my foot. (1 Nephi 11:1)

And Moses went up unto God, and the Lord called unto him out of the mountain. (Exodus 19:3)

Now Moses kept the flock of Jethro his father in law, the priest of Midian: and he led the flock to the backside of the desert, and came to the mountain of God, even to Horeb. ... God called unto him out of the midst of the bush, and said, Moses, Moses. And he said, Here am I. (Exodus 3:1, 4)

And he gave unto Moses, when he had made an end of communing with him upon mount Sinai, two tables of testimony, tables of stone, written with the finger of God. (Exodus 31:18)

Second, Nephi was like Moses because he, too, led the people safely through the waters to the Promised Land. Though not the most likely meaning of Nephi's name, it is curious that one possible meaning in Egyptian is "sea captain."<sup>2</sup> Perhaps as a form a literary artistry and character revelation, Nephi, in his writing, may have given himself the

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*Studies in Honor of John L. Sorenson*, ed. Davis Bitton (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998), 151–89.

2. John Gee, "Notes and Communications: A Note on the Name *Nephi*," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1, no. 1 (1992): 189–91; "Four Suggestions on

name “sea captain,” though more likely his name meant “good,” “fair,” or “desirable.”<sup>3</sup>

Third, Nephi led the people through the wilderness, despite murmurings and plots, just as Moses led the people of Israel.

And thou art like unto our father, led away by the foolish imaginations of his heart; yea, he hath led us out of the land of Jerusalem, and we have wandered in the wilderness for these many years; and our women have toiled, being big with child; and they have borne children in the wilderness and suffered all things, save it were death; and it would have been better that they had died before they came out of Jerusalem than to have suffered these afflictions. Behold, these many years we have suffered in the wilderness, which time we might have enjoyed our possessions and the land of our inheritance; yea, and we might have been happy. (1 Nephi 17:20–21)

And they said unto Moses, Because there were no graves in Egypt, hast thou taken us away to die in the wilderness? wherefore hast thou dealt thus with us, to carry us forth out of Egypt? Is not this the word that we did tell thee in Egypt, saying, Let us alone, that we may serve the Egyptians? For it had been better for us to serve the Egyptians, than that we should die in the wilderness. And Moses said unto the people, Fear ye not, stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord, which he will shew to you to day: for the Egyptians whom ye have seen to day, ye shall see them again no more for ever. The Lord shall fight for you, and ye shall hold your peace. (Exodus 14:11–14)

Fourth, Nephi taught the commandments to his people that he had received from God.

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the Origin of the Name Nephi,” in *Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch and Melvin J. Thorne (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2009), 1–5.

3. Matthew L. Bowen, “Internal Textual Evidence for the Egyptian Origin of Nephi’s Name,” *Insights* 22, no. 11 (2002): 2; Bowen, “Nephi’s Good Inclusio,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 17 (2016): 181–95, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/nephis-good-inclusio/>; Bowen, “‘He Is a Good Man’: The Fulfillment of Helaman 5:6–7 in Helaman 8:7 and 11:18–19,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 17 (2016): 165–70, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/he-is-a-good-man-the-fulfillment-of-helaman-5-6-7-in-helaman-8-7-and-11-18-19/>; Bowen, “‘O Ye Fair Ones’: Revisited,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 20 (2016): 315–44, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/o-ye-fair-ones-revisited/>.

And it came to pass that after I, Nephi, had been carried away in the Spirit, and seen all these things, I returned to the tent of my father. . . . Wherefore, I, Nephi, did exhort them to give heed unto the word of the Lord; yea, I did exhort them with all the energies of my soul, and with all the faculty which I possessed, that they would give heed to the word of God and remember to keep his commandments always in all things. (1 Nephi 15:1, 25)

And we did observe to keep the judgments, and the statutes, and the commandments of the Lord in all things, according to the law of Moses. (2 Nephi 5:10)

And the Lord said unto Moses, Thus thou shalt say unto the children of Israel, Ye have seen that I have talked with you from heaven. (Exodus 20:22)

### Not a King Like David

Let's turn to the parallel argument that Nephi did not want to be a king like David. The first piece of evidence comes from Deuteronomy 17:14–20, where the Lord describes the attributes of a good king. If we measure David according to this list, he was *not* the type of king God had envisioned. However, if we measure Nephi against this kingly-expectations list, Nephi *was* the ideal type of king that God desired for his people. This list gives these directions to future kings over Israel:

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. Don't seek after silver and gold (v. 17)
5. Have a copy of the scriptures (v. 18)
6. Read the scriptures every day (v. 18)
7. Teach the scriptures (vs. 19–20)
8. Do not lift yourself up above your brethren (v. 20)

David did most things on this list incorrectly, while Nephi did most things correctly.<sup>4</sup>

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4. Taylor Halverson, "Deuteronomy 17:14–20 as a Guide to Book of Mormon Kingship," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 24 (2017): 1–10, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/deuteronomy-1714-20-as-criteria-for-book-of-mormon-kingship/>.

Second, Nephi refused the title of kingship for himself:

And it came to pass that I, Nephi, did cause my people to be industrious, and to labor with their hands. And it came to pass that they would that I should be their king. But I, Nephi, was desirous that they should have no king; nevertheless, I did for them according to that which was in my power. And behold, the words of the Lord had been fulfilled unto my brethren, which he spake concerning them, that I should be their ruler and their teacher. Wherefore, I had been their ruler and their teacher, according to the commandments of the Lord, until the time they sought to take away my life. (2 Nephi 5:17–19)

If Nephi had desired to truly usurp power and authority, as his brothers accused him of doing, then Nephi had ample opportunity to lead the people away into some unknown wilderness and set himself up as a king over them. Strikingly, what does Nephi do, just when he is at the pinnacle of servant-rule and the people demand he take the title of kingship? He flatly refuses and admonishes the people to avoid kingship (2 Nephi 5:18, but see also Jacob 1:9–11, where, near the end of his life, Nephi anoints his successor as king over the people, apparently yielding to their desires).

Third, Nephi, like David, used the same narrative device to demonstrate his legitimate claim to kingship or leadership. One core purpose for the David and Goliath story was to legitimize David as the rightful ruler of Israel. The Nephi vs. Laban story is an updating of the David vs. Goliath story for the Lehites. As Book of Mormon scholar Ben McGuire has so ably demonstrated, Nephi's story of confronting Laban is intertextually connected to David's story of confronting Goliath.<sup>5</sup> In each story the father sends the youngest son on a mission to support the older brothers in confronting a dangerous character who threatens the future of the covenant people. In each story, the youngest brother is young, but strong, untrained in the military arts. This young son, essentially unarmed, confronts a dangerous character, not knowing beforehand what he will do. In each story, the young hero defeats the anti-hero and cuts off the anti-hero's head, using the anti-hero's own

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5. Ben McGuire, "Nephi and Goliath: A Case Study of Literary Allusion in the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 18, no.1 (2009): 16–31; see, also, the table at the end of Book of Mormon Central, "Why Was the Sword of Laban So Important to Nephite Leaders," *KnowWhy* #441, February 27, 2018, <https://knowwhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/knowwhy/why-was-the-sword-of-laban-so-important-to-nephite-leaders>.

sword. That sword then becomes, for generations afterwards, the symbol of legitimate rule and military protection and prowess. But if Nephi, like David, would model himself as a shepherd *gaining* kingship, why does Nephi *never* mention David as king or David's kingly character or actions? Perhaps the silence tells us about Nephi's preferences.

Fourth, Nephi *never* mentions David. Remarkably, David is the most frequently named human character in the Old Testament. And likely, for any young Israelite boy, the story of David defeating Goliath must have been a famous and well-loved story, perhaps functioning analogously to our superhero stories loved by the young (and old alike) in our society. I believe it is very telling that Nephi would narrate himself in the guise of David as shepherd and young man conquering a military adversary and thus *gaining* kingship, yet Nephi never models himself on David *as* king. Furthermore, Nephi never explicitly calls readers' attention to the clear borrowing he cited from the David vs. Goliath story. Nephi is open about naming other key human characters from the biblical text, such as Moses, while being entirely silent on David. That compelling silence may suggest Nephi's ultimate dissatisfaction with David *as* king; Nephi's chosen leadership style was modeled after that of Moses, who is named, and *not* David, who remains unnamed by Nephi.

The only person to mention David directly by name in the Book of Mormon is Jacob, Nephi's younger brother.<sup>6</sup> How did Jacob remember David and how did Jacob teach his people to remember David? As a bad father and leader who caused heartache by seeking after multiple wives and silver and gold. What God expects of a king and a leader is expressed in Deuteronomy 17:14–20. David, according to Book of Mormon memory, does the exact opposite of each of the injunctions in this scripture. Where may have Jacob received his perspective on David? Possibly from his older brother Nephi, who wanted to be a prophet like Moses and not a king like David.

### The Historical/Theological Context

In addition to the ideas expressed above, a compelling case about Nephi's socio-religious-political worldview can be made on the basis of what is known of the Northern Kingdom, the Southern Kingdom of Judah, the literary production of Biblical books, and clues found in the Book

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6. Across the many passages of Isaiah that Nephi quotes, David's name does appear three times. But these are more representative of what Isaiah was thinking than what Nephi was thinking.



of Mormon.<sup>7</sup> Though some have argued that the Book of Mormon is a modern fraud because there is so little discussion of David (as noted above),<sup>8</sup> that fact actually argues for the ancient authenticity of the Book of Mormon when we place it in its ancient Israelite setting.<sup>9</sup>

Ancient Israel had a variety of theological traditions, some in competition with each other. The two most prominent during Lehi's day can be summarized as shown in Table 1.

Nephi is literate, meaning he had likely been trained in a scribal school.<sup>10</sup> Scribal schools in ancient Israel often featured wisdom literature in their curriculum and may have been repositories or transmitters of theological worldviews such as Deuteronomistic thinking.<sup>11</sup> Those traditions also seem to appear in Nephi's writing.<sup>12</sup> The Book of Mormon indicates that Nephi was from a northern Israelite tribe living in Jerusalem. Deuteronomistic theology seems to have originated in Northern Israel<sup>13</sup> (and later adopted and adapted in the Southern Kingdom), while the theology of the Southern Kingdom of Judah tended toward Zion-Davidic Theology.<sup>14</sup>

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7. John L. Sorenson, "The Brass Plates and Biblical Scholarship," in *Nephite Culture and Society: Collected Papers* (Salt Lake City: New Sage Books, 1997), 25–39.

8. Kyle Beshears, "Davidic References in the Book of Mormon as Evidence Against its Historicity," Master of Theology thesis (Louisville, KY: Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, May 2016), [http://digital.library.sbts.edu/bitstream/handle/10392/5176/Beshears\\_sbts\\_0207N\\_10331.pdf?sequence=1](http://digital.library.sbts.edu/bitstream/handle/10392/5176/Beshears_sbts_0207N_10331.pdf?sequence=1); for a counter argument, see Jeff Lindsay, "Too Little or Too Much Like the Bible? A Novel Critique of the Book of Mormon Involving David and the Psalms," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 29 (2018): 31–64, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/too-little-or-too-much-like-the-bible-a-novel-critique-of-the-book-of-mormon-involving-david-and-the-psalms/>.

9. See Scripture Central, "Covenant Patterns in the Old Testament and the Book of Mormon — Taylor Halverson," YouTube video, 44:20, May 17, 2017, <https://youtu.be/UCUdceAvM0A>.

10. Noel B. Reynolds, "Lehi and Nephi as Trained Manassite Scribes," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 50 (2022): 161–216, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/lehi-and-nephi-as-trained-manassite-scribes/>.

11. Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School*.

12. Taylor Halverson, "Reading 1 Nephi with Wisdom," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 22 (2016): 279–93, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/reading-1-nephi-with-wisdom/>.

13. See M. Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1-11* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995).

14. Taylor Halverson, "Ancient Israelite Zion Theology, Judeo-Christian Apocalypticism, and Biblical (Mis)interpretation: Potential Implications for the

**Table 1.** “Zion theology” vs. “Deuteronomistic theology”<sup>15</sup>

	Zion Theology	Deuteronomistic Theology
Based on:	Land grant treaty	Vassal treaty
Breakable?	No	Yes
Eternal?	Yes	No, but renewable
Primary requirement	Trust	Obedience
Response to sin	Discipline	Punishment (e.g., exile)
Spatial center	Jerusalem	The Land
Leadership	Davidic king	Prophet like Moses
Theological center or origination	Southern Kingdom of Judah	Northern Kingdom of Israel

The contrast between Zion theology and Deuteronomistic theology as I discuss it here may clash with proposals of several Latter-day Saint scholars, such as Neal Rappleye<sup>16</sup> or Kevin Christensen,<sup>17</sup> that Lehi’s enemies in Jerusalem were Deuteronomists who perverted original Judaism. Margaret Barker’s article “What Did Josiah Reform?”<sup>18</sup> has been particularly influential in casting the Deuteronomists as the enemies

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Stability of the Modern Middle East,” *Comparative Civilizations Review* 64 (Spring 2011): 75–89.

15. The information in Table 1 is based on a handout to a Yale University Hebrew class led by Roy Heller (now at Southern Methodist University), 1998. For more on Zion Theology and Deuteronomistic Theology, see Jon D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1985); Raymond F. Person, Jr., *The Deuteronomistic School: History, Social Setting, and Literature* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002); M. Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1972); John H. Hayes, “The Tradition of Zion’s Inviolability,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 82, no. 4 (December 1963): 419–26; J. J. M. Roberts, “Zion in the Theology of the Davidic-Solomonic Empire,” in *Studies in the Period of David and Solomon and Other Essays*, ed. Tomoo Ishida (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1982), 93–108; Ben C. Ollenburger, *Zion The City of the Great King: A Theological Symbol of the Jerusalem Cult* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1987).

16. Neal Rappleye, “The Deuteronomist Reforms and Lehi’s Family Dynamics: A Social Context for the Rebellions of Laman and Lemuel,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship*, 16 (2015): 87–99, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/the-deuteronomist-reforms-and-lehis-family-dynamics-a-social-context-for-the-rebellions-of-laman-and-lemuel/>.

17. Kevin Christensen, “Paradigms Regained: A Survey of Margaret Barker’s Scholarship and Its Significance for Mormon Studies,” *FARMS Occasional Papers* 2 (2001), <https://archive.bookofmormoncentral.org/content/paradigms-regained-survey-margaret-barkers-scholarship-and-its-significance-mormon-studies>.

18. Margaret Barker, “What Did King Josiah Reform?,” in *Glimpses of Lehi’s Jerusalem*, ed. John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, Jo Ann H. Seely (Provo,

of visionary prophets and the temple-related principles of original Judaism. Without getting into the many topics that can be debated around this issue, I will simply say that the situation in Lehi's day was likely complex, with various degrees of apostasy occurring among the competing theological movements and ample room for bad actors in the various schools of thought. I see Lehi and Nephi as more closely aligned with Deuteronomistic thinking from the Northern Kingdom of Israel, while rejecting key aspects of the David-centric Zion theology of the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Likewise, I propose that Laman and Lemuel had mostly rejected the Deuteronomistic perspective and instead largely opted for a Zion theology. Though I differ with Rappleye on several issues, he nevertheless provides a clear explanation of how the theological controversies of Lehi's day could have contributed to the internal conflict we see taking place among Lehi's family in the Book of Mormon.

Lehi and Nephi taught, as did Jeremiah, that repentance was the only way for Jerusalem and its inhabitants to avoid destruction, as a consequence of a broken covenant. This is a very Deuteronomistic theological worldview. Jeremiah, who appears to be interconnected with the Deuteronomistic perspective,<sup>19</sup> was thrown in prison for such treasonous preaching because many of the inhabitants of Jerusalem, apparently including Laman and Lemuel, trusted in Zion-Davidic theology.<sup>20</sup> "Neither did they believe that Jerusalem, that great city, could be destroyed according to the words of the prophets. And they were like unto the Jews who were at Jerusalem, who sought to take away the life of my father" (1 Nephi 2:13). These socio-religious-political differences caused significant contention in the family, it seems.<sup>21</sup>

Who was the heroic leader in Zion-theology thinking? David.

Nephi appears to have no interest in repeating the theological problems of Zion theology, supported by human messianic kingship and idealized in David. Nephi therefore appears to reject Davidic kingship as he seeks to avoid the problems he saw firsthand in Zion theology

UT: FARMS, 2004), 526, <https://archive.bookofmormoncentral.org/content/what-did-king-josiah-reform>.

19. William Holladay, "Elusive Deuteronomists, Jeremiah, and Proto-Deuteronomy," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 66 (2004): 55–77.

20. Book of Mormon Central, "How Can the Old Testament Covenants Help Us Understand the Book of Mormon?," *KnowWhy* #363, September 12, 2017, <https://knowwhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/knowwhy/how-can-the-old-testament-covenants-help-us-understand-the-book-of-mormon>.

21. See Rappleye, "The Deuteronomist Reforms and Lehi's Family Dynamics."

— apostasy influenced by kings who taught that Jerusalem was God’s favored city, which could not be destroyed; and therefore there was no need to repent.

Nephi seems to have rejected Zion-Davidic theology and instead embraced Deuteronomistic theology. In a rejection of Zion-Davidic theology, we would not expect to hear much about David in the Book of Mormon, and if we do, we should expect negative memories. And that is what we hear.

Who is the heroic leader in Deuteronomistic thinking? Moses.

Nephi follows the model of Moses in his teaching and leadership, which is what we might expect from a descendant of Northern Israelites trained in scribal schools that potentially conveyed Deuteronomistic thinking and wisdom traditions.

### Conclusion

Though any individual is more complex than a single statement or summary phrase, what is said in the Book of Mormon and what is left unsaid may suggest that Nephi aspired to emulate the prophet Moses while downplaying or eschewing the kingly aspects and actions of David. Reading the Book of Mormon as it emerged from its ancient Near Eastern environment can help us more fully imagine and situate the very real people who created the Book of Mormon, such as Nephi. Emerging from this context, Nephi appears to aspire to be a prophet like Moses and *not* a king like David.

**Taylor Halverson** is currently an entrepreneurship professor in the BYU Marriott School of Business. As an executive coach and entrepreneur, he builds leaders and businesses while creating transformative professional and personal development experiences. Taylor leads tours to locations throughout the world (Israel, China, India, Europe, Central America, and America’s national parks). He is a prolific author and editor of 20 books and more than 300 articles and a developer of scripture study resources with Book of Mormon Central (ScripturePlus app) and BYU’s Virtual Scripture Group (3D Ancient Jerusalem project). Taylor loves to spend time with his wife Lisa and kids David and Rachel on all sorts of adventures including exploring the nooks and crannies of the American West and Southwest, participating with geology and archaeology teams on location, creating and mixing electronic music, watching and discussing edifying shows, reading good books, playing games, learning, and laughing.

*Taylor's academic training includes: BA, Ancient Near Eastern Studies, Brigham Young University; MA, Biblical Studies, Yale University; MS, Instructional Systems Technology, Indiana University; PhD, Instructional Systems Technology, Indiana University; PhD, Judaism & Christianity in Antiquity, Indiana University.*

