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Irregular Kings and Precious Things: Viewing Nephi and Joseph Smith through the Lens of Ancient Near Eastern Kingship

Noel Hudson

Abstract: *Political legitimacy is a key concept related to the exercise of political power. Legitimacy was especially critical for "irregular kings," so named because they were not automatically legitimated by the existing political structure. There are many examples of apologetics from the literature of the Ancient Near East that sought to bolster the legitimacy of irregular kings. The Book of Mormon uses similar apologetics to legitimate its own irregular rulers. The most striking example is seen in the case of Nephi (son of Lehi). Nephi provides dozens of arguments that strengthen his status as a divinely sanctioned king within an Ancient Near Eastern framework. Startlingly, Nephi and other Book of Mormon prophets also seem to have viewed Joseph Smith, the future seer who would bring their words to light, in similar terms. Joseph appears to have been presented as the legitimate heir of the Nephite royal line. The prophecies of the Book of Mormon and Joseph's receipt of the royal artifacts serve to bolster this claim.*

Many articles have been written about the nature of kingship in the Book of Mormon. Topics range from those that contrast monarchy with the more democratic reign of the judges,[1] those asserting adherence to ancient codes of kingship,[2] and those that suggest

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1. Gregory Steven Dundas, "Kingship, Democracy, and the Message of the Book of Mormon," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 56, no. 2 (2017): 7–58, scholars archive.byu.edu/byusq/vol56/iss2/3.
2. Todd R. Kerr, "Ancient Aspects of Nephite Kingship in the Book of Mormon,"

scriptural rubrics by which to judge a king's performance.[3] A critical aspect of kingship, which has been mentioned by Noel Reynolds,[4] Val Larsen,[5] Godfrey Ellis,[6] and Jeff Lindsay,[7] is the question of legitimacy. Legitimacy is a key attribute, highly discussed in the field of political science, to which ancient monarchs tended to be critically attuned. In other fields of study, examining monarchs of the Ancient Near East relative to the question of legitimacy has proven to be a useful way of understanding the actions of many kings.

What Constitutes Legitimacy?

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy states that *legitimacy* may be defined as the basis or authority on which a political leader exercises power. One standard definition of political legitimacy proposes that there are:

> Three main sources of legitimacy — understood as the acceptance both of authority and of the need to obey its commands. People may have faith in a particular political or social order because it has been there for a long time (tradition), because they have faith in the rulers (charisma), or

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Journal of Book of Mormon Studies, no. 1 (1992): 85–118, scholarsarchive.byu .edu/jbms/vol1/iss1/6.

3. Taylor Halverson, "Deuteronomy 17:14–20 as Criteria for Book of Mormon Kingship," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 24 (2017): 1–10, interpreter foundation.org/journal/deuteronomy-1714-20-as-criteria-for-book-of -mormon-kingship/.

4. Noel B. Reynolds, "The Political Dimension in Nephi's Small Plates," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 27, no. 4 (1987): 15–37, scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol27 /iss4/3.

5. Val Larsen, "Killing Laban: The Birth of Sovereignty in the Nephite Constitutional Order," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 16, no. 1 (2007): 26–41, scholars archive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1416&context=jbms.

6. Godfrey J. Ellis, "What Happened to Nephi at the Camp of the Broken Bow? A Book of Mormon Mystery," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 63 (2025): 203–56, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/what -happened-to-nephi-at-the-camp-of-the-broken-bow-a-book-of-mormon -mystery/.

7. Jeff Lindsay, "'Arise from the Dust': Insights from Dust-Related Themes in the Book of Mormon (Part 2: Enthronement, Resurrection, and Other Ancient Motifs from the 'Voice from the Dust')," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 22 (2016): 233–77, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/arise-from-the -dust-insights-from-dust-related-themes-in-the-book-of-mormon-part-2 -enthronement-resurrection-and-other-ancient-motifs-from-the-voice-from -the-dust/.

because they trust its legality — specifically the rationality of the rule of law.[8]

According to Allen Buchanan, "an entity has political legitimacy if and only if it is morally justified in wielding political power."[9] The concept of moral justification varies according to time and culture, but in the ancient world, rulers who came to power outside of the established channels of dynastic primogeniture almost always justified their rise to power on the basis of their predecessor's loss of legitimacy. Arguments in favor of deposing a ruler because he had "lost the mandate of heaven" or for the "well-being of the people"[10] have the concept of political legitimacy at their core. Rulers who enjoy a high degree of legitimacy reap many benefits including greater social stability and reduced internal conflict,[11] increased military power and effectiveness,[12] and greater social cohesion and economic prosperity.[13]

Royal legitimacy comes into question during any transition of leadership; however, transitions of leadership are much more likely to result in civil unrest when the ruling dynasty is overthrown. It is when new rulers seek to establish themselves as king or queen that questions of legitimacy must be addressed with great urgency.[14] The ending of one dynasty and the founding of a new one inevitably bring up thorny questions about the new ruler's right to ascend the throne. An Ancient Near Eastern ruler generally achieved legitimacy in the eyes of the

8. Fabienne Peter, "Political Legitimacy," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter Edition)*, ed. Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (Stanford, CA: Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2023), plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2023/entries/legitimacy/

9. Allen Buchanan, "Political Legitimacy and Democracy," *Ethics* 112, no. 4 (2002): 689–719, doi.org/10.1086/340313.

10. A. T. Nuyen, "The Mandate of Heaven: Mencius and the Divine Command Theory of Political Legitimacy," *Philosophy East and West* 63, no. 2 (2013): 113–26, jstor.org/stable/43285816.

11. Amanda R Greene, "Is Political Legitimacy Worth Promoting?" *Nomos* 61 (2019): 78–80, jstor.org/stable/26786312.

12. Henrique M. de Sant Anna, "Domination and Legitimacy in Early Hellenistic Basileia: The Rise of Self-Proclaimed Kings," *CHS Research Bulletin* 1, no. 2 (2013): nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hlnc.essay:ModanezdeSantAnnaH.Domination_and_Legitimacy_in_Early_Hellenistic_Basileia.2013.

13. Sebastian Dellepiane-Avellaneda, "Good Governance, Institutions and Economic Development: Beyond the Conventional Wisdom," *British Journal of Political Science* 40, no. 1 (2010): 195–203, jstor.org/stable/40649429.

14. Andrej Kokkonen and Anders Sundell, "Delivering Stability—Primogeniture and Autocratic Survival in European Monarchies 1000–1800," *The American Political Science Review* 108, no. 2 (2014): 438–40, jstor.org/stable/43654382.

people if he or she could produce three things: 1) a convincing story as to why his or her ascension was legitimate, 2) possession of the royal artifacts, which were seen as conferring almost mystical power, and 3) a close association with divine powers, whether by demonstrating that power directly or through close association with a temple.

As an ancient record that contains accounts of political succession, the Book of Mormon provides several examples of rulers who had to deal with questions of legitimacy. Nephi, the first author in the book, stands as the prime example of how monarchs from the Ancient Near East viewed royal legitimacy. Noel Reynolds notes that:

> Several factors indicate that Nephi carefully structured his writings to convince his own and later generations that the Lord had selected him over his elder brothers to be Lehi's political and spiritual successor. Thus, the writings of Nephi can be read in part as a political tract or a "lineage history," written to document the legitimacy of Neph's rule and religious teachings.[15]

Reynolds enumerates several examples of how Nephi approached the question of legitimacy. This present article examines the question of legitimacy in terms of the apologetics of Near Eastern kings who rose to power outside of established political channels. The shared historical and cultural context of such kings led them to address questions of legitimacy in a few consistent ways that would likely influence their subjects to regard the kings' rule as legitimate. Examining Nephi through this lens, it is clear that as a leader who came to reign outside of the established political channels — whether viewed from the point of view of the Jewish nation or even within his own family — Nephi was a leader who assumed political authority in an irregular fashion. Despite his unwillingness to take up the title of *king* (discussed below), Nephi was, in practice, an irregular king who had to establish his legitimacy within the culture and tradition of the Ancient Near East. Nephi's approach to legitimizing his rule fits perfectly into the Ancient Near Eastern framework.

This article examines the way in which Ancient Near Eastern monarchs established an apologetic story, made use of powerful artifacts, and claimed to associate themselves with divinity, in order to legitimize their reign. It then shows how Nephi may have made use of these

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15. Reynolds, "The Political Dimension," 15.

same techniques to establish the legitimacy of his rule. It ends with a discussion of Joseph Smith.

Legitimacy for Ancient Near Eastern Monarchs: The Story

For thousands of years, *monarchy* has been a common answer to the question of how to structure and organize a society. While a single ruling family might hold power for hundreds of years, inevitably every dynasty eventually comes to an end. In the eyes of the people who must validate any change in dynasty, the critical question about the legitimacy of the new rulers arises during such transitions. If those who replaced the previous ruling family are not able to present a story to convince the people that in some fashion their line represented a legitimate continuation of royal investiture, then civil unrest ensues, resulting in an eruption of revolts and, in the worst case, civil war.

Legitimizing the rule of someone who has no obvious claim to the throne is a problem that has been faced by many different monarchs over time. Based on their shared cultural attributes, kings in the Ancient Near East produced a common set of justifications in their attempts to legitimize their rule. Sometimes these justifications worked quite well. However, aspirants whose stories seemed to stretch credulity too far found themselves enmeshed in political intrigue and even war.

The story developed by kings to legitimate their rule is termed an *apologetic*. Andrew Knapp defines an *apologetic* in the context discussed here as "propaganda produced as defense against attacks upon a person's character or conduct." Knapp explains that:

> Apologists from all parts of the Ancient Near East faced many of the same quandaries of how to legitimate a candidate with no obvious natural claim to the throne. It should not surprise, therefore, that many of the same themes appear in multiple apologies.[16]

What makes one a king in the Ancient Near East?

In order to discuss political legitimacy within the framework of kingship, we must first define who qualifies as a king from the Ancient Near Eastern point of view. Bradley Parker notes that, at its core, kingship consists of the exercise of supreme power by a single individual.

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16. Andrew Knapp, *Royal Apologetic in the Ancient Near East* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2015), 45, doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt18z4h1f.

Whether a king rules over hundreds or over millions, the defining characteristic of that king is the ability to make a final decision in creating laws and governing or enforcing obedience, usually without approval from others. After noting the difficulty of defining an institution that is used in myriad ways across many cultures, Parker discusses the degree to which the perception of his subjects is a critical attribute a king must address. He notes: "Kings are not inherently different from other people, they only wield 'great personal power' because they are perceived by others as belonging to a superstratum of human society." In the Ancient Near Eastern conception specifically, Parker states that "ideas of royal legitimacy very much hinged on the perception that there was a 'true king' who was both uniquely qualified and divinely chosen."[17]

Thus, in an Ancient Near Eastern view, a king is a leader who exercises supreme, governing power by right of having been chosen by a god to lead. This view of kingship, which often combines the attributes of a priest or prophet with those of a royal leader, was reinforced by John van Seters, who states that:

> It is really the theme of the divine election of the king, which is the most significant ideological principle by which the actions of the king are justified. This election is first and foremost for the service of the gods, the building and maintenance of the shrines and the cult.[18]

The king was generally seen in the Ancient Near East as an agent of the gods, entrusted with the custodianship of the structures built to house the deity. This close association with deity resulted, in many cases, in the king himself being viewed as divine, the son of the god of the city. H. F. Lutz notes: "The early Semitic kings introduced the view that with sonship also divinity was conferred, and Sargon and Naram-Sin accordingly prefixed their names with the determinative of god." He also states, "Kingship and priestship are in fact synonymous terms in Assyria."[19]

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17. Bradley J. Parker, "The Construction and Performance of Kingship in the New-Assyrian Empire," *Journal of Anthropological Research* 67, no. 3 (2011): 365, jstor.org/stable/41303323.

18. John van Seters, "Sacral and Not-so-Sacral Kingship in the Ancient Neat East," in *Kingship in Asia and Early America: 30, International Congress of Human Sciences in Asia and North Africa*, ed. A. L. Basham (Pedregal de Santa Teresa, MX: El Colegio de Mexico, 1981), 19, doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvcwp01n.6.

19. H. F. Lutz, "Kingship in Babylonia, Assyria, and Egypt," *American Anthropologist*

In addition to the key role that the king played as the first servant of the god of the state, van Seters adds that the king had a critical role to play in the protection of the weak, intervention in the economy, management of the military, and control of relationships with adjacent states.[20] In the culture of the Ancient Near East, the "true king" was chosen by god or the gods to direct the affairs of the people, maintain the temple, create and enforce laws, direct military operations and manage relationships with neighboring peoples.

Regular kings and irregular kings in the Ancient Near East

While civil disturbances, disease, military reversals, ambitious family members, and the direct action of adjacent states could all intervene to disrupt the regular flow of dynastic succession, there was an expectation that, in the regular course of events, a kingdom would be passed from the reigning king to his eldest son. This expectation likely stemmed from the custom of primogeniture, which regulated the transfer of responsibility from father to eldest son within the family setting. Ironically, in the Bible this expectation is often conveyed differently. Jacob, Joseph, David, and others are shown overturning the clearly established expectation for the eldest son to lead. For example, Joseph, a younger son who had come to displace ten older brothers in taking the leadership of his family, still objected when Joseph's father, Israel, preferred his younger grandchild over the elder:

> And Joseph said unto his father, Not so, my father: for this is the firstborn; put thy right hand upon his head. And his father refused, and said, I know it, my son, I know it: he also shall become a people, and he also shall be great: but truly his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his seed shall become a multitude of nations. (Genesis 48:18–19)

Again, the clear expectation of leadership falling upon the eldest son was strongly embedded in the family setting in the Ancient Near East.[21] As the pattern of monarchy was likely originally derived from familial relationships, the same expectation held true for dynastic succession. The primary reason for this rule in both the family and

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26, no. 4 (1924): 443, 445, jstor.org/stable/661391.
20. Van Seters, "Sacral and not-so Sacral," 19–20.
21. Laiu Fachhai, "Primogeniture in the Old Testament," *Towards a Theological-Ethical Understanding of Patriarchy in Ancient Israel* University of Stellenbosch (2007): 57, scholar.sun.ac.za/server/api/core/bitstreams/28590d21 -f868-42d7-ad70-abb459c43995/content.

the royal setting was it provided a means to prevent strife.[22] George Charles Brodrick says that "it was as necessary for the family as for the lord that it should have one acknowledged head to govern it, one standard round which all its members and dependents could rally, one judgment seat to which all disputes could be referred."[23] Avoiding strife and maintaining continuity by way of primogeniture inheritance was even more important in dynasties with a long history of inheritance than in newly established monarchies.[24]

Of course, the exceptions in historical dynasties are nearly as numerous as the instances of the "ideal" being followed. Andrew Knapp notes: "Although the eldest son often succeeded [the previous king], this was far from a given."[25] Liau Facchai similarly states: "Primogeniture was a common custom for royal succession in all the regions of the Ancient Near East (Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Syro-Palestine) . . . [but] the custom was often not followed."[26]

The apologetics of irregular kings in the Ancient Near East

In the Ancient Near East, whenever a king came to power in a manner different than the expected order of things, an explanation seems to have been required. The greater the irregularity in the royal succession, the greater the explanation required regarding the discrepancy. A relatively simple explanation might suffice when a younger brother was selected to rule, despite the existence of an elder male heir. Thus, Assurbanipal did not appear overly concerned with justification when he explained his selection for the rulership of Assyria over his elder brother, based on either his greater wisdom, skill, and piety, or his election by a god.[27] However, when Darius seized control of the Achaemenid throne and killed the previous ruler, the occasion seems to have required an intensive propaganda campaign, including a massive inscription 22 feet high and 60 feet wide written in three

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22. Fachhai, "Primogeniture in the Old Testament," 86–87.
23. George Charles Brodrick, *The Law and Custom of Primogeniture* (UK: Cassell, Petter, and Galpin, 1872), 9, google.com/books/edition/The_Law_and _Custom_of_Primogeniture/r480AAAAIAAJ?hl=en.
24. Fachhai, "Primogeniture in the Old Testament," 65.
25. Andrew Knapp, "The Conflict Between Adonijah and Solomon in Light of Succession Practices Near and Far," *The Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 20 (2020): 22, doi.org/10.5508/jhs29557.
26. Fachhai, "Primogeniture in the Old Testament," 88.
27. Knapp, *Royal Apologetic*, 62.

languages on a limestone cliff on Mount Behistun, near the frequently traveled royal road.[28]

Knapp carried out a study of the apologetics used by irregular kings in the Ancient Near East. He found that certain arguments recur over and over, despite large distances in time and space between the various irregular kings who made these apologetics. The fact that many of the same apologetics are used in so many different situations indicates that a common culture created a shared sense of which justifications could best aid the rulers in achieving legitimacy. This was needed in the eyes of both the common people and the elites, whose support was critical in establishing solid rulership. Knapp identifies three primary approaches employed by Ancient Near Eastern kings. They make up a common motif, which he calls "the triad of legitimacy":[29]

1. **Divine Election**: Any Ancient Near Eastern monarch, however regular his succession to the throne may have been, owed his power to the god(s). The perception of divine approbation empowered rulers and the dissipation of this perception could erode a ruler's support.
2. **Royal Prerogative or Affiliation**: A second means of establishing the legitimacy of a candidate for the throne (who was not the eldest son of the preceding king) was to appeal to the will of the predecessor. The basic notion is that the outgoing reigning king had the right to override customs in certain circumstances. As one would expect, younger sons frequently employed this approach.
3. **Popular Acclamation**: Though not as determinative as the prior two grounds for establishing legitimacy, the idea of popular acclamation is frequently employed in apologetic writings. The voice of the people may not have been equivalent to a divine election in the Ancient Near East, but it was worth something.

To these three, Knapp adds a fourth approach that is nearly as common as the first three:

4. **Military Success**: A king's ability to lead (or in some cases, send) his troops to victory in battle was considered

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28. Jennifer Finn, "Gods, Kings, Men: Trilingual Inscriptions and Symbolic Visualizations in the Achaemenid Empire," *Ars Orientalis* 41 (2011): 221–22, jstor.org /stable/23075965.

29. Knapp, *Royal Apologetic*, 46–53.

a confirmation of his divine approbation; conversely, defeat signaled divine disapprobation.

Additional themes mentioned by Knapp, which come up less frequently than the main four, include:

5. **The Unworthy Predecessor**: This theme finds expression in the besmirching of the previous king, usually by demonstrating how he forfeited divine favor through impious acts.

6. **The Unworthy Rival**: This does not appear in cases of overt usurpation, but in situations of unstable transitions of power. The basic concept is that the person who ends up achieving rulership paints his rivals as less worthy than himself.

7. **Passivity**: This refers to the tactic, common in the apologetics used by usurpers, that the new king did not intend to seize the throne, but he became swept up in events that placed him in power for the good of the people or at the behest of a god. The kings who employ this justification tend to portray themselves as victims of circumstance or as pawns in a game much greater than themselves. In other words, they were manipulated by gods and/or humans into redressing the injustices of the land.

8. **Transcendent Non-Retaliation**: This theme, which often goes hand in hand with the passivity strategy, refers to the new king who states that he was provoked by his enemy yet still refused to take action against him. This is similar to the tactic of the merciful victor.

9. **The Merciful Victor**: This refers to the king who has just come to power and intends to display his beneficence by pardoning his enemies. Drawing attention to the king's merciful nature is meant to garner popular support.

10. **The Youngest Brother**: It appears that there was also a maneuver that circulated in the Ancient Near East wherein the *youngest* brother was elevated to power.

Legitimacy was such a critical concept in ancient kingship that rulers would take great pains to validate their rule in the eyes of the nobles and the common people of their realms, as illustrated by the case of Darius mentioned above. In addition to his massive apologetic inscription, Darius also created inscriptions at the archives in Persepolis, on

royal seals, and in many other documents. His apologetics employed each of the first four of Knapp's most common themes listed above, as well as some of the less common themes.[30]

Legitimacy for Ancient Near Eastern Monarchs: The Artifacts

While publicizing their claims was an important method of proclaiming royal legitimacy, it was certainly not the only means. Displays of royal power could also be interpreted as a way of expressing legitimacy. Thus, Egyptian pharaohs built monumental works, such as pyramids and temples, as a way of affirming their legitimacy.[31] Possession of, or association with, an important sacral location could also serve to strengthen claims of legitimacy.[32] In addition to sacred locations, physical objects often played an important role in establishing and maintaining legitimacy. To this end, kings used elaborate displays of sacred objects and other political symbols. Fred M. Hayward and Ahmed R. Dumbuya wrote:

> Sacred symbols, myths, dogmas, and rituals were all employed to endow various systems with mystical values on the basis of which the social order and the authority of rulers were accepted.[33]

Whether it be the crook and flail of Egypt,[34] or the crown jewels of England,[35] royal artifacts were required to be impressive to gaze upon as they played an important role in conveying legitimacy during state occasions. Indeed, in certain ancient myths, the possession of the symbols of royal authority alone constituted sufficient justification to proclaim the possessor as the legitimate ruler of the country.[36]

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30. Finn, "Gods, Kings, Men," 219–75.
31. Lisa Sabbahy, *Kingship, Power, and Legitimacy in Ancient Egypt: From the Old Kingdom to the Middle Kingdom* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 1–2.
32. Sabbahy, *Kingship, Power, and Legitimacy,* 720.
33. Frewd M. Hayward and Ahmed R. Dumbuya, "Political Legitimacy, Political Symbols, and National Leadership in West Africa," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 21, no. 4 (1983): 649, jstor.org/stable/160585.
34. Percy E. Newberry, "The Shepherd's Crook and the So-Called 'Flail' or 'Scourge' of Osiris," *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 15, no. 1/2 (1929): 84–94, doi.org/10.2307/3854018.
35. Charles M. Skinner, "The Crown Jewels of England," *The Decorator and Furnisher* 14, no. 2 (1889): 43–44, doi.org/10.2307/25585798.
36. Roberta Davidson, "The 'Reel' Arthur: Politics and Truth Claims in 'Camelot,

In many cultures throughout the world, the royal emblems of authority were endowed with such awe that they were regarded with the same level of reverence as holy religious artifacts. Akira Akiyama notes that the archbishop of Cologne said of the royal relics of the Holy Roman Empire that "whoever holds the imperial relics should be the king, and no one should call the one without them king."[37]

The royal regalia of the emperors of Japan were likewise the objects of great veneration. These relics consist of a mirror, a sword, and a long necklace. While in early times these objects were required to be present at the enthronement ceremony of the emperors, the mirror gradually became so esteemed an object that moving it became unthinkable. For that reason, at the enthronement ceremony, only the sword and jewels were brought to the imperial throne and set beside the emperor. The emperors of the fourteenth century BC regarded these royal objects so highly that they viewed the entire fate of their country as being bound up with the possession of these artifacts.[38]

Like their Japanese and European counterparts, the monarchs of the Ancient Near East adorned themselves with artifacts. They exhibited the kings' status and power, due to the artifacts' associated history. A Neo-Babylonian inscription, known as the inscription of Neriglissar, illustrates the close association of royal power with the regalia worn by the king and declared legitimate by the god Marduk:

> He (Marduk) looked upon me and declared (my) gracious name to be king in the land. In order to shepherd his people for eternity, for my kingship, he indeed gave me a just scepter (ḫaṭṭu) that widens the land; for (my) lordship, he indeed entrusted me with a legitimate rod (ušparu) that protects the people, let my hands grasp a staff (šibirru) that subdues enemies, made me wear a legitimate tiara (agû), and he did not bring about rivals or intimidators for my kingship.[39]

Excalibur, and King Arthur,'" *Arthuriana* 17, no. 2 (2007): 62–84, jstor.org/stable/27870837.

37. Akira Akiyama, "Relic or Icon? The Place and Function of Imperial Regalia," in *The Nomadic Object: The Challenge of World for Early Modern Religious Art*, ed. Christine, Göttler and Mia M Mochizuki (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2018), 431, doi.org/10.1163/9789004354500_016.

38. Akiyama, "Relic or Icon," 435.

39. Louise Quillien, "Royal Dress and the Expression of Power in Babylonia, First Millennium BCE," *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern History*, 11 no. 2: (2024): 329, doi.org/10.1515/janeh-2024-0007.

Toby Wilkinson goes so far as to state: "The role of the creation and promulgation of the institution of kingship, a concept so resonant that it survived for three thousand years, must rank as the supreme accomplishment of Egypt's early rulers." He goes on to explain how the iconography, art, and architecture used by the early rulers of Egypt were bulwarks of royal power for millennia.[40]

Legitimacy for Ancient Near Eastern Monarchs: The Divine Power

Legitimacy is a cultural construct that flows naturally from the shared beliefs and attributes of a given society, and the methods of proclaiming legitimacy could be linked to many attributes of the culture. As discussed above, the collective identity was often associated with physical objects. They were also associated with locations, such as a temple, a holy mountain, or a shrine. Indeed, in the context of Knapp's theme of "Divine Election," building or refurbishing temples was the most ubiquitous way of establishing legitimacy in the Ancient Near East. John M. Lundquist gives an example from Sumeria that may be seen as the archetype for establishing legitimacy among Ancient Near Eastern kings:

> Here we have the ultimate "legitimizing" connection, bringing together all the main factors that I believe were involved in the establishment of the "divine charter" ideology in ancient Near Eastern state polities: the god in his temple, which temple was built by divine instruction by the king of the city after it was duly authorized and approved by Enki of the "Temple of the Abyss" in Erida; then the king, the "good shepherd," was handed a scepter of perpetual rule, guaranteeing the authority and legitimacy of his throne; all of this carried out, of course, in the temple itself (which of course, as mentioned above, underscores the priestly functions of the king).[41]

For this reason, the first act of any Ancient Near Eastern king was

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40. Toby A. H. Wilkinson, "What a King Is This: Narmer and the Concept of the Ruler," *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 86 (2000): 23–32, doi.org/10.2307/3822303.

41. John M. Lundquist, "The Legitimizing Role of the Temple in the Origin of the State," in *Temples of the Ancient World: Ritual and Symbolism*, ed. Donald W. Parry (Provo, UT: Maxwell Institute Publications, 1994), 210–11, scholarsarchive.byu.edu/mi/76/.

inevitably the building or the refurbishing of temples for the housing of his patron deity. Since the temple was such a powerful legitimizing symbol, great care had to be taken with its treatment. If a temple was lost through military defeat, the effect on the legitimacy of the ruler was absolutely disastrous. Lundquist says: "The destruction or loss of the temple is seen as calamitous and fatal to the community in which the temple stood. The destruction is viewed as the result of social and moral decadence and disobedience to God's word."[42]

The Ancient Near Eastern rulers became so closely associated with their roles as priestly kings that their genealogy often included divine or partially divine beings. Well-established dynasties generally did not find it necessary to emphasize this relationship, but irregular Ancient Near Eastern kings, especially those with no credible claim to any past royal line, often made claims of relationship directly to a god as a means of bolstering their legitimacy in the eyes of the people. Also, in Rome, where irregular kingship became something of a rule rather than an exception, the emperors claimed descendancy from Venus, Neptune, Jupiter, Vulcan, or some other members of the expansive pantheon.[43]

Nephi as an Irregular King in the Book of Mormon

Now that the importance of the story, the artifacts, and the divine power has been demonstrated in the case of Ancient Near Eastern monarchs, we can examine how these elements can be seen in the case of Nephi in the Book of Mormon.

The story: Nephi's writings are consistent with Ancient Near Eastern legitimization tropes

Noel Reynolds recognized that throughout the Book of Mormon there is a persistent question of legitimacy that is raised over and over again, not just between Nephites and Lamanites, but within the Nephite polity itself. Reynolds says:

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42. Lundquist, "The Legitimizing Role of the Temple in the Origin of the State," 186.

43. Olivier Hekster, "Descendants of Gods: Legendary Genealogies in the Roman Empire," In *The Impact of Imperial Rome on Religions, Ritual and Religious Life in the Roman Empire: Proceedings from the Fifth Workshop of the International Network Impact of Empire (Roman Empire, 200 B.C. - A.D. 476),* ed. Lukas de Blois, Peter Funke, and Johannes Hahn (Brill, Münster, 2006), 24–35, jstor.org/stable/10.1163/j.ctv2gjwt45.6.

> The great political question among Book of Mormon peo-
> ples was "Who has the right to rule?" Did Nephi's descen-
> dants and those who followed them have a legitimate right
> to rule? Or should the right have belonged to Lehi's oldest
> son Laman and his descendants? This quarrel is the cause
> of centuries of political and military struggle. But this was not
> the only problem. Even within Nephite society, an endless
> number of dissenters challenged the government. . . . By
> paying close attention to how this struggle was waged, we
> can see one of the reasons the Book of Mormon was writ-
> ten. Of course, it is a witness for Christ and his teachings.
> But in addition, it provides reasons why we should believe
> that the tradition of the Nephites was just and correct. The
> two messages of the book are tied together in such a way
> that whoever accepts the teachings of Christ accepts that
> Nephi was a legitimate ruler, and vice versa.[44]

The recognition that the question of legitimacy is a key theme treated throughout the Book of Mormon can prompt the reader to recognize the many ways in which this question was addressed. There is a great deal of evidence that the many wars narrated in the book of Alma stemmed from a crisis of legitimacy intensified by the introduction of the Nephites' reign of the judges. The end of the line of kings who descended from Nephi (son of Lehi) offered an opportunity for a competing line, that of Zedekiah, to attempt to retake control of the government.[45] For centuries, the line of King Zedekiah (the last king of the Old Testament's southern kingdom) had ruled the Book of Mormon's people of Zarahemla (often referred to as the *Mulekites*). Then came the fusion of the Nephites and Mulekites, and some descendants of that line began various attempts to overthrow the judges in order to install once again a Mulekite king on the throne.[46]

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44. Noel B, Reynolds, "Nephi's Political Testament," in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon: Insights that You May Have Missed Before*, ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Provo, UT: Maxwell Institute Publications, 1991), 121–25, scholarsarchive.byu.edu/mi/65.

45. Note that before the merging of the Nephites and Mulekites, the kings of Zarahemla's line would presumably have all been able to trace their ancestry back to Zedekiah, who was a Davidic Hebrew king.

46. Lyle H. Hamblin, "Proper Names and Political Claims: Semitic Echoes as Foundations for Claims to the Nephite Throne," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 60 (2024): 409–44, interpreterfoundation
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While it is beyond the scope of the current article, the record indicates that after the Nephite-Mulekite fusion, steps were taken by each of the Nephite leaders to legitimize their reigns in the eyes of their more restive Mulekite subjects.

Early in the Book of Mormon it is clear that Nephi was aware of, and took pains to address, the question of his irregular rise to kingship, amidst the counterclaims of his older brothers, Laman and Lemuel.[47] Note that the prevalence of these legitimating claims, inscribed on the small plates of Nephi (which were to focus more on spiritual matters, rather than political; see 1 Nephi 9:4), gives some indication of the critical importance to Nephi of the issue of legitimacy. This is apparent in the subtitle for The First Book of Nephi, which is *His Reign and Ministry.* These efforts fit perfectly into the motif described by Knapp, with Nephi's narrative covering the "triad of legitimacy" as well as the other themes of the legitimacy motif. Nephi begins by building an interlocking set of convincing stories that work together to legitimate his claims:

Divine election

Early in his account, Nephi records the promise made to him by God: "And inasmuch as thou shalt keep my commandments, thou shalt be made a ruler and a teacher over thy brethren" (1 Nephi 2:22). Nephi repeats this divine promise several times, most notably in the context of his justification of the legitimacy of his kingship:

> 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 5:19)

Royal prerogative or affiliation

Lehi, the first leader of the group, is shown legitimating Nephi's leadership when he tells his eldest sons, Laman and Lemuel: "Rebel no more against your brother, whose views have been glorious, and who hath kept the commandments from the time that we left Jerusalem; and

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journal/proper-names-and-political-claims-semitic-echoes-as-foundations -for-claims-to-the-nephite-throne/.

47. Noel B. Reynolds, "Nephite Kingship Reconsidered," *Faculty Publications* 1488 (1997): scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub/1488.

who hath been an instrument in the hands of God, in bringing us forth into the land of promise" (2 Nephi 1:24).

Popular acclamation

Nephi himself suggests that he was pushed by the people to be their king (2 Nephi 5:18). And Nephi's younger brother Jacob tells us:

> The people having loved Nephi exceedingly, he having been a great protector for them, having wielded the sword of Laban in their defence, and having labored in all his days for their welfare— Wherefore, the people were desirous to 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 name they would. (Jacob 1:10–11)

Military success

Nephi identifies his role as both military leader and protector in the same sentence in which he notes his possession of the sword of Laban (2 Nephi 5:14). And, in addition to Jacob's affirmation above, he also spoke of Nephi in these words: "my brother Nephi, unto whom ye look as a king or a protector, and on whom ye depend for safety" (2 Nephi 6:2). Thus, in a clear show of legitimizing imagery, Nephi is depicted as achieving military success by wielding one of the royal artifacts.

The unworthy predecessor

The unworthy predecessor is not directly invoked, although there are hints that Zedekiah (back in Jerusalem) was an unworthy predecessor. For example, Nephi wrote that "in the commencement of the first year of the reign of Zedekiah, king of Judah . . . there came many prophets, prophesying unto the people that they must repent, or the great city Jerusalem must be destroyed" (1 Nephi 1:4). The issue of whether or not Zedekiah was a worthy predecessor when compared to Nephi became a matter of critical importance hundreds of years later in the context of a series of rebellions led by Mulekites, presumably within the context of their claims to the throne based on membership in the royal line of David.[48] Much could be written about the crisis

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48. Hamblin, "Proper Names and Political Claims," 416–17.

of legitimacy that occurred when the system of judges replaced the monarchy (initiated in Mosiah 29). Also, there may have been additional complications due to differences in perceptions of legitimacy based on the influence of other peoples and cultures in the New World, such as the remnants of the Jaredites. However, these concerns are beyond the scope of this paper. I will restrict the comments here to note that, while later political considerations may have painted Zedekiah and his descendants as unworthy predecessors, Nephi's account pays scant attention to Zedekiah.

The unworthy rival

Nephi disparages Laman and Lemuel in many ways; for their stiff-neckedness and murmuring (1 Nephi 2:11), their murderous disposition (1 Nephi 2:13), their rebellion (1 Nephi 2:21; 7:6), the hardness of their hearts and blindness of their minds (1 Nephi 7:8), and their failure to hearken to the word of the Lord (1 Nephi 7:9), among other examples. The details Nephi gives about their failings certainly seem to depict Laman and Lemuel as "unworthy rivals."

Passivity

Nephi does not place great emphasis on this theme, but there are at least two examples of justification that seem to be based on passivity when he says that, "my people would that we should call the name of the place Nephi; wherefore, we did call it Nephi. And all those who were with me did take upon them to call themselves the people of Nephi" (2 Nephi 5:8–9). Additionally, he states 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" (2 Nephi 5:18). These passages suggest that Nephi did not seek power but rather accepted it somewhat hesitantly when it was urged upon him.

Transcendent non-retaliation

This theme is on display when Laman and Lemuel seek to kill Nephi for attempting to dissuade them from returning to Jerusalem. Despite their attempted murder, Nephi "did frankly forgive them all that they had done, and I did exhort them that they would pray unto the Lord their God for forgiveness" (1 Nephi 7:21).

The merciful victor

This theme is apparent in the story of the building of the ship, after Laman and Lemuel had been confounded and rebuked:

> And now, they said: We know of a surety that the Lord is with thee, for we know that it is the power of the Lord that has shaken us. And they fell down before me, and were about to worship me, but I would not suffer them, saying: I am thy brother, yea, even thy younger brother; wherefore, worship the Lord thy God, and honor thy father and thy mother, that thy days may be long in the land which the Lord thy God shall give thee. (1 Nephi 17:55)

The younger brother

Knapp refers to this theme as the *youngest* brother. I refer to it as the *younger* brother because the logic behind the apologetic applies to any younger brother who would not inherit under the law of primogeniture. To me, calling this theme "the youngest brother" seems too restrictive.

Nephi portrays himself as the archetypal younger brother who ends up ruling from almost the beginning of his record. He notes,

> I did cry unto the Lord; and behold he did visit me, and did soften my heart that I did believe all the words which had been spoken by my father; wherefore, I did not rebel against him like unto my brothers. . . . But, behold, Laman and Lemuel would not hearken unto my words; and being grieved because of the hardness of their hearts I cried unto the Lord for them. (1 Nephi 2:16, 18)

More importantly, Nephi declares that the Lord specifically told him, "And inasmuch as thou shalt keep my commandments, thou shalt be made a ruler and a teacher over thy brethren" (v. 22). Godfrey Ellis connects the themes of the Younger Brother motif and that of the Royal Affiliation motif when he notes that the story of Nephi and his brothers on the return journey from their visit to Ishmael "echoes another set of older brothers who left another younger brother, Joseph, to die."[49]

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49. Ellis, "What Happened to Nephi?" 203–56. See also Larsen, "Killing Laban," 26–41.

Literary themes establishing legitimacy

Outside of these Ancient Near Eastern themes that legitimize Nephi's rule, there are unique literary themes Nephi uses to further establish his legitimacy. These make sense only within a Hebrew context. Jeff Lindsay has written a series of articles that explore the imagery of dust and its association with kingship in the Book of Mormon. Several instances of this imagery come from Isaiah 52, and in his paper, Lindsay summarizes the position of David Bokovoy:

> The issue of Nephite leadership and authority and the use of Isaiah 52:1–2 [is] especially meaningful in light of a scholar's work that establishes a connection between "rising from the dust" and kingship, enthronement, and authority.[50]

In his own paper, Bokovoy notes that Lehi's poem in 2 Nephi chapter 1 "clearly draws its inspiration from Isaiah 52, a poetic text that seeks to reverse the sufferings experienced by the exilic community through a promise of royal restoration." He explains "The passage in Isaiah is a reversal. Captive Judah will arise from the dust and sit down upon a royal throne. In contrast, her oppressor, Babylon, will undergo the exact opposite experience."[51]

Lehi and Nephi both appear to seize upon the notion of royal enthronement in Isaiah 52, and expand upon it to address ideas of political legitimacy. Lindsay expounds upon this notion, saying that:

> The political aspects of the dust-related content in Lehi's speech and Nephi's writings, coupled with other signs of Nephi's having been commissioned as prophet and leader, gave legitimacy to the reign of Nephi and his descendants and would be important for many generations thereafter. Nephi's legitimacy as Lehi's successor, established in these opening chapters of 2 Nephi, may have intentional parallels to Lehi's divine commission and his role as leader at the beginning of 1 Nephi.[52]

The fact that Nephi created scripture accounts that legitimized his rule, both within the broader Ancient Near Eastern context as well as

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50. Lindsay, "Arise from the Dust," 238.

51. David Bokovoy, "Deutero-Isaiah In The Book Of Mormon: A Literary Analysis (Pt. 1)," *When Gods Were Men* (blog), 27 May 2014, patheos.com /blogs/davidbokovoy/2014/04/deutero-isaiah-in-the-book-of-mormon -a-literary-analysis-pt-1/.

52. Lindsay, "Arise From the Dust," 238–41.

within the uniquely Hebrew context, indicates that he was aware to some degree of how issues of legitimacy would change, based on the different audiences for whom he was writing. Nephi's heightened sensitivity to issues of legitimacy also explains why he seems to have considered legitimacy even for people of the far distant future that he saw in vision, as will be discussed below.

The artifacts: Nephi possesses royal treasures which legitimize his kingship

In addition to declaring his legitimacy within the standard Ancient Near Eastern framework identified by Knapp, Nephi also could declare his legitimate rule through the possession of royal artifacts. These include the plates of brass, the ball or compass which becomes known as the Liahona (2 Nephi 5:12), the sword of Laban (v. 14), and both the large plates and small plates of Nephi. As in the case with King Neriglissar mentioned above, each of these artifacts plays a specific role in the service of royal legitimacy.

Brett Holbrook discusses the specific use of swords as symbols of royal power:

> As a symbol of power in war, the sword came to be part of the regalia (royal objects) owned by kings that justified their kingship and rule. The sword was passed on to the heir as a transfer of authority, and the giving of a sword to the new king was a widespread feature of coronation ceremonies.[53]

He then goes on to note that the sword of Laban held a similar symbolic place as part of the royal regalia of the Nephites:

> Held by the Nephite kings and leaders, the people saw the sword of Laban as a religious symbol and a sign of the leader's kingship and power.[54]

Holbrook also notes that David kept the sword of Goliath as a token of his royal legitimacy, and that it was after David retained the sword that the priest Abiathar brought the holy ephod and joined David, thus further increasing his legitimacy.[55] Nephi's use of the sword of Laban mirrors David's use of the sword of Goliath.

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53. Brett L. Holbrook, "The Sword of Laban as a Symbol of Divine Authority and Kingship," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2, no. 1(1993): 42, scholars archive.byu.edu/jbms/vol2/iss1/4.
54. Holbrook, "The Sword of Laban," 54.
55. Holbrook, "The Sword of Laban," 52.

The sword of Laban is also specifically mentioned by both Nephi and his brother, Jacob, in the context of Nephi's military prowess. Gordon C. Thomasson adds to the sword of Laban the Liahona, the plates of brass, and the large plates and small plates of Nephi as the royal treasures of the Nephites. He also draws particular attention to the genealogy of Joseph of Egypt (found on the plates of brass) as providing legitimacy by descent.[56] Likewise, in an in-depth discussion of the point at which Nephi assumed the leadership of the family of Lehi, Ellis discusses the royal Nephite artifacts and shows that the possession of a specific artifact or artifacts was often seen as a metaphor for leadership and royal authority.[57]

The plates of brass were an important artifact that was both functional (in terms of transmitting cultural and religious information) as well as symbolic. As the plates of brass were obtained by Nephi at Lehi's behest, one can perceive possible narrative choices made by Nephi that highlight the Divine Election, Royal Prerogative, and Unworthy Rival motifs. Lehi said to Nephi:

> And now, behold thy brothers murmur, saying it is a hard thing which I have required of them; but behold I have not required it of them, but it is a commandment of the Lord. Therefore go, my son, and thou shalt be favored of the Lord, because thou hast not murmured. (1 Nephi 3:5–6)

From their initial murmuring to their willingness to give up after the first failure to obtain the plates, Laman and Lemuel show themselves to be unworthy rivals. The appearance of an angel who berates Laman and Lemuel cements the idea of Nephi's superior worthiness in the eyes of God. The angel's rhetorical question to Laman and Lemuel: "Know ye not that the Lord hath chosen him to be a ruler over you, and this because of your iniquities?" (1 Nephi 3:29). This makes Nephi's Divine Election clear.

The narration of the scene in which Nephi slays Laban in a way that could be considered to echo David's rise to power is a strong demonstration of Nephi's early claim to divinely sanctioned leadership.[58]

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56. Gordon C. Thomasson, "Mosiah: The Complex Symbolism and Symbolic Complex of Kingship in the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, 2, no. 1 (1993): 25–26, scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol2/iss1/3.

57. Ellis, "What Happened to Nephi?" 223–26.

58. 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): 15, scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol18/iss1/12.

(Note, as well, that David was also a younger son and irregular king.) Val Larsen suggests that Nephi's behavior in the case of Laban was meant to demonstrate that Nephi acted as a legitimate monarch executing justice. He identifies six layers in the story of Nephi executing Laban that contribute to the notion that Nephi was a dutiful sovereign performing a divinely sanctioned duty.[59] In this story, Nephi obtains the sword of Laban and the plates of brass, both of which became royal treasures that conveyed great legitimacy on their bearers. (For example, see Omni 1:14 and Mosiah 10:16.)

Another story associated with a royal relic, which also bolsters Nephi's claim to divinely sanctioned leadership, is that of the Liahona ("the round ball of curious workmanship"; 1 Nephi 16:10) and the broken bow. In this story, Nephi demonstrates not only the tangible results of his greater favor with the Lord, he also appears to show greater faith during this event than his father, Lehi (see 1 Nephi 16:25). Godfrey Ellis sees the story of the broken bow as the transition point wherein Nephi takes over the lead of the expedition.[60] In this story it is Nephi who follows the directions on the Liahona to go and obtain food for the party (1 Nephi 16:30). When Nephi's brothers rebel, the voice of Lord chastens them, once again confirming Nephi's divinely sanctioned leadership over them (v. 39).

The legitimacy of Nephi's leadership is made even more apparent in the story of the rebellion of his brothers at sea. On the ocean voyage to the new land of promise, the Liahona "did cease to work" (1 Nephi 18:12). After his brothers reluctantly freed Nephi, "the compass worked only for him."[61] The fact that a key royal artifact would function only when in the hands of the rightful, divinely appointed ruler is a point that is apparent in this story. This attribute is a part of the Ancient Near Eastern conception of the one true king who possesses qualities that pretenders cannot imitate.

The large plates and the small plates of Nephi, both of which were written under direct instruction from God (see 1 Nephi 9), constitute yet another clear indication of divine election. Thus, all the royal artifacts of

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59. Larsen, "Killing Laban," 26–41, 84–85.

60. Ellis, "What Happened to Nephi?" 213–20.

61. Timothy Gervais and John L. Joyce, "'By Small Means': Rethinking the Liahona," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 30 (2018): 223, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/by-small-means-rethinking-the -liahona/.

the Nephites serve as powerful reminders of royal legitimacy through their association with the foundational stories of the Nephite nation.

The divine powers: Nephi's kingship is legitimized by his royal line and his priestly role

Shortly after the death of Lehi, and the final rupture between Nephi and his brothers, Nephi asserts his divinely sanctioned kingship through the construction of the critical sacral and monumental building, the temple (see 2 Nephi 5:16). In addition to the essential act of temple building, Nephi's status as prophet and religious leader is reinforced by his constant communication with the Lord (2 Nephi 5:1), by consecrating priests, and by recording his prophecies and visions (2 Nephi 5:26, 29).

Not only is Nephi endowed with the role of prophet and priest, but he also records his royal affiliation by citing his descendancy from Joseph in Egypt (see 1 Nephi 5:14; 2 Nephi 3:4). This was an important and widely venerated ancestor who had become next in power to Pharaoh himself (see Genesis 41:40). Nephi's leadership is also compared to Moses (see 1 Nephi 4:2; 17:23–32) who was the epitome of the divinely sanctioned lawgiver.[62] These actions position Nephi securely within the Ancient Near Eastern concept of kingship in which the king acts as the agent of his patron deity, holds both priestly and political power, and exercises power from both roles in the construction of a temple.

Nephi's relationship to Joseph of Egypt also seems to have set an additional criterion for kingship among the Nephites. Just as Joseph became a mighty prophet and seer (see 2 Nephi 3), it seems that the royal line of Nephi was to possess the gifts of seership and prophecy (see Omni 1:13; Words of Mormon 1:17; Mosiah 8:13). A king who could prophesy and see the future could therefore demonstrate his legitimacy by possessing the gifts of the line of Joseph.

The outcome of Nephi's legitimizing efforts

Nephi's efforts to legitimate his rule were remarkably successful in establishing the Nephite sovereignty, which lasted for four-hundred years. His efforts were so successful that it seems that many Nephites, as exemplified by Zeniff, found it difficult to leave behind the land and temple that were closely associated with Nephi.[63] Zeniff indirectly

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62. Reynolds, "Nephite Kingship Reconsidered," 9–24.
63. Val Larsen, "Prophet or Loss: Mosiah$_1$/Zeniff, Benjamin/Noah, Mosiah$_2$/

points out Nephi's success in establishing his kingship based on the Ancient Near Eastern pattern when the counterclaims of the Lamanites, which Zeniff cites, are made on the same established patterns of legitimacy as Nephi's. Thus, the Lamanites were "wroth" because of Nephi's claims of divine sanction (see Mosiah 10:12–14), also wroth because of his violation of the custom of primogeniture (v. 15), and wroth because he "robbed them" of royal relics (v. 16).[64] Significantly, they claimed he had "taken the ruling of the people out of their hands" (v. 15).

Challenges to the primacy of Nephite domination of the government reached a critical point hundreds of years later when the link between the reign of the Nephite kings and rulership of the people was severed upon the death of King Mosiah, son of King Benjamin (see Mosiah 29). These challenges are unsurprising when viewing the political situation through the lens of legitimacy. Val Larsen proposes a model that explains the Amlicite rebellion as a direct reaction to the perceived illegitimacy of the newly developed reign of the judges (in contrast to the legitimacy of the rulership of Nephi that the judgeship replaced; see Alma 2–3).[65]

Nephi's efforts at legitimizing his rule built the foundation of a four-hundred year political and spiritual kingdom, which ended not because of a successful internal rebellion, but because the final ruler, Mosiah, willingly chose to end the rule of Nephi's line.[66]

Who may have served as model irregular kings for Nephi's legitimizing efforts?

The concept of political legitimacy in the Ancient Near East would have, at least to some degree, been a part of Nephi's cultural milieu.

Limhi and the Emergence of the Almas," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 60 (2024): 371, interpreterfoundation.org/journal /prophet-or-loss-mosiah1-zeniff-benjamin-noah-mosiah2-limhi-and-the -emergence-of-the-almas/.

64. A. Keith Thompson, "Who Was Sherem?" *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 14 (2015): 7n45, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/who-was-sherem/.

65. Val Larsen, "In His Footsteps: Ammon$_1$ and Ammon$_2$," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 3 (2013): 85–113, interpreterfoundation.org/journal /in-his-footsteps-ammon-and-ammon/.

66. It is unclear in the record whether or not Mosiah I and his descendants (Benjamin and Mosiah II) were continuous with the dynasty established by Nephi. It may be that Mosiah I was only made king after fleeing the city of Nephi, in which case Nephi's successful dynasty would have been shorter by three generations.

He was surely exposed to concrete examples of how an Ancient Near Eastern king could go about legitimizing his rule. Ben McGuire has commented on how Nephi employed motifs associated with King David as a means of communicating his political legitimacy to his subjects.[67] Similarly, Andrew Knapp uses David as an example of several of the various types of apologetics for irregular kings.[68] Indeed, David's dynasty is an excellent illustration of the difficulties irregular kings face when their legitimacy is in question, for David's reign and that of his descendants were riven with revolt and succession crises. The instability of the regime is illustrated by the stories of Absalom, Sheba the Benjamite, Adonijah, Solomon, and Jeroboam.

While the details of each of these stories are sparse in the Bible, there are a few examples that make it clear that these kings and would-be kings were attuned to the requirements of political legitimacy. Adonijah, for example, attempted to force the issue of succession based on his primogeniture and public acclaim, including the support of many of the court officials and nearly all of his brothers. Solomon, on the other hand, made use of the apologetic elements of Divine Election, Royal Prerogative, and Younger Son. When Adonijah apparently tried to burnish his claim to royal affiliation by marrying David's young wife, Abishag, Solomon had him killed (see 1 Kings 2:16–25). Knapp suggests that other biblical kings also employed the apologetics of irregular kings, discussing Jehu in the context of Divine Election and the Unworthy Predecessor, and also Joash in the context of the Unworthy Predecessor.

There are other Ancient Near Eastern kings who employed the motifs discussed by Knapp, and whose proximity, impact, and regnal years were likely of significant interest to the Hebrews of Nephi's day. They may have been sufficiently important for Nephi to be aware of their stories, including kings such as Esarhaddon, Assurbanipal, and Nabopolassar. A brief summary of each may illustrate their legitimization, which Nephi may have witnessed (or at least been aware of).

Esarhaddon was a younger brother who outfought his older brothers to win the kingdom of Assyria. He had an extensive apologetic written providing justifications that fit well within the themes of Divine Election, Military Victor, and Royal Prerogative. For example, he claimed that his father designated him as the heir despite the claims of his older brothers on the custom of primogeniture. This royal chronicle

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67. McGuire, "Nephi and Goliath," 16–31.
68. Knapp, *Royal Apologetic*, 49–55.

is a part of what Knapp calls "Esarhaddon's legitimacy propaganda campaign."[69]

Like his father Esarhaddon, Assurbanipal was a younger brother who was proclaimed king over his elder brother. Assurbanipal had multiple legitimation texts written in which he claims favor with the goddess, Ishtar. He also claimed to fulfill prophecy in his actions as an agent of the gods. Unlike Assurbanipal, the elder brother, Šamaš-šuma-ukīn, is shown as having overthrown the traditions of his fathers in order to adopt Babylonian practices instead. Shana Zaia notes that Šamaš-šuma-ukīn constructed his political identity in a way which "was not congruent with the ruler's ethnic, familial, or cultural background."[70] His fascination with and adoption of Babylonian culture is depicted as having resulted in his corruption, resulting in Šamaš-šuma-ukīn breaking off the previously warm relationship with his brother and making common cause with many of Assyria's enemies, including the Elamites and the Arabians.

In his confrontation with Šamaš-šuma-ukīn, Assurbanipal used several of the irregular king apologetics, including, Divine Election, Royal Affiliation, Popular Acclaim, Military Success, the Unworthy Rival, the Younger Brother, and Passivity. Assurbanipal characterized his brother as a traitor and heretic who betrayed his family and identity and, by so doing, provoked the wrath of the gods. While Assurbanipal could have boasted about defeating his brother in battle, the chronicle instead tells of:

> Ambiguity as to whether he was executed, committed suicide, died accidentally, or was killed in some other way; the texts say only that it was a "cruel death" and that the gods "consigned him to a fire and destroyed his life" with one inscription stating that the gods "made the fire-god grasp his hands (and) had his body burned."[71]

Nabopolassar, the king of Babylon in the time just prior to Lehi's flight to the new world, was likely infamous in Jerusalem. The expansion of the Babylonian Empire was one of the chief political concerns

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69. Andrew Knapp, "The Sitz Im Leben of Esarhaddon's Apology," *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 68 (2016): 181–95, doi.org/10.5615/jcunestud.68.2016.0181.

70. Shana Zaia, "Going Native: Šamaš-šuma-ukīn, Assyrian King of Babylon," *Iraq* 81 (2019): 247, jstor.org/stable/26888063.

71. Shana Zaia, "My Brother's Keeper: Assurbanipal versus Šamaš-šuma-ukīn," *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern History* 6, no. 1, (2019): 19–52, doi.org/10.1515/janeh-2018-2001.

in Jerusalem in Lehi's day, and the kings of Judah played a dangerous game of shifting alliances between the declining Egyptian Empire (which installed Jehoiakim as the king of Judah, but only as an Egyptian vassal) and the waxing power of the Neo-Babylonian Empire.[72]

Nabopolassar was portrayed as a champion of the people, who rebelled against the corrupt and oppressive Assyrian overlords. He was the avenger of Akkad, a prophesied liberator, and a restorer of order, while his Assyrian foes were depicted as unworthy predecessors who committed all manner of unspeakable crimes against both gods and men, serving chaos and destroying the land. The god Marduk was said to have aided Nabopolassar in defeating his enemies and restoring order to the land, thus granting military and administrative prowess.[73] Nabopolassar displayed both great piety and humility, attributing his successes to Marduk and denigrating himself. Knapp stresses how Nabopolassar utilized the motifs of the Unworthy Predecessor and Divine Election in his inscriptions. Interestingly, Nabopolassar broke with the Royal Affiliation motif. Instead, he called himself "the servant who was anonymous among the people" prior to his successful leadership of the revolt.

The above-mentioned kings may have influenced Nephi's understanding of acceptable apologetics for irregular kings. Their usage of common motifs contributed to the cultural milieu in Jerusalem, which defined what constituted political legitimacy for a monarch of that time and region.

Joseph Smith: The Once and Future King

The importance of a leader demonstrating his legitimacy may be as mandatory in modern times as it was anciently. The inability to do so may lead to contention and dissension. This critical point was understood very well by Nephi, a prophet who spent so much effort engraving upon the plates his visions of the latter days that he is called by one scholar a "prophet of the restoration."[74] Nephi's high level of sen-

72. Knapp, *Royal Apologetic*, 62–63.

73. Rocio Da Riva, "The Figure of Nabopolassar in Late Achaemenid and Hellenistic Historiographic Tradition: BM 34793 and CUA 90*," Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 76, no. 1 (2017): 75–92, jstor.org/stable/26557692.

74. S. Brent Farley, "Nephi, Isaiah, and the Latter-day Restoration," in *The Book of Mormon: Second Nephi, The Doctrinal Structure*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1989), 227–39.

sitivity to questions of legitimacy was not restricted to his own irregular kingship. With miraculous and prophetic foresight, he realized that a latter-day prophet, Joseph Smith, would face similar difficulties establishing his legitimacy in the face of incredulity and opposition. Accordingly, and perhaps surprisingly to many readers, Nephi and other Book of Mormon prophets appear to have taken steps to help establish the legitimacy of the prophet of the far-distant future who would bring their words to light. They appear to have done this by extending to Joseph Smith the same Ancient Near Eastern framework of royal legitimacy that they applied to themselves.

Joseph Smith as the inheritor of the legacies of Moses and Joseph of Egypt

The extensive prophecy attributed to Joseph of Egypt in 2 Nephi 3, given in the context of Lehi's words to his son Joseph, can be viewed as an apologetic meant to bolster the legitimacy of Joseph Smith. In a sense, Joseph Smith can be understood as an irregular "king" who faced many of the same challenges that Nephi faced. In fact, Nephi's prophecy of a future Joseph appears to use the triad of legitimacy to bolster the young prophet as a leader. This included Divine Election, Royal Affiliation, and Popular Acclaim. What is more, as discussed below, a mystery is resolved by viewing Joseph Smith as the chosen inheritor of the tradition of sacred Nephite kingship.

As it relates to Joseph Smith, the prophecy of the future revelator of the Hebrew tradition opens with Divine Election, in which the ancient prophet, Joseph of Egypt, sees a future prophet whom the Lord would raise up from among his descendants (see 2 Nephi 3:6). This future prophet is depicted as receiving his direction directly from God (v. 7). In fact, God himself says that he would "make him great in mine eyes" (v. 8). The message that this is a Divinely Elected prophet is reinforced by comparing Joseph Smith to the great prophet and lawgiver, Moses (v. 9) and by the statement that God would give him "power to bring forth my word" (v. 11). In these and a few subsequent passages (vv. 12–15, 18), Joseph Smith's divine election is abundantly clear.

The Royal Affiliation of Joseph Smith, the future seer, is also made clear in the prophecy linking him directly to Joseph of Egypt, the great Hebrew prophet and seer. As with the Divine Election noted above, Joseph Smith is also associated here with Moses, the eventual founder of the nation. Joseph of Egypt notes that the the Lord told him that the future latter-day prophet was to come "out of the fruit of thy

loins" (2 Nephi 3:7). We are then told that this prophet "shall be great like unto Moses" (v. 9). The work that Joseph Smith is to perform — bringing salvation to Israel — is shown to be similar to the work of both Joseph of Egypt and Moses. That Royal Affiliation is again highlighted when Joseph of Egypt draws a direct comparison to himself, saying:

> And his name shall be called after me; and it shall be after the name of his father. And he shall be like unto me; for the thing, which the Lord shall bring forth by his hand, by the power of the Lord shall bring my people unto salvation. (2 Nephi 3:15)

The Popular Acclaim of the future prophet is somewhat muted in this passage in comparison to the other two elements of the triad. In the Book of Mormon there is only a brief note that the latter-day seer "shall be esteemed highly among the fruit of thy loins" (2 Nephi 3:7). However, there are other related prophecies. First, the "great worth" of the work he would do for his brethren is mentioned (v. 7). Then it is noted that his work would convince his brethren of other words of God and confound false doctrines, dismiss contentions, establish peace among the descendancy of Joseph of Egypt, and bring them to a knowledge of their fathers (vv. 11–12). A stronger mention of popular acclaim would have to await a prophecy from another Book of Mormon prophet, Moroni. The resurrected Moroni told Joseph Smith in 1823 that his "name should be had for good and evil among all nations, kindreds, and tongues, or that it should be both good and evil spoken of among all people" (Joseph Smith — History 1:33).

One scholar specializing on the life of Joseph Smith, Richard Bushman, has indicated that Joseph Smith's legitimacy hinged primarily on his Divine Election, as shown by his ability to exercise divinely delegated power.[75] Bushman notes that the legitimacy of Joseph's leadership was challenged on many different bases, but the strongest was always a question of whether or not he actually received divine communication and keys of authority.

Of course, Joseph Smith was not a king, but his unique role in the leadership of the restored Church required him to exercise many of the prerogatives of Ancient Near Eastern kings. He acted as the divine agent of his patron God, exercised sovereign authority over the

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75. Richard Lyman Bushman, "Joseph Smith and Power," in *A Firm Foundation: Church Organization and Administration*, ed. David J. Whittaker and Arnold K. Garr (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011), 1–13.

Church, established a new code of laws, cared for the poor, founded cities, made decisions designed to promote the economic welfare of his people, and built temples. All of these actions indicate that Joseph Smith may indeed be understood as a king from the standpoint of Ancient Near Eastern culture, though such a role was distasteful to the sentiments of his detractors.[76] Bushman writes:

> Joseph Smith was accused of authoritarian control. In 1834 he complained that the cry of his critics was "Tyrant! Pope!! King!!!" And from the point of view of American democracy, the charges were justified. Charismatic leadership almost inevitably involves unchecked power. Because authority originates in the leader's gifts, who can restrain him? The very nature of charismatic governance rules out any criticism of the leader's powers. Neither his followers nor his lieutenants can challenge the charismatic leader's will without undermining the movement. To imply that his gifts have failed and the leader has erred destroys the foundation on which the entire enterprise rests. Everyone must yield to the leader's will because his power supports everything else.[77]

This is not merely theoretical. Many of the most prominent dissenters from the Latter-day Saint movement left because of what they perceived as Joseph Smith's despotic abuse of power.[78] The arguments of Joseph's detractors, both from within and without the Church, were inevitably arguments of legitimacy that essentially stated that Joseph had "lost the mandate of Heaven." A critical point to note here is that the Church, with its essentially authoritarian and top-down structure, depends entirely on the morally correct actions of its leaders to maintain its legitimacy. Bushman observes that:

> Paradoxically, the very factor that seems to underlie

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76. A. Keith Thompson, "The Habeas Corpus Protection of Joseph Smith from Missouri Arrest Requisitions." *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 29 (2018): 274, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/the-habeas-corpus-protection -of-joseph-smith-from-missouri-arrest-requisitions/.

77. Bushman, "Joseph Smith and Power," 7.

78. Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, "'There's the Boy I Can Trust': Dennison Lott Harris' First-Person Account of the Conspiracy of Nauvoo and Events Surrounding Joseph Smith's 'Last Charge' to the Twelve Apostles," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 21 (2016): 23–117, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/theres -the-boy-i-can-trust-dennison-lott-harris-first-person-account-of-the -conspiracy-of-nauvoo-and-events-surrounding-joseph-smiths-last-charge/.

authoritarianism in the Church is also the chief restraint on power. Church leaders at every level from top to bottom are believed to act on behalf of God. In the minds of the people, that is the source of their legitimacy. They are not elected to office, nor do they inherit their positions; they receive a call from the heavens. Their authority, therefore, is essentially godly.[79]

Bushman's view that Joseph Smith and those who follow him in the prophetic office are essentially charismatic monarchs seems to agree with the view of Nephi and other Book of Mormon authors. Indeed, those authors appear to have understood the future prophet within the context of Nephite monarchy. For Nephi and later prophets, Joseph Smith's legitimacy as the future leader of God's kingdom rests on the same pillars as the legitimacy of Nephi and many subsequent Book of Mormon leaders. Thus, prophecies about Joseph Smith, such as that given by Moroni in Mormon 8, address legitimacy in Nephite terms, stating that only Divine Election, combined with an eye single to God's glory, can empower a worthy prophet to bring to light the Nephite record (see Mormon 8:14–16).

It is unlikely that the Book of Mormon prophets would have known the details of how the assaults on Joseph's legitimacy would occur. However, some of the prophecies of Lehi, Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni could be interpreted as providing support to shore up the foundation of Joseph's legitimacy. If this is correct, they did so to such a degree that Joseph's legitimacy is inextricably tied to the Book of Mormon as the authentic product of an ancient civilization.

Joseph Smith and the restoration of the temple

As already noted, Ancient Near Eastern kings associated themselves closely with a temple as a means of legitimizing their rule. Irregular kings, in particular, frequently either built new temples or renovated existing temples as a way of associating themselves with the legitimizing influence of the divine. In the latter-day kingdom of God, it is notable that the building of temples and the participation of Church members in temple rituals and ordinances were absolutely essential to Joseph Smith's theology, as revealed to him by the Lord. Joseph taught: "The Church is not fully organized, in its proper order, and cannot be, until the Temple is completed, where places will be provided for

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79. Bushman, "Joseph Smith and Power," 9.

the administration of the ordinances of the Priesthood."[80] Additionally, he explained that the purpose of gathering the people of God in any dispensation is primarily in order to build temples. He said:

> What was the object of gathering the . . . people of God in any age of the world? . . . The main object was to build unto the Lord a house whereby He could reveal unto His people the ordinances of His house and the glories of His kingdom, and teach the people the way of salvation; for there are certain ordinances and principles that, when they are taught and practiced, must be done in a place or house built for that purpose.[81]

In this focus on the importance of building temples, Joseph Smith more closely resembled Ancient Near Eastern kings than did any of his Christian contemporaries. In a study of ancient temples, John M. Lundquist pointed out: "The temple is the central, organizing, unifying institution in ancient Near Eastern society. The temple is associated with abundance and prosperity; indeed, it is perceived as the giver of these."[82] Despite the extreme poverty of Church members early in the Restoration, as soon as there was a body of Saints sufficiently large to undertake the endeavor, albeit at great sacrifice on their part, a beautiful temple was built in Kirtland, Ohio. Steven C. Harper writes that:

> Joseph worked hard to get the Saints to see the importance of the momentous revelation and to understand the temple and ultimate blessings. Like Moses, he wanted to usher his sometimes-shortsighted people into the presence of the Lord (see Doctrine and Covenants 84). The temple revelations preoccupied Joseph's attention. He wanted their promised blessings, and he worked to explain them to the Saints. Joseph was driven by section 88's command to build a temple and by the promise that the Lord would honor them with his presence (see Doctrine and Covenants

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80. "The House of the Lord," The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2025, history.churchofjesuschrist.org/content/the-house-of-the-lord.

81. "The House of the Lord," The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

82. John M. Lundquist, "The Common Temple Ideology of the Ancient Near East," in *The Temple in Antiquity: Ancient Records and Modern Perspectives*, ed. Truman G. Madsen (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1984), 53–76.

88:68). He urged the Saints forward, at enormous sacrifice, to build the house of the Lord in Kirtland.[83]

In his drive to build a temple and restore the ancient ordinances associated therewith, Joseph Smith was similar to the ancient Hebrew prophet-kings David, Solomon, and Nephi. There is perhaps no greater support for Joseph's Divine Election than the tremendous outpouring of spiritual power following the dedication of the Kirtland Temple. Many of the early Saints of the Restoration testified that they had experienced something akin to the day of Pentecost as described in the New Testament (see Acts 2). One eyewitness recorded:

> [S]ome have seen the heavens opened & seen the savior others have seen angels on the four corners of the house of the Lord with drawn swords & also stood thick on the ridge Elisha with his chariot of Fire, Peter John & James, & the highway cast up the ten tribes returning in chariots as far as the eye could extend some saw the Redemtion of Zion.[84]

Surely one would be hard pressed to find any clearer indication of the imprimatur of divine favor than what was experienced by these early Saints. This event may have been when Joseph Smith's divinely elected leadership appeared at its zenith.

The mystery of the sword of Laban and the Liahona

A mystery that has intrigued some members of the Church is the fact that, in addition to the plates that he was to translate and the Urim and Thummim he would use to aid in the translation, Joseph Smith was also given the breastplate, the sword of Laban, and the Liahona. Why were these artifacts, of no apparent value to Joseph's translation work, included with the plates and interpreters?

Brett Holbrook suggests that the sword of Laban was given to Joseph not only as a symbol of divine power and authority, but also as a symbol of kingship and royal power. He indicates that early members of the Church, including Brigham Young, found Joseph's possession

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83. Steven C. Harper, "Joseph Smith and the Kirtland Temple, 1836," in *Joseph Smith, the Prophet and Seer*, ed. Richard Neitzel Holzapfel and Kent P. Jackson (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2010), 239, rsc.byu.edu/sites/default/files/pub_content/pdf/09%20Harper.pdf.

84. Steven C. Harper, "Pentecost Continued: A Contemporaneous Account of the Kirtland Temple Dedication," *BYU Studies* 42, no. 2. (2003): 17, scholars archive.byu.edu/byusq/vol42/iss2/10.

of the sword to be an important confirmation of his leadership and authority in the kingdom of God.[85]

These royal artifacts seem to have been such an important part of establishing Joseph Smith's legitimacy that they were shown to the three men who were subsequently commanded to bear witness that Joseph possessed not only the plates and interpreters, but all of the Nephite royal relics that are mentioned in the Book of Mormon (see Doctrine and Covenants 17:1–5). That these things were given to Joseph by God and by Moroni (the rightful heir of the treasures) suggests that one purpose of their inclusion was for the bestowal of legitimacy, establishing thereby both Divine Election and Royal Prerogative.

Joseph Smith and popular acclamation

To complete the triad of legitimacy, the fact of Joseph's Popular Acclaim is perhaps best seen in the epitaph given for him in Doctrine and Covenants 135:3, which contains several references to the criteria of legitimacy:

> Joseph Smith, the Prophet and Seer of the Lord, has done more, save Jesus only, for the salvation of men in this world, than any other man that ever lived in it. In the short space of twenty years, he has brought forth the Book of Mormon, which he translated by the gift and power of God, and has been the means of publishing it on two continents; has sent the fulness of the everlasting gospel, which it contained, to the four quarters of the earth; has brought forth the revelations and commandments which compose this book of Doctrine and Covenants, and many other wise documents and instructions for the benefit of the children of men; gathered many thousands of the Latter-day Saints, founded a great city, and left a fame and name that cannot be slain. He lived great, and he died great in the eyes of God and his people; and like most of the Lord's anointed in ancient times, has sealed his mission and his works with his own blood.

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85. Brett L. Holbrook, "The Sword of Laban as a Symbol of Divine Authority and Kingship," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2, no. 1 (1993): 39–72, scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol2/iss1/4.

Summary and Conclusions

This study has examined the matter of political and prophetic legitimacy as it pertains to ancient and modern figures, focusing on the ways in which Nephi and Joseph Smith can both be understood as "irregular kings" whose authority required theological, narrative, and symbolic validation beyond hereditary succession. Drawing upon comparative material from the Ancient Near East, this article identifies a shared cultural logic underlying ancient apologetics of kingship. It argues that the Book of Mormon intentionally adopts this framework in its portrayal of Nephi — and, by prophetic extension, of Joseph Smith — both having been divinely sanctioned leaders.

Within the Ancient Near East, kingship was sustained by a recognizable triad of legitimacy — Divine Election, Royal Affiliation, and Popular Acclamation — often supplemented by further motifs such as the Unworthy Predecessor, Passivity, Merciful Victor, or Younger Brother. These legitimizing strategies formed a common rhetorical repertoire through which "irregular" rulers — those who came to power outside normal dynastic channels — could justify their right to rule. As this study demonstrates, the Book of Mormon record displays these same patterns with remarkable consistency. It explicitly emphasizes Nephi's divine appointment as both leader and prophet: "thou shalt be made a ruler and a teacher over thy brethren" (1 Nephi 2:22); his father Lehi's acknowledgment of his leadership (2 Nephi 1:24); and the love and loyalty of his people (Jacob 1:10–11). Nephi's account further aligns with Ancient Near Eastern royal ideology through the possession of sacred regalia — the sword of Laban, the plates of brass, the Liahona, and the large and small plates of Nephi — each functioning as an emblem of covenantal authority and divine favor. Additionally, Nephi's construction of a temple and his assumption of both priestly and prophetic roles complete the pattern by which Ancient Near Eastern monarchs affirmed their divine legitimacy through sacral service and monumental building.

The article extends this analysis to Joseph Smith, suggesting that Book of Mormon prophets foresaw and, if my theory is correct, intentionally situated the future prophet of the Restoration within this same legitimating paradigm. The prophecy of 2 Nephi 3 presents Joseph Smith as the divinely elected seer of the latter days — descended from Joseph of Egypt (Royal Affiliation), commissioned by God to bring forth sacred scripture and authority (Divine Election), and ultimately recognized and revered among his people (Popular Acclamation). In

addition to these textual parallels, Joseph's reception of the Nephite royal relics — the plates, interpreters, breastplate, sword of Laban, and Liahona — constitutes a symbolic transference of sacral leadership from the Nephite era to the dispensation of the Restoration. Joseph's theology of temple building and his exercise of charismatic, prophetic authority align him not with democratic models of leadership, but with the Ancient Near Eastern conception of a king as a divine agent who was responsible for building the temple, revealing divine law, and maintaining cosmic order.

Viewed through this comparative lens, Nephi and Joseph Smith emerge as participants in a single theological tradition of irregular kingship — leaders raised up by divine mandate rather than by inheritance or popular election. Both employ the legitimating instruments of ancient monarchs: authoritative narrative, possession of sacred relics, and association with the temple as the nexus of divine power. In both cases, legitimacy is not conferred by human convention, but derived from divine election, revelation, and covenantal stewardship.

Those who sought to assault Joseph Smith's legitimacy in the early years of the Church, as well as those who do so today, may intuitively recognize that Joseph's credibility rests on the accuracy of the apologetics discussed herein. Like those who challenged the right to rule of Ancient Near Eastern kings, Joseph's detractors target his legitimacy. Some may attack the story of his ascension by bringing into question the accuracy of the First Vision. Others may insist that his exercise of divine powers such as prophecy and revelation was fraudulent. Still others may dismiss the stories of gold plates delivered by a divine messenger as fantasy. And perhaps most of all, they fail to recognize that, ultimately, the strongest evidence of Joseph's prophetic calling is the Book of Mormon itself.

This study proposes that the Book of Mormon deliberately situates both its founding prophet and its latter-day translator within an ancient apologetic framework of kingship, one that reconciles the irregular rise of divinely appointed leaders with the enduring requirement of legitimacy. Nephi's successful establishment of a dynastic kingship lasted more than four centuries and Joseph Smith's restoration of prophetic authority through sacred artifacts and temple ordinances has lasted two centuries and counting. Both attest to a shared theology: that true rule — whether ancient or modern — is legitimate only insofar as it is sanctioned by God. Through their respective narratives, both figures reaffirm the enduring Near Eastern conviction that sovereignty is

sacred, that leadership is covenantal, and that divine election remains the ultimate foundation of legitimacy.

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