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King Benjamin: The Drama's Sacral Kingship is about Being a Child of God

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King Benjamin: The Drama's Sacral Kingship is about Being a Child of God

The speech delivered by King Benjamin and its setting have been recognized by LDS scholars as one of the most convincing evidences that the text of the Book of Mormon is as ancient as it claims to be and that its religion and culture stem from the background of pre-exilic Israel.⁷⁴¹ The fact that the occasion described here is a celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles, and not just a political gathering, is evinced by several striking features. First, the event required a pilgrimage where people gathered from all over. They attended as families, and performed sacrifices. Second, King Benjamin spoke from the temple and from a tower. Third, the people stayed in tents that were occupied by entire family units, and all the tents faced the temple.⁷⁴² That the families temporarily resided in tents rather than leaf-covered booths as in the Old Testament, is interesting. The reason for that modification in the ritual is easily understood. In Jerusalem the booths provided protection from the sun, but in ancient Mesoamerica it may have been much more important to be protected from the rain. Fourth, as in the Old Testament, the king lead the people in their covenant-making ceremonies, and the people who watched also participated in the ceremonies. Similar audience participation appears in other places in the Book of Mormon.⁷⁴³

King Benjamin's speech also evinces that this was a special ceremonial occasion. As John Welch observed, "Whoever composed Benjamin's speech knew essentially what

⁷⁴¹ For a full volume of essays by LDS scholars, see Welch and Ricks, *King Benjamin's Speech*.

⁷⁴² John W. Welch, "Good and True" in Susan Easton Black, ed. *Expressions of Faith: Testimonies of Latter-day Saint Scholars* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1996: 235-36.

⁷⁴³ Examples are: Mosiah 5:1-8, where the people speak in unison to make a covenant; 3 Nephi 4:28-33, where there seems to be a ceremony where the people also speak in unison; 3 Nephi 20:1-10, where the Savior administers the sacrament, and "when the multitude had all eaten and drunk, behold, they were filled with the Spirit; and they did cry out with one voice, and gave glory to Jesus, whom they both saw and heard." (v.9)

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belonged in an ancient coronation ceremony held in conjunction with a Feast of Tabernacles or the Day of Atonement and a covenant renewal.”⁷⁴⁴

As time passed, it seems that among the Nephites, King Benjamin's speech came to be recognized as something like the official commentary on the most significant portions of the Feast of Tabernacles temple drama.⁷⁴⁵

In his own writings, the prophet-historian Mormon described neither the beginning events of King Benjamin's festival, nor the drama, nor the sacred ordinances performed in conjunction with it. Rather, he placed his emphasis on their meanings, by focusing on the royal speech and on the covenants made at the conclusion of the ceremony. The speech is extraordinary for three reasons—these reasons are also sound evidences that it was delivered during the Feast of Tabernacles. The first is that King Benjamin was both king and prophet, and he used this occasion to give his farewell address. The second is that it was given in conjunction with the consecration of Benjamin's son Mosiah, who became the next king.⁷⁴⁶ The third is that the content of the speech was initiated by an angel who visited King Benjamin to explain the most important meanings of the festival drama.

Other LDS scholars have carefully analyzed the speech and its festival setting,⁷⁴⁷ but we find the visit of the angel to be most interesting because he used the psalms to explain the most significant doctrines taught in the festival and its drama. Inasmuch as the psalms were the liturgy of the temple drama, it seems reasonable to suppose that any reference the angel made to the psalms was also a reference to the meaning of the drama.

It appears from the narrative that King Benjamin had already given the traditional

⁷⁴⁴ Welch, “Good and True,” 235.

⁷⁴⁵ See Mosiah 8:3, 26:1; and Helaman 5:9 as examples.

⁷⁴⁶ Thomasson, “Mosiah: the Complex Symbolism,” 26. Mark J. Morrise, “Simile Curses in the Ancient Near East, Old Testament, and Book of Mormon,” *FARMS Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2, 1 (Spring 1993): 132. For a discussion of the relationship of adoption, redemption, and covenant, see Jennifer Clark Lane, “The Lord Will Redeem His People: Adoptive Covenant and Redemption in the Old Testament and Book of Mormon,” *FARMS Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2, 2 (Fall 1993): 48.

⁷⁴⁷ For examples of its use, see Mosiah 8:3, 26:1; Helaman 5:9. For a discussion of the festival setting of King Benjamin's address, see Terrence L. Szink and John W. Welch, “King Benjamin's Speech in the Context of Ancient Israelite Festivals,” in *King Benjamin's Speech: “That Ye May Learn Wisdom,”* ed. John W. Welch and Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1998), 147-223.

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royal sermon, and the events of the festival were nearly concluded. The angel's visit apparently caused the king to break with tradition, because the record says the king instructed his son to gather the people together again. He then apparently delivered a second speech that began with an account of the angel's visit:

1 And again my brethren, I would call your attention, for I have somewhat more to speak unto you; for behold, I have things to tell you concerning that which is to come.

2 And the things which I shall tell you are made known unto me by an angel from God. And he said unto me: Awake; and I awoke, and behold he stood before me [in the Old Testament, one stands to make or initiate a covenant⁷⁴⁸].

3 And he said unto me: Awake, and hear the words which I shall tell thee; for behold, I am come to declare unto you the glad tidings of great joy.

4 For the Lord hath heard thy prayers, and hath judged of thy righteousness, and hath sent me to declare unto thee that thou mayest rejoice; and that thou mayest declare unto thy people, that they may also be filled with joy (Mosiah 3:1-4).

Twice, the angel commanded the king to awake. That word may also have reflected words found in the festival drama. "Awake" has two meanings. The first is to be awakened from sleep. The second is to become mentally alert. The angel used both.⁷⁴⁹

The principles the angel was about to explain were most important. The Feast of Tabernacles drama carried two concurrent messages: the first and most easily recognized was the eternal biography of each individual as told through the story of the king, in the context of the work and power of Jehovah. The second was that the biographical account of the king was parallel to and, therefore, representative of, the biography of the God of Israel, first as Jehovah, then as the Messiah, Jesus, and the Resurrected Christ. The angel called attention to the second symbolic meaning of the drama when he paraphrased and elaborated on the 146th Psalm. The psalm reads:

⁷⁴⁸ As in 2 Kings 23:1-3 and Psalm 82:1.

⁷⁴⁹ For examples of these uses, see Psalms 7:6, and 44:23. In Paul's statement, "Awake thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light" (Ephesians 5:14), awake seems to mean to become mentally alert, and arise to become physically alive.

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- 1 Praise ye the Lord.
Praise the Lord, O my soul.
- 2 While I live will I praise the Lord:
I will sing praises unto my God while I have any being.
- 3 Put not your trust in princes,
nor in the son of man, in whom there is no help.
- 4 His breath goeth forth, he returneth to his earth;
in that very day his thoughts perish.
- 5 Happy is he that hath the God of Jacob for his help,
whose hope is in the Lord his God:
- 6 Which made heaven, and earth, the sea,
and all that therein is:
which keepeth truth for ever:
- 7 Which executeth judgment for the oppressed:
which giveth food to the hungry.
The Lord looseth the prisoners:
- 8 The Lord openeth the eyes of the blind:
the Lord raiseth them that are bowed down:
the Lord loveth the righteous:
- 9 The Lord preserveth the strangers;
he relieveth the fatherless and widow:
but the way of the wicked he turneth upside down.
- 10 The Lord shall reign for ever, even thy God, O Zion,
unto all generations. Praise ye the Lord (Psalm 146:1-10).

In that psalm, the Lord himself is represented as fulfilling the covenantal responsibilities that were given to the members of the Council in Psalm 82:

- 3 Defend the poor and fatherless:
do justice to the afflicted and needy.
- 4 Deliver the poor and needy:
rid them out of the hand of the wicked.
- 5 They know not, neither will they understand;
they walk on in darkness:
all the foundations of the earth are out of course (Psalm 82:3-5).

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The Angel who spoke to King Benjamin said:

5 For behold, the time cometh, and is not far distant, that with power, the Lord Omnipotent who reigneth, who was, and is from all eternity to all eternity, shall come down from heaven among the children of men, and shall dwell in a tabernacle of clay, and shall go forth amongst men, working mighty miracles, such as healing the sick, raising the dead, causing the lame to walk, the blind to receive their sight, and the deaf to hear, and curing all manner of diseases.

6 And he shall cast out devils, or the evil spirits which dwell in the hearts of the children of men (Mosiah 3:5-6).

Again from Psalm 82:

6 I have said, Ye are gods;
and all of you are children of the most High.

7 But ye shall die like men,
and fall [in battle] like one of the princes (Psalm 82:6-7).

The angel said to King Benjamin:

7 And lo, he shall suffer temptations, and pain of body, hunger, thirst, and fatigue, even more than man can suffer, except it be unto death; for behold, blood cometh from every pore, so great shall be his anguish for the wickedness and the abominations of his people.

8 And he shall be called Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Father of heaven and earth, the Creator of all things from the beginning; and his mother shall be called Mary.

9 And lo, he cometh unto his own, that salvation might come unto the children of men even through faith on his name; and even after all this they shall consider him a man, and say that he hath a devil, and shall scourge him, and shall crucify him (Mosiah 3:7-9).

The angel referred to the drama scene where Jehovah rescued the reigning king from death and hell when he explained:

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10 And he shall rise the third day from the dead; and behold, he standeth to judge the world; and behold, all these things are done that a righteous judgment might come upon the children of men (Mosiah 3:10).

Then the angel reiterated the promise of salvation for the dead that is represented in Psalm 22, where the Savior visits the Underworld to proclaim the gospel to the spirits there:

11 For behold, and also his blood atoneth for the sins of those who have fallen by the transgression of Adam, who have died not knowing the will of God concerning them, or who have ignorantly sinned.

12 But wo, wo unto him who knoweth that he rebelleth against God! For salvation cometh to none such except it be through repentance and faith on the Lord Jesus Christ (Mosiah 3:11-12).

The angel further explained:

15 And many signs, and wonders, and types, and shadows showed he [the Lord] unto them [the Israelites], concerning his coming; and also holy prophets spake unto them concerning his coming; and yet they hardened their hearts, and understood not that the Law of Moses availeth nothing except it were through the Atonement of his blood (Mosiah 3:15).

Perhaps that statement was a suggestion that some of King Benjamin's people had missed the most important meanings of the festival and its drama. The next explanation by the angel was another clear reference to the doctrine of salvation for the dead that is taught in the final third of Psalm 22.⁷⁵⁰

17 And moreover, I say unto you, that there shall be no other name given nor any other way nor means whereby salvation can come unto the children of men, only in and through the name of Christ, the Lord Omnipotent.

⁷⁵⁰ For a discussion of Psalm 22, see the chapter called, "Act 2, Scene 7, Jehovah Conquers Death and Hell."

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18 For behold he judgeth, and his judgment is just; and the infant perisheth not that dieth in his infancy; but men drink damnation to their own souls except they humble themselves and become as little children, and believe that salvation was, and is, and is to come, in and through the atoning blood of Christ, the Lord Omnipotent.

19 For the natural man is an enemy to God, and has been from the fall of Adam, and will be, forever and ever, unless he yields to the enticings of the Holy Spirit, and putteth off the natural man and becometh a saint through the atonement of Christ the Lord, and becometh as a child, submissive, meek, humble, patient, full of love, willing to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon him, even as a child doth submit to his father.

20 And moreover, I say unto you, that the time shall come when the knowledge of a Savior shall spread throughout every nation, kindred, tongue, and people.

21 And behold, when that time cometh, none shall be found blameless before God, except it be little children, only through repentance and faith on the name of the Lord God Omnipotent.

22 And even at this time, when thou shalt have taught thy people the things which the Lord thy God hath commanded thee, even then are they found no more blameless in the sight of God, only according to the words which I have spoken unto thee. (Mosiah 3:17-22).

The angel's teaching about children may have been another explanation of a portion of the festival drama that was not fully understood by the Nephites. The most explicit reference to children in the psalms is Psalm 131. Its three verses are a celebration of childhood innocence:

1 Lord, my heart is not haughty, nor mine eyes lofty:

either do I exercise myself in great matters,
or in things too high for me.

2 Surely I have behaved and quieted myself,

as a child that is weaned of his mother:
my soul is even as a weaned child.

3 Let Israel hope in the Lord from henceforth and for ever (Psalm 131:1-3).

Another short psalm spoke of the importance of the family:

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- 1 Except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it:
 except the Lord keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain.
- 2 It is vain for you to rise up early, to sit up late,
 to eat the bread of sorrows: for so he giveth his beloved sleep.
- 3 Lo, children are an heritage of the Lord:
 and the fruit of the womb is his reward.
- 4 As arrows are in the hand of a mighty man;
 so are children of the youth.
- 5 Happy is the man that hath his quiver full of them: they shall not be ashamed,
 but they shall speak with the enemies in the gate (Psalm 127:1-5).⁷⁵¹

The angel who spoke to King Benjamin concluded his instructions by reiterating the same ideas with which he had begun: “For the Lord hath heard thy prayers, and hath judged of thy righteousness, and hath sent me to declare unto thee that thou mayest rejoice; and that thou mayest declare unto thy people, that they may also be filled with joy” (v. 4). Now he tied his entire message into a neat bow by reminding the king of the story of Adam and Eve and the Fall, and reaffirmed the Lord’s powers of both justice and mercy. That understanding of kingship is described in the 89th Psalm:

- 14 Justice and judgment are the habitation of thy throne:
 mercy and truth shall go before thy face.
- 15 Blessed is the people that know the joyful sound:
 they shall walk, O Lord, in the light of thy countenance.
- 16 In thy name shall they rejoice all the day:
 and in thy righteousness shall they be exalted.
- 17 For thou art the glory of their strength:
 and in thy favour our horn shall be exalted.
- 18 For the Lord is our defence;
 and the Holy One of Israel is our king.
- 19 Then thou spakest in vision to thy holy one, and saidst,
 I have laid help upon one that is mighty;
 I have exalted one chosen out of the people.

⁷⁵¹ Daniel E. Fleming, “Psalm 127: Sleep for the Fearful, and Security in Sons,” *Zeitschrift fur die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 107 (1995): 435-44.

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- 20 I have found David my servant;
with my holy oil have I anointed him:
21 With whom my hand shall be established:
mine arm also shall strengthen him.
22 The enemy shall not exact upon him;
nor the son of wickedness afflict him.
23 And I will beat down his foes before his face,
and plague them that hate him.
24 But my faithfulness and my mercy shall be with him:
and in my name shall his horn be exalted (Psalm 89:14-24).

One of the most obvious themes of the drama emphasized the rights of the reigning king to judge, but the angel pointed out that the ultimate authority to judge rested with God himself:

- 23 And now I have spoken the words which the Lord God hath commanded me.
24 And thus saith the Lord: They shall stand as a bright testimony against this people, at the judgment day; whereof they shall be judged, every man according to his works, whether they be good, or whether they be evil.
25 And if they be evil they are consigned to an awful view of their own guilt and abominations, which doth cause them to shrink from the presence of the Lord into a state of misery and endless torment, from whence they can no more return; therefore they have drunk damnation to their own souls.
26 Therefore, they have drunk out of the cup of the wrath of God, which justice could no more deny unto them than it could deny that Adam should fall because of his partaking of the forbidden fruit; therefore, mercy could have claim on them no more forever.
27 And their torment is as a lake of fire and brimstone, whose flames are unquenchable, and whose smoke ascendeth up forever and ever. Thus hath the Lord commanded me. Amen (Mosiah 3:23-27).

Even this description of the final fate of the wicked was an echo of one of the psalms. The angel said:

- 26 Therefore, they have drunk out of the cup of the wrath of God, which justice

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could no more deny unto them than it could deny that Adam should fall because of his partaking of the forbidden fruit; therefore, mercy could have claim on them no more forever.

27 And their torment is as a lake of fire and brimstone, whose flames are unquenchable, and whose smoke ascendeth up forever and ever. Thus hath the Lord commanded me. Amen (Mosiah 3:26-27).

The psalm reads:

4 The Lord is in his holy temple,

the Lord's throne is in heaven [Note: this throne is not on the earth]:
his eyes behold, his eyelids try the children of men.

5 The Lord trieth the righteous:

but the wicked and him that loveth violence his soul hateth.

6 Upon the wicked he shall rain snares, fire and brimstone, and an horrible tempest:
this shall be the portion of their cup.

7 For the righteous Lord loveth righteousness;

his countenance doth behold the upright (Psalm 11:4-7).

When King Benjamin had concluded telling about the angel, and adding his own instructions, the people fell to the earth and:

2 ... viewed themselves in their own carnal state, even less than the dust of the earth. And they all cried aloud with one voice, [they spoke in unison] saying: O have mercy, and apply the atoning blood of Christ that we may receive forgiveness of our sins, and our hearts may be purified; for we believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who created heaven and earth, and all things; who shall come down among the children of men (Mosiah 4:2b).

While this appears to be a formally structured, probably orchestrated, response, that did not preclude its being a heartfelt one by each individual who participated:

3 And it came to pass that after they had spoken these words the Spirit of the Lord came upon them, and they were filled with joy, having received a remission of their sins, and having peace of conscience, because of the exceeding faith

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which they had in Jesus Christ who should come, according to the words which king Benjamin had spoken unto them (Mosiah 4:2-3).

After they had spoken these words, the king continued his speech by admonishing them to bind themselves in a covenant whose conditions sound remarkably like the covenant in Psalm 82, and like the law of consecration as it would be practiced by the later Nephites:

11 And again I say unto you as I have said before, that as ye have come to the knowledge of the glory of God, or if ye have known of his goodness and have tasted of his love, and have received a remission of your sins, which causeth such exceedingly great joy in your souls, even so I would that ye should remember, and always retain in remembrance, the greatness of God, and your own nothingness, and his goodness and long-suffering towards you, unworthy creatures, and humble yourselves even in the depths of humility, calling on the name of the Lord daily, and standing steadfastly in the faith of that which is to come, which was spoken by the mouth of the angel. ...

13 And ye will not have a mind to injure one another, but to live peaceably, and to render to every man according to that which is his due.

14 And ye will not suffer your children that they go hungry, or naked; neither will ye suffer that they transgress the laws of God, ...

15 But ye will teach them to walk in the ways of truth and soberness; ye will teach them to love one another, and to serve one another.

16 And also, ye yourselves will succor those that stand in need of your succor; ye will administer of your substance unto him that standeth in need; and ye will not suffer that the beggar putteth up his petition to you in vain, and turn him out to perish. ...

21 And now, if God, who has created you, on whom you are dependent for your lives and for all that ye have and are, doth grant unto you whatsoever ye ask that is right, in faith, believing that ye shall receive, O then, how ye ought to impart of the substance that ye have one to another. ...

26 ... I would that ye should impart of your substance to the poor, every man according to that which he hath, such as feeding the hungry, clothing the naked,

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visiting the sick and administering to their relief, both spiritually and temporally, according to their wants.

27 And see that all these things are done in wisdom and order; for it is not requisite that a man should run faster than he has strength. And again, it is expedient that he should be diligent, that thereby he might win the prize; therefore, all things must be done in order (Mosiah 4:11-27).

Once again, the people responded “with one voice”:

2 Yea, we believe all the words which thou hast spoken unto us; and also, we know of their surety and truth, because of the Spirit of the Lord Omnipotent, which has wrought a mighty change in us, or in our hearts, that we have no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually.

3 And we, ourselves, also, through the infinite goodness of God, and the manifestations of his Spirit, have great views of that which is to come; and were it expedient, we could prophesy of all things.

4 And it is the faith which we have had on the things which our king has spoken unto us that has brought us to this great knowledge, whereby we do rejoice with such exceedingly great joy.

5 And we are willing to enter into a covenant with our God to do his will, and to be obedient to his commandments in all things that he shall command us, all the remainder of our days, that we may not bring upon ourselves a never-ending torment, as has been spoken by the angel, that we may not drink out of the cup of the wrath of God (Mosiah 5:2b-5).

King Benjamin complimented them on the covenant they had just made by giving them a new name, “Ye shall be called the children of Christ.” That is clearly a paraphrase of the royal coronation hymn. In that psalm the king testifies:

I will declare the decree: the Lord hath said unto me,
Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee (Psalm 2:7).

The story of King Benjamin’s covenant ceremony is of great value to us when we try to recreate the festival drama of the Old Testament. We have the text of the drama in the psalms, but scholars can only conjecture what else was going on. But in the Book of

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Mormon we have many of the missing stage directions, and we discover, as a certainty, that not only was the king adopted as a son and heir of God, but the entire congregation shared in that adoption. After the people had spoken the words of the covenant, King Benjamin said to them:

6 Ye have spoken the words that I desired; and the covenant which ye have made is a righteous covenant.

7 And now, because of the covenant which ye have made ye shall be called the children of Christ, his sons, and his daughters; for behold, this day he hath spiritually begotten you; for ye say that your hearts are changed through faith on his name; therefore, ye are born of him and have become his sons and his daughters.

8 And under this head ye are made free, and there is no other head whereby ye can be made free. There is no other name given whereby salvation cometh; therefore, I would that ye should take upon you the name of Christ, all you that have entered into the covenant with God that ye should be obedient unto the end of your lives.

9 And it shall come to pass that whosoever doeth this shall be found at the right hand of God, for he shall know the name by which he is called; for he shall be called by the name of Christ. ...

12 I say unto you, I would that ye should remember to retain the name written always in your hearts, that ye are not found on the left hand of God, but that ye hear and know the voice by which ye shall be called, and also, the name by which he shall call you.

13 For how knoweth a man the master whom he has not served, and who is a stranger unto him, and is far from the thoughts and intents of his heart? ...

15 Therefore, I would that ye should be steadfast and immovable, always abounding in good works, that Christ, the Lord God Omnipotent, may seal you his, that you may be brought to heaven, that ye may have everlasting salvation and eternal life, through the wisdom, and power, and justice, and mercy of him who created all things, in heaven and in earth, who is God above all. Amen (Mosiah 5:6b-15).

Even though the visitation of the angel apparently caused the king to change some of the details of the ceremony, this account of the conclusion of the drama gives us a good

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look into some of the most important parts of the drama as they were performed during pre-exilic Old Testament times.

King Benjamin's paraphrasing Psalm 2 that the psalm itself had been used earlier in his ceremony. Otherwise he would have quoted it rather than paraphrased it. It shows something else too: the Nephites understood that the king must be an adopted son of God in order to legitimately sit upon his throne as king and in order to represent God in priesthood and theological matters. If he were not a son, he would be a usurper.

That is an important insight into the politics and theology of the Book of Mormon. It was the principle with which Alma confronted Zeezrom when the latter was planning to conduct a *coup* to overthrow the Nephite government. The principle was actualized when the Savior established his new kingdom in Third Nephi. There he ordained the Twelve, then taught the Beatitudes—the pinnacle of which reads: “And blessed are all the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God” (3 Nephi 12:9).