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Nephi's Review of the Festival Temple Drama

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Nephi's Review of the Festival Temple Drama

There are many examples, but one of the first we encounter is “mystery” in the first verse of the Book of Mormon. As observed earlier, the Greek word translated “mystery” in the New Testament is the same as the Hebrew *sode* that is translated “secret” in the Old Testament. That being true, we can know that Nephi’s intent in the first verse of the Book of Mormon was to teach us that he is—by definition—a true prophet. He wrote:

Having been highly favored of the Lord in all my days; yea, having had a great knowledge of the goodness and the *mysteries* of God ...

With those words he tells us that he has had a *sode* experience,⁷³⁷ and therefore (given the

⁷³⁷ The distinguished Catholic Biblical scholar, Raymond E. Brown, has shown that the meaning of the Greek word *mysterion* (translated "mystery" in the English versions of the New Testament) and of the Hebrew word *sode* (translated "secret" in the English versions of the Old Testament) is essentially the same. *Mysterion* is more specific since it refers to secrets disclosed during initiation into sacred religious rites, [Strong 3466: “the idea of silence imposed by initiation into religious rites”] while *sode* is more general in that it refers to the deliberations (or decisions) of either a religious or a secular council. Brown observes that the New Testament *mysterion* refers to the Council in Heaven. He shows that in the Old Testament *sode* sometimes refers to that Council or its decisions (as in Amos 3:7), though it is sometimes used to describe any gathering, whether legal, or illegal and conspiratorial. (see Raymond E. Brown, *The Semitic Background of the Term "Mystery" in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968), 2-6).

Understanding these words casts a fascinating light on the manner in which the Book of Mormon was translated. The Nephites most likely spoke Hebrew or some other Semitic language, not Greek, so the Greek word *mysterion* was probably not a part of their language, whereas the Hebrew word *sode* (with its English equivalents) was likely familiar to the ancient Book of Mormon peoples. In the Book of Mormon, as in the Bible, *sode* might refer to a Council in Heaven *sode* experience, or a ceremony related to the temple drama representing a *sode* experience, or even the secret decisions of conspirators. In this, the English translation of the Book of Mormon is very precise. When the underlying word *sode* used in the negative sense it is translated as "secret," as in "secret combinations." However, when the underlying word *sode* is used in the positive sense—indicating a temple or temple-like experience—it is always translated as "mystery," equivalent to the English New Testament translation of the Greek *mysterion*. Thus, Nephi writes of "having had a great knowledge of the goodness and the mysteries of God" (1 Nephi 1:1).

For a more detailed discussion of the *sode* experience see the chapter called, “Sode Experience.”

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criterion established by Jeremiah 23:18-23) he is a true prophet who has the right and responsibility to speak the words that God has instructed him to speak.

To Nephi, that simple declaration—that he knows the mysteries—is sufficient for himself, because he will give us details of his *sode* experience later in his narrative. But for his father, Lehi, Nephi gives us all the information we need to judge that he was also a true prophet. In his account of his father's vision, Nephi mentioned all of the classic elements of a true *sode* experience:⁷³⁸ (1) Lehi was taken in vision to the premortal Council in Heaven where he saw “numberless concourses of angels in the attitude of singing and praising their God.” (2) “He saw God sitting upon his throne.” (3) He received his earthly assignment from Jehovah who “gave unto him a book, and bade him that he should read.” Lehi's assignment was in the words of the book. (4) He was promised that he would be able to fulfill his assignment and his covenants. That promise is not explicitly stated, but it is strongly asserted by Lehi's response to the information he received in the vision:

And it came to pass that when my father had read and seen many great and marvelous things, he did exclaim many things unto the Lord; such as: Great and marvelous are thy works, O Lord God Almighty! Thy throne is high in the heavens, and thy power, and goodness, and mercy are over all the inhabitants of the earth; and, because thou art merciful, thou wilt not suffer those who come unto thee that they shall perish! (1 Nephi 1:14)

Thus, Nephi begins his account in exactly the way we would expect from an Israelite prophet. He says that both he and his father have had *sode* experiences—that they have revisited the Council in Heaven, have received instructions from God, and have authority to speak God's words. They are, therefore, true prophets.⁷³⁹

First Nephi is a magnificent chiasmic poem that took Nephi ten years to compose. One can deduce that time from his statement in Second Nephi:

⁷³⁸ Blake T. Ostler, “The Throne-Theophany and Prophetic Commission in 1 Nephi: a Form-Critical Analysis,” *BYU Studies* 26, 4 (Fall 1986): 67-95. See Nibley, *Abraham in Egypt*, 36-37, 190-91; Stephen D. Ricks, “The Narrative Call Pattern in the Prophetic Commission of Enoch (Moses 6),” *BYU Studies* 26, 4 (Fall 1986): 97-105.

⁷³⁹ Examples of Old Testament passages in which prophets introduce themselves by telling of their *sode* experience are Isaiah 6 (2 Nephi 16 is a better version); Jeremiah 1:4-6, and Ezekiel 1:3-28. John does the same in Revelation.

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28 And thirty years had passed away from the time we left Jerusalem.

29 And I, Nephi, had kept the records upon my plates, which I had made, of my people thus far.

30 And it came to pass that the Lord God said unto me: Make other plates; and thou shalt engraven many things upon them which are good in my sight, for the profit of thy people.

31 Wherefore, I, Nephi, to be obedient to the commandments of the Lord, went and made these plates upon which I have engraven these things.

32 And I engraved that which is pleasing unto God. And if my people are pleased with the things of God they will be pleased with mine engravings which are upon these plates.

33 And if my people desire to know the more particular part of the history of my people they must search mine other plates.

34 And it sufficeth me to say that forty years had passed away, and we had already had wars and contentions with our brethren (2 Nephi 5:21-34).

Earlier in the record, Nephi explained the purpose for this set of small plates. He wrote:

3 And after I had made these plates by way of commandment, I, Nephi, received a commandment that the ministry and the prophecies, the more plain and precious parts of them, should be written upon these plates; and that the things which were written should be kept for the instruction of my people, who should possess the land, and also for other wise purposes, which purposes are known unto the Lord.

4 ... and that these plates should be handed down from one generation to another, or from one prophet to another, until further commandments of the Lord (1 Nephi 19:3-4b).

That the plates of Nephi were to be “handed down ...from one prophet to another” implies that their purpose was to be a kind of spiritual rudder to prevent the people from wandering off into strange religious paths, as had happened with the people in Jerusalem. To achieve that end, Nephi recorded the vital story of his colony’s spiritual beginnings, but he also wanted those future prophets to understand that the primary purpose for leaving Jerusalem (apart from saving their lives) was to preserve the pure religion of the Israelites. It was probably for that reason that he repeatedly chose the pattern of the Feast of

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Tabernacles temple drama as an encoded testimony that he did, in fact, have “a great knowledge of the goodness and the mysteries of God.”

That also helps explain why he introduced himself and his father within the context of that drama, for in the first six verses of First Nephi he mentions, in their correct order, every one of the most significant concepts in the New Year festival temple drama, creating a subtextual colophon that identifies himself and his father as true prophets. He divides it into the same three acts that we found in the 23rd Psalm:

Act 1

1 I, Nephi, having been born of goodly parents, therefore I was taught somewhat in all the learning of my father;

Act 2

He enters the “valley of the shadow of death” and tells his qualifications and purposes for writing:

and having seen many afflictions in the course of my days, nevertheless, having been highly favored of the Lord in all my days; yea, having had a great knowledge of the goodness and the mysteries of God, therefore I make a record of my proceedings in my days.

He says his writing will include a subtext:

2 Yea, I make a record in the language of my father, which consists of the learning of the Jews and the language of the Egyptians.

He did not write that his father’s language was a combination of the languages of the Jews and the Egyptians, but rather that it consisted of the *learning of the Jews* (the concepts expressed in the code of the Jewish sacral language) *and the language of the Egyptians* (the non-sacral script or language of the world).

He then bears a powerful legal witness:

3 And I know that the record which I make is true; and I make it with mine own hand ;

One does not make a record true with one’s “hand” simply by writing the words. Something more is required. For example, in our courts of law, even though one’s

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testimony may already be written, it is made “true” by a hand gesture—raising the arm to the square while swearing that the information is correct according to one’s own first-hand knowledge. It is likely that Nephi may be referring to such a hand gesture.

In a very real way, one’s hand is the expression, even the personification, of one’s Self. If one were to slip and fall, it is likely that the hand would be the first thing to touch the ground because the hand is the protector of the body, both defensively and aggressively. It is especially protective of the face. One’s hand not only protects but also sustains the body. It cleanses one’s body, brings it food and drink, attends to its pain, and brings it pleasure. One’s hand is also the outward expression of one’s inner Self. The hand attends to and comforts others, and it can convey the expression of the full range of human emotion, from hate to sorrow, to tenderness and love, and to adoration. Thus, it is appropriate that one’s hand—especially the right hand—is the symbol of one’s honesty, integrity, power, and love.

and I make it according to my knowledge.

He has said his record is true, symbolically used his hand to verify its truthfulness, and now has sworn that his is primary evidence and is not hearsay.

The combined elements of Nephi’s evidence—the assertion that it is true, the symbolism of the hand, and the affirmation of his personal knowledge—make Nephi’s testimony as legally binding upon his readers as can be done with written words: He now mentions kingship:

4 For it came to pass in the commencement of the first year of the reign of Zedekiah, king of Judah,

He mentions priesthood leadership:]

(my father, Lehi,

He mentions sacred space:]

having dwelt at Jerusalem in all his days);

He calls attention to those who make and fulfill their covenants:

and in that same year there came many prophets, prophesying unto the people that they must repent,

He predicts the reality of the combat:

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or the great city Jerusalem must be destroyed.

He mentions prayer:

5 Wherefore it came to pass that my father, Lehi, as he went forth prayed unto the Lord, yea, even with all his heart, in behalf of his people.

He mentions the veil (the *Shechinah*):

6 And it came to pass as he prayed unto the Lord, there came a pillar of fire and dwelt upon a rock before him;

Act 3

As in the 23rd Psalm, Act 3 is very brief. Here it is simply,
and he saw and heard much (1 Nephi 1:1-13).

In that subtextual colophon, Nephi has taken us through the festival drama with such care that it is apparent that he wished us to identify his writings with the ancient temple drama. His being able to write that way is a second evidence that he is a true prophet. Then, apparently to make sure we would not think that reciting the main points of the drama was only a happenstance, he immediately repeated the drama's sequence again in the first two chapters of his book. This time he used a first-person version of its events of the cosmic myth to create a second subtextual colophon.

(1) The sequence begins with his father's *sode* experience where Lehi returns to the Council in Heaven. So Nephi's third colophon begins in the Council just like the ancient temple drama did. He does not tell the Adam and Eve story with its promise that death will bring deliverance from this world. Rather, he tells its near equivalent in the boldest of up-to-date terms—only rather than the promise that death will bring deliverance, its focus is on the proposition that death is the consequence of unrepented sin:

18 Therefore, I would that ye should know, that after the Lord had shown so many marvelous things unto my father, Lehi, yea, concerning the destruction of Jerusalem, behold he went forth among the people, and began to prophesy and to declare unto them concerning the things which he had both seen and heard.

19 And it came to pass that the Jews did mock him because of the things which he testified of them; for he truly testified of their wickedness and their

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abominations; and he testified that the things which he saw and heard, and also the things which he read in the book, manifested plainly of the coming of a Messiah, and also the redemption of the world (1 Nephi 1:18-19).

(2) Lehi's Melchizedek priesthood is shown in the next verse, not by telling when he received it but by showing that he had the authority to exercise its power:

But behold, I, Nephi, will show unto you that the tender mercies of the Lord are over all those whom he hath chosen, because of their faith, to make them mighty even unto the power of deliverance (1 Nephi 1:20).

(3) The Abrahamic Covenant includes the blessings of priesthood the assurances of family, and a promised land. Nephi mentioned them all. His father was a prophet ("the Lord commanded my father, even in a dream"), he mentions family ("that he should take his family"), and he implies the promised land as the destination of their travel ("and depart into the wilderness").

(4) Only a few verses later, Nephi demonstrates that his father can establish sacred space for after "he had traveled three days in the wilderness, he pitched his tent." Each time Nephi mentions his father's tent, it is, like this one, in conjunction with sacred rites or events, showing that it was the family's "tabernacle"—that is, the central tent of the camp was sacred space. That is confirmed in the next verse where he talks about ordinances and shows that Lehi had the authority to officiate in them:

And it came to pass that he built an altar of stones, and made an offering unto the Lord, and gave thanks unto the Lord our God (1 Nephi 2:7).

(5) For Nephi the ritual combat of the drama is very real. He next introduces us to his personal nemeses, his brothers Laman and Lemuel:

Now this he [Lehi] spake because of the stiffneckedness of Laman and Lemuel; for behold they did murmur in many things against their father, because he was a visionary man, and had led them out of the land of Jerusalem, to leave the land of their inheritance, and their gold, and their silver, and their precious things, to perish in the wilderness. And this they said he had done because of the

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foolish imaginations of his heart (1 Nephi 2:11).

(6) Nephi shows that notwithstanding their attempts to prevent him from keeping his covenants, Jehovah himself would intercede in his behalf:

And it came to pass that the Lord spake unto me, saying: Blessed art thou, Nephi, because of thy faith, for thou hast sought me diligently, with lowliness of heart (1 Nephi 2:19).

(7) The coronation ceremony of the seventh day of the drama is made reality when the Lord promised Nephi that he would be a king and a priest, thus establishing his own authority and the legitimacy of his new dynasty:

20 And inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments, ye shall prosper, and shall be led to a land of promise; yea, even a land which I have prepared for you; yea, a land which is choice above all other lands.

21 And inasmuch as thy brethren shall rebel against thee, they shall be cut off from the presence of the Lord.

22 And inasmuch as thou shalt keep my commandments, thou shalt be made a ruler [king] and a teacher [priest] over thy brethren (1 Nephi 2: 20-22).

Because Nephi would soon own the brass plates, the royal clothing, and sword worn by Laban, the words “a ruler and a teacher” came closer to expressing Nephi’s future role than “king and priest” might have done.⁷⁴⁰

(8) In that same blessing is the hope of the final scene of the festival drama:

Ye shall prosper, and shall be led to a land of promise; yea, even a land which I have prepared for you; yea, a land which is choice above all other lands.

Thus, in the narrative of only the first two chapters of his small plates, Nephi has twice directed our thoughts through the entire sequence of the Feast of Tabernacles temple drama. It is significant that he did this without calling attention to the drama itself.

⁷⁴⁰ See Ahlstrom, *Joel and the Temple*, 102-3.

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For, as he wrote at the outset, he would teach us in “double speak”: “Yea, I make a record in the language of my father, which consists of the learning of the Jews [the ancient temple drama subtext] and the language of the Egyptians [the everyday speech of the surface-text]” (1 Nephi 1:2). He not only told us that he would do it, but as we have seen he immediately showed us how he would do it.

Consistent with his word, and as further evidence that his intent was to preserve an understanding of the festival drama, Nephi patterned the entire book of First Nephi after the cosmic myth, that is, after the same chiasmic pattern as the festival drama:

- A. Nephi and his family must leave home.
 - B. They are given a seeming impossible task.
 - C. They receive all necessary empowerment.
 - D. Rebellion and starvation in the wilderness.
 - C. The Liahona leads to a mountain top for sustenance.
 - B. They travel to Bountiful to complete their task.
 - A. They arrive at the promised land.