



BOOK OF MORMON CENTRAL
<http://bookofmormoncentral.org/>



Religious Studies Center
<https://rsc.byu.edu/>

King Benjamin: In the Service of Your God

Author(s): Susan Easton Black

Source: *A Book of Mormon Treasury: Gospel Insights from General Authorities and Religious Educators*

Published: Provo, UT; Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2003

Page(s): 199-202

Abstract: Many years ago Moses declared to gathered Israel, "Love the Lord your God, and . . . serve him with all your heart and with all your soul" (Deuteronomy 1 1:13). Since this declaration, many rulers of the house of Israel have vacillated in their love of and service to the Lord. Yet there was one Israelite king who obediently lived this ancient command. His name was Benjamin, king over the land of Zarahemla in ancient America in the second century B.C. Unfortunately, we know little about King Benjamin's reign except the last part, which is recorded in the book of Mosiah. That part radiates with the brightness, hope, and love of a righteous Christian king. His example is an ensign to rulers and a beacon to all disciples of Christ. My purpose in this paper is to share understanding and insight into the significance King Benjamin placed on the mysteries of God and service and to show how these concepts are interrelated.



The Religious Studies Center is collaborating with Book of Mormon Central to preserve and extend access to scholarly research on the Book of Mormon. Items are archived by the permission of the Religious Studies Center.

<https://rsc.byu.edu/>

KING BENJAMIN: IN THE SERVICE OF YOUR GOD

Susan Easton Black

Many years ago Moses declared to gathered Israel, “Love the Lord your God, and . . . serve him with all your heart and with all your soul” (Deuteronomy 11:13). Since this declaration, many rulers of the house of Israel have vacillated in their love of and service to the Lord. Yet there was one Israelite king who obediently lived this ancient command. His name was Benjamin, king over the land of Zarahemla in ancient America in the second century B.C. Unfortunately, we know little about King Benjamin’s reign except the last part, which is recorded in the book of Mosiah. That part radiates with the brightness, hope, and love of a righteous Christian king. His example is an ensign to rulers and a beacon to all disciples of Christ. My purpose in this paper is to share understanding and insight into the significance King Benjamin placed on the mysteries of God and service and to show how these concepts are interrelated.

King Benjamin, like prophets before him, wanted his people to share in the knowledge of revealed truth that he had obtained by prophecy, revelation, and the ministration of an angel. His love for his people had grown as he defended them against both external and

Susan Easton Black is a professor of Church history and doctrine at Brigham Young University.

internal forces of destruction. Near the end of his life, King Benjamin wanted to give his people one last sermon, “that [he] might go down in peace, and [his] immortal spirit may join the choirs above in singing the praises of a just God” (see Mosiah 2:28, 30).

In an outpouring of love, this elderly king desired to share with his people his most precious pearl, the great mysteries that he had extracted from eternal realms. He did not merely inform subordinate heads of the government so they, in turn, could disseminate the mysteries. Rather he considered his revelation, prophecy, and visit by an angel so precious that he wanted to personally tell everyone his message at the same time. All were invited to come to the heart of the kingdom, the city of Zarahemla, to hear it.

Mosiah, Benjamin’s oldest son, gathered the people so they could hear their prophetic king. King Benjamin stated that the purpose of this gathering was for him to “proclaim unto this my people out of mine own mouth that thou [Mosiah] art a king and a ruler over this people, whom the Lord our God hath given us. And moreover, I shall give this people a name, that thereby they may be distinguished above all the people which the Lord God hath brought out of the land of Jerusalem” (Mosiah 1:10–11).

The place for gathering was not the king’s residence, his palace, or government offices. It was the temple, the house of the Lord. The time was appointed and a nation responded.

The people of Zarahemla and the people of Mosiah all gathered at the temple. Their cultural distinction, readily apparent by name usage alone, had existed since Mosiah I (King Benjamin’s father) and his followers first discovered the people of Zarahemla. These “people of Zarahemla” were the inhabitants of Zarahemla who traced their heritage to Mulek, the son of Zedekiah, while the “people of Mosiah” (Mosiah 1:10) were the descendants of those who followed Mosiah I when he escaped from a wicked Nephite culture and found Zarahemla. Benjamin desired to unite these two distinct peoples with one name and one purpose, with a name that would “never . . . be blotted out, except it be through transgression” (Mosiah 1:12). He knew this would

bring them abundant joy and rejoicing throughout time and all eternity.

BENJAMIN'S SPEECH COMBINES MYSTERIES OF GOD WITH SERVICE TO HUMANITY

Benjamin delivered his long-awaited message in a series of three orations on different topics. The first is contained in Mosiah 2:9–41, the second in Mosiah 3:1–27, and the third in Mosiah 4:4–30. These three topics were separate and distinct from each other and echoed the three areas of service that King Benjamin had performed in his reign. In the first section, Benjamin spoke as a king reporting his royal stewardship, recalling how he had provided them temporal and spiritual peace. For his second topic he spoke as a prophet, once again teaching his people how to avoid spiritual chaos and unrest. In this phase of his speech he spoke the words of an angel, words that emphasized Christ's service to others, including a portrayal of Christ's atoning sacrifice. For his third and final topic, the prophet Benjamin spoke of how service can extend the knowledge of the glory, truth, and justice of God beyond a spiritual awakening. Thus Benjamin fulfilled his final act of service by bringing his people spiritual salvation.

The common element in each section was the hope-filled message of service to God through service to humanity. The first two messages were examples of service from Benjamin's and Christ's lives. The third message was a discourse on how the people could retain a remission of their sins by implementing these examples of service.

BENJAMIN'S EXAMPLE OF SERVICE

After a lifetime of service, King Benjamin's final act of service was to help his people understand and live in abiding love. To illustrate abiding love he used an example that all the people recognized—himself and his own actions. He reminded them first of his actions in the realm of civil government during times of peace, not of his earlier military role in the beginning of his reign. He pointed out his caring and responsible civil actions, such as not allowing murder, plundering, stealing, adultery, or confinement in dungeons (see Mosiah 2:13). He had

not used harsh disciplinary measures or tyrannical or arbitrary means to stop depredations in his kingdom. Instead he had emphasized obedience to the commandments of God and avoidance of wickedness. He had governed his people through this Christian approach and through his own frugality and simplicity in living. As he spoke, remembering the implementation of these governing principles, he humbly stated, “I have only been in the service of God” (Mosiah 2:16).

Following this gospel-based review of his royal stewardship, King Benjamin proclaimed to his people, “I can answer [with] a clear conscience before God this day” (Mosiah 2:15). Service for Benjamin had become a sign of pure love. By establishing a civil government based on the commandments of God, King Benjamin manifested his love to his subjects. He had clearly embarked “in the service of God” as he began his reign “and had serve[d] him with all [his] heart, might, mind and strength” (D&C 4:2). He now stood on a tower at the end of that reign, blameless before God and before his people.

King Benjamin did not review his royal service “to boast” (Mosiah 2:16). He stated, “I tell you these things that ye may learn wisdom,” which he defined by saying, “When ye are in the service of your fellow beings ye are only in the service of your God” (Mosiah 2:17). Like Jesus Christ in His ministry, King Benjamin gave selfless service. Benjamin knew by revelation and experience the great mystery that Christ would later teach during His earthly ministry: “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me” (Matthew 25:40).

King Benjamin also knew his own life was merely a type and shadow of Christ. He knew each person listening must turn his or her own heart, might, mind, and strength to God. Like the prophets before him, Benjamin realized that “in every work that [one] began in the service of the house of God, and in the law, and in the commandments, to seek his God, he did it with all his heart” (2 Chronicles 31:21). With a humble appeal, he pled with his people, “If I, whom ye call your king, do labor to serve you, then ought not ye to labor to serve one another? . . . If I . . . do merit any thanks from you, O how you ought to thank your heavenly King!” (Mosiah 2:18–19).

King Benjamin taught that the combination of service and gratitude was higher than sacrificing the firstlings of the flocks. It was to “render all the thanks and praise which your whole soul has power to possess” (Mosiah 2:20). Yet, even if you achieved this height of gratitude, “ye would be unprofitable servants” (Mosiah 2:21). What the Lord required of His sons and His daughters was that they keep the commandments. If they kept the commandments, they would be blessed. These blessings included prosperity in the land and protection from enemies (see Mosiah 2:31).

CHRIST’S EXAMPLE OF SERVICE

After commenting on his own service, Benjamin began to prophesy, saying, “I have things to tell you concerning that which is to come” (Mosiah 3:1). The prophetic message he expressed during the second phase of his speech was made known to him by an angel. Because of his prayers and personal righteousness, the angel told Benjamin what the shepherds were to learn over 120 years later: “I am come to declare unto you the glad tidings of great joy” (Mosiah 3:3; see also Luke 2:10). These glad tidings were of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem and His ministry among the Jews.

Christ’s ministry had not been revealed to Benjamin as a series of mere verbal sermons, preachings, or admonitions; rather, it was revealed as a continuous series of examples of service. These acts included “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” (Mosiah 3:5).

After these scenes, Benjamin was shown Christ’s greatest service—the Atonement: “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” (Mosiah 3:7).

The atoning sacrifice had been symbolically declared by earlier prophets (see Isaiah 53:6; Moses 5:7). Yet only when the prophet Benjamin spoke of Mary and the Atonement, death, and the

Resurrection of Christ did an entire nation hear the glorious good news in fulness and in power. Previous prophets alluded to the same message, but their people were “stiffnecked” (Mosiah 3:14; see also Exodus 32:9; Isaiah 48:4). Of necessity, types and shadows replaced clear revealed light, and the law of Moses replaced the fulness of the joyous news of the Redemption. But for the people gathered to hear Benjamin the prophet, there was no symbolic replacement, no delaying substitution, no alternative name. There was “no other name given nor any other way nor means whereby salvation [could] come unto the children of men, only in and through the name of Christ, the Lord Omnipotent” (Mosiah 3:17).

King Benjamin delivered his message in plainness because those gathered had come prepared to learn of Christ. They had before them a benevolent prophet whose example had taught them preparatory to their receiving these angelic words. They had listened and had already begun to put off the natural man and become Saints. They had learned from his actions and words the need to demonstrate in their sacrificial offerings a spirit of rejoicing and thanksgiving to God. They were becoming like children, “submissive, meek, humble, patient, full of love, willing to submit to all things which the Lord [saw] fit to inflict upon [them]” (Mosiah 3:19).

In solemn unity they cried, “O have mercy, and apply the atoning blood of Christ that we may receive forgiveness of our sins, and our hearts may be purified” (Mosiah 4:2). They further pled, “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 4:2).

RETAINING A REMISSION OF SINS THROUGH SERVICE

In an attitude of loving tenderness, King Benjamin expressed his knowledge that what his people now felt was a beginning. It was an awakening, not a fulfillment. His people had been in spiritual darkness and in a state of slumber. Just as the angel told Benjamin to “awake,” Benjamin now called upon his people to “awake” (Mosiah 3:2; 4:5).

They were to arise from slumbering in the types and shadows of the law of Moses to find the gospel of Christ and Christian service.

Benjamin recognized that his people had tasted of the goodness, power, wisdom, love, and glory of God. Obtaining a remission of sins had brought “exceedingly great joy in [their] souls,” proclaimed Benjamin (Mosiah 4:11). Yet to this noble prophet, remembrance and retention of this joy was vital as well. There is a marked difference between having a taste of food and enjoying a continuing feast. King Benjamin desired that his people feast spiritually on and endure in the word of God. This feasting and enduring comes by remembering and retaining the knowledge of the greatness of God and your own nothingness. It is renewed “even in the depths of humility, [by] calling on the name of the Lord daily, and standing steadfastly in the faith of that which is to come” (Mosiah 4:11). As the climax of his third message, Benjamin promised in surety, “If ye do this ye shall always rejoice, and be filled with the love of God, and always retain a remission of your sins” (Mosiah 4:12). In other words, they would not just taste but feast as they grew in the knowledge of glory, truth, and justice.

He promised them that this glory or love would produce peaceful coexistence in the kingdom and that this unity would be lasting because it would be upheld and sustained by righteousness. A righteous people would have no desire “to injure one another,” but would desire “to render to every man according to that which is his due” (Mosiah 4:13). That which was due to every man, woman, and child, according to the prophet Benjamin, was Christlike service.

Benjamin taught that service should commence with family members. Husbands, wives, sons, and daughters were to give and receive Christian service. The prophet Benjamin focused on specific service needed by children:

“And ye will not suffer your children that they go hungry, or naked; neither will ye suffer that they transgress the laws of God, and fight and quarrel one with another, and serve the devil, who is the master of sin, or who is the evil spirit which hath been spoken of by our fathers, he being an enemy to all righteousness.

“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” (Mosiah 4:14–15).

Through the specific service outlined for parents to give to their children, the great eternal mystery of peace and happiness passes from one generation to another.

With service within the family as a foundation, the Lord counseled that service be extended to those outside the family who stand in need of succor. The Prophet Joseph Smith stated, “A man filled with the love of God, is not content with blessing his family alone, but ranges through the whole world, anxious to bless the whole human race.”¹ The “whole human race” includes those who “stand in need of your succor” or substance, the beggar, and even “the man [who] has brought upon himself his misery” (Mosiah 4:16–17). For in actuality, all are beggars unto the Lord.

Therefore, “impart of the substance that ye have one to another” (Mosiah 4:21). If you are poor as to earthly means, Benjamin counseled, “Say in your hearts that: I give not because I have not, but if I had I would give” (Mosiah 4:24). It is apparent that Benjamin was appealing to the gathered people to give Christlike service and develop a consecrated Zion society. Each person present was to emulate more than a type and shadow of a benevolent king; each was to emulate the Savior in his earthly ministry. Benjamin commanded the people, “Impart of your substance to the poor, every man according to that which he hath, such as feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and administering to their relief, both spiritually and temporally, according to their wants” (Mosiah 4:26). As they administered their charitable service, they were to do so “in wisdom and order; for it is not requisite that a man should run faster than he has strength” (Mosiah 4:27).

REACTION OF THE NATION TO BENJAMIN'S SPEECH

When King Benjamin finished his speech, he desired to know whether his people believed the words he had spoken. Did they believe the great mysteries he had shared? The people cried with one voice, saying,

“Yea, we believe all the words which thou hast spoken unto us” (Mosiah 5:2). They had followed the admonition of King Benjamin and had opened their ears that they might hear, their hearts that they might understand, and their minds that they might accept the mysteries of God.

Through the confirmation of the Holy Ghost they attested to the truthfulness of Benjamin’s words. Because of their receptivity, each had experienced a mighty change of heart. All who read or heard Benjamin’s words were changed. “We have no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually,” proclaimed the people (Mosiah 5:2). They “could prophecy of all things” if it were expedient (Mosiah 5:3).

A nation changed. All of the people, excepting their little children, expressed their commitment and willingness to enter into a covenant. They had partaken of the “infinite goodness of God, and the manifestations of his Spirit” and were willing to make a binding promise between themselves and God (Mosiah 5:3). This covenant was “to do his will, and to be obedient to his commandments in all things that he shall command [them], all the remainder of [their] days” (Mosiah 5:5). Benjamin achieved his desire to unite his people in purpose by uniting them in Christian service.

Because they were united in purpose, they could now be united in name. They would be known throughout the land and throughout centuries to come as the children of Christ (see Mosiah 5:7). This name would distinguish them from all other people. It would be a sign to the Lamanites, the Zoramites, and every other “-ite” that this people in 124 B.C. served the Lord and kept His commandments.

In conclusion, Benjamin warned that transgression was the only way to lose the bonding name. Benjamin did not want his people to be divided again. He counseled, “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” (Mosiah 5:15).

CONCLUSION

As the speech ended, the names of all the people were recorded, and a church of Christ was established in Zarahemla. This scene of

becoming a covenant people, to be known as the children of Christ, would be repeated again and again through the centuries that followed. In our dispensation the Lord, through holy prophets, has again organized a covenant people known as the children of Christ.

We are privileged to read the abridged words of King Benjamin, which are some of the most divine and glorious ever uttered by a prophet. The truths revealed by this ancient sovereign-prophet illuminate the path leading to God. Our responsibility, as we read these words and listen to modern prophets, parallels the responsibility of Christians in 124 B.C. We, too, are to “succor the weak, lift up the hands which hang down, and strengthen the feeble knees” (D&C 81:5). We, too, are to “be anxiously engaged in a good cause, and do many things of [our] own free will, and bring to pass much righteousness” (D&C 58:27). Service is our covenant obligation as members of Christ’s church in this dispensation.

Nothing is more exalting to the soul than selfless service. For as Benjamin expressed it, “When ye are in the service of your fellow beings ye are only in the service of your God” (Mosiah 2:17). The person who renders anonymous, loving service may be unknown to us, but the gift and the giver are known to God. As this service is rendered we should remember the Savior’s counsel, “Do not your alms before men, to be seen of them” (Matthew 6:1). Instead, we must be careful that we “let not [our] left hand know what [our] right hand doeth” (Matthew 6:3). And when our service eases the burden of another, we must “tell no man” (Matthew 8:4).

Christlike service has overtones of the Atonement. By giving service we are promised that we can retain “remission of [our] sins from day to day” (Mosiah 4:26). As all are in need of our service, all may benefit by it. Only when we lift another’s burden will God lift our own cares. It is a holy paradox. The disciples who stagger and even fall because their burdens are too heavy can lighten their burdens by carrying the weight of another’s burden. By so doing their hearts will be lighter, their lives brighter, and their souls greater. Hopefully, we look upward as we move forward in service to God and to humanity.

“Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye

blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world:

“For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in:

“Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me. . . .

“Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me” (Matthew 25:34–36, 40).

NOTE

1. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 174.