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Blessing God After Eating One's Fill

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Chapter 26:

BLESSING GOD AFTER EATING ONE'S FILL

And it came to pass that Alma ate bread and was filled; and he blessed Amulek and his house, and he gave thanks unto God. (Alma 8:22)

In the book of Deuteronomy, Moses instructed the Children of Israel to offer a prayer of thanksgiving following the consumption of a meal. “When thou hast eaten and art full, then thou shalt bless the Lord thy God for the good land which he hath given thee” (Deuteronomy 8:10). Blessing the Lord after eating one’s fill ensured that the Israelites would not forget the source of their blessings.¹ This commandment provides the basis for the later Jewish practice of following a meal with the recitation of a series of blessings known as the *birkat hamazon*. According to the tradition, four blessings come after the consumption of bread, while separate blessings are offered for other foods, depending on their nature and origin.²

This same observance is also found in a Dead Sea Scroll poem that Theodor Gaster calls Invitation to Grace after Meals; this poem paraphrases the language in the first part of Deuteronomy noting that “whenso they eat

¹ Compare Deuteronomy 6:11–12; 31:20; Nehemiah 9:25–26.

² For a discussion and bibliography of early Jewish texts, see the section “Blessing God for Our Food,” in Abraham C Hill, *The Mitzvot: The Commandments and Their Rationale* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1974), 385–87.

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and are filled,” noting that this is when men should speak of wisdom and think of the law given by God.³

In Rabbinic Judaism, the tradition of blessing after meals appears in both *M Berakot* 3:3 and *Sukkah* 2:5. The latter notes that when Rabbi Zadok ate only a small portion of food, he didn’t say the blessing afterward since the book of Deuteronomy calls for a blessing only if one has eaten and is full. The amount that one must eat in order to say “common grace” for a group of people is discussed in *M Berakot* 7:2–3, wherein the formula for the blessing varies according to how many are present. In each case, however, it is the Lord who is blessed.⁴ Grace after meals is also noted in several passages of the mystical tradition of the *Zohar*.⁵

The Jewish tradition of blessing after meals relates

³ Taken from Theodor H. Gaster, *The Dead Sea Scriptures*, 3rd ed. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976), 219–21. The text also admonishes the reader to “bless ye the Lord” (line 17), but the thought is separated from the Deuteronomy 8:10 quotation by three other lines and hence may not derive from that scriptural passage.

⁴ The blessing of God is also noted in *Zohar* Genesis 240a, which adds, “Observe that grace after meals should not be said over an empty table, but there should be bread on it and a cup of wine.” Harry Sperling, Maurice Simon, and Paul P. Levertoff, *The Zohar* (New York: Bennet, 1958), 2:364.

⁵ According to *Zohar* Exodus 153a-b, Rabbi Hiya comments on Deuteronomy 8:10: “Should a man then bless the Lord only after he has filled his belly” Nay, even if one eats but a morsel and counts it as a meal, that is called eating to satisfaction.” Rabbi Hezekiah added that even an intoxicated person, who is usually barred from saying prayers, “is allowed to say the grace after meals.” Sperling, Simon, and Levertoff, *The Zohar*, 4:37–38. *Zohar* Exodus 218a says, “Whoever pronounces the after-meal benediction must do so devotedly, and in a joyful mood unmingled with any tinge of sadness, inasmuch as in giving thanks he is giving of his own to someone else” (*ibid.*, 4:242). Grace after meals is also discussed briefly in *Zohar* Exodus 157a and Numbers 186b.

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to the Old Testament story of Isaac and Jacob. Toward the end of his life, Isaac prepared to bless his eldest son, Esau; however this blessing could only be offered after Esau had fulfilled his father's request. "Make me savoury meat, such as I love, and bring it to me, that I may eat; that my soul may bless thee before I die" (Genesis 27:4). Rebekah repeated Isaac's instruction to Jacob thereby emphasizing the fact that the blessing would occur only after Jacob had eaten his meal (v. 7).

The ancient tradition of blessing after meals appears in Alma 8:22, "And it came to pass that Alma ate bread and *was filled*; and he blessed Amulek and his house, and he gave thanks unto God."⁶ Here, too, the blessing and thanks to God are offered only after being "filled." One might object that it is Amulek's household, and not God, being blessed. But the context of Deuteronomy 8:10 is gratitude to God "for the land which he hath given thee" and hence perfectly in line with Alma's giving "thanks unto God." It is, in fact, God who does the real blessing, which is the context in which Deuteronomy 14:29 speaks of "eat[ing] and be[ing] satisfied." In addition, Deuteronomy 6:10–11 and 8:12–14 warn against eating and being full and yet being ungrateful to God.

John W. Welch has noted that an early Christian document, *Didache* 10:1–2, 5, enjoins prayer "after being filled" during communion.⁷ In this connection, it is interesting to see that similar thoughts are expressed on both occasions when the resurrected Christ blessed the

⁶ The connection between these passages and the Book of Mormon was first made by Angela M. Crowell, "A Jewish Blessing after Meals," *Qumran Quest Bulletin* (July 1995): 4.

⁷ John W. Welch, "From Presence to Practice: Jesus, the Sacrament Prayers, the Priesthood, and Church Discipline in 3 Nephi 18 and Moroni 2–6," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 5/1 (1996): 134.

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sacrament for the Nephites. In 3 Nephi 18:8–18 we read that the Nephites partook of the bread and wine and “were filled” (3 Nephi 18:9), after which Jesus instructed them to pray. 3 Nephi 20:9 contains the slight variation that “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.” In this case, the people were filled not with the bread and wine, but with the Spirit. Nevertheless, it is interesting that they “gave glory to Jesus” on this occasion.

Hugh Nibley compared the latter passage with the description of Christ's blessing the sacrament for his Old World disciples, as found in an early Coptic document called the *Gospel of the Twelve Apostles*.⁸ The text reads, “His [Jesus'] blessing fell upon the bread in the apostles hands. And all the people ate and were filled. They gave praise to God.”⁹ Here, again, the pattern is retained. Having eaten their fill, they praised God. Blessing God after eating one's fill is another illustration from the Book of Mormon that the Nephites did, indeed, follow the law of Moses.

⁸ The text was published in Eugene Revillout, *Les Apocryphes Coptes, Première Partie, Les évangiles des douze apôtres et de Saint Barthélemy*, vol. 2 of *Patrologia Orientalis*, ed. R. Graffin and F. Nau (Paris: Firmin-Diot), 1907-13.

⁹ Hugh W. Nibley's English translation of Revillout, *Les Apocryphes Coptes*, 2:134–135 in *The Prophetic Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1989), 421.

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The value of all this information as evidence for the Book of Mormon is increased by the fact that the practice is mentioned only in passing, as one would expect for an authentic record that takes such things for granted.