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Becoming Men and Women of Understanding: Wordplay on Benjamin— An Addendum

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Abstract: Royal and divine sonship/daughterhood (bānîm = “children”/“sons,” bānôt = “daughters”) is a prevalent theme throughout the Book of Mosiah. “Understanding” (Hebrew noun, bînâ or tēbûnâ; verb, bîn) is also a key theme in that book. The initial juxtaposition of “sons” and “understanding” with the name “Benjamin” (binyāmîn, “son of the right hand”) in Mosiah 1:2–7 suggests the narrator’s association of the underlying terms with the name Benjamin likely on the basis of homophony. King Benjamin repeatedly invokes “understand” in his speech (forms of “understand” were derived from the root *byn in Hebrew; Mosiah 2:9, 40; 4:4; cf. 3:15) — a speech that culminates in a rhetorical wordplay on his own name in terms of “sons”/“children,” “daughters,” and “right hand” (Mosiah 5:7, 9). “Understand,” moreover, recurs as a paronomasia on the name Benjamin at key points later in the Book of Mosiah (Mosiah 8:3, 20; 26:1–3), which bring together the themes of sonship and/or “understanding” (or lack of thereof) with King Benjamin’s name. Later statements in the Book of Mosiah about “becoming” the “children of God” or “becoming his sons and daughters” (Mosiah 18:22; 27:25) through divine rebirth allude to King Benjamin’s sermon and the wordplay on “Benjamin” there. Taken as a literary whole, the book of Mosiah constitutes a treatise on “becoming” — i.e., divine transformation through Christ’s atonement (cf. Mosiah 3:18–19). Mormon’s statement in Alma 17:2 about the sons of Mosiah having become “men of a sound understanding” thus serves as a fitting epilogue to a narrative arc begun as early as Mosiah 1:2.

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**BECOMING MEN AND WOMEN OF
UNDERSTANDING:
WORDPLAY ON BENJAMIN
— AN ADDENDUM**

Matthew L. Bowen

ABSTRACT: *Royal and divine sonship/daughterhood (bānîm = “children”/“sons,” bānôt = “daughters”) is a prevalent theme throughout the Book of Mosiah. “Understanding” (Hebrew noun, bînâ or tēbûnâ; verb, bîn) is also a key theme in that book. The initial juxtaposition of “sons” and “understanding” with the name “Benjamin” (binyāmîn, “son of the right hand”) in Mosiah 1:2–7 suggests the narrator’s association of the underlying terms with the name Benjamin likely on the basis of homophony. King Benjamin repeatedly invokes “understand” in his speech (forms of “understand” were derived from the root *byn in Hebrew; Mosiah 2:9, 40; 4:4; cf. 3:15) — a speech that culminates in a rhetorical wordplay on his own name in terms of “sons”/“children,” “daughters,” and “right hand” (Mosiah 5:7, 9). “Understand,” moreover, recurs as a paronomasia on the name Benjamin at key points later in the Book of Mosiah (Mosiah 8:3, 20; 26:1–3), which bring together the themes of sonship and/or “understanding” (or lack of thereof) with King Benjamin’s name. Later statements in the Book of Mosiah about “becoming” the “children of God” or “becoming his sons and daughters” (Mosiah 18:22; 27:25) through divine rebirth allude to King Benjamin’s sermon and the wordplay on “Benjamin” there. Taken as a literary whole, the book of Mosiah constitutes a treatise on “becoming” — i.e., divine transformation through Christ’s atonement (cf. Mosiah 3:18–19). Mormon’s statement in Alma 17:2 about the sons of Mosiah having become “men of a sound understanding” thus serves as a fitting epilogue to a narrative arc begun as early as Mosiah 1:2.*

“My son, attend unto my wisdom, and bow thine ear to my understanding”
(Proverbs 5:1)

Ancient Israelites understood the name Benjamin (*bin/ben*, “son” plus *yāmîn*, “right [hand]”) to mean “son of the south [i.e., the directional right hand]” or “son of the right hand [i.e., son of favored status].”¹ Given the evident meaning of the name Benjamin, royal sonship/daughterhood appropriately constitutes a major focus of the Book of Mosiah (as we now have it).²

However, “understanding” constitutes another important emphasis throughout the Book of Mosiah. The noun “understanding” is almost always represented in Hebrew by the noun *bînâ*³ or its cognate *tēbûnâ* (“understanding, cleverness, skill”)⁴ and the verb “understand” by the Hebrew verbal root *b-y-n* (*bîn* = “to understand,” “to pay attention to,

1. See Matthew L. Bowen, “Becoming Sons and Daughters at God’s Right Hand: King Benjamin’s Rhetorical Wordplay on His Own Name,” *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 21, no. 2 (2012): 2–13; Matthew L. Bowen, “Onomastic Wordplay on Joseph and Benjamin and Gezera Shawa in the Book of Mormon,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 18 (2016): 255–73. Cf. Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 122. Hereafter cited as BDB.

2. Royal Skousen (“History of the Critical Text Project of the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 11, no. 2 [2002], 20) writes: “Along with the loss of the first 116 pages of the original manuscript (which contained the book of Lehi), most of the original first two chapters of the book of Mosiah were also apparently lost. In the printer’s manuscript, the beginning of Mosiah was originally designated as chapter III. In addition, the title of the book (‘the Book of Mosiah’) was later inserted between the lines:

the Book of Mosiah

peace in the land ~~~~~ Chapter I<II> ~~~~~ And now there was no more ...

It should be noted that these putative two lost “chapters” would be much longer than the typical chapter divisions in the Book of Mormon. Jack M. Lyon and Kent R. Minson (“When Pages Collide: Dissecting the Words of Mormon,” *BYU Studies* 51, no. 4 [2012]: 134) see Words of Mormon 1:12–18 as belonging to a 117th page retained by Joseph Smith (i.e., as part of the original “Mosiah” material contiguous with present day Mosiah 1:1). Brant Gardner (“When Hypotheses Collide: Responding to Lyon and Minson’s ‘When Pages Collide’” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 5 [2013]: 105–9) leaves the question open.

3. Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner (*The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* [Leiden: Brill, 2001], 123 [hereafter cited as a *HALOT*]) and BDB (p. 108) both use “understanding” as the sole gloss for *bînâ*.

4. *HALOT*, 1680; BDB, 108, simply glosses *tēbûnâ* as “understanding.”

to consider”⁵ or “discern”⁶). The root meaning of both of these terms is to make a separation (cf., e.g., Arabic *byn* “be separated, remote, clear, obvious”).⁷ From a phonological standpoint, both the noun and verb forms of *bîn* resemble the Hebrew word *bēn* (“son”), a key element in the name Benjamin, the two differing only in the lack of a *yod* in the latter. The paronomastic interrelationship of these conceptual elements also works in Egyptian.⁸ Benjamin (“son of the right hand”) resembles the Egyptian personal name *s3 imn.t* (“son of the [deified] right hand/West” — Hebrew *yāmîn* and Egyptian *imn.t*, both “right hand,” are cognate). The noun *s3* (*z3*), “son”¹⁰ — which appears to have constituted an element in several Israelite/Nephite names¹¹ — and the noun *s3t*, “daughter” constitute homonyms of *Si3* (Sia or Saa, a divine personification of Wisdom or Perception) and *si3* (as a verb, to “recognize,” “perceive,” “know, be aware of”; as a noun, “perception or knowledge”).¹² These in turn constitute homonyms of the verb *s3i* “be wise, prudent,”¹³ the noun *s33* “wise man,” and possibly “wisdom[?].”¹⁴

In what follows, I will endeavor to show that the homophony of the name “Benjamin” (*binyāmîn*, “son of the right hand”), *bēn/bānîm/bānôt* (“son”/“sons, children”/“daughters”) and *byn/bînâ* (verb “understand,” noun “understanding”), whatever Mormon’s actual written language on the plates,¹⁵ served as a paronomastic organizing principle for the

5. HALOT, 122–23.

6. BDB, 107.

7. Aimo E. Murtonen, *Hebrew in Its West Semitic Setting: A Comparative Survey of Non-Masoretic Hebrew Dialects and Traditions, Part 1: A Comparative Lexicon* (Leiden: Brill, 1988), 110.

8. I wish to thank Robert F. Smith (personal communication, notes in possession of author) for bringing this to my attention.

9. Hermann Ranke, *Die ägyptischen Personennamen* (Glückstadt, Augustin, 1935), 1:280.

10. Raymond O. Faulkner, *A Concise Dictionary of Middle Egyptian* (Oxford: Griffith Institute, 1999), 207. Hereafter cited as CDME.

11. See Eve Koller, “An Egyptian Linguistic Component in Book of Mormon Names,” *BYU Studies* 57, no. 4 [2019]: 139–48). She makes an excellent case for the onomastic component *ze-* in Nephite names as derived from or representing the Egyptian word *s3/z3*, “son [of].”

12. CDME, 212.

13. *Ibid.*, 208.

14. *Ibid.*

15. See Mormon 9:32–33, where Moroni mentions that the plates of Mormon were written using “reformed” Egyptian and that the Nephites still continued to use Hebrew, albeit in “altered” form.

material that deals with King Benjamin, his sermon, and its legacy. First, the narrative introduction of King Benjamin and his paraenesis¹⁶ to his sons, including his royal heir Mosiah II, correlated the name Benjamin with the concepts of proper sonship and “understanding” (Mosiah 1, esp. vv. 2, 5). Second, this paraenetic paronomasia hints at the important conclusion toward which King Benjamin’s subsequent sermon drives: King Benjamin’s people were, like his own sons, “becoming” the “children of Christ, his sons and his daughters.” Their collective “becoming” men and women of “understanding” (cf. Mosiah 1:2) was key to this transformation. Thus, third, the theme of “understanding” also helps to frame portions of his subsequent temple sermon (Mosiah 2:9; 40; 4:4). Fourth, the connection between “sons”/“children,” “understanding,” and “becoming” repeatedly resurfaces throughout the Book of Mosiah, especially where the text reflects back on King Benjamin’s speech. All of this suggests that the paronomastic association between the name “Benjamin,” sonship/daughterhood (and “becoming”), and “understanding” is not only of prime thematic importance in the Book of Mosiah, but helps us to better “understand” Jesus Christ’s divine sonship — a status to which we too are called.

“That Thereby They Might Become Men of Understanding”

At the beginning of the extant Book of Mosiah, both Mormon and King Benjamin link sonship and the education given Benjamin’s three *bānîm* (“sons”) to “understanding”:

And now there was no more contention in all the land of Zarahemla among all the people who belonged to king **Benjamin**, so that king **Benjamin** [*binyāmîn*] had continual peace all the remainder of his days. And it came to pass that he had three **sons** [Hebrew *bānîm*]; and he called their names Mosiah and Helorum and Helaman. **And he caused that they should be taught in all the language of his fathers, that thereby they might become men of understanding** [*bînâ*] **and that they might know** concerning the prophecies which had been spoken by the mouths of their fathers, which was delivered them by the hand of the Lord. And he also taught them concerning the records which were engraven on the plates of brass, saying: **My**

16. *Paraenesis* (*paranesis* or *parenesis*, from Greek *parainesis*) is a rhetorical term designating speech or discourse containing advice, counsel, or exhortation, particularly of a religious nature.

sons, I would that ye should remember that were it not for these plates which contain these records and these commandments, we must have suffered in ignorance, even at this present time, **not knowing the mysteries of God**. For it were not possible that our father Lehi could have remembered all these things, to have taught them to **his children**, except it were for the help of these plates; for **he having been taught in the language of the Egyptians**, therefore he could read these engravings **and teach them to his children**, that thereby they could teach them to **their children**, and so fulfilling the commandments of God, even down to this present time. I say unto you, **my sons**: Were it not for these things which have been kept and preserved by the hand of God, **that we might read and understand of his mysteries** and have his commandments always before our eyes, that even **our fathers would have dwindled in unbelief**, and we should have been like unto our brethren, **the Lamanites**, which know nothing concerning these things, or even **do not believe them** when they are taught them because of **the traditions of their fathers**, which are not correct. **O my sons**, I would that ye should remember that these sayings are true, and also that these records are true. And behold also the plates of Nephi which contain the records and the sayings of our fathers from the time they left Jerusalem until now, and they are true; and we can know of their surety because we have them before our eyes. (Mosiah 1:1–6; emphasis in all scriptural citations mine)¹⁷

John Tvedtnes first noted the clear textual dependency of Mosiah 1:2–6 on 1 Nephi 1:1–4: “Both passages describe teaching and mention ‘fathers’ or ‘parents’ (the Hebrew uses one word for both), the name(s) of the son(s), ‘Jerusalem,’ the ‘language of the Egyptians,’ and the ‘mysteries of God’ and declare that the record is ‘true.’”¹⁸ Tvedtnes further remarks, “It is significant that Benjamin’s use of Nephi’s opening

17. Book of Mormon citations generally follow Royal Skousen, ed., *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

18. John Tvedtnes, “A Note on Benjamin and Lehi,” *Insights* 11, no. 22 (2002), 3. Tvedtnes continues: “This is one of many other examples of how Nephite writers relied on earlier records as they recorded their history. Finding such direct correspondence in widely separated passages of the Book of Mormon is particularly significant when we realize that evidence suggests that Joseph Smith translated the book of Mosiah and all that follows it before turning to translate the small plates containing the record of Nephi.”

words are found at the point in the record where the king would have recently received the small plates.”¹⁹

Based on John Gee’s observations regarding the etymology of the name Nephi from Egyptian *nfr*,²⁰ I posited that Nephi’s autobiographical introduction in 1 Nephi 1:1 involves a wordplay on the meaning of his own name: “I **Nephi** having been born of **goodly** parents, therefore I was taught somewhat in all the learning of my father. ... 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.” Extending Tvedtnes’s initial observation, I further suggested that the textual dependency of Mosiah 1:2–6 on 1 Nephi 1:1–3 extended to wordplay on King Benjamin’s name in terms of “sons” and “understanding.”²¹

King Benjamin’s desire to have his “sons” (*bānîm*) “become **men of understanding**” that they “might read and **understand** of his mysteries, and have his commandments always before our eyes” (Mosiah 1:5), amounted to a desire to have his sons become like their righteous ancestors Lehi and Nephi (1 Nephi 1:1, 5–14). To “have his commandments always before [their] eyes” evokes the idea of frontlets and phylacteries (see, e.g., Deuteronomy 6:8; 11:8; Proverbs 6:21) that keep the word of the Lord ever present in one’s memory and consciousness. It also recalls the royal requirements in Deuteronomy 17:18–20 regarding reading the law.

Moreover, it is presumably an application of the very same principle enjoined upon all Israel in Deuteronomy 1:13: “Take you **wise men, and understanding** [*’ānāšîm ḥākāmîm ûnēbōnîm*, or “wise and understanding men”] and known among your tribes, and I will make them rulers over you.” This kind of “understanding” was considered a necessary ingredient of the best kind of leadership. For example, the Lord commends Solomon for having “asked for [himself] **understanding** [*hābîn*] to discern [hear] judgment” (1 Kings 3:11), so that he could “**discern** [*lēhābîn*, understand] **between** [*bên*] good and bad” (3:9). The Lord declares, “I have given thee a wise and an **understanding** [*nābôn*] heart; so that there was none like thee before thee, neither after thee shall any arise like unto thee” (1 Kings 3:12). Isaiah prophesied regarding the

19. Ibid.

20. John Gee, “A Note on the Name Nephi,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1, no.1 (1992): 189–91; Gee, “Four Suggestions on the Origin of the Name Nephi,” in *Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon*, eds. John W. Welch and Melvin J. Thorne (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1999), 1–5.

21. Bowen, “Becoming Sons and Daughters at God’s Right Hand,” 11n23; Bowen, “Nephi’s Good Inclusio,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 17 (2016): 189.

Davidic Messiah²² that “the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and **understanding** [*bînâ*], the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord” (Isaiah 11:2). The kind of “understanding” that characterized King Benjamin himself, also came to characterize his son, Mosiah II. For Mormon, a major point of the extant Book of Mosiah is to show how that “understanding” came to characterize Alma the Elder and his people, then later Alma the Younger, and the sons of Mosiah, the latter of whom “could not understand the words of King Benjamin” when he first spoke them.

“Open ... Your Hearts That Ye May Understand”

Mormon carries the theme of “sonship” over from King Benjamin’s paraenesis to his sons (Mosiah 1), when he describes the “family” setting of Benjamin’s farewell covenant²³ speech. In Mosiah 2:3, Mormon notes that Benjamin’s people “took of the firstlings of their flocks, that they might offer sacrifice and burnt offerings according to the law of Moses” — i.e., as required by the book of Deuteronomy.²⁴ He then states:

And it came to pass that when they came up to the temple, they pitched their tents round about, every man according to his family,²⁵ consisting of **his wife** and **his sons** and **his daughters**

22. In 2 Nephi 30:9–15, Nephi applies Isaiah 11:4–9 to the Lord himself and thus also, implicitly, Isaiah 11:2.

23. On the ancient covenant/treaty pattern evident in King Benjamin’s speech, see John W. Welch, ed., *Reexploring the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1992), 66–68; Stephen D. Ricks, “Kingship, Coronation, and Covenant in Mosiah 1–6,” in *King Benjamin’s Speech: “That Ye May Learn Wisdom,”* eds. John W. Welch and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998), 233–75.

24. Deuteronomy instructs “Unto the place which the Lord your God shall choose out of all your tribes to put his name there, even unto his habitation shall ye seek, and thither thou shalt come: And thither ye shall bring your burnt offerings, and your sacrifices” (Deuteronomy 12:5–6). Deuteronomy further stipulates that Israel was not to eat “the firstlings of thy herds or of thy flock” at home (“in thy gates”), but “before the Lord” (i.e., at the temple; Deuteronomy 12:17). Moreover, the legislation prescribed that “all the firstling males that come of thy herd and of thy flock thou shalt sanctify unto the Lord thy God: thou shalt do no work with the firstling of thy bullock, nor shear the firstling of thy sheep. Thou shalt eat it before the Lord thy God year by year in the place which the Lord shall choose, thou and thy household” (Deuteronomy 15:19–20). See further 1 Esdras 5:47–53; 9:6, 38, 41; Mosiah 7:17, 25:1–7; Alma 2:1, 7; 2:8–10; 20:9–12, 3 Nephi 3:13–14; 4:4.

25. Compare the return of the Israelites “every man unto his family” at the Jubilee (Leviticus 25:10). The “sorting out” or revelatory selection of Saul from the tribe of Benjamin in 1 Samuel 10:21 occurred as the Benjaminites “came near by their families.”

and **their sons** and **their daughters**, from the eldest down to the youngest, every family being separate one from another. And they pitched their tents round about the temple, every man having his tent with the door thereof towards the temple, that thereby they might remain in their tents and hear the words which **king Benjamin** should speak unto them. (Mosiah 2:5–6)

King Benjamin’s temple-sermon was, appropriately, not only a family affair²⁶ (cf. Hebrew *bayit/bêt*, “house” = “family”; “temple”) but a generational event. The presence of grandparents, parents, and children in the Israelite audience with tents pitched “round about the temple”²⁷ underscores the generational nature, not only of this temple experience, but also of the story that Mormon presents going forward. His repetition of the terms “sons” and “daughters” anticipates King Benjamin’s focus on divine sonship and daughterhood and the climactic scene in his farewell speech (see Mosiah 5:7–15).

Deuteronomy 31 records that Moses gave instructions for the reading of the Law “in the solemnity of the year of release, in the feast of the tabernacles” (Deuteronomy 31:10). He instructed, “Gather the people together, men, and women, and children, and thy stranger that is within thy gates, that they may hear, and that they may learn, and fear the Lord your God, and observe to do all the words of this law” (Deuteronomy 31:13). King Benjamin’s covenant sermon in Mosiah 2–5 also served this purpose and function. Benjamin emphasized such “learning” (Mosiah 2:17) but also, relatedly and more frequently, “understanding” (cf. the importance of understanding in Nehemiah 8:2–3).

Just as King Benjamin specifically emphasized “becom[ing] men of understanding” as part of his sonship-focused paraenesis, he brings a similar emphasis to his temple sermon. In fact, the entire first movement of King Benjamin’s speech is framed by the verb “understand”

26. Stephen D. Ricks, “A Note on Family Structure in Mosiah 2:5,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 6 (2013): 9–10.

27. Numbers 1:52–2:34 details the arrangement of the tribes of Israel by families around the wilderness tabernacle. Terrence W. Szink and John W. Welch have proposed that the setting and content of King Benjamin’s sermon matches a Feast of the Tabernacles context. Gary L. Sturgess (“The Book of Mosiah: Thoughts about Its Structure, Purposes, Themes, and Authorship,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 4, no. 2 [1995]: 107–35) compares King Benjamin’s speech to the reading of the law at the Feast of the Tabernacles in Nehemiah 8 and other cultic scenes. See especially Nehemiah 8:13–17.

(cf. Hebrew *byn*). The opening frame of the speech calls his audience to “open” their “ears” (i.e., to have “ears to hear”)²⁸ and to “open” their “hearts” so as to “understand”:

And these are the words which he spake and caused to be written, saying: My brethren, all ye that have assembled yourselves together, you that can hear my words which I shall speak unto you this day, for I have not commanded you to come up hither to trifle with the words which I shall speak, but that you should hearken unto me, and **open your ears that ye may hear and your hearts that ye may understand and your minds that the mysteries of God may be unfolded to your view.** (Mosiah 2:9)

We earlier noted the textual dependency of Mosiah 1:2–6 on 1 Nephi 1:1–4, including the wordplay on “Benjamin” in terms of “sons” and “understanding.” King Benjamin’s use of “understand” to frame his discourse to his people serves a similar function to Mormon’s use (or replication) of it in Mosiah 1:2 and Benjamin’s own use of it in Mosiah 1:6. Just as King Benjamin wished his sons to “become men of understanding” and to “read and understand of his mysteries,” his ultimate objective for his people is that they “become his [Christ’s] sons and his daughters”²⁹ enthroned at “the right hand of God” and to “understand” all “the mysteries of God.”

It should be additionally noted here that the phrase “mysteries of God” also recalls 1 Nephi 1:1 (“having had a great knowledge of the goodness and **the mysteries of God**”) and other similarly worded statements from Nephi: Nephi testifies that he had “great desires to know of the mysteries of God, wherefore, [he] did cry unto the Lord. And [the Lord] did visit [him] and did soften [his] heart that [he] did believe all the words which had been spoken by [his] father” (1 Nephi 2:16). He further avers, “For he that diligently seeketh shall find, and **the mysteries of God** shall be unfolded to them by the power of the Holy Ghost as well in this time as

28. Compare Deuteronomy 29:4 [MT 29:3] (“the Lord hath not given you an heart to perceive, and eyes to see, and ears to hear, unto this day”) and Ezekiel 12:2 (“Son of man, thou dwellest in the midst of a rebellious house, which have eyes to see, and see not; they have ears to hear, and hear not: for they are a rebellious house”). On Jesus’s use of the spiritual “ears to hear” concept, see Matthew 11:15; 13:9, 43; Mark 4:9, 23; 7:16; Luke 8:8; 14:35; and see especially 3 Nephi 11:5, when the Lamanites and Nephites “open their ears to hear” the voice of God the Father.

29. Mosiah 5:7.

in times of old and as well in times of old as in times to come; wherefore the course of the Lord is one eternal round” (1 Nephi 10:19).

Taken together, King Benjamin’s summons to his people to “open [their] hearts that [they] may understand” for the express purpose “that the mysteries of God may be unfolded to [their] view” especially recalls Jacob’s statement regarding the ancient inhabitants of Jerusalem and their failure to “understand” (Jacob 4:18–22). They failed to “understand” the Lord’s *sôd*³⁰ — his “secret” (KJV Amos 3:7), or, better, his “plan” and the “council” in which that “plan” was presented — which prophets, the “stewards of the mysteries of God,”³¹ like Lehi had declared to them:

But behold, the Jews were a stiffnecked people, and they despised the words of plainness, and killed the prophets and **sought for things that they could not understand**. Wherefore because of their blindness, which blindness came by looking beyond the mark, they must needs fall; for **God hath taken away his plainness from them and delivered unto them many things which they cannot understand** because they desired it. And because they desired it, God hath done it that they may stumble. And now I Jacob am led on by the Spirit unto prophesying, for **I perceive** by the workings of the Spirit which is in me that by the stumbling of the Jews they will reject **the stone** upon which **they might build** and have safe foundation. But behold, according to the scriptures, this **stone** shall become the great and the last and the only sure foundation upon which the Jews can **build**. And now my beloved, how is it possible that these, after having rejected the sure foundation, **can ever build upon it** that it may become the head of their corner? Behold, my beloved brethren, **I will unfold this mystery unto you** if I do not by any means get shaken from my firmness in the Spirit and stumble because of my overanxiety for you. (Jacob 4:14–18)

Jacob’s entire critique revolves around an extended paronomasia involving the verb “understand” (*bîn*), “stone” (*’eben*)/“son” (*bēn*, from vv. 5, 11 and drawn from Isaiah 8:14–15; 28:16; and Psalms 118:22) and the verb

30. HALOT, 745, glosses *sôd* as “confidential discussion”; “secret, scheme” (as consequence or result of discussion); “circle of confidants” (i.e., a council). BDB, 691, glosses *sôd* as “council, counsel” including an “intimate circle”; “assembly, company” and “secret counsel.”

31. 1 Corinthians 4:1, Paul says of his apostolic role: “Let a man so account of us, as of the ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God [*mystērion theou*].”

bānâ, “build.” Notably, *’eben* (“stone”), and *bēn* are both apparently related to *bānâ*, while *bîn* (“understand”) constitutes an etymologically-unrelated homonym. All of these images Jacob juxtaposes with the temple-architectural images of the “sure foundation” (*mûsād mûssād*) from Isaiah 18:16³² and the “head” stone of the corner from Psalm 118:22.³³

King Benjamin’s opening commandment that his people “understand” that the “mysteries of God may be unfolded to [their] view” recalls King Benjamin’s assertion: “**My sons**, I would that ye should remember that were it not for these plates, which contain these records and these commandments, **we must have suffered in ignorance**, even at this present time, **not knowing the mysteries of God**” (Mosiah 1:3). The “mysteries of God” here and in other contexts has at least partial reference to the esoterica of the temple and its rites (cf. Greek *mysteria*)³⁴ that enabled one to “become” one of the “saints” or “holy ones” and participate in the divine council³⁵ — the *sôd*.

One of the most important *sôd*-texts³⁶ in the Hebrew Bible is found in Jeremiah 23:18–22, which conceivably constituted one of the “many

32. See discussion in Matthew L. Bowen, “I Have Done According to My Will: Reading Jacob 5 as a Temple Text” in *The Temple: Ancient and Restored*, eds. Stephen D. Ricks and Donald W. Parry (Salt Lake City: Interpreter Foundation, 2016), 235–40. Cf. also Job 38:6; Matthew 7:24–27 (3 Nephi 14:24–27); 21:42; Luke 6:48; 20:17; Romans 9:32–33; 11:11; 1 Corinthians 1:23; 3:11; 10:4; I Peter 2:6–8.

33. Jesus himself quotes Psalms 118:22 in Matthew 21:42, “The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner” (see also Mark 12:10; Luke 20:17). The early disciples also used this passage to describe Jesus (see Acts 4:10–12). The Psalms 118:22 image constitutes the basis for the description of the polity of the church in Ephesians 2:20: “And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone.” Cf. again the stonemasonry imagery in Isaiah 28:16; Jeremiah 51:26; Zechariah 4:7.

34. Greek *mysterion* (plural *mysteria*): “secret, secret rite, secret teaching, mystery’ a relig[ious] t.t. [technical term] (predominantly pl[ural]) applied in the Gr[eco]-Rom[an] world to mostly to the mysteries with their secret teachings, relig[ious] and political in nature, concealed within many strange customs and ceremonies. The principal rites remain unknown because of a reluctance in antiquity to divulge them.” Walter Bauer et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 661. While the word “mysteries,” *per se*, does not occur in the Hebrew Bible, it does occur in New Testament passages like Matthew 13:11. Some modern Hebrew translations have rendered *mysteria* as *sôd* (“secret,” “plan”) or by its plural *sôdôt*.

35. See, e.g., Isaiah 6:1–10; 1 Nephi 1:7–15; Ezekiel 1:4–28; 10:1–22.

36. Besides Jeremiah 23:18–22, some other important *sôd*-texts include Amos 3:7; Psalm 25:14; 55:14; 89:7; 111:1; Proverbs 3:32; Ezekiel 13:9; and Job 15:8.

prophecies which have been spoken by the mouth of Jeremiah” found on the brass plates.³⁷ Lehi³⁸ and his son Nephi,³⁹ like Jeremiah their contemporary, became prophets whose legitimacy was confirmed by their having “stood” in Yahweh’s *sôd*:

For who hath stood **in the counsel** [*sôd*, **council**] of the Lord, and hath perceived [seen] and heard his word? who hath marked his word, and heard it? Behold, a whirlwind of the Lord is gone forth in fury, even a grievous whirlwind: it shall fall grievously upon the head of the wicked. The anger of the Lord shall not return, until he have executed, and till he have performed the thoughts of his heart: in the latter days **ye shall consider it perfectly** [*titbôněnú bāh bînâ*; or, in the latter days **you will understand it clearly** (NRSV)]. I have not sent these [false] prophets, yet they ran: I have not spoken to them, yet they prophesied. But **if they had stood in my counsel** [*sôd*, “council”] and had caused my people to hear my words, then they should have turned them from their evil way, and from the evil of their doings. (Jeremiah 23:18–22)

Notably, Jeremiah mentions *sôd* or “(divine) council” and the concept of prophets standing in the divine council in the context of the Judahites’ failure at that time to “understand clearly” (*titbôněnú bāh bînâ*, literally, you will understand in it understanding) the Lord and his purposes. As Jacob had noted (see above), Judah and Jerusalem did not then “understand” the Lord or his purposes and “sought for things which they could not understand.” Jeremiah prophesies, in essence, that what was then mysterious to the hardhearted inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem would be “made bright at last”⁴⁰: the day would come when they would clearly understand the Lord and his purposes after they have come to complete fulfillment.

In commanding his people to “open ... your hearts that the ye may **understand**, that the mysteries of God may be unfolded to your view,” King Benjamin expressed his desire that his temple audience

37. 1 Nephi 5:13. Cf. also Helaman 8:20.

38. 1 Nephi 1:5–15.

39. 1 Nephi 11–14; see David E. Bokovoy, “‘Thou Knowest That I Believe’: Invoking the Spirit of the Lord as Council Witness in 1 Nephi 11,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 1 (2012): 1–23.

40. Borrowing the language of Katharina von Schlegel, “Be Still My Soul,” *Hymns*, trans. Jane Borthwick (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), 124.

have an experience akin to the Prophet Joseph Smith’s description of the experiences that he and Oliver Cowdery experienced in the Kirtland Temple in D&C 110:1–2: “The veil was taken from our minds, and **the eyes of our understanding were opened**. We saw the Lord standing upon the breastwork of the pulpit, before us; and under his feet was a paved work of pure gold, in color like amber.” They, in effect, stood in the Lord’s *sôd* — the divine council — as in a kind of endowment⁴¹ and “understood.” The “fruit” of their nascent “tree[s] of life”⁴² would thus “enlighten [their] understanding” as it began “to be delicious to [them]; “[their] understanding [could then] begin to be enlightened, and [their] mind[s] ... begin to expand” (Alma 32:28, 34).

The prologue of King Benjamin’s sermon echoes Isaiah 6:9–10: “And he said, Go, and tell this people, **Hear ye indeed, but understand not** [*wě’al tābîn*]; and see ye indeed, but perceive not. Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and **understand** [*yābîn*] **with their heart**, and convert, and be healed.”⁴³ The directive given to Isaiah in the divine council uses the verb *bîn* twice. In commissioning Isaiah, the Lord had commanded him to make the message difficult for his audience — an audience that “sought for things that they could not understand” and in their “blindness” were thus given “many things which they cannot understand” (Jacob 4:14). The Lord apparently directed King Benjamin to do just the opposite for his temple audience on this occasion.

“I Have Spoken Plain unto You That Ye Might Understand”

Just as King Benjamin opens his speech with a call for his audience to “open ... their hearts that [they might] understand” (Mosiah 2:9), he closes the first part of his speech with an address to those who *could* “understand” his words and a testimony given in such a way that they *would* “understand” his words:

O all ye old men and also ye young men and **you little children which can understand my words** — for **I have spoken plain unto you that ye might understand** — I pray that ye should

41. See especially William J. Hamblin, “The Sôd of YHWH and the Endowment,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 4 (2013): 147–54.

42. Alma 32:40–43; 33:23.

43. Isaiah 44:18 similarly describes ancient Israel and Judah: “They have not known **nor understood** [*wě’lō’ yābînû*]: for he hath shut their eyes, that they cannot see; and their hearts, that they cannot understand.”

awake to remembrance of the awful situation of those that have fallen into transgression. And moreover I would desire that ye **should consider on the blessed and happy state of those that keep the commandments of God**; for behold, they are blessed in all things, both temporal and spiritual. And if they hold out faithful to the end, they are received into heaven, that thereby they may dwell with God in a state of never-ending happiness. O remember, remember that these things are true, for the Lord God hath spoken it. (Mosiah 2:40–41)

In alluding to the doctrine of Christ with the words “hold out faithful to the end” (see especially 2 Nephi 31:20) and the promise of eternal life (see 2 Nephi 31:15, 20), Nephi helped his readers understand his instruction in terms of the covenant path and the architectural and ritual design of the temple itself.⁴⁴ Among those whom King Benjamin cites as being able to “understand” his words were *some* of the “little children” present on the occasion. Mormon has deliberate reference to this statement when he describes those a generation later who “could not understand the words of King Benjamin, being little children” (Mosiah 26:1; see further below).

King Benjamin’s statement “I have spoken plain unto you that ye may understand” recalls numerous earlier statements by his ancestor Nephi that connect “plainness” of writing and speech with “understanding.”⁴⁵ However, like his earlier use of the verb rendered “understand” in Mosiah 2:9, King Benjamin’s use of “plain” and “understand” in Mosiah 2:40 recalls the words of Jacob in Jacob 4:

Behold, my brethren, he that prophesieth, **let him prophesy to the understanding of men**, for the Spirit speaketh the truth and lieth not. Wherefore it speaketh of things as they really are and of things as they really will be. Wherefore **these things are manifested unto us plainly** for the salvation of our

44. On the connection of 2 Nephi 31–32 to the temple, see Jared T. Parker, “The Doctrine of Christ in 2 Nephi 31–32 as an Approach to the Vision of the Tree of Life,” in *The Things Which My Father Saw: Approaches to Lehi’s Dream and Nephi’s Vision*, 2011 Sperry Symposium, eds. Daniel L. Belnap, Gaye Strathearn, and Stanley A. Johnson (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2011), 161–78. On the principles of “faith” and “enduring to the end” as remaining “faithful to the end” (including the possibility of martyrdom), see, e.g., Alma 5:13; Revelation 2:10; Hebrews 2:1–4; 2 Maccabees 13:14; Matthew 24:13; Joseph Smith — Matthew 1:11, 30.

45. 1 Nephi 13:29; 14:23; 16:29; 2 Nephi 31:3; 32:7.

souls. But behold, we are not witnesses alone in these things; for God also spake them unto prophets of old. But behold, the Jews [i.e., the inhabitants of 8th–7th century Judah and Jerusalem] were a stiffnecked people, and **they despised the words of plainness** and killed the prophets and **sought for things that they could not understand**. Wherefore because of their blindness, which blindness came by looking beyond the mark, they must needs fall; for God hath taken away his plainness from them and **delivered unto them many things which they cannot understand** because they desired it. And because they desired it, God hath done it that they may stumble. (Jacob 4:13–14)

King Benjamin’s statement of purpose in Mosiah 2:40 (“I have spoken unto you plain that ye might understand”), like the prologue to his address and like Nephi’s “delight” in “plainness,” is nearly the opposite of the prophetic commission given to Isaiah. As also noted above, when Isaiah received his prophetic commission, he was commanded to make his message difficult for his audience (“Go, and tell this people, Hear ye indeed, **but understand not** [*wə`al tābînû*]; and see ye indeed, but perceive not. Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, **and understand** [*yābîn*] **with their heart**, and convert, and be healed,” Isaiah 6:9–10).

The difficulty of Isaiah’s message is mentioned throughout his writings. He was “given the tongue of the learned” so that he would “know how to speak a word in season to the weary” or “unto thee, O house of Israel” (2 Nephi 7:4). In Isaiah 28, the prophet asks: “Whom shall he [the Lord] teach knowledge? and whom shall he **make to understand** [*yābîn*] doctrine [literally, a “hearing” or a “report”]? them that are weaned from the milk, and drawn from the breasts. For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little: For with stammering lips and another tongue will he speak to this people” (Isaiah 28:8–11). Importantly, it is this very text that precedes Isaiah’s prophecy about the “fall” of the inhabitants of Jerusalem and the “stone” (Isaiah 28:13–16) that Jacob correlates, via *Gezera Shawa*, with Isaiah 8:14–15 and Psalm 118:22 in Jacob 4:18–22.⁴⁶

46. Bowen, “I Hove Done According to My Will,” 235–38; Bowen, “Onomastic Wordplay on Joseph and Benjamin and *Gezera Shawa* in the Book of Mormon,” 271–72.

Isaiah later mentions what could be viewed⁴⁷ as an eventual reversal of the mystification of his message: “And the eyes of them that see shall not be dim, and the ears of them that hear shall hearken. The heart also of the rash **shall understand** [*yābîn*] **knowledge**, and the tongue of the stammerers shall be ready to speak **plainly** [*ṣāhôt*]” (Isaiah 32:3–4). In contrast to Isaiah, King Benjamin successfully made his message plain to the understanding of his temple audience. The words of Proverbs 8:8–9 would have thus been at home on the lips of Nephi, Jacob, or King Benjamin himself: “All the words of my mouth are in righteousness; there is nothing froward or perverse in them. **They are all plain** [*někōhîm*] **to him that understandeth** [*mēbîn*], and right to them that find knowledge.”

A part of the work of “understanding” that King Benjamin wishes his people to do is to “consider on [i.e., reflect on, meditate on⁴⁸] the **blessed and happy state** of those that keep the commandments of God” (Mosiah 2:40–41). The phrase “blessed and happy state” evokes the image of Lehi’s tree of life — the “tree, whose fruit was desirable to make one **happy**” (1 Nephi 8:10). Daniel C. Peterson has noted the probable allusive wordplay involving “happy” (Hebrew *’ašrê*) and the asherah, a stylized “tree of life” that was a part of the worship of some Israelites,⁴⁹ though the asherahs and the practices associated with them were later condemned outright by the ascendant, so-called “Deuteronomists.”

Wisdom and “understanding” are thus intrinsically connected to “happiness” and the “tree of life,” and both are associated with the “right hand” (*yāmîn*): “**Happy** [*’ašrê*] is the man that findeth wisdom, and the man that getteth **understanding** [*tēbûnâ*]; “length of days is **in her right hand** [*bîmînāh*]; “She is a **tree of life** [*’ēṣ ḥayyîm*] to them that lay hold upon her: and **happy** [*mē’uššār*] is every one that retaineth her” (Proverbs 3:13–18).⁵⁰

“They Hardened Their Hearts and Understood Not” vs. “Becom[ing] as Little Children”

In the second portion of his speech, King Benjamin uses a verb rendered “understand” just once. Relating the words of an angel, he describes ancient Israel’s response to the Law of Moses as a typological system:

47. Cf. Rashi’s commentary on Isaiah 32:3–4. Rashi specifically connects Isaiah 32:3 with Isaiah 6 and Isaiah 28:11.

48. See, e.g., Psalms 77:12.

49. Daniel C. Peterson, “Nephi and His Asherah,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 9, no. 2 (2000): 24.

50. Cf. also Proverbs 11:30; 13:12; 15:4.

Yet the Lord God saw that his people were a stiffnecked people, and he appointed unto them a law, even the law of Moses. And many signs, and wonders, and **types** [cf. the Hebrew noun *tabnît* < *bny*] and shadows shewed he unto them, 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. And **even if it were possible that little children could sin they could not be saved; but I say unto you they are blessed;** for behold, as in Adam, or by nature, they fall, even so the blood of Christ atoneth for their sins. (Mosiah 3:14–16)

Deuteronomy frames Israel's obedience to the Law of Moses in terms of wisdom and understanding. Moses declares, "Keep therefore and do them [the Lord's statutes and judgments]; for this is your wisdom **and your understanding** [*bînatkem*] in the sight of the nations, which shall hear all these statutes, and say, Surely this great nation is a wise and **understanding** [*nābôn*] people" (Deuteronomy 4:6). The angel who spoke to King Benjamin, in turn, frames "understanding" specifically in terms of understanding the sacred "types and shadows" specifically associated with the tabernacle/temple architectural and ritual design in Exodus 25:8–9, 40 (cf. Hebrews 8:5).⁵¹ Unfortunately, ancient Israel's response to the divinely-appointed "many signs, and wonders, and types, and shadows" was to "harden their hearts." As a result, they "understood not" the meaning of their miraculous deliverances, their temple with its sacrificial system, and all that they "pointed" to: the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ in the flesh and "the atonement of his blood."

The angel's assessment of ancient Israel's failure to "understand" Christ's atonement and the typological system that pointed to it had particular relevance to King Benjamin's temple audience who themselves should have been familiar with the types in the sacrificial system, the temple's ritual and structural architecture, and in the temple's

51. The idea of "type" corresponds to Hebrew *tabnît* as used in Exodus 25:8–9, 40: "And let them make me a sanctuary; that I may dwell among them. According to all that I shew thee, after the **pattern** [*tabnît*] of the tabernacle, and **the pattern** [*tabnît*] of all the instruments thereof, even so shall ye make it"; "And look that thou make them **after their pattern** [*bētābnîtām*], which was shewed thee in the mount." Cf. Mosiah 13:10, 31; Alma 25:10, 15; 33:19; Romans 5:14 (*typos* = type); Colossians 2:17 (*skia* = shadow); Hebrews 8:5 (*skia* ... *typon* = shadow ... pattern/type, citing Exodus 25:40, *typos* = *tabnît*); 10:1 (*skia*).

appurtenances. Moreover, they were descendants of the very Israelites who had hardened their hearts and failed to “understand.”

King Benjamin’s use of “little children” in this instance refers, of course, to all children in general under the age of accountability.⁵² However, in the context of the foregoing it also recalls “the little children” in his audience at the temple, some of whose “hearts were hardened” as they grew to adulthood (Mosiah 26:3), including Mosiah II’s sons — King Benjamin’s grandsons. King Benjamin knew that the greatest obstacle to spiritual “understanding” is the hardness of heart that comes through pride and carnality. The antidote for hardness of heart is divine sonship or daughterhood — to become as a “child”:

And moreover I say unto you that there shall be no other name given nor no other way nor means whereby salvation can come unto the children of men, only in and through the name of Christ the Lord Omnipotent. For behold he judgeth, and his judgment is just. And the infant perisheth not that dieth in his infancy, but men drinketh damnation to their own souls **except they humble themselves and become as little children**⁵³ and believeth that salvation was and is and is to come in and through the atoning blood of Christ the Lord Omnipotent. For the natural man is an enemy to God and has been from

52. See e.g., Moroni 8:10: “Behold, I say unto you that this thing shall ye teach: repentance and baptism unto they which are accountable and capable of committing sin. Yea, teach parents that they must repent and be baptized, and humble themselves as their little children, and they shall all be saved with their little children.” JST Genesis 17:4–7, 11: “And God talked with him, saying, My people have gone astray from my precepts, and have not kept mine ordinances, which I gave unto their fathers; and they have not observed mine anointing, and the burial, or baptism wherewith I commanded them; but have turned from the commandment, and taken unto themselves the washing of children, and the blood of sprinkling; and have said that the blood of the righteous Abel was shed for sins; and have not known wherein they are accountable before me”; “And I will establish a covenant of circumcision with thee, and it shall be my covenant between me and thee, and thy seed after thee, in their generations; that thou mayest know for ever that children are not accountable before me until they are eight years old.” D&C 29:46–47: “But behold, I say unto you, that little children are redeemed from the foundation of the world through mine Only Begotten; wherefore, they cannot sin, for power is not given unto Satan to tempt little children, until they begin to become accountable before me.”

53. See also Matthew 18:3–4, “Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child.”

the fall of Adam and will be forever and ever but if he yieldeth 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.** (Mosiah 3:17–19)

Paradoxically, those who become men and women of understanding “humble themselves and become as little children.” These men and women recognize that the “natural man” (or natural woman) “is nothing,”⁵⁴ “even less than the dust of the earth,”⁵⁵ and, worse, an enemy to God. They recognize that the only wise course of action is to “put off the natural man” as one would take off clothing and, in Paul’s words, “put on Christ” — that is, “become a saint through the atonement of Christ” and “become as a child”⁵⁶ (Mosiah 3:19).⁵⁷

At this point King Benjamin, recalls the name of his own royal “son” and heir “Mosiah” when he declares, “And moreover, I say unto you, that the time shall come when the knowledge of a **Savior** [*môšîaʿ*] shall spread throughout every nation, kindred, tongue, and people. 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” (Mosiah 3:20–21). The name Mosiah probably derives from⁵⁸ or contains the term *môšîaʿ*, the Hebrew term for “savior.”⁵⁹ On the occasion of his son Mosiah’s ascension to the

54. Moses 1:10.

55. Mosiah 4:2; Helaman 12:7.

56. Cf. Jesus’s statement as recorded in 3 Nephi 11:37–38: “And again I say unto you, ye must repent, and **become as a little child**, and be baptized in my name, or ye can in nowise receive these things. And again I say unto you, ye must repent, and be baptized in my name, and become as a little child, or ye can in nowise inherit the kingdom of God.”

57. Alma the Younger quotes a portion of the angels words to and cited by King Benjamin in Mosiah 3:19 (“becometh as a child, submissive, meek, humble, patient, full of love, willing to submit . . .”) almost verbatim in his speech to the people of Ammonihah (“becoming humble, meek, submissive, patient, full of love and all long-suffering”).

58. John W. Welch, “What Was a Mosiah?” in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1992), 105–7; see also Paul Y. Hoskisson, s.v. “Mosiah,” Book of Mormon Onomasticon, last modified May 30, 2016, <https://onoma.lib.byu.edu/index.php/MOSIAH>.

59. Isaiah 19:20; 49:26; 60:16; 63:8; Jeremiah 14:8; Hosea 13:4; Obadiah 1:21; Psalm 106:21.

throne and using the angel's words, King Benjamin employed a wordplay pointing to the true *môšîa'* or Savior that Mosiah typified.

“That Ye May Hear and Understand the Remainder of My Words”

Amid the dramatic proskynesis⁶⁰ of his people in response to the second part of his speech and amid further ritual actions through which they place themselves under a formal oath and covenant with the Lord (see Mosiah 4:2; 5:1–6), King Benjamin re-opens his sermon with yet another call to “understand”: “And king **Benjamin** again opened his mouth and began to speak unto them, saying: My friends and my brethren, my kindred and my people, I would again call your attention, **that ye may hear and understand**⁶¹ the remainder of my words which I shall speak unto you” (Mosiah 4:4). King Benjamin's third call to “understanding” marks the opening of the third part of his speech and recalls his earlier emphasis on understanding in his speech (Mosiah 2:9, 40; 3:15), and the emphasis on “understanding” in the paraenetic material of Mosiah 1:2–6.

“Ye ... Have Become His Sons and Daughters”

King Benjamin emphasized his son Mosiah's royal sonship at the outset of his speech: “[the Lord God] hath commanded me that I should **declare unto you this day**, that **my son** Mosiah is a king and a ruler over you”; “**if ye shall keep the commandments of my son**, or the commandments of God which shall be delivered unto you by him, ye shall prosper in the land, and your enemies shall have no power over you” (Mosiah 2:30–31).⁶² The statement “**I ... declare unto you this day that my son** Mosiah

60. Hugh W. Nibley (*An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 3rd ed. [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988], 304) writes: “The proskynesis was the falling to earth (literally, ‘kissing the ground’) in the presence of the king by which all the human race on the day of the coronation demonstrated its submission to divine authority; it was an unflinching part of the Old World New Year's rites as of any royal audience. A flat prostration upon the earth was the proper act of obeisance in the presence of the ruler of all the universe.” Matthew L. Bowen, “‘They Came Forth and Fell Down and Partook of the Fruit of the Tree’: Proskynesis in 3 Nephi 11:12–19 and 17:9–10 and Its Significance” in *Third Nephi: New Perspectives on an Incomparable Scripture*, eds. Gaye Strathearn and Andrew Skinner (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute, 2011), 107–29; Bowen, “‘And Behold, They Had Fallen to the Earth’: An Examination of Proskynesis in the Book of Mormon,” *Studia Antiqua* 4, no. 1 (2005): 91–110.

61. Cf. Hebrew *tābînû* in Job 18:2.

62. Robert F. Smith (personal communication, notes in the possession of the author) points out that King Benjamin's promise in Mosiah 2:30–31 has strong resonances

is a king and a ruler over you” dramatically recalls the enthronement liturgy of Psalm 2:7: “**I will declare** the decree: the Lord hath said unto me, Thou art **my Son** [*běni*]; this day have I begotten thee.”

At the end of his speech, however, King Benjamin democratizes⁶³ his earlier use of the enthronement liturgy of Psalm 2:7 in a climactic rhetorical wordplay on his own name — i.e., “son of the right hand.” The first part of this rhetorical wordplay, which emphasizes the divine nature of the sonship and daughterhood to which his people were attaining, constitutes a pun on the first element in his name, “son”:

And now, these are the words which king **Benjamin** [*binyāmîn*] desired of them. And therefore he said unto them: Ye have spoken the words that I desired, and the covenant which ye have made [cut] is a righteous covenant. And now because of the covenant which ye have made, ye shall be called the **children** [Hebrew *běně* or *yaldê*] **of Christ, his sons** [*bānāw* or *bānāw*] and **his daughters; for behold, this day he hath spiritually begotten you** [cf. “have I begotten thee,” *yělidtîkā*, from Psalm 2:7], for ye say that your hearts are changed through faith on his name; therefore **ye are born of him and have become his sons** [*bānāw* or *bānāw*] and **his daughters** [*ûběnôtāw*]. (Mosiah 5:6–7)

The Hebrew Bible repeatedly defines and describes Israel’s covenant relationship with the Lord in terms of sonship. A prophecy by Hosea describes Israel collectively as God’s “son”: “When Israel was a child, then I loved him, and called **my son** [*liběni*, “as my son”⁶⁴] out of Egypt” (Hosea 11:1) — a text that Matthew notably applies individually to Jesus’s royal/divine sonship (Matthew 2:15). To be “called” God’s “son”/“daughter”/“child” was to *become* such (see Matthew 5:9;

with Leviticus 26:3–8, “If ye walk in my statutes, and keep my commandments, and do them; Then I will give you rain in due season, and the land shall yield her increase, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit. And your threshing shall reach unto the vintage, and the vintage shall reach unto the sowing time: and ye shall eat your bread to the full, and dwell in your land safely.... And ye shall chase your enemies, and they shall fall before you by the sword ... and your enemies shall fall before you by the sword.” Cf. also Leviticus 25:18–19; 26:22, 36. So, too, the Lord’s promise to Nephi in 1 Nephi 2:20 reiterated throughout the Book of Mormon.

63. John W. Welch, “Democratizing Forces in King Benjamin’s Speech,” in *Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon*, eds. John W. Welch and Melvin J. Thorne (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1999), 110–26.

64. Hebrew *liběni* = “as my son” < *lē* (“as,” “for”) + *běni* (“my son”).

cf. Hosea 1:10 [MT 2:1]: “It shall be said unto them, Ye are **the sons** [*běně*, children] of the living God [*’el-ḥāy*”).⁶⁵ In some of these covenant “sonship” contexts, the Hebrew term *bānîm* (“sons”) can be understood as gender inclusive — i.e., “children”: “Ye are the **children** [*bānîm*] of [belonging to] the Lord [*lyhwh*] your God ... for thou art an holy people unto the Lord thy God, and the Lord hath chosen thee to **be** [become] a peculiar people unto himself, above all the nations that are upon the earth (Deuteronomy 14:1–2). Similarly, the Song of Moses says regarding Israel’s covenant unfaithfulness, “And when the Lord saw it [Israel’s idolatrous sacrifices], he abhorred them, because of the provoking **of his sons** [*bānâw*], **and of his daughters** [*ûběnôtâw*” (Deuteronomy 32:19). Notwithstanding all past covenant violations, Isaiah prophesies that the Lord would gather his “sons” and “daughters”: “I will say to the north, Give up; and to the south, Keep not back: bring **my sons** [*bānay*] from far, **and my daughters** [*ûběnôtây*] from the ends of the earth” (Isaiah 43:6). The idea that Israelites were Yahweh’s *bānîm* recurs as a theme in Isaiah’s prophecies,⁶⁶ as well as Jeremiah’s.⁶⁷

King Benjamin, as noted above, quotes the royal sonship decree of Psalm 2:7 in Mosiah 5:7. There he also quotes the version of the covenant rebirth formula (sometimes called a covenant “adoption” formula) familiar to us from 2 Samuel 7:14.⁶⁸ Regarding David’s royal son, Solomon and the

65. As Jesus expressed divine/royal adoption in the Sermon on the Mount: “Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God” (Matthew 5:9), or as he expressed it at the Sermon at the Temple (in Bountiful) “And blessed are **all** the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God” (3 Nephi 12:9).

66. E.g., Isaiah 1:2: “I have nourished and brought up **children** [*bānîm*], and they have rebelled against me”; Isaiah 30:1: “Woe to the rebellious **children** [*bānîm*], saith the Lord”; Isaiah 30:9: “That this is a rebellious people, lying **children** [*bānîm*], **children** [*bānîm*] that will not hear the law of the Lord”; Isaiah 45:11: “Ask me of things to come concerning **my sons** [*bānay* or, children]”; Isaiah 63:8: “For he said, Surely they are my people, **children** [*bānîm*] that will not lie: so he was their Saviour.”

67. E.g., Jeremiah 3:14: “Turn, O backsliding **children** [*bānîm*], saith the Lord; for I am married unto you: and I will take you one of a city, and two of a family, and I will bring you to Zion”; Jeremiah 3:18–19: “In those days the house of Judah shall walk with the house of Israel, and they shall come together out of the land of the north to the land that I have given for an inheritance unto your fathers. But I said, How shall I put thee among the **children** [*bānîm*], and give thee a pleasant land, a goodly heritage of the hosts of nations? and I said, **Thou shalt call me, My father**; and shalt not turn away from me”; Jeremiah 3:22: “Return, ye backsliding children, and I will heal your backslidings. Behold, we come unto thee; for thou art the Lord our God.”

68. See Bowen, “Sons and Daughters at God’s Right Hand,” 2–13. In addition to Psalm 2:7, see Acts 13:33, Hebrew 1:5, “(sons) this day have I begotten thee”;

royal line that would issue from him, the Lord declared: “I will be [become] his father, and he shall be [become] **my son** [*lēbēn*]” (2 Samuel 7:14). What is so radical about King Benjamin’s use of these texts on the occasion of his own son’s enthronement, is that he applies them to all of his people as well. In giving his people a “name” — the name of Messiah or “Christ” — King Benjamin gave his people an endowment to “become” kings and queens as sons and daughters of Christ.

Just as the first part of the wordplay on King Benjamin’s name in Mosiah 5 emphasizes royal/divine sonship and daughterhood, the second part of the wordplay in the climax of King Benjamin’s speech emphasizes the last part of his name: the *yāmîn* or “right hand,” the place of divine favor versus the “left hand” the place of divine disfavor:

And it shall come to pass that whosoever doeth this [i.e., takes upon oneself the name of Christ by covenant] shall be found at **the right hand** [i.e., at the *yāmîn*] **of God**, for **he shall know the name by which he is called; for he shall be called by the name of Christ.** (Mosiah 5:9)

And now it shall come to pass that whosoever shall not take upon them the name of Christ must be called by some other name; therefore he findeth himself on **the left hand of God**. And I would that ye should remember also that this is the name that I said I should give unto you that never should be blotted out except it be through transgression; therefore take heed that ye do not transgress, that the name be not blotted out of your hearts. 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.** (Mosiah 5:10–12)

King Benjamin contrasts the final state of those who have “become” Christ’s “sons” and “his daughters” at “the right hand” of God (“called by the name of Christ” or “called by the name of the Lord,” Deuteronomy 28:10),⁶⁹ with those who find themselves on the “left hand of God.” King Benjamin, like his own name (“son of the right hand”),

cf. 2 Corinthians 6:18, “and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty.”

69. Deuteronomy 28:10: “And all people of the earth shall see that thou art called by the name of the Lord; and they shall be afraid of thee.” See also Jeremiah 15:16: “Thy words were found, and I did eat them; and thy word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of mine heart: for I am called by thy name, O Lord God of hosts.”

associates kinship terminology (“children,” “sons,” and “daughters”) with the right hand in Mosiah 5:7–9, but not with the “left hand.” In other words, the kinship status of those found on the left hand remains *completely undefined*: they “must be called by some other name.” Finally and appropriately, king Benjamin describes the kinship relationship between the Lord and the faithful as “sealed.” The Lord “seals” the faithful “his”⁷⁰ or “to him”⁷¹ with his name “written always in [their] hearts.”⁷² All of this seems to suggest that eternal kinship relations exist “at the right hand of God” or “in the Lord” (cf. New Testament Greek *en kyriō*), but ultimately not outside of that sphere.⁷³

It should be further noted that divine rebirth (or so-called “adoption”) language first occurs here in the Book of Mormon. King Benjamin’s statements “this day he hath begotten you” (quoting Psalm 2:7, see above)

70. See John Gee, “Book of Mormon Word Usage: ‘Seal You His,’” *Insights* 22, no. 1 (2002): 4.

71. Bowen, “Becoming Sons and Daughters at God’s Right Hand,” 8–10.

72. See also 3 Nephi 18:7; Moroni 4:3. Jeremiah 31:33 describes Yahweh’s law being written, like his name, in his people’s hearts: “But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel . . . I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people” (see also Hebrews 8:10). Proverbs 3:3; 7:3 also employ the image of words “writ[ten] . . . upon the table of [the] heart.” Cf. especially 2 Corinthians 3:3.

73. See, e.g., D&C 132, where the Lord revealed to the Prophet Joseph Smith: “And verily I say unto you, that the conditions of this law are these: All covenants, contracts, bonds, obligations, oaths, vows, performances, connections, associations, or expectations, that are not made and entered into and sealed by the Holy Spirit of promise, of him who is anointed, both as well for time and for all eternity, and that too most holy, by revelation and commandment through the medium of mine anointed, whom I have appointed on the earth to hold this power (and I have appointed unto my servant Joseph to hold this power in the last days, and there is never but one on the earth at a time on whom this power and the keys of this priesthood are conferred), are of no efficacy, virtue, or force in and after the resurrection from the dead; for all contracts that are not made unto this end have an end when men are dead. Behold, mine house is a house of order, saith the Lord God, and not a house of confusion” (vv. 7–8); “And everything that is in the world, whether it be ordained of men, by thrones, or principalities, or powers, or things of name, whatsoever they may be, **that are not by me or by my word**, saith the Lord, shall be thrown down, and **shall not remain after men are dead, neither in nor after the resurrection**, saith the Lord your God. For whatsoever things remain are by me; and whatsoever things are not by me shall be shaken and destroyed. Therefore, if a man marry him a wife in the world, and he marry her not by me nor by my word, and he covenant with her so long as he is in the world and she with him, their covenant and marriage are not of force when they are dead, and when they are out of the world; therefore, they are not bound by any law when they are out of the world” (vv. 13–15); and so forth.

and “born of him” find later iteration in the Book of Mosiah as “born of the spirit,”⁷⁴ “born of god,”⁷⁵ and “born again”⁷⁶ (Mosiah 27:24–25, 28). Alma uses this language in Mosiah 27 and elsewhere (Alma 5:14, 49; 36:5, 23–24, 26; 38:6; cf. 22:15).

“So That They Might Understand the Words Which He Spake”

In the text that follows King Benjamin’s sermon in Mosiah 2–5, Mormon makes the first significant reference to that sermon in Mosiah 8. After Ammon₁, a member of the former ruling Mulekite/Mulochite⁷⁷ royal family in Zarahemla,⁷⁸ successfully locates the remnant of Zeniff’s people, Zeniff’s grandson Limhi has him address his people. Mormon specifically mentions that Ammon utilized King Benjamin’s speech as a means of helping these Zeniffite-Nephites “understand” everything else that he said:

And he caused that Ammon should stand up before the multitude and rehearse unto them all that had happened unto their brethren from the time that Zeniff went up out of the land even until the time that he himself came up out of the land. And **he also rehearsed unto them the last words which king Benjamin had taught them, and explained them** to the people of king Limhi, **so that they might understand all the words which he spake.** (Mosiah 8:2–3)

In juxtaposing the name Benjamin with the verbal phrase “so that they might understand” (cf. Hebrew *bîn*), Mormon recalls the foregoing paronomasia on Benjamin and “understanding” (*bînâ/těbûnâ/byn*). Mormon further recalls King Benjamin’s earlier desire that his sons might read and “understand” the mysteries of God (Mosiah 1:2) and his repeated use of “understanding” in framing aspects of his sermon. In particular, the verbal expression “so that they might understand” paraphrases the purpose clause of Mosiah 2:40 (“that ye might understand”).

We learn in addition here that King Benjamin’s sermon, which had been written down and disseminated to “those that were not under the

74. See also John 3:6, 8; Moses 27:24.

75. See also 1 John 3:9; 5:1, 4, 18; Alma 5:14; 22:15; 36:5, 23–26; 38:6.

76. John 3:3, 7; 1 Peter 1:23; Alma 5:49; 7:14; Moses 6:49.

77. See Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon, Part Three: Mosiah 17–Alma 20* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2006), 1464–70.

78. Mosiah 7:3, 13. Cf. Mosiah 25:2.

sound of his voice,”⁷⁹ must have received an even wider circulation. As one connected with Mosiah II and a member of the previously ruling royal family in Zarahemla (see Mosiah 7:3, 13), Ammon may have even had some official responsibility for this wider dissemination. In reciting King Benjamin’s speech, in part or in whole, Ammon re-contextualized temple teachings originally situated in the Zarahemla temple for a temple audience in the city of Lehi-Nephi.

On the heels of Ammon’s temple speech, there follows a dialogue between Limhi and Ammon on prophets, seers, revelators, and seership. Limhi’s people had recently discovered the twenty-four plates of Ether and was anxious to have them translated. Ammon informs Limhi that he knew of someone who could translate the plates: “the king of the people who are in the land of Zarahemla is the man that is commanded to do these things, and who has this high gift from God.” From the time of the publication of the 1837 edition of the Book of Mormon, it has been customary to assume that this king was Mosiah II. However, the earliest textual evidence suggests King Benjamin was the “seer” that Ammon had in mind. Moreover, it should be remembered that Ammon’s recitation of King Benjamin’s speech (Mosiah 8:3) prompts Limhi to have Ammon read the Zeniffite record apparently to ascertain whether Ammon could interpret languages. Ammon’s response suggests that King Benjamin had not yet died at the time of his departure from Zarahemla and had a track record of translating (i.e., the record of the Brother of Jared).⁸⁰ Limhi’s response appropriately echoes the name Benjamin in terms of *bînâ/těbûnâ*:

And now when Ammon had made an end of speaking these words the king rejoiced exceedingly and gave thanks to God, saying: Doubtless a great mystery is contained within these plates; and **these interpreters were doubtless prepared for the purpose of unfolding all such mysteries to the children of men**. O how marvelous are the works of the Lord And how long doth he suffer with his people Yea, and how blind and impenetrable are **the understandings of the children of men**, for they will not seek wisdom, neither do they desire that she should rule over them. (Mosiah 8:19–20)

79. Mosiah 2:8.

80. See Daniel B. Sharp and Matthew L. Bowen, “Scripture Note — ‘For This Cause Did King Benjamin Keep Them’: King Benjamin or King Mosiah?” *Religious Educator* 18, no. 1 (2017): 80–87.

Limhi's speech here is notable for its personification of Wisdom in the mode of Proverbs 8:16 ("By me [wisdom/understanding, *bînâ* in v. 14] princes rule, and nobles, even all the judges of the earth").⁸¹ Situated in the context of the foregoing material in the Book of Mosiah, it recalls King Benjamin's paraenesis (Mosiah 1), his commandment to his people to "understand" (Mosiah 2:9, 40–41; 4:4), and their becoming "sons" and "daughters" at God's "right hand" (Mosiah 5:7–9). His description of the purpose of the interpreters, "these interpreters were doubtless prepared for the purpose of unfolding all such mysteries to the children of men" echoes the words from King Benjamin that he has just heard from Ammon: "Open ... your minds that the mysteries of God may be unfolded to your view" (Mosiah 2:9).

Limhi's statement in the context of the history of the Zeniffites also represents a significant critique of his own father, his father's priests, and his people. In his earlier "temple" speech,⁸² Limhi acknowledges their culpability in the death of Abinadi ("a prophet of the Lord have they slain," Mosiah 7:26; cf. broadly Mosiah 7:24–33). Mormon later expressly states that "Limhi was not ignorant of the iniquities of his father, he himself being a just man" (Mosiah 19:17). In other words, Limhi, as a royal son, was a man of understanding, who understood in ways that his father did not.

Thus, Limhi's description of the "understandings of the children of men" as "impenetrable" afforded Mormon perhaps the perfect narrative transition to Abinadi's earlier prophecies and his lengthy speech in King Noah's court. As we shall see, Abinadi preached to Limhi's wicked father Noah and his sycophantic priests a sermon remarkably similar to King Benjamin's speech, including an emphasis on "understanding" and Christ's divine sonship. Mormon's abridgment and inclusion of this speech takes great pains to show that King Noah and his priests, like ancient Israel,⁸³ had specifically failed to "understand" Christ's divine sonship and the types and shadows in the law of Moses that pointed to it.

81. Wisdom (*hokmâ*) was sometimes more elaborately personified as a virtuous woman as throughout Proverbs 8. Jesus similarly personified Wisdom at least once: "But wisdom is justified of her children" (Matthew 11:19) or "But wisdom is justified of all her children" (Luke 7:35).

82. For the temple in the city of Lehi-Nephi as the locus Limhi's speech in Mosiah 7:18–33, see Mosiah 7:17.

83. See, e.g., Alma 33:16, where Alma cites the prophet Zenock as saying, "For behold, he said: Thou art angry, O Lord, with this people, because **they will not understand** thy mercies which thou hast bestowed upon them because of **thy Son**."

“I Would That Ye Should Understand That God Himself Shall Come Down Among the Children of Men”

Some comments at the end of Zeniff’s personal royal autobiography appropriately accord with Mormon’s unfolding theme of “understanding” (or lack thereof) and royal sonship. Mormon appears to have included wholesale Zeniff’s record into his historical abridgment with little or no editorial intrusion. Nevertheless, Zeniff’s comments help us to contextualize Noah and his priests’ failure to “understand” the law of Moses, prophecy, and Christ’s divine sonship, and thus Noah’s failure as a royal “son.”

Having grappled with the Lamanite problem for most of his reign, Zeniff assesses the historical reasons behind Lamanite hardheartedness: “And his [Nephi’s] brethren [Laman, Lemuel, and the sons of Ishmael] were wroth with him because **they understood not the dealings of the Lord**; they were also wroth with him upon the waters because they hardened their hearts against the Lord” (Mosiah 10:14). He continues, “thus **they have taught their children** that they should hate them, and that they should murder them, and that they should rob and plunder them, and do all they could to destroy them; therefore **they have an eternal hatred towards the children of Nephi**” (Mosiah 10:17). According to Zeniff, the generational Lamanite problem of “unbelief”⁸⁴ was a direct result of Laman, Lemuel, and the sons of Ishmael’s failure to “understand ... the dealings of the Lord.” Ultimately, their failure to “understand”⁸⁵ confirmed the legitimacy

Note the wordplay on *byn* (*yābīnū*) and *bēn*, “son” and in the following verses (Alma 33:17–18).

84. See Matthew L. Bowen, “Not Partaking of the Fruit: Its Generational Consequences and Its Remedy,” in *The Things Which My Father Saw: Approaches to Lehi’s Dream and Nephi’s Vision: The 40th Annual Brigham Young University Sidney B. Sperry Symposium*, eds. Daniel L. Belnap, Gaye Strathearn, and Stanley A. Johnson (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011), 240–63.

85. Compare, for example, Nephi’s statements in 1 Nephi 15:6–11 with 2 Nephi 32:4. In 1 Nephi 15:6–11, Nephi shows that Laman and Lemuel’s failure to “understand” was at the heart of their “unbelief”: “And it came to pass that after I had received strength, I spake unto my brethren, desiring to know of them the cause of their disputations. And they said: Behold, **we cannot understand** the words which our father hath spoken concerning the natural branches of the olive-tree and also concerning the Gentiles. And I said unto them: **Have ye inquired of the Lord? And they said unto me: We have not, for the Lord maketh no such thing known unto us.** Behold, I said unto them: How is it that ye do not keep the commandments of the Lord? **How is it that ye will perish** because of the hardness of your hearts? Do ye not remember the things which the Lord hath said? — If ye will not harden your hearts and ask me in faith, believing that ye shall receive, with diligence in keeping my commandments, surely these things shall be made

of Nephi's leadership and that of his successors⁸⁶ — especially in the Nephite view — over that of Laman and his royal successors.

Zeniff's record ends rather abruptly: "And now I, being old, did confer the kingdom upon **one of my sons**. Therefore, I say no more. And may the Lord bless my people. Amen" (Mosiah 10:22). Zeniff does not even give his successor's name. Unlike Mosiah I, Benjamin, and Benjamin's sons,⁸⁷ Zeniff's royal son, Noah, would neither be "just" nor become a "m[a]n of understanding" (see below). Mormon resumes his direct authorial/editorial intervention in the next verse with the statement, "And now it came to pass that Zeniff conferred the kingdom upon Noah, one of his sons; therefore Noah began to reign in his stead. And he did not walk in the ways of his father" (Mosiah 11:1). The fact that Mormon names Zeniff's royal son, Noah, while that son's own father does not, is striking. Mormon pejoratively exploits the meaning of that son's name — "rest" — in the evaluation and catalogue of the latter's sins that follows (e.g., "And he [Noah] caused a breastwork to be built before them **that they might rest** their bodies and their arms upon while they should speak lying and vain words to his people").⁸⁸

All of this sets the stage for Mormon's presentation of Abinadi's speech to King Noah and his priests. Todd Parker has noted numerous similarities between King Benjamin's sermon and Abinadi's speech(es).⁸⁹ Mormon uses King Benjamin's and Abinadi's speeches as two mutual witnesses that the law of Moses constituted a system of types and

known unto you" (1 Nephi 15:6-11). Nephi's later statement to the descendants of his brothers on the necessity of "asking" and "knocking" in order to "understand" with its temple imagery appears to allude, at least in part, back to that earlier event: "Wherefore now after that I have spoken these words, **if ye cannot understand them, it will be because ye ask not, neither do ye knock**. Wherefore ye are not brought into the light **but must perish in the dark**" (2 Nephi 32:4).

86. See Noel B. Reynolds, "The Political Dimension in Nephi's Small Plates," *BYU Studies* 27, no. 4 (1987): 15–37.

87. Amaleki states that King Benjamin was a "just man before the Lord" (Omni 1:25). Amaleki's description echoes Enos's description of his own father Jacob, its onomastic wordplay, and its allusions to Genesis 32–33. See Matthew L. Bowen "'And There Wrestled a Man with Him' (Genesis 32:24): Enos's Adaptations of the Onomastic Wordplay of Genesis," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 10 (2014): 151–60.

88. See especially Matthew L. Bowen, "'This Son Shall Comfort Us': An Onomastic Tale of Two Noahs," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 23 (2017): 279–82.

89. Todd Parker, "Abinadi: The Man and the Message (Part 1)" (Provo, UT: FARMS Transcripts, 1996), 1–2.

shadows that pointed to Jesus Christ as the royal/divine Son of God (see Mosiah 3:14–15; 13:27–32). A salient aspect of Abinadi’s critique is his use of the term “understand,” which, within the context of the narrative sequence, reminds the audience of King Benjamin’s speech, although chronologically-speaking, King Benjamin’s speech would have come later. Abinadi repeatedly excoriates King Noah and his priests for their failure to “understand.” They could not “understand” the words of Isaiah or, apparently, the Law of Moses with its cultic system of types and signs — which they did not keep — and failed to teach about the one to whom they “pointed”:

And now Abinadi saith unto them: Are you priests and **pretend to teach this people and to understand the spirit of prophesying**, and yet desireth to know of me what these things mean? I say unto you: Woe be unto you for perverting the ways of the Lord For **if ye understand these things, ye have not taught them**; therefore, ye have perverted the ways of the Lord. Ye have not **applied your hearts to understanding**; therefore ye have not been wise. Therefore what teachest thou this people? And they said: We teach the law of Moses. And again he said unto them: If ye teach the law of Moses, why do ye not keep it? Why do ye set your hearts upon riches? Why do ye commit whoredoms and spend your strength with harlots, yea, and cause this people to commit sin, that the Lord hath cause to send me to prophesy against this people⁹⁰ — yea, even a great evil against this people? (Mosiah 12:25–29)

As King Benjamin also does (will do) in his sermon, Abinadi recalls ancient Israel and Judah’s failure to “understand.” If King Noah and his priests do not “understand,” they are only “fill[ing] ... up the measure of [their] fathers.”⁹¹ Abinadi further asks, “And now, **did they understand**

90. Abinadi may be quoting or paraphrasing Jeremiah 26:12: “The Lord sent me to prophesy against this house and against this city.”

91. In Matthew 23:29–32, Jesus is recorded as saying to the Pharisees: “Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites because ye build the tombs of the prophets, and garnish the sepulchres of the righteous, and say, If we had been in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets. Wherefore ye be witnesses unto yourselves, that ye are the children of them which killed the prophets. Fill ye up then the measure of your fathers.” [Or, as the NJB renders it “Very well then, finish off the work that your ancestors began.”] Like Jesus, Abinadi was about to undergo martyrdom at the behest of morally and ethically corrupt religious leaders.

the law? I say unto you: Nay, **they did not all understand** the law — and this because of the hardness of their hearts. For **they understood not** that there could not any man be saved except it were through the redemption of God” (Mosiah 13:32).

Like ancient Israel and Judah, King Noah and his priests did not “understand the law” to the degree that they hardened their hearts and did not keep the law. Nor could they understand what and who the law “pointed” to: Jesus Christ and his redeeming atonement.⁹² Jesus faced similar obduracy among the religious elite during his mortal ministry.⁹³ Moses had declared to Israel, which was already prone to obduracy, “Keep therefore and do [the statutes and judgments given through Moses]; for this is your wisdom **and your understanding** [*ûbînatkem*] in the sight of the nations, which shall hear all these statutes, and say, Surely this great nation is a wise and **understanding** [*wěñābôn*] people” (Deuteronomy 4:6). “Applying” one’s “heart to understanding” and being “wise” was no more and no less than wholeheartedly keeping and “teaching the law of Moses and the intent for which it was given, persuading them to look forward unto the Messiah and believe in him to come as though he already was” (Jarom 1:11; cf. 2 Nephi 25:24–30).

Like King Benjamin (Mosiah 3:15), Abinadi describes the Law of Moses as a system of “types of things to come.”⁹⁴ The name Moses itself, which in Egyptian denotes “[the God is] begotten” and which acquired the Hebrew connotation “drawer” or “puller,”⁹⁵ is loaded with christological typology. Moses as a royal⁹⁶ “begotten” son, “pulled” from the waters of birth/death (cf. Exodus 2:10; Romans 6:4), would “pull”

92. Jacob 4:5; Alma 34:14. See Matthew L. Bowen, “Scripture Note: “Pointing Our Souls to Him,” *Religious Educator* 20, no. 1 (2019): 164–71. Matthew. On the meaning and necessity of Christ’s redemptive act, see Galatians 3:13: “Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law”; cf. also Psalms 111:9, 130:7; John 14:6, Revelation 5:9.

93. See, e.g., Matthew 19:8; Mark 3:5; cf. Psalms 81:11–12 [MT 12–13]; 95:8; Mark 10:5.

94. Abinadi describes his own life and ministry as a christological “type” (see Mosiah 13:10).

95. See, e.g., James K. Hoffmeier, s.v. “Moses,” *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, eds. Geoffrey W. Bromiley et al. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), 417; Michael P. O’Connor, “The Human Characters’ Names in the Ugaritic Poems: Onomastic Eccentricity in Bronze-Age West Semitic and the Name Daniel in Particular,” in *Biblical Hebrew in Its Northwest Semitic Setting Typological and Historical Perspectives*, eds. Steven E. Fassberg and Avi Hurvitz (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2006), 270–71, especially notes 7–8.

96. I.e., Moses was raised by Pharaoh’s daughter in the Egyptian royal court according to Exodus 2.

Israel from the waters (cf. especially Moses 1:25) — i.e., “baptiz[ing] Israel” (1 Corinthians 10:2). One who baptizes, as Abinadi’s lone convert Alma the Elder does in Mosiah 18, represents⁹⁷ Jesus Christ himself who “pulls,” redeems, and resurrects Israel from physical and spiritual death, and divine “rebirth”⁹⁸ into the “mysteries of the kingdom of heaven”⁹⁹ and “newness of life”¹⁰⁰ here and hereafter.

Moses as royal “son” was royal “lawgiver.” Benjamin and Mosiah similarly filled this role in righteousness,¹⁰¹ all of them being typical of Jesus Christ. There exists no greater theological statement regarding Jesus Christ’s royal, divine sonship in scripture than the one Abinadi makes before King Noah, a failing royal son, and his priests in Noah’s royal court:

And now Abinadi saith unto them: **I would that ye should understand that God himself shall come down among the children of men** and shall redeem his people. And because he dwelleth in flesh [cf. Mosiah 3:5], he shall be called **the Son of God**; and having subjected the flesh to the will of the Father, **being the Father and the Son, the Father because he was conceived by the power of God and the Son because of the flesh, thus becoming the Father and the Son** — and they are one God, yea, the very Eternal Father of heaven and of earth — and thus the flesh becoming subject to the spirit, or **the Son to the Father**, being one God, suffereth temptation and yieldeth not to the temptation, but suffereth himself to be mocked and scourged and cast out and disowned by his people. And after all this and after working many mighty miracles among the **children of men**, he shall be led, yea, even as Isaiah said: As a sheep before the shearer is dumb, so he opened not his mouth. Yea, even so he shall be led, crucified, and slain, the flesh becoming subject even unto death, **the will of the Son**

97. See especially Alma the Younger’s statement regarding priests and priesthood in Alma 13:3: “And those priests were ordained after the order of his Son, in a manner that thereby the people might know in what manner to look forward to his Son for redemption.”

98. See John 3:3–17.

99. OT1 Moses 6:59. (OT1 is the first draft of Joseph Smith’s translation of the Old Testament.) See Jeffrey M. Bradshaw and Matthew L. Bowen, “‘By the Blood Ye Are Sanctified’: The Symbolic, Salvific, Interrelated, Additive, Retrospective, and Anticipatory Nature of the Ordinances of Spiritual Rebirth in John 3 and Moses 6,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 24 (2017): 163.

100. Romans 6:4.

101. See especially Mosiah 2:31.

being swallowed up in the will of the Father. And thus God breaketh the bands of death, having gained the victory over death, **giving the Son power to make intercession for the children of men,** having ascended into heaven, having the bowels of mercy **being filled with compassion toward the children of men,** standing betwixt them and justice, having broken the bands of death, having taken upon himself their iniquity and their transgressions, having redeemed them and satisfied the demands of justice. And now I say unto you: Who shall declare his generation? Behold, I say unto you that when his soul has been made an offering for sin, he shall see his seed. And now what say ye? And **who shall be his seed?** (Mosiah 15:1–10)

As part of his piercing exegesis of Isaiah 53 (Mosiah 14) in Mosiah 15–16, Abinadi presents Yahweh as Divine King and Divine Warrior who “came down”¹⁰² and “br[o]ke the bands” of Israel’s — and humankind’s — great enemy, Death (Mot),¹⁰³ which gave him “power” as “the Son” to “make intercession” in a priestly capacity for all humankind.¹⁰⁴ These are images that Noah, as an Israelite *king*, and his priests as Israelite *priests*, should have “understood,” appreciated, and taught to a much greater degree than they did.

Thus, King Noah “feared” Abinadi’s words, but did not ever truly “understand” them. Therefore, Noah and his priests never experienced the divine rebirth that makes one Christ’s “seed,”¹⁰⁵ though one (Alma) did (see Mosiah 17:2). King Noah’s failure to “understand” Christ’s divine sonship (and thus his own royal sonship) soon culminated in his using Abinadi’s words regarding that divine sonship as the very pretext for executing and martyring the latter (see Mosiah 17:5–20).

102. See also Abinadi’s earlier statement Mosiah 13:33–34, which frames his entire quotation and exegesis of Isaiah 53 in the chapters that follow (Mosiah 14–16).

103. The imagery of Death and Hell as Israel’s enemies pervades Israel’s ritual hymns (i.e., temple hymns), the Psalms (e.g., Psalm 18:4–5; 116:3). The image of Yahweh as a warrior “breaking bands” is familiar from texts like Psalm 107:14.

104. See, e.g., Hebrews 7:24–25: “But this man, because he continueth ever, hath an unchangeable priesthood. Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession [Gk. *entynchanein*] for them.”

105. See Aaron P. Schade and Matthew L. Bowen, “‘To Whom Is the Arm of the Lord Revealed?’ *Religious Educator* 16, no. 2 (2015): 90–111.

**“And Thus They Became the Children of God”:
Alma the Elder’s People**

Mormon gives an account of the people of Alma, their conversion, their society, their afflictions, and their subsequent redemption in order to demonstrate what “becoming” the “sons” and “daughters” of God looks like in praxis. Alma the Elder, as an after-type of Moses and a prototype of Christ, had baptized his people in (or, “pulled” them from) the waters of Mormon.

But it was not until they were born from above and became “one” that they fully “became” the “children of God”:

And he [Alma] commanded them that there should be no contention one with another, but that they should look forward with one eye, having one faith and **one baptism**, having their hearts knit together **in unity and in love** one towards another. And thus he commanded them to preach. And thus **they became the children of God** [Hebrew *bĕnê ʾĕlōhîm*]. (Mosiah 18:21–22)

At this point in the narrative, Mormon’s description of Alma’s people’s divine rebirth (their “becoming”) recalls the numerous previous statements heretofore in the Book of Mosiah about “becom[ing] men of understanding” (Mosiah 1:2–5); *not* “becom[ing] an enemy to all righteousness” (Mosiah 2:37); “becom[ing] as little children” (Mosiah 3:18); “becom[ing] a saint through the atonement of Christ” (Mosiah 3:19); and “becom[ing] as a child” (Mosiah 3:19). Moreover, Mormon’s statements invoke the climactic moments of King Benjamin’s speech: “And now because of the covenant which ye have made, **ye shall be called the children** [*bĕnê*¹⁰⁶ or *yaldê*¹⁰⁷] **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**” (Mosiah 5:7). Like King Benjamin’s rhetorical wordplay on his own name, Mormon’s words “and thus they became the children of God” recall the royal rebirth language of 2 Samuel 7:14 (cf. Psalm 2:7) and its democratized form in Deuteronomy 14:1.

Perhaps most appropriately, the collocation “children of God” recalls Abinadi’s description of Christ’s divine birth and sonship (“he shall be called **the Son** of God; and having subjected the flesh to the will of **the Father**, being **the Father** and **the Son**”; “thus becoming **the Father** and

106. Cf. *bānîm* in Deuteronomy 14:1; 32:20, *inter alia*.

107. Cf. *yĕlādîm* in Genesis 33:5; Hosea 1:2, *inter alia*.

Son”; “the flesh **becoming** subject to the spirit, or **the Son to the Father**, being one God, suffereth temptation ... ”; “the flesh becoming subject even unto death, the will of **the Son** being swallowed up in the will of **the Father**”; “giving **the Son** power to make intercession for **the children of men**”; “**the Son** reigneth and hath power over the dead,” Mosiah 15:2–3, 5, 8, 20). Abinadi’s words not only helped Alma’s people — and help us — “understand” what Christ’s divine sonship involved and required, but what was required of them — and is required of us — to become the “children of God” (see again especially Mosiah 3:19: “... 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”). From this point forward in Mormon’s narrative, the collocation “children of God” serves as a technical term that describes members of the church who have undergone the royal, divine rebirth described throughout the Book of Mosiah.¹⁰⁸

“They Could Not Understand the Words of King Benjamin”

Mormon’s abridged “Book of Mosiah” juxtaposes the account of Alma’s and Limhi’s converted peoples with an account of a faith crisis in the “rising generation” among the Nephites. A generation after King Benjamin’s speech, Nephite religion undergoes a major crisis. When Alma the Elder’s people came to Zarahemla, King Mosiah II had apparently given royal sanction to Alma’s church, which had apparently merged with the existing Nephite religion (“Now king Mosiah had given Alma the authority over the church,” Mosiah 26:8). Mosiah II was reluctant to use royal authority to intervene in the emerging crisis (see Mosiah 26:12), leaving Alma the Elder to sort things through divine revelation.

Mormon frames the problem in language that echoes King Benjamin’s paraenesis to his sons as recorded in Mosiah 1:2–7 and exhortations within his speech (Mosiah 2:9, 40–41; 3:15; 4:4) that emphasize the importance of “understanding”:

Now it came to pass that **there were many of the rising generation that could not understand** the words of king **Benjamin**, being

108. See, e.g., Alma 6:6; 30:42; 4 Nephi 1:17, 39. In 4 Nephi 1:17, Mormon gives us an especially poignant glimpse into what he was thinking when he used the collocation “children of Christ”: “There were no robbers nor no murderers, neither were there Lamanites nor no manner of ites, but they were in one, the children of Christ and heirs to the kingdom of God.”

little children at the time he spake unto his people; and **they did not believe** the tradition of their fathers. **They did not believe** what had been said concerning the resurrection of the dead, **neither did they believe** concerning the coming of Christ. And **now because of their unbelief they could not understand the word of God**; and their **hearts were hardened**. And they would not be baptized; neither would they join the church. And they were a **separate people as to their faith**, and remained so ever after, even in their carnal and sinful state; for they would not call upon the Lord their God. (Mosiah 26:1–4)

Mormon’s description of those of “the rising generation that could not understand the words of king Benjamin, being little children at the time he spake” alludes directly to Mosiah 2:34 (“there are not any among you, except it be your **little children** that have not been taught concerning these things”) and 2:40 (“**you little children who can understand my words**”). That group definitively included King Mosiah’s own sons. The “children” (cf. Hebrew *bānîm*) of “the rising generation” were pointedly unlike King Benjamin’s *bānîm*/sons (Mosiah II, Helaman, and Helorum) who became “men of understanding” (cf. Hebrew *bînâ*). They were also unlike King Benjamin’s people — their own parents among them — who had, in fact, “open[ed] [their] ears that [they might] hear, and [their] hearts that [they might] understand and their minds” and thus had “the mysteries of God ... unfolded to [their] view” (Mosiah 2:9).

Mormon’s additional comment in Mosiah 6:2 also suggests that he intended to revisit the theme of “sons”/“little children” and “understanding” later in the narrative: “And it came to pass that there was not one soul, except it were little children, but who had entered into the covenant and had taken upon them the name of Christ.” Mosiah 26 brings Mosiah 6:2 up to date.

The “children” of “the rising generation,” thus fit the Lord’s negative description of Isaiah’s audience in Isaiah 6:9–10 (i.e., hard- or “fat”-hearted and unable to “understand”). They had “dwindle[d] in unbelief” like the Lamanites (1 Nephi 12:22–23; cf. 1 Nephi 1:4) and their Israelite ancestors, the Lord’s “sons” and “daughters” of the covenant (*bānâw ûbēnôtâw*, “his sons and his daughters”) who provoked him in the wilderness, “children in whom [was] no faith [*bānîm lô’-’emun bām*]” (Deuteronomy 32:19–20; compare to the “Lamanites” and *lô’-’emun*, “no faith,” “unbelief”).¹⁰⁹

109. See Bowen, “Not Partaking of the Fruit,” 242–43. A large amount of textual evidence in the Book of Mormon suggests that the name Laman was dysphemized from an early stage as *l’-’mn* (“unfaithful,” “faithless” [Deuteronomy 32:20 MT

“Becoming His Sons and Daughters” and “New Creatures”

Although it remains doubtful or an open question¹¹⁰ whether the “angel of the Lord” in Mosiah 27:11 should be identified as the Lord,¹¹¹ Alma does mention that the Lord spoke directly to him:

For, said he [Alma], I have repented of my sins and have been redeemed of the Lord. Behold, **I am born of the Spirit**. And the Lord said unto me: Marvel not that all mankind, yea, men and women — all nations, kindreds, tongues and people — **must be born again, yea, born of God**, changed from their carnal and fallen state to a state of righteousness, being redeemed of God, **becoming his sons and daughters**; And thus **they become new creatures**; and unless they do this, they can in nowise inherit the kingdom of God. I say unto you: Unless this be the case, they must be cast off. And this I know because I was like to be cast off. (Mosiah 27:24–27)

In addressing Alma the Younger, the Lord quotes from and alludes to¹¹² the climax of King Benjamin’s address — the words that the “children” of their “rising generation,” including Alma and the sons of Mosiah, had failed to understand. The Lord’s use of the phrases “born of God”¹¹³ (from “born of him,” Mosiah 5:7), “carnal [state]” (Mosiah 4:2)

vocalization is *lō’-’ēmūn*], with wordplay on that name in 1 Nephi 17:23, Alma 56:4, Helaman 6:34, 36, *inter alia*). Cf. the opposite play on words at Alma 18:2, 10, “faithfulness of Ammon,” and 1 Samuel 22:14 “so faithful” (*ne’ēmān*). On which, see Matthew L. Bowen, “The Faithfulness of Ammon,” *Religious Educator* 15, no. 2 (2014): 65–89. See further Bowen, “Laman and Nephi as Key-Words: An Etymological, Narratological, and Rhetorical Approach to Understanding Lamanites and Nephites as Religious, Political, and Cultural Descriptors” (FairMormon Conference, Provo, UT, August 2019), <https://www.fairmormon.org/conference/august-2019/laman-and-nephi-as-key-words>.

110. See the appearance of the same “angel of the Lord” to Alma in Alma 8:14–16 as a sequel to his previous appearance.

111. John W. Welch, “Ten Testimonies of Jesus Christ from the Book of Mormon” in *A Book of Mormon Treasury: Gospel Insights from General Authorities and Religious Educators* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2003), 316–42.

112. The Lord’s language here (“born of the spirit,” “must be born again”) fore-echoes his own words as recorded in John 3:6–8: “born of the spirit” (2 x); “Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again”; cf. Alma 36:24, 26; 38:6.

113. Perhaps a form of Hebrew *yālad* (“bear,” “beget”) or Egyptian *ms(i)* = “give birth,” “beget.” Robert F. Smith (personal communication) sees a possible pun here in terms of Moses [*mōšeh*], *ms(i)*, and Mosiah [Yahweh is Savior (*mōšīa’*)].

and “fallen state” (Mosiah 4:5), and “becoming his sons and daughters” (from “having become his sons and daughters,” Mosiah 5:7) all have their antecedents in King Benjamin’s sermon. The phrase “becoming his sons and daughters” echoes the name Benjamin and the marvelous rhetorical play on his own name employed at the end of that sermon.

Mormon appears to suggest in Mosiah 26 that the sons of Mosiah had already been born and were present for King Benjamin’s sermon. Alma the Younger, however, would not have been present for King Benjamin’s sermon, even as a little child or when Ammon read King Benjamin’s words to Limhi’s people. Alma would have encountered King Benjamin’s words only in written or oral form after his father Alma the Elder had emigrated with his people and his own family to Zarahemla, presumably through his father or others.

Although this experience marks the beginning of Alma’s new life, including the understanding of spiritual things, Mormon still marks the sons of Mosiah as not yet “understanding” (“they fell to the earth, and **understood not** the words which he spake unto them”) until Alma gives his “born again” or “born of God” speech (Mosiah 27:24–31). From this point forward, Mormon reports,

And after they [Alma and the sons of Mosiah] had traveled throughout all the land of Zarahemla and among all the people which was under the reign of king Mosiah, zealously striving to repair all the injuries which they had done to the church, confessing all their sins and publishing all the things which they had seen, and **explaining** the prophecies and the scriptures to all who desired to hear them. (Mosiah 27:35)

They could “explain” the prophecies and scriptures to the very people that they had been deceiving, flattering, and leading astray because they now truly “understood” those prophecies and scriptures. They also now understood that they “had murdered many of **his children** — or rather led them away to destruction — ”¹¹⁴ and what they needed to do to “repair” these wrongs. All of this suggests that “understanding” constitutes a key component of being “born of him,” “born of God,” “born again,” and “becoming the children of God” in the same way that “becoming men

114. Alma 36:13–14: “Yea, I saw that I had rebelled against my God and that I had not kept his holy commandments. Yea, and **I had murdered many of his children** — or rather led them away unto destruction — yea, and in fine so great had been my iniquities that the very thoughts of coming into the presence of my God did rack my soul with inexpressible horror.”

[and women] of understanding” constitutes an important aspect of proper sonship/daughterhood (see especially Mosiah 1:2–6; 2:9, 40; 4:4; 5:6–15; 18:22; 27:24–28).

“They Were Men of a Sound Understanding”

Indeed, the sons of Mosiah became “men of understanding,” in every sense implied by Mormon’s and Benjamin’s statements in Mosiah 1:2–6. Fourteen years after the initial conversion of Alma and the sons of Mosiah, Mormon relates the story of their first meeting, this at the end of the sons’ long mission among the Lamanites:

And now it came to pass that as Alma was journeying from the land of Gideon southward, away to the land of Manti, behold, to his astonishment he met **the sons of Mosiah** a journeying towards the land of Zarahemla. Now **these sons of Mosiah** were with Alma at the time the angel first appeared unto him; therefore Alma did rejoice exceedingly to see his brethren. And what added more to his joy, **they were still his brethren in the Lord**. Yea, and **they had waxed strong in the knowledge of the truth, for they were** [i.e., had become and remained] **men of a sound understanding**; and **they had searched the scriptures diligently that they might know the word of God**. But this is not all. They had given themselves to much prayer and fasting; therefore they had the spirit of prophecy and the spirit of revelation; and when they taught, they taught with power and authority, even as with the power and authority of God. (Alma 17:1–3)

The sons of Mosiah, like Alma the Younger, became “men of understanding” as their father Mosiah II had before them (see Mosiah 1:2–7). Mormon, in fact, says that they “were” or had “become” (cf. Hebrew *hāyâ*) “men of sound understanding.” Note Mormon connects this fact directly to their “search[ing] [of] the scriptures” to “know the word of God,” which is the very thing that King Benjamin had instilled in his “three sons”: “and he caused that they should be taught in all the language of his fathers, that thereby they might **become men of understanding and that they might know concerning the prophecies which had been spoken by the mouths of their fathers**, which was delivered them by the hand of the Lord” (Mosiah 1:2).

Thus we not only hear again echoes of King Benjamin’s name (“son of the right hand”) and that initial paronomasia in terms of “understanding”

(Hebrew *bînâ*), but King Benjamin’s formula for becoming “men of understanding.” Alma the Younger and the sons of Mosiah, like their own fathers, had not just become “men of understanding,” who knew the “word of God” thoroughly, but men of Christ and “son[s] of the right hand” — *Benjamins* (see especially Helaman 3:24–25).

Conclusion

The textual evidence suggests that the theme of royal/divine sonship and daughterhood and the repetition of “understanding” in the Book of Mosiah both revolve around the name Benjamin and the temple sermon that King Benjamin gave to his people in Zarahemla. This suggests that becoming “men [and women] of understanding” is inseparable from the process of undergoing divine rebirth and walking the covenant path to ultimate enthronement at the “right hand of God.” That divine rebirth includes receiving the ordinances and rites of the temple and “understanding” the mysteries of God (i.e., being “born again into the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven,” OT1 Moses 6:59).¹¹⁵

Becoming men and women of understanding is much like our initial experiences in language acquisition. As children we understand little of what we see and hear around us at first, but we grow quickly in our understanding. Our mortal education consists of much more than simply being inducted into the lexical semiotics of English, French, Mandarin, or Arabic. We are here to become “experts” in the doctrines and language of the gospel,¹¹⁶ the language of gospel symbolism, and the language of the temple. All of the latter were “languages” that Isaiah, King Benjamin, Abinadi, Mosiah, Alma the Elder, Alma the Younger, and the sons of Mosiah had acquired and passed on to their children and their people. So must we acquire them and pass them on to ours.

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115. Bradshaw and Bowen, “By the Blood Ye Are Sanctified,” 163.

116. To the Latter-day Saints, Dieter F. Uchtdorf (“Your Potential, Your Privilege,” *Ensign* [April 2011]: 59) stated: “As a people, we rightfully place high priority on secular learning and vocational development. We want and we must excel in scholarship and craftsmanship. I commend you for striving diligently to gain an education and become an expert in your field. I invite you to also become experts in the doctrines of the gospel — especially the doctrine of the priesthood.”

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