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Abinadi and Pentecost

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Mosiah 13:5 "His face shone with exceeding luster, even as Moses' did while in the mount of Sinai, while speaking with the Lord."

Fifty days after Passover on the ancient Israelite calendar was the festival of Pentecost or Shavuot ("Weeks"), which the law of Moses required the children of Israel to observe (see Exodus 23:16). Recent research has probed the possibility that Abinadi delivered his prophetic message in the city of Nephi on this festive occasion.

Pentecost marked the concluding phase of Passover.¹ It was also an agricultural holiday sometimes called the Day of the Firstfruits (see Numbers 28:26). It was a pilgrimage festival, with a "holy convocation" (Leviticus 23:21), rejoicing in the bounty of the spring, especially the new wheat (see Deuteronomy 16:9–12; 26:5–11). Just as Passover marked a time of poverty and bondage, Pentecost exulted in a time of bounty, with offerings of leavened bread baked from the new crop of wheat (see Leviticus 23:17) and of the choicest firstfruits.

About this same time of the year was the day when Moses received the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai (see Exodus 19:1). Thus, Pentecost probably also celebrated the giving of the law by God to Moses. The connection between Pentecost and the giving of the law is well-documented in the Talmud.² When this connection was first established is a matter of historical debate. A recent opinion of Professor Moshe Weinfeld of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem is that this connection was made very early in Israelite history, as evidenced by Psalms 50 and 81, which he concludes were sung at Pentecost.³

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Psalm 50:16–21 shows that Pentecost also became a day of stern admonition: “What hast thou to do to declare my statutes, . . . seeing thou hatest instruction[?] . . . When thou sawest a thief, then thou consentedst with him, and hast been partaker with adulterers” (vv. 16–18). A warning like this must have been especially potent on a day when the people were venerating the law.

Against this, the story of Abinadi in Mosiah 11–17 now comes vividly to life. Consider the following points:

1. Timing would have been important to Abinadi. He had already been expelled once from the city, two years earlier (see Mosiah 11:28–12:1). His reentry on a festival day would have given him a ready audience.

2. Both of Abinadi’s speeches deal with the themes of Pentecost. He reversed the festival’s blessings and rejoicing, and turned them into curses and predictions of gloom. At the time when a bounteous grain season would have been at hand, Abinadi cursed the crops: he prophesied that hail, dry winds, and insects shall ruin “their grain” (Mosiah 12:6). While Israel’s deliverance from bondage was traditionally being celebrated, Abinadi called upon Exodus terminology to proclaim that bondage and burdens would return to the wicked people in the city of Nephi: “They shall be brought into bondage; . . . and none shall deliver them” (Mosiah 11:21, 23), “and I will cause that they shall have burdens lashed upon their backs” (Mosiah 12:2, 5; compare Exodus 1:11).

3. At precisely the time when Noah’s priests would have been hypocritically pledging allegiance to the Ten Commandments (and indeed they professed to teach the law of Moses; see Mosiah 12:27), Abinadi rehearsed to them those very commandments (see Mosiah 12:33). On any other day this might have seemed a strange defense for a man on trial for his life, but not on Pentecost – the day on which the Ten Commandments were on center stage!

4. Indeed, the connection with Pentecost could hardly have been more graphic than when Abinadi’s “face shone with ex-

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ceeding luster, *even as Moses' did while in the mount of Sinai, while speaking with the Lord*" (Mosiah 13:5, italics added; compare Exodus 34:29–30). This divine manifestation was quintessentially pentecostal.

5. There are further connections between Abinadi and Exodus 19. For example, cursing Noah to be like a "garment in a hot furnace" may well recall the fact that Mt. Sinai became a furnace (see Exodus 19:18) and that people whose garments were not clean were not "ready" for the Lord (see Exodus 19:10–15). The tongues of fire that appeared when the apostle Peter spoke on the Feast of Pentecost in Acts 2–3 likewise recall the burnings on Mt. Sinai.

6. The ancient festival appears to have been a three-day event (see Exodus 19:11), which may explain why Abinadi's trial was postponed for "three days" (Mosiah 17:6).

7. Finally, there are intriguing parallels between Abinadi's piercing rebukes and Psalm 50, identified by Weinfeld as a psalm of Pentecost.

For example, Psalms 50:3 begins: "Our God *shall come*, and shall not keep silence" (italics added). Compare Exodus 19:11: On "the third day *the Lord will come down* in the sight of all the people" (italics added). So Abinadi's main message is how "God himself shall come down among the children of men" (Mosiah 15:1).

In Psalms 50:4–7, God is bringing a lawsuit against his people, just as Abinadi's words take the form of a "prophetic lawsuit."⁴

Psalms 50:13–14 makes it clear that the Lord prefers thanksgiving from the heart over sacrifices. Likewise, Abinadi requires the commandments of God to be "written in your hearts" (Mosiah 13:11).

Psalms 50:16 asks what a person must do in order to teach the law. The answer is to *keep the law*, otherwise God will "tear you in pieces, and there be none to deliver" (Psalms 50:22, italics added; compare Mosiah 11:23). This is exactly Abinadi's point:

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“And again he said unto them: If ye teach the law of Moses why do ye not keep it?” (Mosiah 12:29).

Both Abinadi and Psalm 50 particularly condemn those who wrongfully become rich and those who commit whoredoms (compare Psalms 50:18; Mosiah 12:29).

All together these details lead to one conclusion: No other day on the ancient Israelite calendar fits the message, words, and experience of the prophet Abinadi more precisely than does the ancient Israelite festival of Pentecost.

Based on research by John W. Welch, Gordon C. Thomasson, and Robert F. Smith, September 1985.

Notes

1. Abraham Bloch, *Biblical and Historical Background of the Jewish Holy Days* (New York: KTAV, 1978), 179.

2. *Ibid.*, 186–88, citing esp. *Shabbat* 86b.

3. Moshe Weinfeld, “The Decalogue in Israel’s Tradition,” in Edwin Firmage, Bernard Weiss, and John Welch, eds., *Religion and Law: Biblical/Judaic and Islamic Perspectives* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 38–47; see also Moshe Weinfeld, “Pentecost as Festival of the Giving of the Law,” *Immanuel* 8, no. 7 (Spring 1978): 7–18.

4. See Richard McGuire, “Prophetic Lawsuits in the Hebrew Bible and Book of Mormon” (Provo: F.A.R.M.S., 1983).