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Our Nephite Sacrament Prayers

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Abstract: Latter-day Saints most commonly turn to D&C 20:76-79 to find the texts of the sacrament prayers regularly used on Sundays. In fact, however, the words for these prayers were first found in this dispensation in the Book of Mormon, in Moroni 4:3-5:2, and the words in those texts can be traced further to the words of Jesus Christ himself in 3 Nephi 18.

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Moroni 4:1 "The manner of their elders and priests administering the flesh and blood of Christ unto the church; and they administered it according to the commandments of Christ."

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It is enriching to know something of the Nephite backgrounds behind the words and covenants in these prayers. The history can be picked up at an early stage in King Benjamin's speech (especially in Mosiah 5), discerned in the very words of Jesus in 3 Nephi 18, and observed in resultant prayers recorded in Moroni 4–5.

A detailed relationship exists between Mosiah 5, 3 Nephi 18, and Moroni 4–5, and all three texts should be viewed together in minute detail. For example, at the conclusion of Benjamin's speech, his people entered into a covenant, saying "we are willing . . . to be obedient to [God's] commandments in all things that he shall command us," after which they agreed to "take upon [themselves] the name of Christ" and obligated themselves to "remember to retain the name written always in [their] hearts" (Mosiah 5:5–12). These three specific promises are still the essential elements of the sacramental prayers as they eventually appeared in Moroni 4–5 and as they are used today.

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The sacrament prayers are most closely related to Jesus' actual words in 3 Nephi 18. In that narrative, he said, "This shall ye do in remembrance of my body, which I have shown unto you. And it shall be a testimony unto the Father that ye do always remember me. And if ye do always remember me ye shall have my Spirit to be with you." On the wine, he said, "This doth witness unto the Father that ye are willing to do that which I have commanded you. . . . Ye shall do it in remembrance of my blood, which I have shed for you, that ye may witness unto the Father that ye do always remember me. And if ye do always remember me ye shall have my Spirit to be with you" (3 Nephi 18:3–11). A close, orderly, and definite relationship exists between the texts of 3 Nephi 18 and Moroni 4–5.

Several interesting points can be observed in these texts.

1. The words in Moroni 4–5 present the very words of Jesus, but now written in the third person plural "they," whereas Jesus had used the second person plural "you." The prayers in Moroni likewise refer to Jesus as "thy Son" and speak of "his Spirit," whereas Jesus in 3 Nephi naturally referred to himself as "me" or "my Spirit." Anyone hearing the prayers in Moroni 4–5 today can thus vividly visualize the personal events at the Nephite temple in Bountiful as the main origin of these words and of the form of the present sacrament prayers.

2. The persistence of certain precise covenantal terms throughout these three texts from Benjamin to Moroni, separated over many years and pages of Nephite history, speaks highly of the cultural sensitivity and logical orderliness of this inspired textual and historical development. Benjamin's words were influential among the Nephites down to the time of Christ (see Helaman 5:9; 14:12 and Mosiah 3:8). Thus it is impressively consistent that Benjamin's three main covenantal phrases should reappear in Moroni 4 in ways that show continuity with the older covenantal pattern as well as sensitivity to the newer revelation at the time of Christ's appearance. The phrase "take upon them the name of Christ," for example, appears in Mosiah 5,

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but not in 3 Nephi 18. It seems that Nephite texts and traditions have combined and coalesced beautifully into the final sacrament prayers in Moroni 4–5.

3. Through this, we can see one way that Nephite law and ritual changed with the coming of Christ. Through the ministry of Jesus “all things became new” (3 Nephi 12:47; 15:2). Benjamin’s earlier covenant language was not jettisoned, but was transformed in and by Jesus’ appearance. This transformation is visible, for example, in the way God is now addressed as Father, in the different way the covenant of obedience is stated without reference to a king, in the new symbolism of the cup, which is no longer a cup of wrath as in Mosiah 5:5, and in the present nature of the spiritual blessings promised.

4. To the Nephites, the sacrament possibly also seemed related to several ancient Israelite antecedents. For example, their bread was eaten in remembrance of the body that Jesus had “shown unto” them (3 Nephi 18:7), thus recording a further dimension beyond the “giving” and “breaking” symbolism in the New Testament. Since the shewbread of the Israelite temple was known as *lechem happanim*, the “bread of the face [or presence] of [God],” the Nephites may have connected the bread of the body “shewn unto” them (1st ed., Book of Mormon) and the shewbread of their temple. The shewbread and the manna kept in a gold bowl in the ancient Israelite temple have been recognized as early Jewish antecedents to the Christian sacrament.¹

Further comparisons with Jewish blessings, the feeding of the multitude, and the earliest Christian liturgies are additionally informative. For example, the instruction in 3 Nephi 18:5 that the bread and wine should be given “unto all those who shall believe and be baptized in my name” is not found in the New Testament, but it appears in the very early Christian *Didache*, discovered this century: “But let none eat or drink of your Eucharist, except those who have been baptized into the Lord’s name.”²

5. It is also interesting that similar events preceded both the covenant in Mosiah 5 and the sacrament in 3 Nephi 18. The

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people in 3 Nephi were first told great prophecies of things to come (see 3 Nephi 16:1–20), and their souls were “filled.” “So great was the joy of the multitude that they were overcome” (3 Nephi 17:17–18); they fell down and Jesus instructed them to “arise” (3 Nephi 17:19). He blessed them because of their faith, and after a great spiritual manifestation (see 3 Nephi 17:24), the people bore record that what they had seen and heard was true (see 3 Nephi 17:25). Each of these aspects in the experience at the temple in Bountiful has a specific corollary in the Nephite covenant practice of Mosiah 5:1–4.

Thus, the texts of the sacrament prayers in Moroni 4–5 have a rich and meaningful historical background in the world of Nephite covenant making. They reflect many ancient symbols and the mighty influence of the words of King Benjamin, as well as the deep spiritual power of the inspired words and ministrations of Jesus in 3 Nephi 18 among the Nephites.

Based on research by John W. Welch, June 1986. A detailed discussion of this material was published soon afterward in John W. Welch, “The Nephite Sacrament Prayers: From King Benjamin’s Speech to Moroni 4–5” (Provo: F.A.R.M.S., 1986).

Notes

1. See Hippolytus, *Daniel* 4, 35; Origen, *Leviticus* 13, 3; A. Adam, “Ein vergessener Aspekt des frühchristlichen Herrenmahles,” *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 88 (1963): 9–20; Hugh W. Nibley, *Since Cumorah*, in *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1988), 7:176, 202.

2. Didache 9:5; in Kirsopp Lake, trans., *Apostolic Fathers* (New York: Loeb Classical Library, 1930), 1:323.