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Upon the Tower of Benjamin

Author(s): John W. Welch and Terry L. Szink

Source: *Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon: The FARMS Updates of the 1990s*

Editor(s): John W. Welch and Melvin J. Thorne

Published: Provo, UT: FARMS, 1999

Page(s): 97-99

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UPON THE TOWER OF BENJAMIN

"He caused a tower to be erected, that thereby his people might hear the words which he should speak unto them." (Mosiah 2:7)

When King Benjamin crowned his son Mosiah, all the people in Zarahemla sat in tents around the temple while Benjamin addressed them. Because he "could not teach them all within the walls of the temple, therefore he caused a tower to be erected, that thereby his people might hear the words which he should speak unto them" (Mosiah 2:7). Was the need to improve the acoustics the only reason for the construction of this tower? Recent research has discovered ancient precedents for the use of such "towers" in royal convocations and coronation ceremonies. These biblical and Jewish precedents are not obvious to the casual reader and may well shed light on Benjamin's tower.

In the King James translation of 2 Kings 11:14, we read that King Joash, at the time of his coronation, "stood *by a pillar*, as the manner was" (emphasis added). After Joash was made king (see 2 Kings 11:12), the priest Jehoiada conducted two covenant ceremonies, one "between the Lord and the king and the people," and the other "between the king also and the people" (2 Kings 11:17).

Likewise, when King Josiah rededicated the temple of Solomon, he stood "*by a pillar*" to read the book of the covenant and to put the people under covenant to keep its

commandments (2 Kings 23:3; emphasis added. See also v. 2). The Hebrew text in both these instances is *ʿal-haʿammud*. The preposition *ʿal* can be translated “by,” but it is much more often rendered “on” or “upon.”¹ The Greek Septuagint version of these passages uses the comparable preposition *epi*, which on occasion can also mean “near,” “by,” or “at,” but more generally means “upon” or “on.” One manuscript of the Jewish historian Josephus, accordingly, placed King Joash “upon the stage” (*epi tēs skēnēs*) at the time of his coronation.² Consistent with this technical textual detail, the Book of Mormon is on strong ancient ground when it reports that King Benjamin spoke, not while standing *beside* a pillar or post, but “from the tower,” presumably while positioned *on top* of his tower (Mosiah 2:8; compare also Nephi’s speech in Helaman 7:10, from *upon* his tower).

The pillar (*ʿammud*) mentioned in connection with the coronation of Joash and Josiah can also be associated with the “brasen scaffold” that Solomon built (2 Chronicles 6:13), *upon* which he stood and knelt “before all the congregation of Israel,” and from which he offered the dedicatory prayer for the temple in Jerusalem (2 Chronicles 6:13; see also vv. 14–42).

Another such structure is mentioned in Nehemiah 8:4, when Ezra “stood *upon* a pulpit of wood” to read the law to the people as they sat in booths for seven days following their return to Jerusalem from Babylon (emphasis added; see also vv. 5–18). Ezra’s platform is clearly related to the platform that was used by the king during the Feast of Tabernacles according to the Mishnah:

After the close of the first Festival-day of the Feast of Tabernacles, in the eighth year, after the going forth of the Seventh Year, they used to prepare for him in the Temple Court a wooden platform *on which* he sat, for it

is written, "At the end of every seven years in the set time" (Deuteronomy 31:10).³

As has been discussed elsewhere, the Feast of Tabernacles and ancient coronation ceremonies have many points in common with King Benjamin's speech.⁴ One of the clearest yet subtlest points of comparison is the tower that Benjamin stood upon when addressing his people.

Research by John W. Welch, Terry L. Szink, and others, originally published as a FARMS Update in Insights (August 1995): 2.

NOTES

1. Francis Brown, Samuel R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980), 752.

2. Josephus, *Antiquities*, 9.7.3.

3. M *Sotah* 7:8; emphasis added; in Herbert Danby, trans., *The Mishnah* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 301.

4. See John A. Tvedtnes, "King Benjamin and the Feast of Tabernacles," in *By Study and Also By Faith*, ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 2:197-221; Terrence L. Szink and John W. Welch, "King Benjamin's Speech in the Context of Ancient Israelite Festivals," in *King Benjamin's Speech: "That Ye May Learn Wisdom,"* ed. John W. Welch and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1998), 147-223; Stephen D. Ricks, "The Coronation of Kings," in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992), 124-26.