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Title “According to Their Language, unto Their Understanding”: The Cultural Context of Hierophanies and Theophanies in Latter-day Saint Canon

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Abstract The prophet Nephi declared that the Lord speaks to his people “according to their language, unto their understanding” (2 Nephi 31:3). Religious beliefs are an integral part of a culture’s shared “language,” and the ways in which individuals interpret supernatural manifestations is typically mediated through their cultural background. The hierophanies recorded in Latter-day Saint canon directly reflect the unique cultural background of the individuals who witnessed them. This paper analyzes several distinct hierophanies witnessed by prophets in both the Old and New Worlds and discusses the cultural context in which such manifestations occur, which aids modern readers in obtaining a greater understanding of the revelatory process recounted in these texts.

“ACCORDING TO THEIR LANGUAGE,
UNTO THEIR UNDERSTANDING”:
THE CULTURAL CONTEXT OF
HIEROPHANIES AND THEOPHANIES
IN LATTER-DAY SAINT CANON

Mark Alan Wright

Latter-day Saint canon is replete with manifestations of the sacred. A general term for a manifestation of the sacred is *hierophany*, whereas the appearance of a deity is referred to as a *theophany*.¹ Scholars of religion note that hierophanies are products of their culture; in essence, a culture both defines and is defined by its hierophanies.² The peoples and cultures described in Latter-day Saint canonical texts did not exist in cultural vacuums. They were surrounded by, and at times entrenched within, other nations; sometimes the people were generalized as Gentiles or pagans and at other times were specified by name, such as Babylonians, Egyptians, or Lamanites. It was within these contexts that ancient prophets received revelations and were witnesses to divine power. Each prophet was a product of his own culture, and the manner in which the divine was manifested to the prophets was largely defined by the semiotics of their culture.

Language is not limited to the words we use; it also entails signs, symbols, and bodily gestures that are imbued with meaning

1. In essence, all theophanies (the appearance of a god) are hierophanies (manifestation of the sacred), but not all hierophanies are theophanies.

2. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1959), 11.

by the cultures that produced them.³ As with spoken language, symbolic and gestural languages are culturally specific and can be fully understood only by those entrenched within that particular culture. The Book of Mormon prophet Nephi appears to have understood this concept and noted that the Lord “speaketh unto men according to their language, unto their understanding” (2 Nephi 31:3). This is echoed in modern revelation, as Doctrine and Covenants 1:24 declares: “Behold, I am God and have spoken it; these commandments are of me, and were given unto my servants in their weakness, after the manner of their language, that they might come to understanding.” More recently, the late LDS apostle Marion G. Romney reaffirmed, “Revelation comes to men in an unlimited number of ways.”⁴

Scholars can place the events described in the Old Testament⁵ within their cultural context by turning to the wealth of information found in ancient Near Eastern texts, which range from intimate personal letters to sweeping historical epics. We can now do likewise for the Book of Mormon, thanks to recent advances in scholarship that have provided translations of hundreds of ancient glyphic texts and interpretations of richly detailed works of art that depict many aspects of ancient Mesoamerican beliefs and practices.⁶ Although LDS canon is rife with accounts of hierophanic experiences, this discussion will be limited to a few examples from the Book of Mormon and the Old Testament.

Storm Hierophanies

The way in which deities were conceptualized anciently was not static and appears to have been shaped in different eras accord-

3. Yu. M. Lotman, B. A. Uspensky, and George Mihaychuk, “On the Semiotic Mechanism of Culture,” *New Literary History* 9/2 (1978): 211–32.

4. Marion G. Romney, “Revelation,” *Improvement Era*, June 1964, 506.

5. Although the Society of Biblical Literature recommends using the term *Hebrew Bible* rather than *Old Testament* to avoid bias, the focus of this work is on LDS canonical texts, so the use of the term *Old Testament* is appropriate.

6. Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007); John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1985).

ing to the most pressing concerns of a particular culture. The great Assyriologist Thorkild Jacobsen argues that in Mesopotamia during the fourth millennium BC the primary concern was famine, so natural phenomena that were linked to agricultural fertility were worshipped as incorporeal deities specific to a particular phenomenon such as rain or lightning. By the third millennium, the biggest threat to the survival of a nation was war, so the gods gradually transformed into anthropomorphized warriors; rather than being the actual phenomena, they became humanlike rulers over such phenomena or used them as their weapons. By the second millennium, religious worship appears to have narrowed its focus from concerns of group survival to more individual religious expression, which reflects the type of worship we find in the Old Testament.⁷

The picture that emerges is that local gods were custom-made for local conditions and local concerns. For example, the highest-ranking gods of the Canaanites were the storm gods, which were logical choices for a land plagued by tempests. Because storms were so fierce, so too were the gods, and they came to be thought of as mighty warriors who brandished powerful weapons in their hands, such as lightning or fiery maces. Storms, then, were hierophanies to cultures who worshipped storm gods, and lightning served as a menacing manifestation of the power their gods wielded.

In ancient Mesopotamia, lightning was deified as the god Birqu and essentially functioned as the weapon of the storm god Adad. Similarly, Baal, the god of Ugarit, is depicted holding a lightning spear in his right hand and a war mace in the other.⁸ In the Old Testament, one of Yahweh's many roles is that of storm god, which is closely linked with his role as a divine warrior. Similar to Birqu and Baal, he hurls arrows of lightning at his enemies. For example, the prophet Zechariah assures Zion they will be protected, for "the

7. Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976).

8. Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter W. van der Horst, eds., *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 519; compare Alberto R. W. Green, *The Storm-God in the Ancient Near East* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 199.

Lord will appear over them; his arrow will flash like lightning. The Sovereign Lord will sound the trumpet; he will march in the storms of the south, and the Lord Almighty will shield them” (Zechariah 9:14-15 NIV; see also 2 Samuel 22:15; Psalms 18:14; 144:6).

Lightning as a manifestation of the Lord’s power is a common feature of both the Old Testament and the Book of Mormon. However, it appears to serve a different function in the two contexts, and an analysis of the vastly different cultural settings reveals why. In the Old Testament, lightning generally functions as both a weapon in the Lord’s arsenal, as discussed above, but also as a standard feature associated with theophanies, typically grouped with thunder, clouds, and earthquakes.⁹ For example, when Yahweh appeared to the children of Israel at Mount Sinai, there was “thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain,” after which “Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the Lord descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, and the whole mountain trembled violently”; the grand theophany reached its culmination when “the Lord descended to the top of Mount Sinai and called Moses to the top of the mountain” (Exodus 19:16-20 NIV).

Lightning had far different connotations in the New World, specifically in Mesoamerica. Unlike the ancient Near Eastern concept of lightning as a dangerous and destructive weapon in the hands of a storm god, in Mesoamerica lightning was associated with fertility and regeneration, even resurrection.¹⁰ A central tenet of ancient Maya theology was that the maize god died, was buried, and was resurrected when lightning cracked open the surface of the earth, which was variously conceptualized as a mountain, a rock, or even a giant turtle carapace.¹¹ Notably, the Book of Mormon mentions

9. Van der Toorn, Becking, van der Horst, *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, 519.

10. Mary Ellen Miller and Karl Taube, *The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico and the Maya: An Illustrated Dictionary of Mesoamerican Religion* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1993), 106.

11. Frauke Sachse and Allen J. Christenson, “Tulan and the Other Side of the Sea: Unraveling a Metaphorical Concept from Colonial Guatemalan Highland Sources”;

lightning ten times, and each instance directly refers to the time of destruction at the death of Christ, either by way of prophecy or in reference to its fulfillment (1 Nephi 12:4; 1 Nephi 19:11; 2 Nephi 26:6; Helaman 14:21, 26-27; 3 Nephi 8:7, 12, 17, 19). In light of the cultural context within which the Book of Mormon likely took place, it may be more appropriate to associate lightning with Christ's resurrection rather than his death. Interestingly, Samuel the Lamanite prophesied that Christ would not be the only one to resurrect amidst the lightnings; "many graves shall be opened, and shall yield up many of their dead; and many saints shall appear unto many" (Helaman 14:25).

Storms and lightning, then, were both hierophanies in the sense that they manifested divine power, but the meaning behind these sacred manifestations varied greatly between the peoples of the Old Testament and the Book of Mormon. Rather than seeing this as a contradiction or inconsistency in divine symbolism, it is rather a reaffirmation that hierophanies are culturally embedded phenomena.

Abrahamic Theophanies and Hierophanies

Yahweh referred to Abraham as "my friend" (Isaiah 41:8; see also James 2:23), a relationship evidenced by the frequent interactions between the two. Some of these interactions are difficult to classify, as they lay somewhere along the continuum between theophanies and hierophanies. At times Abraham is spoken to in vision (Genesis 15:1), but at other times he simply hears the voice of the Lord with no fanfare of thunder or quaking of the earth (Genesis 12:1-3; 22:1-2). His sacrifice of his son Isaac was halted by "the angel of the Lord" (Genesis 22:11), who spoke by virtue of divine investiture of authority, and when Abraham himself was about to be sacrificed by the priests of Elkenah he was visited by the "angel of his presence" (Abraham 1:15), which may refer to the preincarnate Jesus Christ.¹²

<http://www.mesoweb.com/articles/tulan/Tulan.pdf> (accessed 13 August 2008).

12. Margaret Barker, *The Great Angel: A Study of Israel's Second God* (Louisville, KY: Westminster, 1992).

Abraham witnessed Yahweh's wrathful judgment as it was poured out upon Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:28), in addition to his tender mercies in giving the patriarch a son in his old age (Genesis 21:1-2).

Abraham was entrenched within a variety of cultures throughout his long life. He was born in Ur of the Chaldees (Genesis 11:26-28), migrated to Haran (Genesis 11:31), journeyed to Canaan (Genesis 12:1-5), settled in Hebron (Genesis 13:18), and sojourned in Egypt (see Genesis 11-20; Abraham 1-3). From each of these locales he acquired cultural knowledge and learned much concerning foreign gods and the relationship the people maintained with them. Indeed, while he was residing in the land of the Chaldeans he learned firsthand that the heathen gods were offered human sacrifices when he found himself upon an altar (Abraham 1:1-15). His upbringing sets the stage for what would become one of the defining moments in Abraham's life, the command to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac.

Students of the Bible sometimes struggle to comprehend Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac, but by taking into account his own experiences with the divine, combined with his multicultural background, his attitude becomes perhaps a bit more understandable. Human sacrifice is attested in the ancient Near East, including specific references to child sacrifice. For example, a number of Assyrian legal documents "contain penalty formulas which demand that the person who breaks the contract can redeem himself only by burning his eldest child on the altar of a temple."¹³ This is of particular interest in examining the life of Abraham as he assumed the roles of both would-be sacrificer in the case of his son Isaac and would-be sacrificial victim in a sacrifice in which his father, Terah, was involved (Abraham 1:30).

Although human sacrifice seems reprehensible to modern readers, Abraham had been given evidence that Yahweh did at times require human sacrifice. He stood as witness when the Lord's judgment came upon Sodom and Gomorrah in the form of fire and

13. William J. Adams Jr., "Human Sacrifice and the Book of Abraham," *BYU Studies* 9/4 (1969): 473-80.

brimstone, and the next morning he beheld that “the smoke of the country went up as the smoke of a furnace” (Genesis 19:28). The only other instance where the “smoke of a furnace” simile is used in the Bible is when the Lord descends upon Mount Sinai in the grand theophany to Moses and the children of Israel, as discussed above. Significantly, the Hebrew word used to denote the smoke arising from Sodom and Gomorrah (קִיטֹר, *qîṭōr*) did not refer to common smoke, but rather to the sacred smoke created by ritual sacrifices, suggesting that Sodom and Gomorrah were effectually made burnt offerings unto the Lord.¹⁴

Further adding to Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his beloved son was his understanding of the resurrection. Far from being unique to the Christian tradition, the hope for resurrection was had among other ancient Near Eastern peoples, especially in Egypt, where Abraham sojourned. According to later traditions, after Abraham himself had miraculously escaped the sacrificer’s knife, he had a hierophanic experience as he was catapulted into a fire, “which thereupon was instantly transformed into a blooming bower of delicious flowers and fruits amid which Abraham sat enjoying himself in angelic company.”¹⁵ This account fits comfortably among the visual language of ancient Near Eastern art that depicts a “revived or resurrected king sitting beneath an arbor amid the delights of the feast at the New Year.”¹⁶ According to Hugh Nibley, St. Jerome—an early Christian scholar who began writing in the late fourth century AD—described “a Jewish belief that Abraham’s rescue from the altar was the equivalent of a rebirth or resurrection.”¹⁷ Whether or not these late traditions about Abraham’s own triumph over death at the time of his sacrifice have any merit, his understanding of the plan of salvation would have assuaged any fears he had concerning the sacrifice of his son. It had been revealed to him by Jehovah

14. Jeffrey J. Niehaus, *God at Sinai: Covenant and Theophany in the Bible and Ancient Near East* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 196.

15. Hugh Nibley, *Abraham in Egypt* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 2000), 328.

16. Nibley, *Abraham in Egypt*, 328.

17. Nibley, *Abraham in Egypt*, 328.

during a face-to-face theophany (Abraham 3:11) that “they who keep their first estate shall be added upon; and they who keep not their first estate shall not have glory in the same kingdom with those who keep their first estate; and they who keep their second estate shall have glory added upon their heads for ever and ever” (Abraham 3:26). Beyond the cultural background for Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac that we have briefly discussed here, the apostle Paul concisely summarized Abraham’s theological rationale when he concluded, “Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death” (Hebrews 11:19 NIV).

Prophetic Commissions in the Old and New Worlds

In the Old Testament and its pseudepigrapha,¹⁸ the way in which prophets are commissioned by Yahweh tends to be somewhat formulaic, as comparing the prophetic calls of Micaiah (1 Kings 22:19–22), Isaiah (Isaiah 6), and Ezekiel (Ezekiel 1) demonstrates. As Blake Ostler summarizes:

The pattern that emerges . . . is that of a righteous individual who, concerned for the wickedness of his people, prays and weeps on their behalf until physically overcome by the spirit of revelation and who, carried away in a vision, sees God enthroned amidst the heavenly council. He also receives a heavenly book which explains the secrets of the universe and the impending disaster of his people. The vision is completed with a call or commission extended from the heavenly council to warn his people of their impending destruction if they will not repent; however, he is also forewarned that his people will reject him.¹⁹

18. Pseudepigrapha refers to Jewish religious works that were written from circa 200 BC to AD 200.

19. Blake T. Ostler, “The Throne-Theophany and Prophetic Commission in 1 Nephi: A Form-Critical Analysis,” *BYU Studies* 26/4 (1986): 67–95.

Some of these elements appear to be aspects of a shared cultural language among neighboring ancient Near Eastern cultures. Ostler explains that

the idea of the heavenly book was pivotal in Israel where Moses received the Law on heavenly tablets from God on Sinai. It may have become associated with the commission narrative because of the role of fixing the fates on the divine tables at the Babylonian Akitu festival.²⁰

Ostler further demonstrates that Lehi's prophetic calling fits within the historical context of preexilic Israel. This is to be expected, as Lehi had his vision while he was yet at Jerusalem, which spurred his flight into the desert a decade prior to the Babylonian captivity.

Unlike Lehi, later prophets in the Book of Mormon—those grounded firmly in the New World—did not receive their commissions according to this ancient Near Eastern pattern; rather, their calls conform to a pattern that can be detected in ancient Mesoamerica. Elements of this pattern can be seen throughout the Book of Mormon in the accounts of individuals who are overcome by the Spirit to the point that they fall to the earth as if dead and ultimately recover and through that process become spiritually reborn and subsequently prophesy concerning Jesus Christ. This process may seem foreign to modern readers, and indeed it should, since it is not part of our “cultural language” and its deeper meaning is lost in translation. But to the Nephites, living in an ancient Mesoamerican setting, falling to the earth as if dead is pregnant with meaning. Modern Western culture would classify such episodes as near-death experiences,²¹ but an examination of the specific cultural context in which the Book of Mormon events likely took place provides a more nuanced understanding of this obscure practice.

Ethnographic work among traditional societies has shown that holy men of various types—broadly referred to as shamans—

20. Ostler, “Throne-Theophany,” 80.

21. Kevin Christensen, “‘Nigh unto Death’: NDE Research and the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2/1 (1993): 1-20.

commonly receive their calling near-death experiences. Anthropologist Frank J. Lipp notes in reference to modern Mesoamerican shaman-priests called *curanderos* (curers or healers): “Divine election occurs within a context of some physical or emotional crisis,” such as “a severe, chronic, or life-threatening sickness.”²² While in this state they have a vivid dream where “the individual is informed by a spirit being,” such as an angel, that “she or he will receive the divine gift to cure illnesses.”²³ The healing process is often aided by the prayers and ritual actions of another *curandero* on behalf of the critically ill individuals. Once recovered, the newly called shamans possess a power and authority that is recognized by the members of their community because of their shared cultural language. According to Lipp, “During the initiatory dream vision the individual may experience temporary insanity or unconsciousness,” and it is through this near-death experience that “he or she is reborn as a person with shamanic power and knowledge.”²⁴

The Book of Mormon similarly describes individuals who fall to the earth as if dead and then recover and become healers. Beyond the examples where physical infirmities are removed, the Book of Mormon also provides numerous examples of individuals who are spiritually healed. It would be a mistake to place physical and spiritual healing in separate categories; the two concepts are equated in LDS canon and in the ancient mind. For example, during Christ’s visit to the Nephites in the land Bountiful, beyond the healing he provided to the “lame, or blind, or halt, or maimed, or leprous, or that are withered, or that are deaf, or that are afflicted in any manner” (3 Nephi 17:7), he taught his disciples that they must minister to the unworthy with the hope that “they will return and repent, and come unto me with full purpose of heart, and I shall heal them” (3 Nephi 18:32). Centuries earlier, Abinadi quoted Isaiah’s message

22. Frank J. Lipp, “A Comparative Analysis of Southern Mexican and Guatemalan Shamans,” in *Mesoamerican Healers*, ed. Brad R. Huber and Alan R. Sandstrom (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 103.

23. Lipp, “Southern Mexican and Guatemalan Shamans,” 103.

24. Lipp, “Southern Mexican and Guatemalan Shamans,” 104.

that it is “with his stripes we are healed” (Mosiah 14:5) from our sins and our iniquities.

The first recorded instance in the Book of Mormon where someone falls to the earth as if dead in connection with a prophetic commission is that of Alma the Younger. As he was going about with the sons of Mosiah to destroy the church, an angel came down to “stop [them] by the way” (Alma 36:6; compare Mosiah 27:10). Significantly, when the angel first spoke to them as with a voice of thunder, they “understood not the words which he spake unto them” (Mosiah 27:12). The angel “cried again,” and this time his words were plainly understood (Mosiah 27:13; compare 3 Nephi 11:3–6). After being threatened with destruction, Alma fell to earth and became so weak that he could neither speak nor move his hands (Mosiah 27:19). After Alma’s helpless body was carried back to his home by his friends (who had also fallen to the earth but were not the focus of the angel’s rebuke and therefore quickly recovered), Alma’s father rejoiced, acknowledging the Lord’s hand in what had transpired. What his father did next is significant: “He caused that the priests should assemble themselves together; and they began to fast, and to pray to the Lord their God that he would open the mouth of Alma, that he might speak, and also that his limbs might receive their strength” (Mosiah 27:22). These priests were acting in their capacity as *curanderos*, or healers. Alma was healed, not just physically, but spiritually as well. His exquisite and bitter pain was replaced by exquisite and sweet joy (Alma 36:21). He clearly linked his physical healing with his spiritual healing when he declared, “My limbs did receive their strength again, and I stood upon my feet, and did manifest unto the people that I had been born of God” (Alma 36:23).

Because Alma had been healed, both body and soul, he now possessed a culturally recognized power to heal. This recognition would have extended beyond just the believing Nephites who had a clear understanding of the priesthood that Alma held (see Alma 13). For example, Zeezrom was a contentious and apostate Nephite from Ammonihah who knew nothing concerning true points of

doctrine (Alma 12:8). After contending with Alma and Amulek, Zeezrom became convinced of his own guilt and endured a painful repentance process. Interestingly, the language used to convey Zeezrom's situation intentionally parallels that used to describe Alma's experience. Alma 14:6 tells us that Zeezrom "knew concerning the blindness of the minds, which he had caused among the people by his lying words; and his soul began to be *harrowed up* under a consciousness of his own guilt; yea, he began to be encircled about by the *pains of hell*," after which he lay "sick, being very low with a burning fever; and his mind also was exceedingly sore because of his iniquities" (Alma 15:5). Just as Alma was snatched out of "an everlasting burning" (Mosiah 27:28), Zeezrom was "scorched with a burning heat" that was caused by "the great tribulations of his mind on account of his wickedness" (Alma 15:3) and his fear that Alma and Amulek "had been slain because of his own iniquity" (Alma 15:3), much as Alma was concerned that he "had murdered many of [God's] children, or rather led them away unto destruction" (Alma 36:14).

Despite the parallels in their accounts, Zeezrom's soul does not appear to have been carried away in vision, and his conversion and healing come at the hands of men rather than from some interaction he had with the Lord while in his near-death state. We instead read that Zeezrom besought healing from both Alma and Amulek. However, the only one to take Zeezrom by the hand was Alma, as he had become the culturally (and spiritually) recognized healer by virtue of his own near-death experience. Alma turned Zeezrom's focus back to the Lord when he asked, "Believest thou in the power of Christ unto salvation?" and then assured him that "if thou believest in the redemption of Christ thou canst be healed." Alma wanted to be clear that healing came through Christ and not through his own power, so he cried, "O Lord our God, have mercy on this man, and heal him according to his faith which is in Christ." His plea was heard, and Zeezrom "leaped upon his feet, and began to walk" (Alma 15:6-11).

At the same time Alma was preaching to reclaim apostate Nephites within the greater lands of Zarahemla, Ammon was in the land of Nephi trying to win new converts in Lamanite territory. Through his acts of humility and dedicated service, he gained audience with Lamoni, king over the land of Ishmael (Alma 17:21). Ammon's preaching opened the spiritual eyes of King Lamoni, and for the first time he saw his need for a redeemer. The king humbled himself and cried unto the Lord for mercy, at which point he fell as if he were dead (Alma 18:42). Lamoni was seemingly on his deathbed for three days and was even believed to be dead by many of his people (Alma 19:5). Ammon understood that this was not the case, as he had previously witnessed Alma's equivalent experience. The similarity between Lamoni's and Alma's experiences demonstrates the larger cultural language that was shared by Nephites and Lamanites in their ancient Mesoamerican setting.

The New Testament account of Saul's conversion experience on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:3-9) may bear superficial similarities to Alma's experience in the Book of Mormon, but there is a significant difference. We have no record that Saul had a near-death experience in the sense that his soul embarked on a spirit journey while his body lay suffering (as did Alma and Lamoni), which is a defining factor in Mesoamerican shamanic calls. While Lamoni was lying as if dead, his wife was truly concerned for his well-being. Acting on faith in Ammon's word alone, she stayed by Lamoni's side all that night and anxiously waited for him to emerge from his deep sleep. When he arose, he testified, "I have seen my Redeemer," and he prophesied that "he shall come forth, and be born of a woman, and he shall redeem all mankind who believe on his name." Lamoni then sinks to the earth again, being overcome by the Spirit (Alma 19:13). The queen was likewise filled with the Spirit and also fell to the earth, followed by Ammon; finally even the servants of the king were overwhelmed by the Spirit. At the apex of the narrative, Ammon, the king, the queen, and their servants were all prostrate upon the earth, "and they all lay there as though they were dead" (Alma 19:18). When the queen was raised from the ground by her

faithful handmaid Abish, she testified that she had interacted with the Lord by proclaiming, “O blessed Jesus, who has saved me from an awful hell!” (Alma 19:29). Even the king’s servants who had fallen united their testimony with Ammon’s to declare “they had seen angels and conversed with them” (Alma 19:34). King Lamoni, his wife, Ammon, and the king’s servants all “administered” unto the gathered crowd (Alma 19:33), which action carries connotations of healing. While their bodies had lain motionless, their spirits were busy interacting with the Lord and increasing in culturally recognized spiritual potency.

Ammon appears to have fallen to the earth more than any other individual in the Book of Mormon. His initial conversion experience occurred when the angel rebuked him and his brothers along with Alma (Mosiah 27:12). As discussed above, he fell to the earth again when King Lamoni and his wife were converted (Alma 19:14) and once more when he was overcome with joy as he and his brothers chanced upon Alma in the wilderness (Alma 27:17). In his Mesoamerican context, Ammon’s experiences—rather than being viewed as a sign of physical weakness or perhaps a case of spiritual hypersensitivity—would actually have imbued him with more spiritual potency as a holy man. Among the modern Tzotzil Maya of Chamula, for example, “the ability to cure illnesses of increasing severity is dependent upon the number of times the shaman has lost consciousness in a trance.”²⁵

Conclusion

The hierophanies recorded in LDS canon directly reflect the unique cultural background of the individuals who witnessed them. By examining the cultural context in which such manifestations occur, modern readers can obtain a greater understanding of the revelatory process recounted in these texts. This study has briefly examined the cultural context behind a few divine manifestations, primarily from the Old Testament and the Book of Mormon,

25. Lipp, “Guatemalan Shamans,” 104.

but the same approach can fruitfully be employed in interpreting hierophanic experiences recorded in other canonical texts. Modern Latter-day Saints believe in continuing revelation, collectively and individually, and cultural context continues to influence the manner in which divine manifestations are received by individuals entrenched within the various cultures that comprise the worldwide church.

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