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Title Notes and Communications: The Nephite and Jewish Practice of Blessing God after Eating One's Fill

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Abstract A Jewish custom of blessing God after eating one's fill at a meal is reflected in passing in Amulek's household and when the resurrected Christ blesses the sacrament for the Nephites and thereafter instructs them to pray. They "gave glory to Jesus" on this occasion.

NOTES AND COMMUNICATIONS

The Nephite and Jewish Practice of Blessing God after Eating One's Fill

Angela M. Crowell and John A. Tvedtnes

The Christian practice of saying grace before meals probably owes its origin to the blessing Jesus offered at the last supper when he gave bread and wine to his disciples in remembrance of his body and blood. In Matthew 26:26 we read, "And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed it, and brake it, and gave it to the disciples, and said, Take, eat; this is my body." But the word *it*, which appears three times in the King James Bible, is not present in the Greek text. Possibly Jesus was following the Jewish practice of blessing God, not the bread and wine, on the eve of the Sabbath. Indeed, the Roman Catholic mass is still based on the wording of the Jewish prayer, "Blessed art thou, O Lord, our God, king of the universe, who has brought forth bread from the ground."¹

¹ The sacramental prayers found in the Book of Mormon (Moroni 4:3; 5:2) and repeated in Doctrine and Covenants 20:77, 79 may have been unique to the Nephites. When the revelation now in Doctrine and Covenants 20 was first published in the Book of Commandments in 1833, the prayers were not included; instead, reference was made to the Book of Mormon page on which they were found. For a discussion of the development of the sacramental prayers among the Nephites, see "Our Nephite Sacrament Prayers," in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992), 286–89, and John W. Welch, "Benjamin's Covenant and the Nephite Sacrament Prayers," in *King Benjamin's Speech: "That Ye May Learn Wisdom"* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1998), 295–314.

In Judaism, while a brief blessing is recited before eating, a series of longer blessings, the *birkat ha-mazon*, follows the meal. Four blessings come after the consumption of bread, while separate blessings are offered for other foods, depending on their nature and origin.² The basis for this practice is Deuteronomy 8:10:

When thou hast eaten and art full,
then thou shalt bless the Lord thy God
for the good land which he hath given thee.³

This observance is also found in a Dead Sea Scroll poem,⁴ which Gaster calls *Invitation to Grace after Meals*; this poem paraphrases the language in the first part of Deuteronomy 8:10. It says, "whenso they eat and are filled," noting that this is when men should speak of wisdom and think of the law given by God.⁵

Blessing after meals is mentioned in Mishnah *Berakot* 3:3 and *Sukkah* 2:5. The latter notes that when Rabbi Zadok ate only a small portion of food, he didn't say the blessing afterward, probably because Deuteronomy 8:10 calls for a blessing only if one has eaten and is full. The amount that one must eat in order to say "common grace" for a group of people is discussed in Mishnah *Berakot* 7:2-3,⁶ wherein the formula for the blessing varies according to how many are present. In each case, however, it is the

² For a discussion and bibliography of early Jewish texts, see the section "Blessing God for Our Food," in Abraham Chill, *The Mitzvot: The Commandments and Their Rationale* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1974), 385-87.

³ Blessing the Lord after eating one's fill ensured that the Israelites would not forget the source of their blessings. Compare Deuteronomy 6:11-12; 31:20; Nehemiah 9:25-26.

⁴ The connection between these passages and the Book of Mormon was first made by Angela M. Crowell, "A Jewish Blessing after Meals," *Qumran Quest Bulletin* (July 1995): 4.

⁵ Taken from Theodor H. Gaster, *The Dead Sea Scriptures*, 3rd ed. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976), 219-21. The text also admonishes the reader to "bless ye the Lord" (line 17), but the thought is separated from the Deuteronomy 8:10 quotation by three other lines and hence may not derive from that scriptural passage.

⁶ The rabbis disagreed as to the size of the meal that required a blessing, some saying as much as the size of an egg, others the size of an olive.

Lord who is blessed.⁷ Grace after meals is also noted in several passages of the Zohar.⁸

Compare this practice with the wording of Alma 8:22, "And it came to pass that Alma ate bread and was filled; and he blessed Amulek and his house, and he gave thanks unto God." Here, too, the blessing and thanks to God are offered only after being "filled." One might object that it is Amulek's household, and not God, being blessed. But the context of Deuteronomy 8:10 is gratitude to God "for the land which he hath given thee" and hence perfectly in line with Alma's giving "thanks unto God." It is, in fact, God who does the real blessing, which is the context in which Deuteronomy 14:29 speaks of "eat[ing] and be[ing] satisfied." Deuteronomy 6:10–11 and 8:12–14 warn against eating and being full and yet being ungrateful to God. As for Alma's blessing of Amulek's family after having eaten and being filled, a parallel can be found in the biblical story of Isaac, who desired to eat before blessing his son (Genesis 27:4, 7, 10, 19, 25, 31, 33).

John W. Welch has noted that an early Christian document, *Didache* 10:1–2, 5, enjoins prayer "after being filled" during communion.⁹ In this connection, it is interesting to see that similar thoughts are expressed on both occasions when the resurrected Christ blessed the sacrament for the Nephites. In 3 Nephi 18:8–18 we read that the Nephites partook of the bread and wine and

⁷ The blessing of God is also noted in *Zohar* Genesis 240a, which adds, "Observe that grace after meals should not be said over an empty table, but there should be bread on it and a cup of wine." Harry Sperling, Maurice Simon, and Paul P. Levertoff, *The Zohar* (New York: Bennet, 1958), 2:364.

⁸ According to *Zohar* Exodus 153a-b, Rabbi Hiya comments on Deuteronomy 8:10: "Should a man then bless the Lord only after he has filled his belly? Nay, even if one eats but a morsel and counts it as a meal, that is called eating to satisfaction." Rabbi Hezekiah added that even an intoxicated person, who is usually barred from saying prayers, "is allowed to say the grace after meals." Maurice Simon and Paul P. Levertoff, *The Zohar* (New York: Bennet, 1958), 4:37–38. *Zohar* Exodus 218a says, "Whoever pronounces the after-meal benediction must do so devotedly, and in a joyful mood unmingled with any tinge of sadness, inasmuch as in giving thanks he is giving of his own to someone else" (*ibid.*, 4:242). Grace after meals is also discussed briefly in *Zohar* Exodus 157a and Numbers 186b.

⁹ John W. Welch, "From Presence to Practice: Ješus, the Sacrament Prayers, the Priesthood, and Church Discipline in 3 Nephi 18 and Moroni 2–6," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 5/1 (1996): 134.

“were filled” (3 Nephi 18:9), after which Jesus instructed them to pray. Third Nephi 20:9 contains the slight variation that “when the multitude had all eaten and drunk, behold, they were filled with the Spirit; and they did cry out with one voice, and gave glory to Jesus, whom they both saw and heard.” In this case, the people were filled not with the bread and wine, but with the Spirit. Nevertheless, it is interesting that they “gave glory to Jesus” on this occasion.

Hugh Nibley compared the latter passage with the description of Christ’s blessing the sacrament for his Old World disciples, as found in an early Coptic document called the *Gospel of the Twelve Apostles*.¹⁰ The text reads, “His [Jesus’] blessing fell upon [*shope*] the bread in the apostles’ hands. And all the people ate and were filled. They gave praise to God.”¹¹ Here, again, the pattern is retained. Having eaten their fill, they praised God. Blessing God after eating one’s fill is another illustration from the Book of Mormon that the Nephites did, indeed, follow the law of Moses.

The value of all this information as evidence for the Book of Mormon is increased by the fact that the practice is mentioned only in passing, as one would expect for an authentic record that takes such things for granted.

¹⁰ The text was published in Eugene Revillout, *Les Apocryphes Coptes, Première Partie, Les évangiles des douze apôtres et de Saint Barthélemy*, vol. 2 of *Patrologia Orientalis*, ed. R. Graffin and F. Nau (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1907–13).

¹¹ Here we quote Hugh W. Nibley’s English translation of Revillout, *Les Apocryphes Coptes*, 2:134–35, in *The Prophetic Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1989), 421.