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Atonement and the Temple

In 1988 Hugh W. Nibley noted that the use of terms based on the word *atone* (*atonement, atoning, atoned, etc.*), while used in the Old Testament mostly in association with rites performed in the tabernacle of Moses, clearly tied the Nephites to preexilic Israel, that is, prior to the Babylonian captivity of the Jews in 587 BC. He found that most of the occurrences were “in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers, where they explicitly describe the original rites of the tabernacle or temple on the Day of Atonement.”¹

This English word is found only once in the King James version of the New Testament (at Romans 5:11) but 81 times in the Old Testament. All of these Old Testament passages are cultic in nature, and all but four of them are associated with rites performed in the tabernacle of Moses. The Book of Mormon includes 39 occurrences of atonement words,² suggesting to Nibley a closer tie to preexilic

Israel than to postexilic Israel and the New Testament, where the word occurs much less frequently. Lehi’s departure from Jerusalem preceded the exile of Judah into Babylon, so it is the preexilic milieu that is reflected in the Book of Mormon.

Equally interesting, but missing in Nibley’s study, is the use of the term in the early parts of the Nephite record, where Lehi uses the term once (2 Nephi 2:10), his son Nephi once (2 Nephi 25:16), and Lehi’s son Jacob—the priest in charge of the temple in the city of Nephi—eight times (2 Nephi 9:7 [twice], 25–26; 10:25; Jacob 4:11–12; 7:12). The first five occurrences of Jacob’s use of the term appear in his covenant speech, presumably given at the temple (see 2 Nephi 6:2; 9:1). Two others (Jacob 4:11–12) clearly appear in a temple discourse (see Jacob 1:17; 2:2, 11). Significantly, King Benjamin used the term seven times in his sermon at the temple in the city of Zarahemla (Mosiah 3:11, 15–16, 18–19; 4:6–7), and the people used it once in their response to him (Mosiah 4:2). Another main user of atonement terminology was Alma, who was the high priest at the time he invoked this term seven times in Alma 13, 33, 36, and 42, while his companion Amulek spoke the word six times in Alma 34.

Thus the use of atonement terminology by the first generations of Lehi’s family, together with its continued connection to the temple, places the concept in its proper ceremonial context and provides further weight to Nibley’s suggestion that the use of these terms is evidence that the Book of Mormon correctly reflects its origins in the religious world of preexilic Israel. 📖

Another Gold Book Found

In October 2005, police in Tehran, capital of Iran, recovered a number of artifacts that a farmer had found while plowing a field and then had sold to smugglers. Among the objects was a book consisting of eight gold sheets inscribed in cuneiform script, which was used in much of the ancient Near East. The sheets were bound by four small rings passing through holes in the sheets, in the same fashion as an ancient Etruscan gold book found in Bulgaria in 2003 (see “Etruscan Gold Book from 600 BC Discovered,” *Insights* 23/5, 2003) and the plates of the Book of Mormon (described in *History of the Church*, 4:537). The book is from the Achaemenid period, which began in the mid-sixth century BC. One of its most prominent rulers was Cyrus the Great, who conquered the Babylonian Empire in 539 BC and allowed the Jews taken captive by the Babylonians to return home two years later. A fuller report of this interesting discovery will appear in a forthcoming issue of FARMS’s *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*. 📖

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Notes

1. See Hugh Nibley, “The Meaning of the Atonement,” in his *Approaching Zion*, ed. Don E. Norton (1989), 566–67. Nibley’s paper was originally presented on 10 November 1988 as part of a lecture series sponsored by Deseret Book and FARMS.
2. The figures presented here were obtained by means of a computer search of the scriptures. Nibley did not have access to the electronic version of the scriptures and consequently erred in his count. He wrote that the atonement words appeared 127 times in the Old Testament (5 of them outside the Pentateuch) and only once in the New Testament, in the epistle to the Hebrews. In reality, the word’s sole appearance in the KJV New Testament is in Paul’s epistle to the Romans (5:11).