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King Mosiah's Address

Michaël Ulrich

KING BENJAMIN'S ADDRESS IS WELL KNOWN to readers of the Book of Mormon and is often quoted in devotional contexts. The address marks the transition between two great kings of Nephite history: Benjamin and Mosiah. It is also a moment of teaching and of testimony for the old king. From that point on, the people are officially called by the name of Christ. Another moment of teaching and of popular commitment occurs in the Book of Mosiah, although it receives less attention: the address given by King Mosiah and Alma the Elder when the latter's people arrive in Zarahemla (reported in Mosiah 25). The aim of this brief research note is to underline commonalities between Mosiah's address and King Benjamin's address and to suggest that both form part of a larger trend in Nephite institutions, a trend that changes the depth of Nephite religious and political institutions.

Mosiah 24 concludes with the arrival of Alma the Elder's people in Zarahemla after their flight from the oppression of the Lamanites and their Amulonite taskmasters. Mosiah 25 consists of the record of an address by King Mosiah followed by Alma speaking to the people in Zarahemla to make known to them the history of the people in the land of Nephi. The address begins with Mosiah reading the records of Zeniff (verse 5) and of Alma (verse 6). After an account of the audience's reaction to these records (verses 7 to 11) and a brief report regarding the children of King Noah's priests (verses 12 and 13), the address continues

with Alma speaking by way of exhortation (verse 16). Finally, Limhi and his people request baptism, done at the hand of Alma, and we learn that churches were established in the land (from verse 19 onward).

The obvious similarity between this event and King Benjamin's address is simply that, in both cases, a king speaks to his people. There seems, of course, to be a notable difference: not only does Mosiah speak in chapter 25, but so does Alma. A closer examination of the situation, however, shows that this detail and many others suggest a close resemblance between the two talks. Indeed, Benjamin is not the only speaker in the course of his own address. Mosiah 3:2 reports that an angel had appeared to him, whom he then proceeds to quote at length in Mosiah 3 (through to the end of the chapter). The angel's message, like Alma's in the context of Mosiah's address, is central to Benjamin's address, as it introduces the mission of Jesus Christ. King Benjamin builds on this message to deliver his own admonitions and teachings. Alma, too, is a messenger, both through the record of his people read by the king and by his own mouth when he "preach[es] unto the people repentance and faith on the Lord" (Mosiah 25:16).

This general similarity is not the only one between the addresses. Another broad but important similarity concerns the strong reactions of the audiences. At Benjamin's time, the people experienced "a mighty change [of heart]" (Mosiah 5:2), so that they had "no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually." Later, during King Mosiah's address, the people were "struck with wonder and amazement" (Mosiah 25:7), having mixed feelings of joy and sadness, due to, respectively, the deliverance out of bondage of their brethren and the "sinful state" of the Lamanites and the deaths they caused. Further, the general setting is the same: the people come to listen to King Benjamin, being gathered "every man according to his family" (Mosiah 2:5); Alma speaks to his hearers "when they were assembled in large bodies" (Mosiah 25:15), and he even "went from one body to another," thus denoting the fact that these bodies were separate, as were the families at the former event ("every family being separate one from another" as mentioned in Mosiah 2:5). There is also a similarity in the themes addressed. During

Benjamin's time, the people made sacrifices "that they might give thanks to the Lord their God who . . . had delivered them out of the hands of their enemies" (Mosiah 2:4). This anticipates the "power [of God] in delivering Alma and his brethren out of the hands of the Lamanites and of bondage" (Mosiah 25:10), which caused Zarahemla's people to wonder so much and to "give thanks to God," much as their predecessors did.

The greatest similarity between these two events is the fact that covenant-making follows each address. In the earlier address, the people "covenant with . . . God . . . to be obedient to his commandments in all things," which in return gives them the right to bear the name of Christ, as they "shall be called the children of Christ." In the later situation, the people of Limhi, who have not yet had the opportunity to be baptized, ask for baptism and receive it (Mosiah 25:17). Further, there is again here the mention of the importance of names: "Whosoever were desirous to take upon them the name of Christ" (Mosiah 25:23) would become members of a church. This point is even more interesting in light of verse 12, where we learn that the children of Amulon and of the other priests of King Noah were ashamed of the behavior of their fathers and therefore decided to "be called the children of Nephi" and become part of the Nephite people. If we combine this new identification with the mention in verse 23 of taking upon oneself the name of Christ, it seems to implicitly underline the fact that the only solution to be purified of sin or of shame is not to take upon oneself the name of a specific people—of a specific ethnicity—or even of a hero (after all, Nephi was a hero in many respects), but instead it is to take upon oneself the name of Christ, the only one powerful enough to purify a person completely.

There are therefore strong indications that the two addresses should be read together. In this regard, we should also keep in mind that Mosiah's address took place roughly four years after Benjamin's address and one year after Benjamin's death.¹ As these addresses are temporally

1. If we follow the chronological indications given in the Book of Mormon, King Benjamin's talk would have taken place around 124 BC, he would have died around 121 BC, and Mosiah's talk would have been around 120 BC.

close, it is plausible to assume that Mosiah's audience would have been much the same as Benjamin's.

One should not forget, though, that one of the main goals of King Benjamin's address is to "[consecrate] his son Mosiah" (Mosiah 6:3). This aim is already announced at the beginning of the address, when Benjamin says "that [his] son Mosiah is a king and a ruler over you" (Mosiah 2:30). There is thus an important aspect of institutional change in King Benjamin's talk. Does a parallel exist in Mosiah's address?

We might find a parallel in the fact that "king Mosiah granted unto Alma that he might establish churches throughout all the land of Zarahemla" (Mosiah 25:19). Note that he did not establish them only among Limhi's people, who had before been estranged from God, nor only among his own people, but rather "throughout all the land of Zarahemla." This broad scope and the use of the word "establish" seem to indicate that a new system, or a new order, is being put into place.² In a similar fashion, Joseph Spencer³ sees Abinadi's ministry (on which Alma's preaching is based) as a turning point in the Nephite interpretation of scripture. Before Abinadi, interpretation was mainly eschatological; after him, it became more soteriological. To quote Spencer: "Whereas for Nephi, the Prophets ultimately speak to a community, for Abinadi, they speak to the individual who desires salvation."⁴ Further, according to Spencer, Abinadi's move was prompted by the corrupt use of the community-oriented interpretation by the priests of King Noah, who saw their own state as fulfilling the promises of scriptures and thus thought they were not in need of repentance. This duality between

2. See John L. Sorenson, "Religious Groups and Movements among the Nephites, 200–1 B.C.," in *The Disciple as Scholar: Essays on Scripture and the Ancient World in Honor of Richard Lloyd Anderson*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks, Donald W. Parry, and Andrew H. Hedges (Provo, UT: BYU Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2000), <https://publications.mi.byu.edu/fullscreen/?pub=1091&index=7>, for a study of the religious changes among Nephites.

3. See Joseph M. Spencer, *An Other Testament: On Typology*, 2nd ed. (2012; Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2016).

4. Spencer, *Other Testament*, 163.

individual and communal salvation would then have been fully resolved only in Christ's ministry and teachings to the Nephites.

If we look at Mosiah's address through Spencer's lens, we see how a church organization with an emphasis on personal salvation could be appropriate. One works out one's own salvation by receiving personal ordinances (and not only communal ordinances, as the Jewish feasts may have been) and through the personal decision of joining the Church. We also see how the "large bodies" of Mosiah 25 were the seeds, so to speak, of the churches to be established, as is clarified in verse 21: "They did assemble themselves together in large bodies, being called churches." And we also understand how the timing for such a change is perfect. From a state tying together the religious and the political,⁵ and with an emphasis on communal ordinances and rituals,⁶ Benjamin first introduces the individual aspect by "tak[ing] the names of all who had entered into a covenant with God to keep his commandments" (Mosiah 6:1). This action can be seen as a preparation so that, four years later, the people, having been prepared, can now receive a new order with the introduction of the system of churches. One could then see this move in terms of a broader context, as part of a process that ultimately leads to a strong separation between church and state with the introduction of the system of judges in Mosiah's final address in Mosiah 29. In this reading, we have a deep change in the affairs of the people that encompasses both the religious and the political aspects, which all occurs in the space of thirty-five years (according to the text's internal chronology).

5. See Sorenson, "Religious Groups." See also Hugh W. Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 3rd ed. (1957; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 295–310; Terrence L. Szinck 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, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 1998) gives an interesting insight into the observance of Ancient Israelite communal rituals and the speech of King Benjamin.

6. It has long been suggested that King Benjamin's address might have taken place during a ritual feast, similar to the Jewish feasts.

If indeed the church system is introduced at this point, it might throw a new light on the youth of Alma₂ (Alma the Younger). We are told nothing about his sins except that “he was going about to destroy the church of God” (Mosiah 27:10). Could it be that Alma had been attached to the old practices and, in a gesture of religious conservatism, thus failed to understand the need for a church? Like Laman and Lemuel, who thought the Israelites were righteous because they kept the Law of Moses and saw no further, perhaps Alma defended the idea that the true system was the old one and that the introduction of a church was a corruption. This reading might then give new weight to the angel’s words to Alma that “this is [the Lord’s] church” (3 Nephi 27:13).

At any rate, if we accept that the system of churches is introduced into Zarahemla only after Mosiah’s address, what are we to make of the ordinance of baptism? Is it not practiced early in the Book of Mormon? References to baptism before the first baptisms practiced by Alma₁ include only the following: 2 Nephi 31; 1 Nephi 10:9–10; 1 Nephi 11:27; and 2 Nephi 9:23–24.⁷ Of these, 1 Nephi 10:9–10 and 1 Nephi 11:27 actually apply to the Savior being baptized by John the Baptist. The more problematic references seem therefore to be 2 Nephi 31 and 2 Nephi 9:23–24, since they recommend baptism to the hearer or reader. However, 2 Nephi 31 seems to find Nephi talking to “[his] brethren.” Looking at the broader context, one sees that 2 Nephi 31 continues a discourse beginning in 2 Nephi 25. As 2 Nephi 25:3 makes clear, that longer prophetic discourse is one that Nephi addresses “unto my people, unto all those that shall receive hereafter these things.” The “hereafter” seems to indicate clearly that he is not speaking to his people but to the later readers of the Book of Mormon. This may leave only 2 Nephi 9:23–24 as problematic, where Jacob (within Nephi’s record) clearly

7. There would also be 1 Nephi 20:1 that mentions baptism. However, Royal Skousen in *Analysis of Textual Variants* has shown that the phrase “or out of the waters of baptism” is actually a later gloss inserted by Joseph Smith. We therefore will not consider it here. See Royal Skousen, Vol. IV: *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon*, in six parts (Provo, UT: FARMS, Brigham Young University, 2004–2009).

speaks to his contemporaries in recommending baptism (“Jerusalem, from whence we came” in 2 Nephi 9:5).

There is thus only this one reference, 2 Nephi 9:23–24, that concerns an explicit teaching about baptism to the Nephites before Alma’s time. This is quite meager for almost five hundred years of history until the time of Mosiah’s address. Based on this scripture alone, one might conclude that baptism was known and even practiced by the Nephites from the time of Nephi, even though the evidence is scant. But one might also assume without too much risk that this knowledge and practice have been long forgotten by Benjamin’s time. After all, the dynasty of King Benjamin originated with Mosiah₁, who was “warned by the Lord that he should flee out of the land of Nephi” (Omni 1:12), presumably due to a kind of general Nephite apostasy. At this time, or at any time before, knowledge about baptism might have been lost.

We might even go further. If one accepts the hypothesis that there was a Nephite apostasy somewhere between the time of Jacob and the time of Benjamin, then one might well conclude also that the knowledge of Christ was lost at the same moment. This could explain the fact that the angel announces to Benjamin “glad tidings of great joy” (Mosiah 3:3) concerning the “com[ing] down from heaven” of the “Lord Omnipotent.” The word “tidings” is defined as “a piece of news.”⁸ If the knowledge of the Messiah was available from the time of Nephi, why would there be a need to announce this knowledge again? Benjamin could have preached about the coming of Christ and its consequences and blessings, but there would have been no need for an angel to announce the coming itself. Moreover, if knowledge about the mission of Jesus Christ was indeed lost, this loss would explain why King Noah’s priests were so shocked by Abinadi’s affirmation that “God himself should come down among the children of men” (Mosiah 17:8) to the point of sentencing him to death. It would also explain why the same priests would teach that “salvation come[s] by the law of Moses”

8. *American Dictionary of the English Language*, by Noah Webster, 1828, s.v. “tidings,” <http://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/tidings> (accessed November 29, 2018).

Table 1. Summary of the commonalities of the addresses

King Benjamin's address	King Mosiah's first address
Gathered "every man according to his family" (Mosiah 2:5)	Gathered "in large bodies" (Mosiah 25:15)
An angel gives a message (Mosiah 3:1–4:1) "mighty change [of heart]" (Mosiah 5:2)	Alma gives a message (Mosiah 25:14–15) "struck with wonder and amazement" (Mosiah 25:7)
Give thanks to the Lord their God "who . . . had delivered them out of the hands of their enemies" (Mosiah 2:4)	"when they thought of the . . . power [of God] in delivering Alma and his brethren out of the hands of the Lamanites and of bondage, they did . . . give thanks to God" (Mosiah 25:10)
Covenant to obey the commandments (Mosiah 5:5)	Baptism of Limhi and his people (Mosiah 25:17)
Name of Christ is given (Mosiah 5:7)	Some were "desirous to take upon them the name of Christ" (Mosiah 25:23)
A new king is announced (Mosiah 6:3)	The church system is introduced (Mosiah 25:19–22)

(Mosiah 12:32). We should remember that Zeniff, inaugurating the colony in which Noah and his priests dwell, left the land of Zarahemla with his party before Benjamin's address. Thus, if knowledge about Christ was restored only at this latter point, the people of Noah would not know about it; this knowledge would only be restored with Abinadi.

This interpretation might seem far-fetched. It could be simply that the aim of the angel in Mosiah 3:3 is to announce that the coming of Christ is soon approaching. Nevertheless, the literary construction of the sentence does not seem to put an emphasis on the time of the coming so much as the events themselves that are to transpire.⁹

There is thus reason to believe that the address of King Mosiah in Mosiah 25 provides a pivotal moment in Nephite history. It marks the moment of official ecclesiastic organization through the establishment of the Church; it also marks the moment when Nephite religious life collectively passes from a state-organized religion with ordinances centered on the community to a church organization with individual or personal ordinances. It might also serve as a site of restoration in

9. Critics of the Book of Mormon could also argue that the explanation is linked to the order of dictation: Joseph Smith dictated the Book of Mosiah long before the book of Nephi.

which the previously lost Nephite knowledge of Christ and sacred ordinances such as baptism are restored (although the evidence in support of this hypothesis is ultimately too scant to be definitively conclusive). If King Mosiah's address, however, does mark a moment of such restoration, then the Book of Mormon takes on additional meaning as the scripture of the Restoration. It perhaps *models* events of restoration within its pages as it speaks to a people organized around a latter-day restoration. Perhaps, in fact, it models at least two restorations: the one wrought through Nephi and Lehi, and another later through Benjamin and Mosiah.

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