

Introduction

John W. Welch,
Stephen D. Ricks

With the exception of the words of Christ himself, no speech in sacred literature, in our opinion, surpasses that of King Benjamin. Delivered at the temple in the city of Zarahemla around 124 BC, this text is a treasure trove of inspiration, wisdom, eloquence, and profound spiritual experience and insight. Little wonder that Mormon saw fit to include this speech as he compiled the most significant Nephite records into the Book of Mormon. Mormon abridged many Nephite sources, but not Benjamin's speech. Mormon may well have copied the text directly from Benjamin's original or from one of the copies that Benjamin caused to be "written and sent forth among those who were not under the sound of his voice" (Mosiah 2:8). That oration was a landmark in its own day, and it still stands as a shining beacon of truth and goodness in our day.

In this lengthy collection of studies, we approach this classic text from many angles. What kind of a text is Benjamin's speech? Is it a prophetic text? A coronation text? A covenant renewal text? A farewell speech? Is it religious exhortation? A doctrinal discourse? A judgment speech? A temple text? Is it a royal confession? A personal testimony? It is all of these things, and more.

Professor Hugh W. Nibley was likely the first scholar to sense the extraordinary historical and literary richness of the words found in Mosiah 1–6. Nibley's discussion of Benjamin's speech in the 1957 Melchizedek Priesthood manual opened many doors and invited multifaceted studies of the ways in which these chapters reflect Old World ritual and experience. Many students over the ensuing forty years have pursued various avenues of research that radiate from this ancient text.

This volume began to come together over a decade ago. The work of gathering and refining these materials eventually culminated in a FARMS symposium, held in Provo and repeated in Oakland, California, in April 1996. All the contexts of this book are related to the speeches presented at that symposium, drawing together and expanding the research that stood behind those studies about Benjamin's speech.

Elder Neal A. Maxwell first discusses the main spiritual messages and personal character of Benjamin and sees the speech as a manual for discipleship. He focuses his attention on removing stumbling blocks, on prayer and revelation, and on virtues of submissiveness, consecration, loving-kindness, and meekness.

Two essays by John W. Welch next examine Benjamin's place in Nephite history and the qualities of Benjamin's speech that make it a masterful oration. Of particular interest are Benjamin's lineage, name, chronology, roles, and responsibilities. The speech itself displays numerous qualities that make it a masterful oration and consummate work of sacred literature.

A study by Welch and Daryl R. Hague examining these words as a classic speech of a departing leader near the time of his death displays an array of elements that positions this speech alongside the most famous farewell speeches of ancient Judeo-Christian and Greco-Roman literature.

Great orations are spawned by great occasions, and annual assemblies of entire populations were awe-inspiring events in the ancient world. As Hugh W. Nibley shows, coming together in assemblies was no perfunctory formality, but was the essence of unification, typifying the coming atonement that would reconcile and unify God and his people.

Annual convocations were mandated anciently under the law of Moses, which prescribed a detailed set of regulations that the Nephites continued to observe strictly until the coming of the resurrected Christ. Accordingly, Terrence L. Szink and Welch explore the distinct possibilities, detected and researched by several scholars, that Benjamin's speech occurred during a traditional Israelite festival season, most likely sometime near the beginning of the ancient calendar year, when the all-important festivals of the Day of Atonement and the Feast of Tabernacles were celebrated. Although it is difficult to know with certainty very much about the ancient observance of such holy days either in Lehi's Jerusalem or in Benjamin's Zarahemla, primary evidence from the Bible, supplemented with secondary evidences from later, but related, Jewish texts and traditions provides a rich field against which Benjamin's speech can be favorably compared on many counts.

The beginning of the autumn season was also often a time of covenant renewal and coronation, especially during sabbatical years. On such occasions, the leaders of the Israelites called their people to repentance and renewed their requirements of social justice. Hence Benjamin's speech may also be viewed as a "prophetic lawsuit," in which this Nephite leader called the Nephite and Mulekite peoples to judgment in ways that took full advantage of the popular, royal, and sacred domains of law and justice that existed in ancient Israel.

Ancient celebrations typically also had much to do with kingship, coronation, treaty making, covenant renewal, and promises of temporal and divine blessings or curses. Stephen D. Ricks demonstrates a broad range of Nephite and Israelite attitudes toward kingship, royal ideologies, coronation ceremonies, and treaty-covenant patterns detectable in Benjamin's speech, consistent with what many scholars have perceived as basic elements in the ideology of kingship from the ancient Near East.

Delivered within the sacred precinct of the Nephite temple in Zarahemla, Benjamin's speech also reaches deeply into the domain of sacral experience. M. Catherine Thomas illuminates the clear religious messages and subtle spiritual allusions in Mosiah 1–6 as she reflects on the mysteries unfolded by Benjamin to the minds and hearts of his people. For those who have ears to hear and eyes to see, more is going on here than an initial conversion of neophyte investigators. Readers of Benjamin's speech are made privy to a higher election and deeper covenantal commitment than the ordinary reader often assumes.

It follows appropriately from the temple setting of Benjamin's speech that the sacred words used by Benjamin in consummating that covenant should persist down through the years in other covenant-making and covenant-renewing texts found within the gospel of Jesus Christ. As Welch next shows, several key words and elements in Benjamin's covenant terminology in Mosiah 5 are closely aligned with the words that the resurrected Jesus used when he administered the sacrament in 3 Nephi 18. These same words in turn formed the basis of the Nephite sacrament prayers found in Moroni 4–5, which are used each week in the LDS Church today.

Words were obviously of great importance to Benjamin. He selected his words with precision and crafted his statements to convey his brilliant doctrinal messages and powerful spiritual testimony. Benjamin's use of various forms of parallelism, and in particular chiasmus, communicated potent contrasts and created sharp points of emphasis. A comprehensive treatment of Benjamin's implementation of these various literary forms is offered by Welch, assisted by Claire Foley. This study displays many intricate and skillful literary qualities in the composition of Benjamin's elaborate text.

Few passages of scripture have had a richer influence on the preaching and doctrinal awareness of the modern church than Benjamin's speech. Bruce Van Orden's contribution to this book catalogues and classifies all general conference talks that have quoted or paraphrased the words of King Benjamin. Benjamin is a primary source of

revealed truth on dozens of points, most notably with respect to the theology of service and the centrality of the atonement of Jesus.

Finally, we conclude this volume by presenting the complete text of Benjamin's speech along with detailed notes and textual commentary. The full text of the speech is divided into sections. The notes following each section offer information on such data as the numerous scriptural cross-references that can be drawn between Benjamin's speech and other passages in the four standard works, summaries or quotations of insights given by dozens of Latter-day Saint commentaries on Benjamin's speech, information about biblical scholarship pertinent to verbal or cultural elements in the speech, and references that direct the reader to specific information contained in this volume concerning the particular words, phrases, concepts, or patterns present in Mosiah 1–6. At the end of these textual annotations is a bibliography of LDS writings about Benjamin's speech to which the textual annotations refer. This textual supplement has been developed mainly by Alison V. P. Coutts, together with the editors and other FARMS researchers.

This volume is full of many details and much information. We hope that this collection of studies will serve its readers as a valuable reference tool, a source of inspiration, and a book that can be read and enjoyed either one piece at a time or as a grand tour that opens up broad views and allows the mind to contemplate Benjamin's speech as a whole. Our objective is to know as much as possible about Benjamin and the message, methods, and moment of his speech, and to participate in that event almost as if we were present to hear and understand the words which he spoke. Although we have tried to deal with our topics as well as possible, we know that our modest effort leaves much more to be said about Benjamin's speech. We fully expect a classic text of its order to wear us out long before we will wear it out. We hope that each reader will appreciate and enjoy the rich blessings that can be claimed through further study of Benjamin's scripture.

Many points have deeply impressed us about Benjamin's speech. Our studies have convinced us that if a person were to sit down to write such a speech, that person would need to know hundreds of facts and details; and after years of research seeking to grasp all of those details correctly, that author would still be left with the staggering task of embedding all that information fluently and purposefully into an organized composition that accomplishes simultaneously multiple objectives and does so in an unassuming and artistically lucid manner. Benjamin's speech is not a creation that just happened. Its very existence, with all that it enfolds, testifies of God, that he is, that he loves his children despite their weaknesses, and that he blesses those that keep his commandments.

We conclude, both on spiritual and intellectual grounds, that Benjamin's speech bears true and valuable testimony of the prophesied atonement of Jesus Christ, the son of God, the creator of the heavens and the earth and all things that in them are. We apologize if it takes readers more than a day and a half to read this book, but we remind the impatient that Joseph Smith took only about that long to translate this section in the Book of Mormon containing King Benjamin's speech.

Many people have assisted us in bringing this volume to publication. We express our deep appreciation to Shirley S. Ricks for her editing, with the assistance of Alison V. P. Coutts; to S. Kent Brown for his careful review and useful suggestions; to Claire Foley for her assistance in research and drafting; to Marc-Charles Ingerson for his meticulous source checking; to Mara L. Ashby, Jeromy R. Caballero, Rebecca M. Flinders, Robyn M. Patterson, Wendy C. Thompson, and Anita C. Wells for their proofreading; to Mary Mahan for her design and typesetting skills; to Jessica Taylor for her indexing macros; and to our many other colleagues and associates at Brigham Young University and FARMS who have enriched and promoted our quest to fathom the treasures of Benjamin's speech.

