

# Benjamin's Covenant as a Precursor of the Sacrament Prayers

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King Benjamin's covenant language in Mosiah 5 has a familiar ring even today. His words figure seminally as an early text to which Jesus was apparently alluding when he articulated in 3 Nephi 18 words that provided the basis for the final form of the Nephite sacrament prayers in Moroni 4–5. The precision and persistence of basic terms throughout all three of these texts, separated from each other by many years and pages of Nephite history, speak highly of the faithful and logical orderliness, the linguistic sensitivity, and the progressing revelation and inspiration present in this history.

## Benjamin's Words and Moroni 4–5

At the conclusion of Benjamin's speech (Mosiah 5), his people entered into a covenant. The event began with a declaration by the people of their faith in the king's words, an affirmation of their disposition to do good continually, and an acknowledgment that the goodness of God had filled them with the spirit of prophecy and with joy. The people then, in the following words, expressed their willingness to enter into a covenant. (The emphasized phrases contain words similar to those appearing in Moroni 4–5.) "And we *are willing* to enter into a covenant with our God to do his will, and *to be obedient to his commandments in all things that he shall command us*, all the remainder of our days, that we may not bring upon ourselves a never-ending torment, as has been spoken by the angel, that we may not drink out of the cup of the wrath of God" (Mosiah 5:5).

Benjamin responded by accepting the words of the people as a "righteous covenant" (Mosiah 5:6). He explained the resultant relationship the people would enjoy with their God as a consequence of their covenant and then affirmed the next requirement: "And now, because of the covenant which ye have made ye shall be called the children of Christ, his sons, and his daughters. . . . Therefore, I would *that ye should take upon you the name of Christ, all you that have entered into the covenant*" (Mosiah 5:7–8).

Benjamin explained how all those who know the sacred name by which they are called shall be found on the right hand of God, but those who do not shall be found on the left. Accordingly, he instructed his people further that they should "remember also, that this is the name that I said I should give unto you that never should be blotted out . . . [and that you] should *remember to retain the name written always in your hearts*" (Mosiah 5:11–12). Provided that they knew and remembered the name, the people were promised that they would not be driven away or cast out; if they remained steadfast in good works, they would have everlasting salvation (Mosiah 5:13–15).

Obviously, the sacrament prayers in Moroni 4–5 contain several phrases that are similar to these words of King Benjamin:

O God, the Eternal Father, we ask thee in the name of thy Son, Jesus Christ, to bless and sanctify this bread to the souls of all those who partake of it; that they may eat in remembrance of the body of thy Son, and witness unto thee, O God, the Eternal Father, that they *are willing to take upon them the name of thy Son, and always remember him, and keep his commandments* which he hath given them, that they may always have his Spirit to be with them. Amen. (Moroni 4:3)

O God, the Eternal Father, we ask thee in the name of thy Son, Jesus Christ, to bless and sanctify this wine to the souls of all those who drink of it, that they may do it in remembrance of the blood of thy Son, which

was shed for them; that they may witness unto thee, O God, the Eternal Father, that they do *always remember* him, that they may have his Spirit to be with them. Amen. (Moroni 5:2)

### **Jesus' Words in 3 Nephi 18 as a Midpoint between Benjamin and Moroni 4-5**

With the coming of the risen Jesus to the Nephites gathered at their temple in Bountiful, the law of Moses was fulfilled, and Nephite laws and ordinances were changed. Jesus taught and ministered the sacrament to those assembled in Bountiful following a rich outpouring of the Spirit. The words which Jesus then spoke in this connection in 3 Nephi 18 are as follows:

He said unto the disciples: Behold there shall one be ordained among you, and to him will I give power that he shall break *bread* and *bless* it and give it unto the people of my church, unto *all those who* shall believe and be baptized in my name. And this shall ye always observe to do, even as I have done, even as I have broken bread and blessed it and given it unto you. And this shall ye *do in remembrance of my body*, which I have shown unto you. And it shall be a *testimony unto the Father that ye do always remember me*. And if ye do always remember me *ye shall have my Spirit to be with you*.

And it came to pass that when he said these words, he commanded his disciples that they should take of the *wine* of the cup and *drink of it*, and that they should also give unto the multitude that they might drink of it. . . . And when the disciples had done this, Jesus said unto them: Blessed are ye for this thing which ye have done, for this is fulfilling my commandments, and this doth *witness unto the Father that ye are willing to do that which I have commanded you*. And this shall ye always do to those who repent and are baptized in *my name*; and ye shall do it *in remembrance of my blood, which I have shed for you*, that ye may *witness unto the Father that ye do always remember me*. And if ye do always remember me *ye shall have my Spirit to be with you*. (3 Nephi 18:5-11)

The textual similarities between these words of Jesus, as italicized, and the Nephite sacrament prayers in Moroni 4-5 are abundant and apparent.

Less obvious but equally significant is the continuity between the words of Jesus in 3 Nephi and the Nephite covenant language known from the time of Benjamin. The phrases “take upon you the name of Christ,” “remember to retain the name always,” and “be obedient to his commandments” appear in Mosiah and are echoed in 3 Nephi. These connections demonstrate one way in which Jesus took the old Nephite covenant text and made it new. The promises and allegiance to Christ remained basically the same, but the tokens of his resurrected body and atoning blood were presented as Jesus himself stood in their midst and provided the pattern that his repentant followers should observe from that time forth. The result would have appeared to the Nephites both marvelously familiar and revealingly innovative.

Thus significant verbal similarities exist between the words of the Nephite sacrament prayers and the covenant language of Mosiah 5. Several further subtle differences, developments, or relationships between Christ's words and King Benjamin's, however, can also be observed.

### **Clear Reference to God as the Eternal Father**

It is important and interesting that the sacrament prayers address God as “the Eternal Father” and clearly distinguish him from Jesus Christ, his Son.

In their covenant language, however, Benjamin's people initially referred to their God only as "our God" (Mosiah 5:5), not as their "father." In a covenantal sense, God (Christ) became their Father as a result of their conversion, as they were thereby spiritually begotten of him that day and were thus called "the children of Christ, his sons, and his daughters" (Mosiah 5:7). For the people to have spoken of God as their Father before uttering the words that created or renewed that relationship would have been premature.

### **Asking the Father in the Name of the Son, Jesus Christ**

When the prayers in Moroni 4–5 request a blessing and sanctification, they petition, "We ask thee in the name of thy son, Jesus Christ." In so doing, they follow a specific instruction given by Jesus in 3 Nephi 18:20, immediately following his administration of the sacrament. The use of this phrase in 3 Nephi 18 may represent a change from the time of Benjamin, making this form of asking God explicitly part of the covenant text for the first time. On the other hand, in the early portions of the Book of Mormon, many things were done in the name of Christ. Nevertheless, the precise concept of "asking the Father in the name of Christ" appears to have taken on broader significance in Nephite usage only after it appears in full and is emphasized four times by the resurrected Jesus in 3 Nephi (see 3 Nephi 16:4; 17:3; 18:20; 27:28). Since Jesus had specifically instructed the Nephite disciples to ask in his name (see 3 Nephi 18:20), it is no wonder that this phrase was expressly incorporated into the sacrament prayers.

### **Blessing and Sanctifying**

Benjamin's text mentions no sacramental emblems being blessed or sanctified as his people made their covenant. The people themselves, nevertheless, first recited the ways in which *they* personally had been blessed and sanctified by the Spirit of God, making their desires pure. Likewise, Jesus pronounced the people in Bountiful "blessed" because of their faith (3 Nephi 17:20) before he administered the sacrament to them. In the prayers in Moroni 4–5, the bread and wine were sanctified. While the holiness of the people is not thereby diminished, the focus on Christ's sanctity is a meaningful addition.

### **Bread and Wine**

From the words of Jesus, above all, came the eucharistic aspects of the prayers in Moroni 4–5. The bread was eaten "in remembrance of" the body which Jesus "*show[ed] unto*" them (3 Nephi 18:7), thus adding a new and profound dimension to the sacrament symbolism over and above that found in the New Testament. There the bread represents the body "given for you" (Luke 22:19; compare 3 Nephi 18:6) and "broken for you" (1 Corinthians 11:24; compare 3 Nephi 18:6), but the idea of the body "shown unto" you is never mentioned. The wine here, as in the New Testament, was "in remembrance of" the blood which was shed (3 Nephi 18:11; Luke 22:20). A substitute for blood was appropriate, since the old law pertaining to the "shedding of blood" (3 Nephi 9:19) had been superseded.

Although probably remote, a connection between the texts of Mosiah 5 and 3 Nephi 18 may be found in the fact that another cup was mentioned in the covenant text of Benjamin. Previously, the cup was the cup of God's wrath (see 2 Nephi 8:17; Mosiah 3:26; 5:5; Alma 40:26; 3 Nephi 11:11). In 3 Nephi 18:8, the cup became the cup of Jesus' blood. All God's wrath had been poured, as it were, into that cup of the new covenant. One may drink of it, a bitter cup of blood turned through Christ's atonement into something as sweet as wine; otherwise, one will suffer the dregs of the wrath of God on one's own.

### **The Covenantors**

Both Benjamin and Jesus allowed only certain people to complete the covenant. Benjamin permitted only those who had entered into the covenant, “all you that have entered into the covenant with God” (Mosiah 5:8), to take upon them the name of Christ. Using Benjamin’s words, as revealed to him by an angel, we know that those who then transgressed knowingly “drink damnation to their own souls” (Mosiah 3:18) and are “no more blameless” (Mosiah 3:22). In similar words, Christ allowed only those “who shall believe and be baptized in my name” to receive the sacrament. Anyone unworthy was not to be allowed to “eat and drink damnation to his soul” (3 Nephi 18:29). Moreover, the phrase “all you that” is found in the words of Benjamin (Mosiah 5:8) and the phrase “all those who” appears in the words of Jesus (3 Nephi 18:5), with the word “souls” appearing in this context in Mosiah 6:2, perhaps together contributing to the formulation of Moroni 4–5, “to the souls of all those who . . .”

### **The Witness of Willingness**

In all three of these texts, the word *willing* appears. People entering or renewing their covenant with God must do so willingly, voluntarily, eagerly, and resolutely. The people of Benjamin expressed their willingness to enter into a covenant. They covenanted to do whatever God might command them all the rest of their lives. In terms that were rigorous and broad, the people entered into a covenant promising “to do his will” (Mosiah 5:5). Moreover, they promised to keep whatever commandments he might ever give them, now or in the future, all the days of their lives. Their promise was one of loyalty to God in general, and they expected that their king would yet deliver to them further commandments from God (see Mosiah 2:31), which they would be equally bound to follow.

Moroni 4 also requires one’s loyalty, but the orientation is more on the present than the future, for with the appearance of Jesus the law was already fulfilled. Thus the covenant obligation became to keep the commandments “which he *has* given them.” “Therefore blessed are ye if ye shall keep my commandments, which the Father hath commanded me that I should give unto you” (3 Nephi 18:14). By this new covenant, people expressly affirm their desire to keep the commandments, beyond their willingness to enter into a covenant. Benjamin’s people said, “We are willing *to enter* into a covenant with our God to do his will, and to be obedient to his commandments in all things that he *shall* command us” (Mosiah 5:5). In slightly more direct terms than Benjamin had used, Jesus explains in 3 Nephi 18 that with the partaking of the sacrament comes a “witness unto the Father that ye are willing *to do* that which I *have* commanded you” (3 Nephi 18:10).

### **The Promise**

Finally, in the different promises extended to the people by Benjamin and Jesus, a shift in emphasis may be discerned. The promises of Benjamin were that God would seal the people his, that they would have “everlasting salvation and eternal life,” and that they would be the beneficiaries of God’s wisdom, power, justice, and mercy (Mosiah 5:15). Benjamin’s object was to bring well-being to his people “in heaven and in earth” (Mosiah 5:15). Benjamin’s promise, therefore, was not just one of the companionship of the spirit. He promised life and munificence in God—a spiritual counterpart to the secular blessing of victory and prosperity which he had earlier promised to the people if they would be obedient to their new king, his son (see Mosiah 2:31).

By contrast, the promise extended by both prayers in Moroni 4–5 is that the people will have this Spirit of Jesus “to be with them.” This promise comes directly from the words of Jesus, spoken twice earlier in the Book of Mormon: “And if ye do always remember me ye shall have my Spirit to be with you” (3 Nephi 18:7, 11). These words of Jesus shift the blessing from a longer-term blessing of future salvation to a more immediate personal appreciation of the continual presence of Jesus among his righteous followers. Earlier the Nephites had hoped and prayed, in several sublime moments, to have “the love of God always” in their hearts (Alma 13:29), and they had

experienced a number of outpourings of his Spirit on particular occasions (see Mosiah 4:20; Alma 16:16; 17:10; 19:36; Helaman 6:36). But the culminating blessing of always having the companionship of this Spirit came more intensely with the fulfillment of all things in Jesus.

Thus, in conclusion, the texts of the sacrament prayers in Moroni 4–5 have a rich and meaningful background. Whenever these prayers are read or heard, they should bring to mind the spiritual power of the words and ministrations of Jesus himself at the meridian of time in Palestine and in Bountiful and, before that, the enduring influence of the words of King Benjamin in Zarahemla. The continuity and consistency from Mosiah 5 to 3 Nephi 18 and to Moroni 4–5 reflects an inspired and detailed textual history, one that remarkably evinces precise usage of particular phrases over several centuries of religious experience, as well as several subtle transformations from earlier points of spiritual emphasis, by incorporating the words and symbols of Israelite and Nephite religious experience into the Nephite covenant-making texts.