

The Use of King Benjamin's Address by Latter-day Saints

Bruce A. Van Orden

Benjamin's speech was a high point in Nephite history, as Mormon recognized when he compiled the ancient Nephite records. Mormon chose to summarize the king's lengthy career in only a few lines, but he dedicated a good deal of space to Benjamin's speech. Like Mormon, many Latter-day Saints recognize the exceptional spiritual and moral value of this address and often appeal to it as a source of doctrine and a guide to righteous living. While the preceding chapters in the present volume concentrate on textual, historical, and cultural aspects of the speech, this chapter examines Benjamin's role in Latter-day Saint doctrine and tradition, describing how Latter-day Saints have used, applied, and discussed Benjamin's speech since its publication in 1830.

While critical analysis may aid in understanding the historical setting of a passage, an examination of modern exegesis is necessary to discover what a particular passage means for contemporary readers. Apparently in the early years of the church, when the Saints were still initially exploring Book of Mormon texts, they rarely referred to Benjamin's words. Over time, however, the speech has grown immensely in popularity, and recent generations have referred to it more often than any other section of scripture. To demonstrate this growth, I have compiled a table and the results of a survey. The first discusses the doctrines taught in general conference addresses that rely on Benjamin's speech for scriptural support. The second gives a chronological survey of many other commentaries by Latter-day Saint writers concerning the speech.

Doctrinal Statements

The following summary demonstrates how Benjamin's speech has been used by General Authorities and a few women leaders in general conference since 1897. After a short explanation of each doctrine or principle, a table shows every reference to a particular passage that relates to the principle. This table includes the chapter and verse(s) from Benjamin's address, the month and year of the modern speech, the name of the speaker, and the specific teaching. An asterisk (*) indicates the speaker elaborated on the scripture.

1. *We should serve one another through daily actions and participation in church welfare programs.* One of the main points in Benjamin's speech pertains to the Christian duty to serve one's fellowman. General Authorities, especially since 1960, have repeatedly referred to Mosiah chapters 2 and 4 while urging members to show true Christian love through daily charitable acts and participation in church welfare programs. Leaders often quote either Mosiah 2:17, "When ye are in the service of your fellow beings ye are only in the service of your God," or Mosiah 4:26, "For the sake of retaining a remission of your sins from day to day, that ye may walk guiltless before God—I would that ye should impart of your substance to the poor, every man according to that which he hath, such as feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and administering to their relief, both spiritually and temporally, according to their wants."

In April 1947, Elder Harold B. Lee cited Mosiah 2:17 and observed, "The highest service that we can render here in mortal life [is] the willingness to sacrifice of our own self for the welfare of others. . . . Giving, then, . . . is an evidence of an abiding love in that individual who thus is willing to give."¹ During the two decades that followed Elder Lee's talk, the church placed heavy emphasis on service, and leaders often quoted Benjamin's statement to strengthen the point. In recent years, while leaders still continue to cite Benjamin's admonition on service, they have done so less frequently; in the April 1986 general conference, however, the entire Saturday afternoon session was dedicated to welfare principles and their practice in the church, and most speakers cited King

Benjamin's speech to support their teachings.² Elder Jeffrey R. Holland, in 1996, focused on our obligation to care for those in need and to be involved in worthy causes since we are all beggars before God.³

2. *Salvation can come only through the atonement of Christ.* During recent years the church has come under increasing attack for allegedly not being Christian. The General Authorities have countered by affirming more frequently their testimony of Christ, the significance of the atonement, and Christ's position as head of the church. Key passages from Benjamin's speech about the role of Christ (Mosiah 3) have often been cited to bolster the church's devotion to the Savior. At one point, in his closing remarks during the October 1978 general conference, President Spencer W. Kimball said, "We know, and it is our testimony, and we also proclaim it to the world that to be saved men must 'believe that salvation was, and is, and is to come, in and through the atoning blood of Christ the Lord Omnipotent' (Mosiah 3:18)."⁴ Four years after President Kimball's talk, Ezra Taft Benson, then president of the Council of the Twelve, testified, "The fundamental principle of our religion is faith in the Lord Jesus Christ." He then asked, "Why is it expedient that we center our confidence, our hope, and our trust in one solitary figure? Why is faith in Him so necessary to peace of mind in this life and hope in the world to come?"⁵ To answer these questions, President Benson explained that Christ was the "*Lord God Omnipotent*" (Mosiah 3:5). Then he declared, "[Christ] was chosen before He was born. He was the all-powerful Creator of the heavens and the earth. He is the source of life and light to all things. His word is the law by which all things are governed in the universe. All things created and made by him are subject to his infinite power."⁶

3. *What is the "natural man"?* Mosiah 3:19, the most quoted passage from Benjamin in past years, describes carnal or "natural" man in this way:

For the natural man is an enemy to God, and has been from the fall of Adam, and will be, forever and ever, unless he yields to the enticings of the Holy Spirit, and putteth off the natural man and becometh a saint through the atonement of Christ the Lord, and becometh as a child, submissive, meek, humble, patient, full of love, willing to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon him, even as a child doth submit to his father.

Leaders have offered various descriptions of the natural man's character and explanations of why he is an enemy of God. Consensus seems to indicate that the natural man represents the selfishness that all people must overcome if they hope to return to the presence of God.

President Spencer W. Kimball has added his own simple definition of the natural man: "The 'natural man' is the 'earthy man' who has allowed rude animal passions to overshadow his spiritual inclinations."⁷

4. *The natural man can be overcome.* When explaining how the Saints can use Christ's atonement to overcome the natural man, General Authorities often quote Mosiah 3:19. Elder Bruce R. McConkie, for example, quoted this verse in 1950 and affirmed that the atonement of Christ was the most important event in world history. By making the atonement effective in their lives through repentance and humility, Elder McConkie explained, Saints can subdue and eventually defeat the natural man. Of course, those who overcome the natural man completely will become Christlike. General Authorities have emphasized the development of Christlike attributes so much over the last several years that they have quoted Mosiah 3:19 more than any other statement in Benjamin's speech.

5. *True humility is a characteristic of Christ's disciples and requires recognition of man's dependence on God.* When using Benjamin's teachings on humility, General Authorities often emphasize man's debt to God and the need to submit

oneself to God. These teachings appear in Mosiah 2:20–24: “And now, in the first place, he [God] hath created you, and granted unto you your lives, for which ye are indebted unto him. And secondly, he doth require that ye should do as he hath commanded you; for which if ye do, he doth immediately bless you; and therefore he hath paid you. And ye are still indebted unto him, and are, and will be, forever and ever; therefore, of what have ye to boast?” In 1944, for example, Elder Joseph Fielding Smith cited Mosiah 2:20–24 and said that all people—and the LDS Church itself—were indebted to God.

Mosiah 3:19 also affirms the need for man to recognize his relationship to and dependence on God. In 1985 Elder Neal A. Maxwell quoted this verse and explained that true disciples offer childlike submissiveness to God, particularly when facing trials. This quality goes far beyond the “bended knee or bowed head.”⁸

6. *Parents are responsible to teach and care for their children.* Leaders have often quoted Benjamin while counseling parents. Of the following twenty-six references, however, only one occurs before 1960. This disparity reflects the greater emphasis on family home evening that occurred near the beginning of that decade. Generally, leaders have urged parents to follow Benjamin’s instructions in Mosiah 4:14–15: “And ye will not suffer your children that they go hungry, or naked; neither will ye suffer that they transgress the laws of God, and fight and quarrel one with another, and serve the devil, who is the master of sin, or who is the evil spirit which hath been spoken of by our fathers, he being an enemy to all righteousness. But ye will teach them to walk in the ways of truth and soberness; ye will teach them to love one another, and to serve one another.” In 1965, Elder Spencer W. Kimball noted that it was Benjamin, through these verses, who gave the scriptural appeal for the equivalent of home evenings.⁹

President Ezra Taft Benson gave an address at the priesthood session of October 1985 general conference on how “faithful fathers [in the Book of Mormon] constantly bore their testimonies to their sons.”¹⁰ He noted that “King Benjamin caused that his three sons ‘should be taught in all the language of his fathers’ and from the brass plates so that they would not suffer ‘in ignorance’ (Mosiah 1:2–3).”¹¹ After quoting Benjamin, President Benson asked, “Could the lack of teaching the scriptures in our homes be a source of our suffering in ignorance today?”¹² Elder Russell M. Nelson, in both 1989 and 1994, used Benjamin as a text to encourage parents to guide their children to love one another and relate well with each other; as a result, intolerance outside the home would decline.¹³

7. *Those who obey God’s commandments will receive blessings both in heaven and in earth.* General Authorities frequently refer to the relationship between obedience and blessings. They quote Mosiah chapter 2, especially verses 22 and 41, to support this principle. Verse 22 reads: “And behold, all that he [God] requires of you is to keep his commandments; and he has promised you that if ye would keep his commandments ye should prosper in the land; and he never doth vary from that which he hath said; therefore, if ye do keep his commandments he doth bless you and prosper you.” In 1987, Elder Charles A. Didier cited verse 41 to show that spiritual security is strengthened when one understands that blessings come to the obedient. Verse 41 reads:

And moreover, I would desire that ye should consider on the blessed and happy state of those that keep the commandments of God. For behold, they are blessed in all things, both temporal and spiritual; and if they hold out faithful to the end they are received into heaven, that thereby they may dwell with God in a state of never-ending happiness. O remember, remember that these things are true; for the Lord hath spoken it.

Elder M. Russell Ballard quoted this verse in his 1995 address on finding answers to life's questions, with particular reference to receiving eternal happiness and joy.¹⁴

8. *True conversion results in a "mighty change" that removes the desire to do evil.* Leaders often teach about the need to be truly converted, and some have referred to the "mighty change" experienced by Benjamin's people. Mosiah 5:2 reads: "And they all cried with one voice, saying: Yea, we believe all the words which thou hast spoken unto us; and also, we know of their surety and truth, because of the Spirit of the Lord Omnipotent, which has wrought a mighty change in us, or in our hearts, that we have no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually." In 1898, President Joseph F. Smith spoke about the oath and covenant of the priesthood, as found in Doctrine and Covenants 84. President Smith likened that section to the covenant made by Benjamin's people and affirmed that those who are baptized and receive the gift of the Holy Ghost should experience a mighty change and strive to maintain the desire to do good constantly. This teaching applied especially to those who held the priesthood.

Leaders have not limited the need for true conversion to active members of the church. President Marion G. Romney, for example, has discussed several times the "mighty change" and its application to helping less active members. In 1975, he said that less active members would not want to return to full activity unless they experienced the profound change that true conversion effects. After explaining how Benjamin helped the people of Nephi and Zarahemla to desire the "mighty change," President Romney encouraged the Saints to follow Benjamin's example in their activation programs, as did Elder Richard G. Scott in 1990. Elder Scott reminded those who are seeking to come back that "any lasting improvement must come from your own determination to change."¹⁵

9. *Those who are born again become the children of Christ.* When one is "born again," one becomes a child of Christ. General Authorities sometimes quote Mosiah 5:7–10 concerning those who reach this state. In 1987, for example, Elder W. Grant Bangerter cited Mosiah 5:7 to explain what it meant to be spiritually begotten by Christ: "And now, because of the covenant which ye have made ye shall be called the children of Christ, his sons, and his daughters; for behold, this day he hath spiritually begotten you; for ye say that your hearts are changed through faith on his name; therefore, ye are born of him and have become his sons and his daughters." After quoting Benjamin, Elder Bangerter asked the Saints if their daily actions were those of a person redeemed of God, a true child of Christ. Leaders often ask such questions when discussing the need to be born again or to overcome the natural man. In April 1995, both Aileen H. Clyde and Bonnie D. Parkin, serving respectively in the Relief Society and Young Women general presidencies, cited Mosiah 5:7 in the context of reminding us to keep our covenants.

10. *God will forgive our sins when we truly repent and serve others.* Several General Authorities have quoted Mosiah 4 to explain the repentance process and how one can retain the remission of one's sins. In 1983, for example, Elder Jack H. Goaslind cited Mosiah 4:26 and said that perfect love comes from having one's sins remitted. Since "perfect love" or charity manifests itself through service, Elder Goaslind explained, those who hope to retain a remission of their sins must administer to the spiritual and temporal needs of their fellowmen. President Marion G. Romney has spoken in a similar vein while encouraging members in active support of welfare programs.

Mosiah 4:3 asserts that after Benjamin's people cried out for mercy, they were filled with a "peace of conscience." In 1973, President Harold B. Lee used this passage to explain to church members that they can know when the Lord has forgiven them: "In your soul-searching, if you seek for and you find that peace of conscience, by that token you may know that the Lord has accepted of your repentance. Satan would have you think otherwise and sometimes persuade you that now having made one mistake, you might go on and on with no turning back. That is one of the great falsehoods."¹⁶

11. *Believe in God and be faithful.* Leaders sometimes cite Mosiah 4 to encourage members to remain strong and stay confident in the Lord. Mosiah 4:9–10 reads:

Believe in God; believe that he is, and that he created all things, both in heaven and in earth; believe that he has all wisdom, and all power, both in heaven and in earth; believe that man doth not comprehend all the things which the Lord can comprehend. And again, believe that ye must repent of your sins and forsake them, and humble yourselves before God; and ask in sincerity of heart that he would forgive you; and now, if you believe all these things see that ye do them.

12. *Run no faster than you have strength.* When encouraging diligence tempered by thoughtfulness and order, some leaders have quoted Mosiah 4:27: “And see that all these things are done in wisdom and order; for it is not requisite that a man should run faster than he has strength.” Elder M. Russell Ballard reminded us that King Benjamin counseled “that all these things are done in wisdom and order” (Mosiah 4:27) and urged focusing on a few basic objectives in order to keep life’s demands in balance.¹⁷

13. *Benjamin exemplifies a great teacher.* There are two instances in general conference in which a General Authority held up Benjamin as a paradigm for teachers.

14. *Do not trifle with God’s word.* An interesting use of Benjamin’s words occurred in 1975, when Elder Vaughn J. Featherstone quoted Mosiah 2:9 to instruct members that conference messages should not be taken lightly: “My brethren, all ye that have assembled yourselves together, you that can hear my words which I shall speak unto you this day; for I have not commanded you to come up hither to trifle with the words which I shall speak, but that you should hearken unto me, and open your ears that ye may hear, and your hearts that ye may understand, and your minds that the mysteries of God may be unfolded to your view.” Elder Featherstone also proclaimed that Benjamin gave the second greatest discourse ever, the most important being Christ’s first discourse to the Nephites after his resurrection.

15. *Miscellaneous.* Many General Authorities have employed Benjamin’s teachings to encourage members of the church to improve their lives and draw nearer to the Lord.

Chronological Survey of Secondary Commentaries on Benjamin’s Speech

A review of other literature concerning Benjamin’s speech reveals that few writers have concentrated on the text as a whole. Perhaps predictably, much of the commentary has been fairly superficial. In general, writers have used three methods of interpretation. First, many have noted in Benjamin a favorite doctrine or theme and have concentrated on that theme to the exclusion of others. Second, commentators have frequently seen themselves reflected in the text. For example, Elder B. H. Roberts, one of the finest intellectuals in the church, loved aphorisms and found the Book of Mormon an excellent source for them. One of his favorite aphorisms was from Mosiah 2:17: “When ye are in the service of your fellow beings, you are only in the service of your God.”¹⁸ Unfortunately, Roberts’s commentary on Benjamin did not really go beyond this point. Third, some writers have freely interpolated words and meanings not found in Mosiah. A Sunday School lesson in 1898, for example, says that Benjamin taught about the *condescension* of God, a term Benjamin never used. While creative interpretation of this last sort cannot be justified, there is certainly nothing wrong with concentrating on a particular theme or seeing oneself in scripture. These two methods do not, however, allow analysis of the text as a whole. They cannot fully answer the question of what Benjamin wanted to say and why he said it. On the other hand, they do show that Benjamin’s speech encompasses many truths that should not be treated lightly, a fact the following survey bears out.

Evidence reveals that during the pre-Utah period (1830–1846), the Saints rarely quoted the Book of Mormon in their books, pamphlets, and periodicals. Early Saints loved to study the Bible and were generally more familiar with

its contents than with the Book of Mormon. Studies by Grant Underwood show that the early Saints cited biblical passages over those from the Book of Mormon by a ratio of nineteen to one, although the recently published journals of William E. McLellin show that the Book of Mormon was used in early LDS preaching to a greater extent than had been previously suspected.¹⁹ Of the relatively few Book of Mormon references, none refers to Benjamin or his speech. In the first European edition of the Book of Mormon (1841), numerous index entries explained the chapter contents. The few references pertaining to Benjamin's address included "King Benjamin teacheth the people," "Their tent doors towards the temple," "Coming of Christ foretold," "Beggars not denied," and "Sons and daughters."²⁰

Although the Saints apparently did not often cite Benjamin, they probably knew about his important convocation and saw themselves acting similarly. Brigham Young's remark at the beginning of his 8 August 1844 discourse indicates this. At that time, when he was transfigured in the appearance and voice of the Prophet Joseph Smith, Brigham declared: "*Attention all!* This congregation makes me think of the days of King Benjamin, the multitude being so great that all could not hear. I request the brethren not to have any feelings for being convened this afternoon, for it is necessary; we want you all to be still and give attention, that all may hear."²¹ Brigham the leader saw his situation reflected in that of the ancient Nephite leader.

The Book of Mormon received relatively little treatment from Latter-day Saint writers until the appearance of the 1879 edition, which was divided into shorter chapters and verses and included numerous footnotes. This represented one of the culminating life works of Orson Pratt.

The year 1879 also saw the landmark Supreme Court ruling in the case of *Reynolds v. the United States*, which sent thirty-seven-year-old George Reynolds, a secretary to the First Presidency, to prison "for conscience sake" on polygamy charges. Reynolds—a longtime student of history, geography, and science—had also studied the potential of these disciplines to influence a person's understanding of the scriptures. He served as a member of the General Sunday School committee on publications and frequently contributed to the magazine for youth, the *Juvenile Instructor*. He and his close friend George Q. Cannon, Deseret Sunday School Union superintendent and editor of the *Juvenile Instructor*, had long recognized the need for aids to help young people understand the Book of Mormon. While imprisoned in the Utah Territorial Penitentiary, George Reynolds wrote more than eighty articles for publication, over half on the Book of Mormon. He became so excited upon receiving a copy of the new 1879 edition that he also commenced his comprehensive concordance to the Book of Mormon, which was eventually published in 1904. The Saints received Reynolds's prison articles on the Book of Mormon so enthusiastically that friends convinced him to publish the articles together with additional material in a book that could be used in the Sunday Schools and in homes to understand the teachings, story, geography, and internal and external evidences of the Book of Mormon. *The Story of the Book of Mormon*, first published in 1888, was the first real commentary on the contents of the Book of Mormon. The book appeared in several subsequent editions.

Elder Reynolds wrote that Benjamin was "a mighty man in the midst of Israel," whose final teachings "were some of the most divine and glorious ever uttered by man." Reynolds further indicated that Benjamin taught his people "the pure principles of the gospel—the duty which men owed to their God and to their fellows. He also told them how he had been visited by an angel, and what wondrous things that angel had shown him concerning the coming of the God of Israel to dwell with men in the flesh."²² George Reynolds went on to publish his *Dictionary of the Book of Mormon* in 1891 and included the same material under "Benjamin" as he had in *The Story of the Book of Mormon*.²³ Although he praised Benjamin's contributions, Reynolds did not specifically comment on the prophet-king's many teachings.

After Reynolds's work, no serious commentary on Benjamin's speech appeared for several decades, although General Authorities and church literature did refer to it occasionally. The *Deseret Sunday School Union Leaflets* (1898), for example, contain five lessons about Benjamin, several of which analyze him in a superficial way that often includes creative speculation and interpolation. Lesson 145, "Benjamin, King of the Nephites," gives a basic biography and says that Benjamin faced three major problems: contentions among his people, Lamanite invasions, and false religious teachers. Lesson 147, "King Benjamin's Vision of the Angel," concentrates on Mosiah 3:1–7 and the Savior's role. The following quotation contains some interesting material:

Nowhere in the sacred scriptures have we a grander picture of the greatness, glory and everlasting mercy of *God, our Savior*, than in these memorable words of Benjamin's holy visitor. They are not the words of man but of an angel, and they describe to us the regard with which our Lord Jesus is held by the *heavenly hosts*; how he is Lord Omnipotent and reigns as such in heaven, yet with *condescension* beyond our comprehension he became man and suffered all that mortals can, that we, *his creatures*, may be saved and *become like unto him*.²⁴

Several non-Book of Mormon phrases appear in this passage, as well as the word *condescension*, which Benjamin does not use. *Condescension* occurs only in 1 Nephi. The lesson places great emphasis on the heavenly kingdom and man's potential to become like God, neither of which can actually be found in Benjamin's speech. Lesson 148, "King Benjamin's Vision of the Angel (continued)," simply paraphrases Mosiah 3:8–12. Lesson 149, "Benjamin's Teachings Concerning the Poor," describes service and aid to the poor. Lesson 150, "Organization of the Church of Christ," sets out the covenant established by Benjamin. By "organization," the lesson means that the covenant probably signaled the first time that the title of Christ was applied to a group in the New World.

In 1909, B. H. Roberts published his in-depth study on the Book of Mormon, *New Witnesses for God*. Surprisingly, Roberts did not comment on Benjamin at all, although, as stated earlier, one of Roberts's favorite aphorisms was Mosiah 2:17. Even in his major theological treatise, *The Truth, The Way, The Life*, Roberts quoted Benjamin to support only two propositions about the salvation of children and the omnipotence of God, besides recommending Mosiah 3–5 as general supplemental reading.²⁵

Mother Stories from the Book of Mormon, by William A. Morton, appeared in 1911. Contrary to what one might think, the book did not tell stories about mothers in the Book of Mormon. Instead, it recounted the Book of Mormon through short stories that children could understand. (One assumes, perhaps, that "Mother" was telling the stories). The stories, unfortunately, do not even mention Benjamin. "Mother" tells about Nephi₁'s death and Jacob's appointment, then says that after many years Zeniff decided to visit the Lamanites. Apparently, Benjamin just did not seem exciting or important enough to be included in this book.

The Gospel Doctrine Sunday School lesson for 10 February 1929 teaches about Benjamin and the history of the priesthood. The lesson reports that Benjamin held the priesthood and served as a prophet to his people. Furthermore, "the proclamation, or address, of King Benjamin to the people was one given him by an angel from the Lord, who commanded him to give the people a 'name, that thereby they may be distinguished above all the people which the Lord God hath brought out of the land of Jerusalem.'" The writers of this lesson seem to think that Benjamin received his entire discourse from the angel. Also, the writers indicate that Benjamin received a commandment from the angel to give the people a new name. The Book of Mormon text does not confirm this. The last part of the lesson affirms that the priests and teachers appointed by Benjamin (see Mosiah 6:3) were "undoubtedly of the Melchizedek Priesthood." This appears to be a case of applying one's own situation to the

scriptures. In other words, the lesson writers reasoned that since they had a prophet aided by Melchizedek priesthood holders, the priests of Benjamin the prophet necessarily held that priesthood too.

The Gospel Teachings lesson for 24 April 1932 contains the following introduction: “No writer in the Book of Mormon has spoken more plainly about the gospel and the plan of salvation than has King Benjamin.” Clearly the church recognized the power of Benjamin’s speech, yet there was still no major commentary. The lesson simply quoted Mosiah 1–4, followed by a few study questions.

An adult Sunday School lesson for 3 June 1934 presents Benjamin’s account in story form and freely speculates about Nephite culture. A 1942 lesson, “Righteous King Benjamin,” follows in a similar vein. Of course, neither of these lessons represents serious study.

Not until Sidney B. Sperry’s *Our Book of Mormon* (1946) and *The Book of Mormon Testifies* (1952) did Benjamin receive some kind of textual analysis.²⁶ Sperry, a pioneer scholar in religious studies at Brigham Young University, focused on “literary forms” in the Book of Mormon. He wrote that Benjamin’s speech was the only good example of “oratory” in the Book of Mormon.²⁷ Furthermore, Sperry characterized the speech as a triumph in rhetoric and described a successful religious orator, of whom Benjamin was an archetype, in this way:

The business of a speech-maker is to do something with his audience, to change the listeners or mold their opinions before they depart. Many *techniques* are used in doing this, and the true orator knows how to *employ them skillfully*. He may leave the audience better informed; he may cause an emotional change; or he may change a purely indifferent attitude to one of active interest. In any event, he must cause a change in the ideas and attitudes of his listeners, or he has failed as an orator.²⁸

Immediately after the above statement, Sperry said that “it is highly improbable that Benjamin had received much instruction in the making of speeches or sermons”²⁹ and that most of Benjamin’s speeches must have been religious. In a comment specifically directed to Mosiah 2:16–18, Sperry wrote that “the homely English of this scripture could be much improved, particularly the first sentence. Nevertheless, the sentiments expressed are lovely and sublime. One likes to believe that King Benjamin, the author, was in effect the Wilford Woodruff of his time, a leader, a hard worker with his hands, a very spiritual man, but not an outstanding writer or orator.”³⁰ Sperry separated Benjamin’s speech into three divisions: “the necessity of rendering service” (Mosiah 2:9–41); the message of an angel concerning the coming of the Savior, his atonement, and its consequent effects on mankind (see Mosiah 3); and the emphatic teaching of practical religious precepts following the assembly’s acknowledgment of testimony (see Mosiah 4:4–30).³¹

Sperry’s analysis presents several difficulties. First, it is not clear why Benjamin constitutes the “only good” example of oratory in the Book of Mormon. In his *Book of Mormon Studies*, a 1948 Sunday School lesson B manual, Sperry said that the “oration of Benjamin is really the *only* example of oration in the Book of Mormon.”³² Why does Sperry ignore Alma (Alma 5), Mosiah₂ (Mosiah 29), and Samuel (Helaman 13–15)? Second, Sperry’s judgment that Benjamin had little instruction in speechmaking lacks justification. Essays in the present volume demonstrate the complexity and craftsmanship of Benjamin’s speech, as well as the fact that it follows traditional farewell patterns. In light of this understanding, Sperry’s description of Benjamin as the “Wilford Woodruff of his time”—an unlettered but sincere and spiritual man—carries little credibility. Third, Sperry writes that “most of [Benjamin’s] speeches were doubtless of a religious nature, if we may judge the spirit of the man in his last formal speech,” but one may well wonder why the majority of a king’s speeches would need to be religious. Fourth, Sperry emphasizes

that a good orator knows and employs the proper techniques to persuade his audience. This makes Benjamin seem more like a rhetorician, although Sperry does point out that the speech is “characterized by dignity, simplicity, sincerity, and a warm religious feeling.”³³ He adds that Benjamin’s statements “are the words of a great religious soul . . . worthy of a high place in the scriptures,” and deserve “more careful study than [they have] heretofore had.”³⁴

Despite its problems, *Our Book of Mormon* marked the first time that anyone tried to outline Benjamin’s speech and comment on its parts comprehensively and systematically. *Our Book of Mormon* reflected a growing interest in the Book of Mormon generally and signaled the beginning of the transition that occurred in the 1950s. That transition was a veritable explosion of scholarly and ecclesiastical interest in the Book of Mormon. This led to increased study of Benjamin as well.³⁵

As mentioned previously, Sidney B. Sperry published *The Book of Mormon Testifies* in 1952. Sperry’s works, and those of Hugh Nibley, were more restrained than the other “scholarly” Book of Mormon studies that proliferated during the 1950s. Nibley’s *An Approach to the Book of Mormon* served as the Melchizedek Priesthood lesson manual for 1957. Lesson 23, “Old World Ritual in the New World,” examined Benjamin’s speech in detail and pronounced that the speech and the Nephite assembly reflected the ancient year-rites found in many civilizations.³⁶ Nibley cited various aspects of ancient New Year festivals and found similar characteristics in the Benjamin account.

Both William E. Berrett (*Teachings of the Book of Mormon*) and Daniel H. Ludlow (*A Combination Student and Teacher Guide to the Reading of the Book of Mormon*) wrote lesson manuals for Sunday School in the years 1960–62. These manuals contain basic questions about Benjamin’s teachings on service, humility, practical religion, and the atonement.

In the early 1960s, George T. Boyd (a church educator) and Sidney B. Sperry voiced opposing interpretations of the “natural man” (Mosiah 3:19). Boyd explained that

The term “natural man” as employed by Benjamin is equivalent to “the incorrigible sinner.” It is also clear that all men are not included in this category. Furthermore, it is clear that those who are outside the class to which the “natural man” belongs include not only those who have not heard the gospel, but also all those who have not become enemies to God by the process he described. Sin, here, has to do with acts, not with an inherent condition of depravity due to the fall.³⁷

Sperry, taking issue with Boyd, indicated that the context in Mosiah 3:19 “makes it clear Benjamin is making a general statement which concerns all men,” not merely “incorrigible sinners.” He added:

By “natural man” is meant man who is subject to the penalty placed upon Adam, unlike little children in this respect, and who, aware that salvation comes only through the atoning blood of Jesus Christ, does not yield to the requirements of the gospel, “to the enticings of the Holy Spirit,” in order to become a new man in Christ. He remains the “old man,” (Romans 6:6) cut off by reason of Adam’s fall “from the presence of the Lord.” (2 Nephi 9:6) All men, regardless of how ethical or just they may appear to be on the surface, are in this fallen state unless, after proper teaching, they are “born of the spirit” and become “redeemed of the Lord.” (Mosiah 27:24).³⁸

In 1967, Hugh Nibley published *Since Cumorah*, a comprehensive study on the Book of Mormon. Nibley wrote only a few sentences about Benjamin, a half paragraph under the heading “Champions of Equality.”³⁹ While Nibley obviously respected Benjamin’s political and moral philosophy, he simply mentioned the king as a believer in equality and continued to a discussion of Mosiah²’s constitutional equality.

Sperry’s *Book of Mormon Compendium* appeared in 1968, but it contained the same Benjamin material as that found in *Our Book of Mormon*.

John L. Sorenson’s *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (1985) was the first comprehensive work about the Book of Mormon to follow Nibley’s *Since Cumorah*. Sorenson does not write about Benjamin’s speech itself, but he uses the event to support the argument that Benjamin’s people were a small group.⁴⁰ Other recent papers on Benjamin’s speech are listed in the bibliography in this volume, indicating a sharp increase in interest in this text that has arisen in the current decade.

Concluding Comments

Obviously, King Benjamin’s farewell speech has gained increased respect from a theological standpoint over the years. Scholars are gaining interest too, but the Latter-day Saints have only begun to study and appreciate the speech. Benjamin had a powerful effect on his original listeners. They believed his teachings, and the Holy Ghost worked a “mighty change” on their hearts so that they had “no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually” (Mosiah 5:2). In 1985, President Ezra Taft Benson similarly urged church members to undergo a change of heart. He said that “Christ changes men, and changed men can change the world.”⁴¹ Now that Benjamin’s speech receives continuous attention in the church curriculum, within the teachings of modern apostles and prophets, and within scholarly studies, the Saints have a greater opportunity to prove the king’s words for themselves.

In more recent years, Benjamin’s speech as a whole has received more attention and further detailed commentary. My master’s thesis in 1975 focused on the strategies of instruction used by prophets and teachers in the Book of Mormon and their application to present-day instructional settings. I described each teacher’s preparation, outstanding character traits, internal feelings for his audience, and the teaching setting in which each found himself. King Benjamin emerged as one of the best examples of a successful teacher. I also urged current Latter-day Saint teachers to cultivate humility and sincere love toward their students, as Benjamin showed toward his people, and further suggested that teachers “recognize the teaching moments when students are most receptive. When the students are all repentant and desire to be fed spiritually, at this time especially should they be challenged to keep the commandments and make a covenant with God.”⁴²

The 1976 Book of Mormon Sunday School manual contained lessons on Mosiah 1–3 and 4–6. These lessons repeated basic doctrines such as service, the mission of Christ, obtaining and retaining forgiveness, and true conversion, as do the lessons in the 1984 manual (the Benjamin lessons are practically reprints from the 1976 manual).

In 1978 Elaine Cannon and Ed J. Pinegar published *The Mighty Change*, in which they described the process of how one may be born again and become a new soul in Christ, and how a righteous society can be achieved. They dedicated their work to “King Benjamin, from whom we gleaned the six principles of change, and to Alma the younger, from whom we learned that all of us may experience the mighty change by experimenting upon the Word and then in turn helping others to progress spiritually.” The six principles of change drawn from Benjamin’s speech include coming to truly know God, coming to know ourselves, feeling the need to change, acting upon righteous information, establishing new values, and making a commitment.⁴³

In a regional representatives seminar in 1977, President Spencer W. Kimball mentioned Mosiah 4:19, which says that men should serve one another and avoid judging the poor, for all are beggars in God's view. President Kimball then asked, "Have we not all received from our Lord life and health and wealth and strength and power and food and clothing? Have we not all been blessed? How selfish and thoughtless would it be for a young man to grow to maturity, spend his time preparing for his life's work and his occupation and be unwilling to serve his Creator in this, the most important service [missionary service] in all the world."⁴⁴

In 1979 the Church Educational System published a student manual on the Book of Mormon for college students enrolled in institute of religion classes and religion classes at church schools. This manual contained commentary, usually drawn from statements by General Authorities, on specific passages from Benjamin's speech. The manual also said that King Benjamin was "one of the few truly righteous monarchs of history," and his final address was "one of the most stirring and significant sermons in the Book of Mormon."⁴⁵ It described Benjamin as "the embodiment of faithfulness and service" and challenged its student readers: "Can you appreciate that the same is true today—that Latter-day Saints must endure in faithfulness to the end and rely upon the mercy of a just God in and through the Atonement of Jesus Christ?"⁴⁶

When Benjamin completed the part of his sermon about Christ's atonement and the natural man, the multitude fell to the earth in deep humility, having recognized themselves "in their own carnal state" (Mosiah 4:1–2). With one voice they prayed that the atoning blood of Christ be applied in their behalf. Elder Maxwell used this passage to explain,

We begin to appreciate the Atonement with more than passive intellectual acknowledgment only when, as in the words of one prophet, we accept the terms of his atonement and "apply the atoning blood of Christ." (Mosiah 4:2.) We do this by repenting of our sins and by having them washed away by the holy ordinance of baptism, an act of both cleansing and commitment, and by receiving the confirming witness of the Holy Ghost, the Comforter. Without this conversion and rebirth, and without its resulting childlike spiritual submissiveness, Christ has told us we can neither see nor enter his kingdom.⁴⁷

Immediately following his charge to care for the needy, King Benjamin indicated that "all these things are done in wisdom and order; for it is not requisite that a man should run faster than he has strength. And again it is expedient that he should be diligent, that thereby he might win the prize; therefore, all things must be done in order" (Mosiah 4:27). Elder Neal A. Maxwell, in a masterful essay on pacing ourselves when we work in the kingdom of God, quoted the foregoing from Benjamin and added,

Running faster than we have strength "is not requisite." Doing things diligently but "in wisdom and order" is, in fact, necessary if one is to "win the prize." This balance between pace and diligence is a high and demanding exercise in the use of our time, talent, and agency. It is easy to be passive and withdrawn. In some ways it is likewise easy to fling ourselves thoughtlessly and heedlessly into a task that we then do not continue as we commenced. (See D&C 9:5.)

It takes, however, real wisdom, discipline, and judgment to do things in order. Only then do we "win the prize." True effectiveness requires the help of heaven, which is given only under certain conditions. The "dignity of causality" that attends genuine accomplishment is a result of *diligence with dignity* as we labor to bring about the accomplishment.⁴⁸

In 1984 Elder Richard G. Scott maintained that the Book of Mormon “holds answers for the problems we face in everyday life.” As one of his examples, he reminded us, “If you have a tendency to be overbearing in your calling and responsibility, remember King Benjamin, who taught us how to preside with humility in the work of the Lord. (See Mosiah 2.)”⁴⁹

Benjamin himself insisted that service to God should not be reason to boast (see Mosiah 2:16) and that if we mortals “should serve [God] with all [our] whole souls [we] would be unprofitable servants” (Mosiah 2:21). The Church Educational System student manual thus indicates, “The debt to God is completely beyond our ability to repay. This is why Benjamin points out that even if we devoted our whole soul to Him we are still unprofitable servants. In other words, we can do nothing that puts God in our debt.”⁵⁰ Elder Joseph Fielding Smith has also said, “We are told that we are unprofitable servants, and so we are, if we think of trying to pay our Savior back for what he has done for us, for that we never can do; and we cannot by any number of acts, or a full life of faithful service, place our Savior in our debt.”⁵¹

One is struck by Benjamin’s humility (see Mosiah 2:19–26). The Church Educational System student manual comments, “In this beautiful discourse on humility we find one of the keys to Benjamin’s greatness. Humility is not a mental groveling about one’s worthlessness. We are the children of God and the crown of his creations. True humility is a recognition of our actual position in relationship to God. If we truly sensed our total dependence upon God, as Benjamin did, it would profoundly affect our daily living.”⁵²

In 1965 Elder Spencer W. Kimball, addressing Brigham Young University students on the law of chastity, related the story of a young unmarried couple who had broken that law. Elder Kimball quoted Mosiah 2:36–39 to this couple, in which Benjamin said that people withdraw themselves from the Spirit of the Lord through their willful disobedience to commandments they know about. When this happens, divine justice awakens in the offender “a lively sense of his own guilt . . . and doth fill his breast with guilt, and pain, and anguish” (Mosiah 2:38). Elder Kimball further told the young couple, “Your very irresponsible act identifies you as most immature. . . . You made the choice when you broke the law of chastity and gave up your virtue. That hour, freedom was replaced with tyrannical fetters. You accepted shackles and limitations and sorrows and eternal regrets when you could have had freedom with peace.”⁵³

Benjamin concluded his address by admonishing his listeners to watch their thoughts, words, and deeds (see Mosiah 4:30). President Ezra Taft Benson wrote in April 1984 that a person is a product of his or her thoughts and used Benjamin’s admonition to challenge members of the church to conquer thoughts of lust.⁵⁴ In like manner, a Church News editorial in 1985 cited Mosiah 4:29–30 and added, “This counsel is so timely in today’s world as we struggle with the proliferation of pornography, obscenity, and indecency. These growing evils bombard us on every hand. At times it seems almost impossible to escape them because they appear to be everywhere. . . . Individually, we must remember the admonition of King Benjamin and watch ourselves, our thoughts, our words, and our deeds. If we keep the commandments and continue in the faith we will have power over the evils of pornography. Otherwise, we may succumb to its enticements and ultimately perish.”⁵⁵

King Benjamin’s address had a profound effect on the people who listened to it. They believed his words, and the Holy Spirit wrought a “mighty change” on them to the point that they had “no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually” (Mosiah 5:2). In 1985 President Benson urged church members similarly to undergo a change of heart.⁵⁶ Now that Benjamin’s speech is receiving continuous attention in the curriculum of the church and in the

teachings of modern-day apostles and prophets, one would hope that it is having a similar effect on the hearts of the members of the church today.

Notes

1. Harold B. Lee, in *Conference Report*, April 1947, 47–48.
2. See *Ensign* (May 1986): 22, 26, 30, 31, 63–64.
3. Jeffrey R. Holland, “A Handful of Meal and a Little Oil,” *Ensign* (May 1996): 29–31.
4. Spencer W. Kimball, “An Eternal Hope in Christ,” *Ensign* (November 1978): 72.
5. Ezra Taft Benson, “Jesus Christ: Our Savior and Redeemer,” *Ensign* (November 1983): 6.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Spencer W. Kimball, “Ocean Currents and Family Influences,” *Ensign* (January 1984): 4.
8. Neal A. Maxwell, “Willing to Submit,” *Ensign* (May 1985): 70.
9. Spencer W. Kimball, “Home Training—the Cure for Evil,” *Ensign* (June 1965): 513.
0. Ezra Taft Benson, “Worthy Fathers, Worthy Sons,” *Ensign* (November 1985): 36.
1. *Ibid.*, 36–37.
2. *Ibid.*, 37.
3. Russell M. Nelson, “The Canker of Contention,” *Ensign* (May 1989): 68–70, and Russell M. Nelson, “Teach Us Tolerance and Love,” *Ensign* (May 1994): 69–71.
4. M. Russell Ballard, “Answers to Life’s Questions,” *Ensign* (May 1995): 22–24.
5. Richard G. Scott, “Finding the Way Back,” *Ensign* (May 1990): 74.
6. Harold B. Lee, “Stand Ye in Holy Places,” *Ensign* (July 1973): 122.
7. M. Russell Ballard, “Keeping Life’s Demands in Balance,” *Ensign* (May 1987): 13–16.
8. See Truman G. Madsen, “B. H. Roberts and the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies* 19/4 (1979): 434–35.
9. Grant Underwood, “Book of Mormon Usage in Early LDS Theology,” *Dialogue* 17/3 (1984): 35–74; Jan Shipp and John W. Welch, eds., *The Journals of William E. McLellin, 1831–36* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1994).
0. Underwood, “Book of Mormon Usage,” 64; Grant Underwood, “Plumbing the ‘Plain and Precious’ from an Early Mormon Perspective,” a paper delivered at the annual meetings of the Mormon History Association in Kansas City, Missouri, 4 May 1985.
1. *HC* 7:232.
2. George Reynolds, *The Story of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Jos. Hyrum Parry, 1888), 79, 82.
3. George Reynolds, *A Dictionary of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Jos. Hyrum Parry, 1891), 85–89.
4. Lesson 147, “King Benjamin’s Vision of the Angel” in *Deseret Sunday School Union Leaflets* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Sunday School Union Board, 1898).
5. B. H. Roberts, *The Truth, The Way, The Life*, ed. John W. Welch (Provo, Utah: BYU Studies, 1994), quotation on 402, 414; see also 359, 403, 522.
6. On the rise of scholarship and emphasis on the Book of Mormon in the middle of the twentieth century, see Noel B. Reynolds, “The Use of the Book of Mormon in the 20th Century,” presented at a symposium entitled “Ancient Scriptures and the Restoration,” cosponsored by the Smith Institute for Church History, BYU, and FARMS on 8 June 1997.
7. Sidney B. Sperry, *Our Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1946), 118; cf. Sidney B. Sperry, “Types of Literature in the Book of Mormon,” *JBMS* 4/1 (1995): 88.
8. Sperry, *Our Book of Mormon*, 118–19, emphasis added; cf. Sperry, “Types of Literature,” 88.
9. Sperry, *Our Book of Mormon*, 119; cf. Sperry, “Types of Literature,” 88.

0. Sperry, *Our Book of Mormon*, 80; cf. Sidney B. Sperry, "The Book of Mormon as Literature," *JBMS* 4/1 (1995): 44.
1. Sperry *Our Book of Mormon*, 120–22; cf. Sperry, "Types of Literature," 89.
2. Sidney B. Sperry, *Book of Mormon Studies* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Sunday School Union Board, 1947), 54, emphasis added.
3. Sperry, *Our Book of Mormon*, 120; cf. Sperry, "Types of Literature," 89.
4. Sperry, *Our Book of Mormon*, 123–24; cf. Sperry, "Types of Literature," 93–94.
5. General conference addresses provide a striking example of this change. Between the years 1897 and 1949, General Authorities cited Benjamin only seventeen times. In the 1950s alone, however, they quoted Benjamin twenty-three times, and in the next decade they nearly doubled that. General Authorities continued to increase their references to Benjamin, and between 1980 and 1989 they cited him one hundred and eighteen times, and in the nineties thus far, close to one hundred times (ninety-four by October 1996).
6. See Hugh W. Nibley, "Old World Ritual in the New World," in *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 3rd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 295–310.
7. This quotation comes from an essay originally prepared for a convention of seminary and institute teachers held on the campus of Brigham Young University in the summer of 1962 and is now published in *Views on Man and Religion: Collected Essays of George T. Boyd* (Provo, Utah: Friends of George T. Boyd, 1979), 27.
8. Sidney B. Sperry, *The Problems of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1964), 3–4.
9. Hugh W. Nibley, "Good People and Bad People," in *Since Cumorah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1967), 396; reprinted in 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 359–60.
0. John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1985), 156–57.
 1. Ezra Taft Benson, "Born of God," *Ensign* (November 1985): 6.
 2. Bruce A. Van Orden, "An Examination of the Strategies of Instruction Employed by Prophets and Teachers in the Book of Mormon and Their Potential Application to Current LDS Instructional Settings" (master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 1975), 164; see 54–60, 159–64.
 3. Elaine Cannon and Ed J. Pinegar, *The Mighty Change* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978).
 4. Spencer W. Kimball, at Regional Representatives Seminar, 30 September 1977 (Salt Lake City), 13.
 5. *Book of Mormon (Religion 121–122) Student Manual* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1979), 153.
 6. *Ibid.*, 156–57.
 7. Neal A. Maxwell, "Our Acceptance of Christ," *Ensign* (June 1984): 72.
 8. Neal A. Maxwell, *Notwithstanding My Weakness* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981), 6, emphasis in original.
 9. Richard G. Scott, "The Power of the Book of Mormon in My Life," *Ensign* (October 1984): 11.
 0. *Book of Mormon (Religion 121–122) Student Manual*, 155.
 1. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954–56), 1:15.
 2. *Book of Mormon (Religion 121–122) Student Manual*, 155.
 3. Spencer W. Kimball, "Love versus Lust," in *Brigham Young University Speeches of the Year* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, 1965), 20–21.
 4. Ezra Taft Benson, "Think on Christ," *Ensign* (April 1984): 10.
 5. Editorial in *Church News*, 1 September 1985, 16.
 6. Benson, "Born of God," 6.