

Benjamin, the Man: His Place in Nephite History

John W. Welch

King Benjamin's speech in Mosiah 2–5 is a classic in the world's library of religious literature. Unparalleled in many respects by anything else in the Book of Mormon, this document stands as a monument of Nephite civilization and spirituality. The text of this speech can be explored from many different angles—literary, historical, and theological, to name but a few. Only under close examination do the complexity, subtlety, beauty, truth, and wisdom of this inspired composition start to come to light. To introduce the study of this address, we begin with some background information about the remarkable man who authored it.

Because of the wide influence he had on his own subjects and subsequent generations in the Book of Mormon, Benjamin occupied a unique place in Nephite history. No other Nephite king was remembered in so many positive ways. While Lehi and Nephi were the founders of the Nephite civilization, it was Benjamin who preserved and revitalized the people at a time when they were perilously close to failure. Benjamin unified his people in the land of Zarahemla at a critical time in their history and gave them the spiritual strength they needed to flourish for the next several generations. His influence produced an important era of religious and political strength in Nephite history.

In this chapter, we seek now to understand Benjamin's place in Nephite history and society. Who was Benjamin, the author of this masterpiece? When did he live? What challenges and tasks did he face? What do we know of him and his world?

Benjamin the King

Benjamin is almost always referred to in the Book of Mormon as King Benjamin. Although he was a multifaceted man and must have been many things to many people, he was remembered primarily as the greatest of all Nephite kings. Of the thirty-four times his name appears in the Book of Mormon, all but two of them identify him as *King Benjamin*. The first exception occurs before he was king (see Omni 1:23), and the second when his son Mosiah speaks of him as “my father Benjamin” (Mosiah 29:13).

He was remembered by his people as having been a very good king. As the records disclose, Benjamin was righteous, holy, inspired, just, frugal, loving, concerned, humble, articulate, and courageous. About thirty years after his death, his son and successor Mosiah₂ declared to the Nephites, “If ye could have men for your kings who would do even as my father Benjamin did for this people—I say unto you, if this could always be the case then it would be expedient that ye should always have kings to rule over you” (Mosiah 29:13). Striking a sharp contrast with the goodness of Benjamin, the book of Mosiah depicts King Noah, the nemesis of Abinadi, as typifying everything antithetical to King Benjamin (see Mosiah 29:18). Noah was wicked, abominable, indulgent, corrupt, extravagant, materialistic, selfish, and impatient. No doubt Benjamin's historical reputation benefited by this comparison. Compared with a king like Noah, such a sterling man as Benjamin looks even more magnificent, and deservedly so.

Genealogy

Benjamin's lineage and the date of his birth are not known. He was the son of a Nephite king, Mosiah₁, and while one may assume that this Mosiah was a descendant of Nephi, there is no indication that Nephite kingship necessarily passed down from father to son among Nephi's descendants. Jacob 1:11 prescribes that each Nephite king should be called by a coronation name of "Nephi" but begins with "*whoso* should reign . . .," which seems to say that lineage was not a determining factor in the selection of these rulers. Mosiah₁ and Benjamin could, therefore, have been Nephites, Jacobites, Josephites, or Zoramites, but one suspects they were from the lineage of Nephi, especially since Amaleki, a descendant of Jacob, had no posterity himself to whom he could give the small plates before he died (see Omni 1:25).

The Name Benjamin

Benjamin's name is intriguing, although somewhat of a mystery. Benjamin was the name of the younger brother of Joseph (see Genesis 35:18; 46:19), and the tribe of Benjamin was known for being warlike. It is quite possible that Benjamin's name was meaningful to him and his people in the context of his kingship over the land of Zarahemla. This name may have been given to him at birth, or it may have been given to him as a coronation name. Indeed it is probable that Israelite kings were given a new name or a coronation name when they took the throne.¹ Either way, the name of Benjamin was probably meaningful to him as king.

Since the Nephites were from the tribe of Manasseh (see Alma 10:2–3), and since the Mulekites were from the tribe of Judah (as descendants of royal fugitives from Jerusalem and their sailors), it is unclear why Benjamin would have been given the name of the head of another tribe in Israel. Several possibilities exist.

The first king over a united Israel was Saul. He was a Benjamite (see 1 Samuel 9:1) who made the site of Gibeah in the central Benjamite territory his capital. Saul ruled over all Israel until he was defeated by the Philistines. Similarly, King Benjamin ruled over a newly consolidated kingdom. In such circumstances, the name Benjamin could well have evoked politically neutral yet positive feelings among these diverse Book of Mormon descendants from both the southern kingdom of Judah and a northern Israelite tribe. While a royal name like David, from whom Mulek was descended, would probably have been politically uncomfortable for the Nephites, a name like Benjamin would have been conciliatory and unifying.

Furthermore, in ancient Israel the lands of the tribe of Benjamin lay immediately and strategically between the territory of the tribe of Judah to the south and the land of Manasseh to the north. In this central territory the people of Israel "came up" to their judges to be judged (Judges 4:5); here also Samuel assembled all Israel to pray (see 1 Samuel 7:5–6). From traditional functions like these, the name and place of Benjamin symbolized to the Israelites a meeting place between Judah and Manasseh. In Nephite terms, one may conjecture that Benjamin's name (either as a birth name or a coronation name) could have similarly suggested a middle ground between the Mulekites (of Judah) and the Nephites (of Manasseh). Consistent with what his name suggests, Benjamin valiantly filled the role of unifier and moderator between these two separate populations over whom he ruled.²

The name Benjamin may mean literally "son of the right hand," although this etymology is not entirely certain. If the name was understood this way among the Nephites, it may have had significance to Benjamin and his people. Benjamin was surely a righteous son, found on the right hand of his father, Mosiah. Moreover, Benjamin promised his people that he who knows "the name by which he is called" "shall be found at the right hand of God" (Mosiah 5:9). Benjamin's audience may well have noticed a similarity between Benjamin's name and this important phrase, "to be found at the *right hand* of God."

Chronology

Though nothing is known about Benjamin's birth, the year of his death is accurately recorded, and from that information several significant details can be extrapolated. Benjamin died in 119 B.C. (see Mosiah 6:5). At this time he was fairly old (see Mosiah 2:28–30), perhaps around the age of seventy or more.³ Since Benjamin had been consecrated king by his father, Mosiah (see Mosiah 2:11), who himself was probably reigning as early as 210 B.C. in the days of Amaleki (see Omni 1:23), one can confidently assume that both Mosiah₁ and Benjamin ruled in Zarahemla for a long time, each probably reigning for more than forty years. Mosiah₂ reigned for thirty-three years (see Mosiah 29:46). In certain periods of history, other rulers have governed for such lengths of time or longer. Some lengthy reigns are noted among the Maya, and other exceptional reigns longer than sixty years are found among the Egyptians.

War and Peace

From all we can learn, Benjamin was a very effective and successful ruler. Despite considerable challenges, he maintained a stable government throughout his long lifetime and established peace in his lands. Judging by the brief account of Benjamin's reign given by Mormon (see Words of Mormon 1:10–18), Benjamin's first political challenge was that of consolidating control over the lands and people in Zarahemla.

Early in his reign, Benjamin had to protect the integrity of his lands. Under the leadership of his father, Mosiah (200 B.C.), the Nephites had moved from the land of Nephi, traveling about two hundred miles to the north, down into the lower land of Zarahemla in the Sidon river valley. Surprisingly, no further Lamanite harassment of the fleeing Nephites is mentioned in the record during the reign of Mosiah₁, but shortly after Benjamin became king, a significant Lamanite invasion occurred (see Words of Mormon 1:13; Omni 1:24). This Lamanite invasion from the south, down into the land of Zarahemla, was launched in the middle of the second century B.C. Several reasons make it probable that the attack against Benjamin was related to the major Lamanite offensive being waged at that same time in the south against the Nephite colonists in the land of Nephi (see Mosiah 10:6–16). At that time, the Lamanites in the south were still angry because Nephi had “departed into the wilderness” four centuries earlier and had taken with him the plates of brass (Mosiah 10:16). Since the plates of brass were now in Zarahemla, it would have been logical for the Lamanites to have included that city as one of the military targets in their campaign.

The date of this Lamanite offensive, known from the record of Zeniff, makes it likely that this campaign was related to the battles fought at that same time by Benjamin. The war began thirty-four years after Zeniff had arrived in the land of Nephi from Zarahemla in the early part of the second century B.C. (see Mosiah 9:11; 10:3–5). Since a reasonable date for Zeniff's departure from Zarahemla is around 195–185 B.C., the date of this war would be around 160–150 B.C., which is further corroborated by the facts that it predated the trial of Abinadi (about 145 B.C.), that it shortly preceded the reign of Noah (about 155 to 145 B.C.), and that it was fought by Noah's father, Zeniff, a contemporary of Benjamin's father, Mosiah, at a time when Zeniff was old (see Mosiah 9:11; 10:22). This war also came during the lifetime of Amaleki, born in the days of Mosiah₁ (see Omni 1:23–24). If Benjamin was born between 195 and 187 B.C. and acceded to the throne like his own son Mosiah at the age of thirty, then the first year of Benjamin's reign would have come between 165 and 157 B.C.—right around the time of this major Lamanite unrest.

In this war, King Benjamin was the commander-in-chief. He assembled his armies and personally stood against the enemy. He fought with his “own arm,” as was customary for kings in the ancient world and in the Book of Mormon.

He also used the sword of Laban—a symbolic artifact as well as an effective weapon—indicating his firm confidence in the sacred and traditional Nephite heritage. This campaign established Benjamin early in his reign as a victorious and successful military leader. The positive claim he modestly makes in his final speech that he had “kept [his people] from falling into the hands of [their] enemies” (Mosiah 2:31) was a feat Benjamin could assert persuasively and legitimately. As a protector of his people, Benjamin epitomized the blessing of Moses given to the tribe of Benjamin, King Benjamin’s ancient namesake: “The beloved of the Lord shall dwell in safety by him; and the Lord shall cover him all the day long, and he shall dwell between his shoulders” (Deuteronomy 33:12).

As a result of this war, Benjamin was able to “[drive the Lamanites] out of all the lands of [Nephite] inheritance” (Words of Mormon 1:14), thereby protecting and affirming his territory as a land subject to his jurisdiction and governed by the prevailing Nephite laws. Benjamin thus administered a defined area, referred to as “the land of Zarahemla” (Omni 1:12; Mosiah 2:4), although the size of this territory is unknown. John Sorenson estimates that, while delivering his famous speech near the end of his reign, Benjamin spoke to a group of about 25,000 citizens, but the population in the land of Zarahemla could have been much larger.⁴

Keeper of All the Records

Early in his reign, Benjamin received the small plates of Nephi from Amaleki. With these sacred plates came the obligation to keep records of the religious experiences of the Nephites. Since Benjamin also held the plates of brass and was one of the probable few who could read these ancient writings, he became the custodian and effective interpreter of all the scriptures and prophecies fundamental to the Nephite tradition. Benjamin held these records, along with the large plates of Nephi that had been entrusted to him by his father, Mosiah (see Words of Mormon 1:10), thereby consolidating for the first time since Nephi these important elements of Nephite religious leadership and political power in the hands of a single individual.

This significant union of religious and political roles in a single leader marked a major change in Nephite politics and theocracy. This shift was apparently not accomplished without some resistance. Mormon mentions several false messiahs, false prophets, false preachers, and false teachers who arose at this time and had to be silenced and punished. This led to “much contention” in Zarahemla (Words of Mormon 1:16). While the origin of these dissenting groups is not disclosed, it is possible that this condition of religious instability and controversy occurred as a result of changes stemming from Benjamin. Members of the tribes of Jacob and Joseph, to whom the roles of prophet, priest, preacher, and teacher had traditionally belonged, might have been alienated by these developments (see 2 Nephi 5:26). They could have objected, as false “prophets,” to the unprecedented dominance of Benjamin in both the political and religious affairs of his people. Undoubtedly Benjamin saw himself not only as carrying out a legitimate stewardship entrusted to him and his posterity by Amaleki, but also as taking steps necessary to the eternal welfare of his people. These steps were occasioned by the fact that descendants of Jacob such as Omni (who was “a wicked man” by his own admission; see Omni 1:2), as well as Amaron, Chemish, and Abinadom, had failed to provide spiritual leadership to the Nephites (see Omni 1:4–11). Amaleki’s brother returned to the city of Nephi (see Omni 1:30), and as a result, this line of religious record keepers ended with Amaleki.

Prophet-Leader

In place of such religious leaders, Benjamin stood successfully as the spiritual leader of his people. He was a “holy man” who reigned “in righteousness” (Words of Mormon 1:17). He received revelation, presided over his temple precinct, and appointed priests. He controlled religious teaching with the “assistance of the holy prophets who

were among his people” with the help of “many holy men in the land” (Words of Mormon 1:16–17; see 1:18). From such statements it appears that many men in Zarahemla were known as prophets and originally functioned independently of the king. Benjamin was apparently able to win their confidence and enlist their support in normalizing religious thought and practice. By the end of Benjamin’s reign, the role of these prophets or holy men seems to have diminished; they are never mentioned in any of Benjamin’s words, nor do they reemerge as part of the church in Zarahemla during the subsequent reign of Mosiah₂. Perhaps the need to fill the vacuum caused by the reduction in the role of these prophets, preachers, and teachers contributed to Mosiah₂’s eagerness to embrace Alma₁ and his group and to grant him very broad powers to establish Nephite churches shortly after he arrived in Zarahemla (Mosiah 25:19) only a few years after the commencement of Mosiah’s reign. In any event, Benjamin seems eventually to have brought these holy men under his administration where their significance lessened because of Benjamin’s own stature and righteousness, although one suspects that the tradition of independent prophets continued to play some role among these people, as had long been the case in ancient Israel and as has been found to have existed among the Maya in later years.

A Man for All Seasons

In his younger years, Benjamin was known as an impressive warrior, but he eventually became known as a devoted spiritual leader as well. This combination of strength and humility is precious and rare among men, and it allowed Benjamin to speak from substantial personal knowledge and experience. The fact that he had personally fought with the sword gives a flesh-and-blood sense of potency to his forceful words about the severe punishment of those who come out “in open *rebellion* against God” and who remain and die “an *enemy* to God” (Mosiah 2:37–38). His position of strength contrasts dramatically with the fact that he worked with his own hands to serve his people so that they would not be heavily taxed (see Mosiah 2:14). His personal knowledge of things of the spirit, particularly through the visitation to him by an angel from God (see Mosiah 3:2), gives an uncommon depth of feeling and perspective to his words about humility and submissiveness (see Mosiah 3:19), about God’s patience and love (see Mosiah 4:6, 11), and about humanity and the universal obligation to care for one another (see Mosiah 4:13–26).

Benjamin’s message combined the best of concerns for both poles in the typical dichotomies of life: the group and the individual, temporal affairs and spiritual matters, politics and theology, power and pleading, and recognizing both strengths and weaknesses. He spoke from a rich and wide spectrum of personal experience gained from his youth to his old age. Like the biblical Jacob had said in his blessing to his own son Benjamin, “[He] shall ravin as a wolf: in the morning he shall devour the prey, and at night he shall divide the spoil” (Genesis 49:27). King Benjamin similarly combined power with magnanimity.

Student of the Scriptures

Benjamin had custody of both the large and small plates of Nephi as well as the plates of brass, and he held these scriptures in high regard. He taught his sons “the language of his fathers, that thereby they might . . . know concerning the prophecies which had been spoken by the mouths of their fathers, which were delivered them by the hand of the Lord” (Mosiah 1:2). He “taught them concerning the records which were engraven on the plates of brass” (Mosiah 1:3) because he felt that if it had not been for the commandments and teachings on these plates, their people would have “suffered in ignorance” (Mosiah 1:3), would not have understood the mysteries of God (see Mosiah 1:5), would have ended up with incorrect traditions as the Lamanites did (see Mosiah 1:5), and would not have prospered in the land (see Mosiah 1:7). He told his sons to search the plates “diligently” (Mosiah 1:7) and reminded the people that they had been taught concerning the sacred records (see Mosiah 2:34) and were now

accountable to live by their precepts. Benjamin's use of Deuteronomy 17:14–20 in Mosiah 2:11–14, his affinity toward the virtues of social justice required in the Pentateuch, and his awareness of other ancient Hebrew texts give evidence that Benjamin himself had indeed searched the plates of brass and knew the words of Moses and his Israelite predecessors.

Moreover, Benjamin knew and also referred to several concepts that were found on the small plates or were traditional in Nephite culture. One example is found in Mosiah 2:27–28, in which Benjamin says he had served the people “that [their] blood should not come upon [him],” and that he had called them together that he “might rid [his] garments of [their] blood . . . that [he] might go down in peace.” Jacob expresses the same idea in 2 Nephi 9:44 (“I . . . am rid of your blood”), in Jacob 1:19 (“by laboring with our might their blood might not come upon our garments; otherwise their blood would come upon our garments, and we would not be found spotless at the last day”), and in Jacob 2:2 (“I . . . magnify mine office with soberness, and that I might rid my garments of your sins”). Another example appears in Mosiah 4:8 (see also Mosiah 3:17), in which Benjamin says “there is none other salvation save this which hath been spoken of,” which seems to quote 2 Nephi 31:21: “this is the way; and there is none other way nor name given under heaven whereby man can be saved in the kingdom of God.” Further examples include Mosiah 2:32 (“beware lest . . . ye list to obey the *evil spirit*”) and Mosiah 4:14 (“the devil, who is the master of sin, or who is the *evil spirit* which hath been spoken of by our fathers”), which appear to draw on 2 Nephi 32:8 (“for the *evil spirit* teacheth not a man to pray”); and also Mosiah 2:41 (“they are blessed in all things, both temporal and spiritual”), which may be quoting from 1 Nephi 22:3 (“pertaining to things both temporal and spiritual”). Independent but similar use by Benjamin and Abinadi of the ideas of rebelling against God (see Mosiah 2:37; 15:26; compare 1 Samuel 12:13–15; Isaiah 1:20), of dying in one's sins (see Mosiah 2:33; 15:26), and of being an enemy to God (see Mosiah 2:37–38; 3:19; 16:5) show that both of these prophets drew faithfully on “all that has been spoken by our fathers until now” (Mosiah 2:35; see 15:11).

Conservator

Having worked hard to unify his political and religious control, Benjamin took great care to see that this situation continued into the reign of his son. To his son Mosiah he passed the Liahona, the sword of Laban, and all the plates (see Mosiah 1:16). These were customary symbols of kingship among the Nephites, and they relate to the orb, scepter, and book of the law used as royal symbols in many civilizations.⁵ He also put the entire population under covenant to obey “the commandments of my son, or the commandments of God which shall be delivered unto you by him” (Mosiah 2:31; see 5:5). To assure a smooth transition of power to his son, Benjamin crowned him while well enough to live three more years (see Mosiah 6:5). Benjamin and his son probably functioned during these three years as coregents in order to facilitate the transition of power in a manner similar to ancient Israelite politics, which is not an unprecedented technique. To secure his son's position over the priests, Benjamin, as his last recorded official act, “appointed priests to teach the people” (Mosiah 6:3), thus carrying out his policies of consolidation and centralization to the end.

Linguist

The most challenging domestic task faced by Benjamin was probably that of unifying his two culturally diverse peoples, the Nephites and Mulekites. Cultural assimilation would have been slow and painful since serious language barriers existed between them and since their religious traditions had diverged widely over the years (see Omni 1:17). One of the main projects Benjamin undertook in an attempt to bring these two populations together was to teach the Nephite language to the Mulekites, for Benjamin knew the importance of words. His father, Mosiah, had led the Nephites out of the land of Nephi, freeing them from the 250-year period of apparent

cultural depression and literary inactivity—years that can almost be called a Dark Age, as reflected in the sparse books of Jarom and Omni. By witnessing what had happened to the Mulekites, who had not preserved their language and records, Benjamin could see in his youth how vulnerable his own people were to the same problem. He probably sensed how perilously close the Nephites had come to suffering a similar fate, judging by the marginal attention they had recently given to adding to their own sacred records kept on the small plates.

When he arrived in the city of Zarahemla, Mosiah₁ found that the teaching of language was needed as a first order of business. The Mulekites' language had become corrupted to such a great extent that communication was impossible (see Omni 1:17), and therefore “Mosiah caused that they should be taught in his language” (Omni 1:18). During this period of social formation in the city of Zarahemla, Benjamin would have been an impressionable young leader, no doubt acutely aware of these problems and intimately involved in the affairs of his father's kingdom, perhaps even as a high administrator instructing the people of Zarahemla in the Nephite language. This was not an insignificant chore or one unbecoming of a prince or priest. Writing was a powerful and closely cherished art in ancient Egypt; it was also of such importance among the Lamanites that the king of the Lamanites once engaged the former priests of Noah to teach his people the language of Nephi (see Mosiah 24:4). Perhaps Benjamin taught or supervised several of the scribes who later served in copying his speech for distribution to his people on his son's coronation day.

Benjamin's concerns about language extended beyond public education and official record keeping. The record gives Benjamin particular credit—more than any other Nephite leader—for having taught his three sons “all the language of his fathers, that thereby they might become men of understanding” (Mosiah 1:2). He taught them Hebrew, the language of his fathers, as well as Egyptian, which he himself knew (see Mosiah 1:4). One can assume that he knew and taught them not only vocabulary words, but also grammar, syntax, style, form, composition, and literary appreciation, for he taught them “*all* the language of his fathers.”

Builder

One also assumes that during the reign of Benjamin's father the Nephites constructed or remodeled a temple in Zarahemla, probably similar to the one they had left in the city of Nephi, and that Benjamin was involved to some extent in its construction. Benjamin's speech was delivered from that temple, whose immediate precincts the population had outgrown during Benjamin's long reign. The sentiments of love, devotion, sacrifice, and homeland must have filled Benjamin's heart as he said farewell to the place he had worked for and occupied all his life.

Parent

Of King Benjamin's three sons, the eldest, Mosiah, was born in 154 B.C., probably not many years after Benjamin became king, and died at the age of sixty-three in 91 B.C. (see Mosiah 29:46). We know nothing about Helorum and Helaman, Benjamin's two other sons, except that the name Helaman was later given by Alma₂ to his eldest son, the great prophet-warrior who led the Ammonite youths in battle. Alma₂ could have known and must have admired this Helaman, the son of Benjamin, who would have been a contemporary of Alma's father and also the uncle of the four sons of Mosiah₂ with whom Alma₂ was a very close friend. Benjamin took personal responsibility for the education of his sons and was a good father. He was also concerned about the children of his kingdom and exhorted parents to teach their children to live righteously (see Mosiah 4:15).

Classicist

The fact that Benjamin was concerned enough to teach his sons these ancient languages at a time when the spoken Nephite language had probably already begun to change shows Benjamin's great interest in classicism. Such a desire to perpetuate and rejuvenate an understanding of the classics typifies many renaissance men who, like Benjamin, lived at a time in their civilization's history when a reawakening and cultural reestablishment was taking place. Benjamin was deeply committed to seeing that the language and literature left behind by the prophets of Israel remained accessible to his posterity.

Given the fact that Benjamin was known to his people and to his sons as a great teacher of languages and literature, it would be unthinkable for him to deliver the greatest speech of his life at the coronation of his son in anything less than an eloquent style and exquisite form. Indeed, his speech shows clear signs of being carefully crafted and artistically composed. Benjamin's interest in classicism may also explain why he crowned his son king in such a solemn and traditional manner. His ceremony followed the traditional patterns of coronation in ancient Israel, and it was evidently scheduled and held at the highest and holiest festival time of the year under the law of Moses—the time when kings were traditionally installed and temples dedicated.

Legalist

Benjamin's intense interest in preserving, teaching, and following the traditional norms of ancient Israel is also reflected in the large number of legal terms or topics found in his speech. In Benjamin's role as a king of Israelites, one of his duties was to assure that justice was found among his people. Traditionally, kings were responsible for the overall administration of justice in their lands; consider, for example, King Jehoshaphat's legal leadership (see 2 Chronicles 19:8–11) or King Hammarubi's legal system in Mesopotamia.

In a few respects, it appears that Benjamin instigated new legal practices among his people. The fact that he mentioned his prohibition against imprisonment and slavery at the top of the list of the legal rules that he enforced during his regime suggests that he was the first to enact or emphasize these two rules: "Neither have I suffered that ye should be confined in dungeons, nor that ye should make slaves one of another" (Mosiah 2:13). The use of dungeons or prisons was apparently tolerated in Israel (see Jeremiah 37:15; 1 Nephi 7:14), generally in the land of Nephi (see Mosiah 17:5), in the land of Ammonihah (see Alma 14:18, 23), and among the Lamanites (see Helaman 5:21); but by special dispensation, the use of prisons was not allowed in Zarahemla under King Benjamin or in other lands by special royal decrees (see Alma 23:2). Likewise, although slavery was possible under the law of Moses, provided the slave was given the opportunity to go free after six years (see Exodus 21:2–6), Benjamin prohibited slavery, presumably including involuntary debt servitude, compulsory enslavement of prisoners of war, and all other forms of bondage. If one looks for a social explanation for Benjamin's emphasis on these two provisions, the answer is probably to be found in Benjamin's need to maintain equality and social justice between the Nephites and the Mulekites. The tendency on the part of the ruling Nephites would have been to subjugate and confine the less-educated Mulekites; likewise, the rich would have wanted to make their poor debtors serve as slaves or bond servants. Obviously, Benjamin was opposed to such developments on theological as well as social grounds.

Other legal or administrative subjects mentioned by Benjamin include murder, plundering, stealing, adultery, and wickedness (see Mosiah 2:13); taxation (see Mosiah 2:14); witnesses (see Mosiah 2:14); the covenant formula from the law of Deuteronomy (see Mosiah 2:31); contentions, which would include lawsuits (see Mosiah 2:32); cursing (see Mosiah 2:33); ignorant sin (see Mosiah 3:11); the legal innocence of little children (see Mosiah 3:21); the bright testimony of judgment (see Mosiah 3:24); parental duties to teach their children (see Mosiah 4:15; compare Deuteronomy 4); laws regarding the poor (see Mosiah 4:22–26); and borrowing and returning borrowed

property (see Mosiah 4:28). It appears significant that Benjamin required the borrower to return the very object that he borrowed; otherwise disputes could arise about the valuation or acceptability of substitute property tendered in return.

In addition, Benjamin drew on legal analogies when he described the nature and consequences of the covenant (or contract) that his people entered into with the Lord: adoption, or becoming sons and daughters (see Mosiah 5:7); banishment, or being blotted out (see Mosiah 5:11–14); and sealing, or being marked with a seal (see Mosiah 5:15). The legal effects of sealing a document or container with a wax or clay seal in antiquity was to attest to the integrity and purity of the enclosed contents and to certify the ownership of the document or the sealed vessel. With similar force and effect, Benjamin blessed his people to the end that God would seal them his.

Founding Father

The legacy left by Benjamin in Nephite thought and culture combines a number of traditional elements with a significant degree of innovation. His major contribution in this area seems to have been to solidify the theology and culture of his people, much as he had consolidated the political power and territory in the land of Zarahemla. In so doing, he set the stage for the next 150 years of Nephite experience.

Judging from the prominence given to Benjamin by Mormon, it seems that Benjamin stood at the head of a great political and cultural reawakening in Nephite civilization. He lived at the beginning of a renaissance in Nephite culture that blossomed in the latter part of the second and the early part of the first centuries B.C. At this time one sees great creative forces at work among the Nephites, not only in literature, but also in politics, theology, law, calendar, weights and measures, and military technology. For example, great literary compositions were produced during this period by Benjamin as well as by Alma₂ and Amulek. The major political reform in Nephite history, that of shifting from a kingship to the chief judgeship (see Mosiah 29:44), came thirty years after Benjamin's death (see Mosiah 29:46). Theologically, the baptizing church that was established in Zarahemla by Alma₁ became very influential during this period, developing clearer doctrines concerning God, the atonement, faith, and personal conversion. New legislation was introduced regarding the judicial system, and the Nephite weights and measures were standardized (see Alma 11:4–19). A new system for counting the years of the judges was adopted, and the Nephites won battles aided by improved breastplates and shields never mentioned earlier in the Book of Mormon. Even the Zoramites did not yet have this equipment (see Alma 43:21) but would soon copy it (see Alma 49:6). The solid cultural foundation laid by King Benjamin made it possible for Nephite civilization to flourish during the three or four generations that followed his reign.

A Lasting Legacy of Authoritative Words and Phrases

Benjamin's words were specifically remembered and used by his people for years after. For instance, shortly after his death, Benjamin's son Mosiah sent Ammon and fifteen other emissaries from Zarahemla to the land of Nephi (see Mosiah 7:1–6). There they found King Limhi and his people in bondage to the Lamanites. After the sixteen messengers were properly identified (see Mosiah 7:13–14), Limhi gathered all his people together at the local temple, where he spoke of bondage and deliverance (see Mosiah 7:17–33). After that, Ammon “rehearsed unto them the last words which king Benjamin had taught them, and explained them to the people of king Limhi, so that they might understand all the words which he spake” (Mosiah 8:3). Soon thereafter, the people of Limhi “entered into a covenant with God to serve him and keep his commandments” (Mosiah 21:31). Thus it appears that Limhi's people not only heard and understood Benjamin's words, but also entered into the covenant “to do [God's] will,

and to be obedient to his commandments” (Mosiah 5:5), as Benjamin had desired of his people at the conclusion of his own speech.

An important political role was given to Benjamin’s words in this distant assembly. Ammon’s mission had a primary political objective—to learn the fate of Zeniff’s colony and, apparently, to seek reunification with them. Ammon went prepared with the words of King Benjamin—the new document of Nephite polity. Once the people of Limhi had entered into the same covenant as had the people of Benjamin, the people of Limhi could be numbered again for political purposes among the Nephites. Conclusive evidence that Ammon’s authority and use of Benjamin’s words embraced political—but not priestly—functions is found in the fact that he had authority to cause the people to enter into the covenant of Mosiah 5:5 to obey the king, but lacked authority to baptize, purify, or establish a religious community (see Mosiah 21:33). Benjamin’s words immediately provided authoritative language for political reunification even beyond the borders of Zarahemla.

Although Benjamin’s foundational words soon seemed obscure to some young people (see Mosiah 26:1), his text remained important to Nephite religious and civic life for more than a century. Consider the following examples:

In establishing the church of God in the first years of the reign of judges, Alma₂ implemented many of the religious and social policies articulated by Benjamin. Alma required that all those who “had taken upon them the name of Christ” (Alma 1:19; compare Mosiah 5:9) should “impart of their substance” to the poor and the needy, “every man according to that which he had” (Alma 1:27; compare Mosiah 4:26); that no church leader should “[esteem] himself above his hearers” (Alma 1:26; compare Mosiah 2:26); that the names of all hardened transgressors “were blotted out” (Alma 1:24; compare Mosiah 5:11); that “every man receiveth wages of him whom he listeth to obey” (Alma 3:27; compare Mosiah 2:32); that all should strive to retain “a remission of their sins” (Alma 4:14; compare Mosiah 4:12), should have “experienced this mighty change in [their] hearts” (Alma 5:14; compare Mosiah 5:2); and that the people should be “humble, and . . . submissive and gentle; easy to be entreated; full of patience and long-suffering; being temperate in all things; being diligent in keeping the commandments” (Alma 7:23; compare Mosiah 3:19; 2:20). Speaking to the people in Ammonihah, Alma exhorted them to become “humble, meek, submissive, patient, full of love and all long-suffering” (Alma 13:28), essentially restating Mosiah 3:19. No one in the Nephite culture who was familiar with King Benjamin’s speech would easily miss Alma’s allusions to the order established by Benjamin. No doubt Alma was following the covenant pattern established by his father, Alma, at the waters of Mormon (see Mosiah 18), but the specific terminology that Alma₂ used around 90 B.C. in implementing that ecclesiastical order was Benjamin’s.

Benjamin’s founding legacy also endured in a Nephite legal formula that persisted to the end of Nephite civilization. When Benjamin gave his accounting of how he had faithfully discharged his governmental duties, he averred that he had not allowed his people to “*murder, or plunder, or steal, or commit adultery . . . or any manner of wickedness*” (Mosiah 2:13). This precise list of five public law requirements is found six other times in the Book of Mormon, and in every case this set measures the extent to which kings and rulers had discharged their legal duty of maintaining the public order. First, in Alma 23:3, the king of the Lamanites issued a proclamation that his people “ought not to *murder, nor to plunder, nor to steal, nor to commit adultery, nor to commit any manner of wickedness.*” Benjamin’s precise words in this regard were apparently taught to the Lamanite king by the four missionary sons of Mosiah, who, we can be sure, intimately knew the details of their grandfather’s speech. Second, in Alma 30:10, Alma affirmed that he had carried out his public duties by punishing all those who “murdered, . . . robbed, . . . stole, . . . committed adultery, . . . yea for all this wickedness they were punished.” Third, in relinquishing the kingship, Mosiah did likewise in Mosiah 29:14–15, 36. In the remaining three texts, the wickedness of the Gadianton rulers in Zarahemla and the corruption of the Jaredite king Akish were judged harshly by Nephi and Moroni because

they sought to “murder, and plunder, and steal, and commit whoredoms and all manner of wickedness, contrary to the laws of their country and also the laws of their God” (Helaman 6:23; see 7:21; Ether 8:16). Benjamin’s list appears in each of these scriptures, modified only slightly as the exigencies of the individual circumstances over time dictated.⁶

About 30 B.C. Helaman, the son of Helaman, exhorted his sons Nephi and Lehi to “remember, remember, my sons, the words which king Benjamin spake unto his people” (Helaman 5:9; compare Mosiah 3:18–19). Helaman taught his sons the words of King Benjamin’s speech, as seen in Helaman 5:9: “Yea, remember that there is no other way nor means whereby man can be saved, only through the atoning blood of Jesus Christ, who shall come; yea, remember that he cometh to redeem the world.” Nephi also echoed Benjamin in Helaman 8:25 when he said, “ye have rejected the truth, and rebelled against your holy God.”

The distinctive name spoken by the angel to Benjamin identified the coming Messiah as “Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Father of heaven and of earth, the Creator of all things from the beginning” (Mosiah 3:8). Significantly, these exact words were used by Samuel the Lamanite at the center of his prophetic judgment speech, given from the walls of the city of Zarahemla in 6 B.C., 116 years after Benjamin’s speech. Samuel declared that his intent was to preach “that ye might know of the coming of *Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Father of heaven and of earth, the Creator of all things from the beginning,*” and believe on his name (Helaman 14:12). Although Samuel did not mention the name of Benjamin, as did Helaman, this second formulaic use of words from Benjamin’s speech provides strong evidence that these sacred words, introduced by Benjamin into the Nephite religious idiom, probably became standard confessional language among the believing generations that succeeded him. It is quite conceivable that Nephi and Lehi followed the admonition of their father not only by remembering but also by teaching the words of Benjamin to their Lamanite converts, from whose ranks Samuel the Lamanite emerged. On hearing these most sacred words repeated by Samuel, some of the Nephites in Zarahemla must have been struck to the core, recognizing them as the very words King Benjamin had spoken years before in the same city.

Other texts in the Book of Mormon quote or paraphrase Benjamin, including 3 Nephi 6:18, which recalls Benjamin’s speech in the phrases “sin ignorantly,” and “wilfully rebel against God” (Mosiah 3:11, 12). In Mormon 7:7, such phrases as “sing ceaseless praises with the choirs above” and “a state of happiness which hath no end” again reflect Benjamin’s lasting influence (see Mosiah 2:28, 41). Further similarities, such as those between Mosiah 5 and the Nephite sacramental covenant at the temple in 3 Nephi 18, also show how the words and phrases of Benjamin’s speech remained useful, meaningful, and normative for years to come. Clearly Benjamin’s words were well-known to many people long after his speech was delivered. It remained a controlling, authoritative text—a primary scripture that the Nephites looked back on as a foundation of their faith. His words became the moral and political standard for many generations to come.

Benjamin’s words remained the standard of Nephite faith and government for so many years for numerous reasons. He was a marvelously inspired man and the paragon of a benevolent monarch. The fact that Benjamin had distributed a written copy of his speech to all his people assured that his words would remain memorable and enduring. His people would have treasured these copies as precious memorabilia from the day they themselves were present at the coronation of King Mosiah. Since many people would have read and used this text for years to come, it is not surprising, as has been shown, that specific words spoken by Benjamin continued to surface significantly in several Nephite texts as time went by. Benjamin was succeeded as the Nephite leader for over three hundred years by strong followers: first by his son Mosiah, who deeply admired his father, and then by Alma₂, who was the close friend of Benjamin’s four grandsons. Alma’s posterity remained in control of the Nephite government and church, succeeding from father to son for many years: Alma₂, Helaman, Helaman, Nephi, Nephi,

Nephi, Amos, Amos, and his brother Ammaron, who finally hid up the records (see 4 Nephi 1:48). These rulers kept the traditions of their dynasty—including those established by Benjamin—in memory and in effect.

A Delicate Union

Benjamin's influence throughout Nephite history was impressive, but under the circumstances it was not indelible. The key function achieved by Benjamin's speech was to bring the entire population—both Nephites and Mulekites—under a single covenant of loyalty to God and to Mosiah, the new king. Benjamin counts both “the people of Zarahemla, and the people of Mosiah” among his people (Mosiah 1:10), and the record emphasizes that all of them entered into the covenant (see Mosiah 1:10–15; 6:2). This political and religious achievement appears to have been very successful at first, but it did not last. While the Mulekites had initially welcomed the arrival of the Nephites in Zarahemla (at least according to the Nephite version of that encounter, recorded in Omni 1:14), it is doubtful that the entire Mulekite population remained content under Nephite rule for long. Human experience says that it would have been extraordinary for an indigenous population to have relinquished control over its own city, to have forgotten all its loyalties to its own king, and to have lost its own cultural identity without some reluctance and eventual resistance. Indeed, several hints and clues in the Book of Mormon indicate that these two groups of people, though politically united for a while under the Nephite king (see Omni 1:19), did not merge into a homogeneous population. In the ensuing years, several political and religious conflicts were led by men *within* the land of Zarahemla who were opposed to the Nephite regime. Some were connected with the order of Nehor, and the names of other dissenters appear to have Mulekite or Jaredite origins (for example, Zarahemnah, Amlici, Nehor, and Korihor). It is tempting, therefore, to conclude that some of the political turmoil and civil wars that arose in the land of Zarahemla in the first century B.C. were instigated by disgruntled Mulekites who had grown weary of Nephite rule. These people, who were more numerous than the Nephites (see Mosiah 25:2), would have naturally sought more of a political role in the society as they became educated about their own royal heritage, which ran back to the Davidic kings of Jerusalem.

These conditions are consistent with the fact that around 90 B.C. a formidable subgroup in Zarahemla began asserting a claim to kingship (see Alma 2). Such a claim would have been most persuasive if it were made or supported by the surviving descendants of King Zarahemla, who himself could trace his legitimacy back to King Zedekiah and to the royal house of David as a recipient of the blessings of Judah. The Nephites, perhaps in part anticipating such a claim, abandoned the institution of kingship altogether (see Mosiah 29) and selected Alma₂ as chief judge. Perhaps his attractiveness as a leader was enhanced by the fact that his lineage was not of Mosiah or Mulek and that his family had not been in the city of Zarahemla during most of the second century B.C. His appointment may have been part of an attempt to work out a politically acceptable compromise. Undoubtedly, many Mulekites remained loyal to Benjamin's heritage, just as some of the Nephites defected from it. The lines were not rigid between these populations, and the ideal of a united people was one the Nephites never forgot.

Thus to Benjamin can be attributed many things: the monumental achievements of protecting and preserving the fledgling colony of Nephites in Zarahemla, unifying diverse populations for several generations, keeping the Nephites from fragmenting into heretical groups, establishing a benevolent but strongly centralized Nephite monarchy, and preserving traditions of literature, culture, and covenant. He combined the best of tradition and personal experience, scripture and vision, nation and individual, and prophet and king. His roles and achievements reflect the underlying character of a man who was long remembered as “a just man before the Lord” (Omni 1:25) and as a hard worker who labored “with all the might of his body and the faculty of his whole soul” to serve his people (Words of Mormon 1:18). Everything known about King Benjamin gives the distinct impression that he was a very Christlike man, whose life was characterized dominantly by humility, love, and service. His many sterling

traits of character were amplified as he used them to teach the gospel of Jesus Christ. He was a true father to his people—the father of one of the most flourishing periods in Nephite civilization.

Notes

1. See Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965), 1:108.
2. See John L. Sorenson, “The Mulekites,” *BYU Studies* 30/3 (1990): 6–22; and *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1985), 156.
3. See John W. Welch, “Longevity of Book of Mormon People and the ‘Age of Man,’” *Journal of Collegium Aesculapium* 3 (1985): 35–45, esp. 37–38.
4. See James E. Smith, “How Many Nephites? The Book of Mormon at the Bar of Demography,” in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence of Ancient Origins*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1997), 255–93.
5. Discussed further in Gordon Thomasson, “Mosiah: The Complex Symbolism and the Symbolic Complex of Kingship in the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2/1 (1993): 21–38.
6. Discussed further in John W. Welch, “Series of Laws in the Book of Mormon” (FARMS, 1987).