

# The Covenant Tradition in the Book of Mormon

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All societies have festivals, rituals, and traditions that reoccur on specific days of the calendar. In the United States, for example, we celebrate Christmas, Easter, Memorial Day, and Halloween. There are certain things that we always do on these days in the same way. Ancient societies were no different from our own in this respect. One common festival, for example, that the Egyptians, Babylonians, Hittites, Greeks, and Phoenicians all observed was the New Year's festival, which followed standard patterns of ceremony and language.

The Israelites also observed certain festivals (Shavuot, Passach, and Sukkot) that they kept as a matter of covenant with Yahweh (Jehovah); that is, by these events they renewed that covenant. The purpose of such festivals in Israel was to aid the people to become a holy community, a nation of priests, God's own people (see Exodus 19:6). The covenant made at such festivals gave Israel a sense of special identity before God: "You should enter into the covenant of Yahweh your God, and into His oath, which Yahweh your God is making with you today; so that He may establish you today for a people to Himself, and He Himself be your God, as He has spoke to you, and He has sworn to your Fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob" (Deuteronomy 29:12-13, New Jerusalem Bible Translation).

The Book of Mormon displays examples of ceremony or ritual that accurately reflect the ritual tradition followed by the ancient Israelites. Many similarities are found, in addition to some differences. It is highly unlikely that any person could accurately write about Israel's rituals and covenants without having been directly and intimately familiar with them.

From knowledge available in the Bible or in any other source at that time, no nineteenth-century writer, such as Joseph Smith, could have made up the picture of rites and covenants among the Nephites and Lamanites that would so accurately reflect the Israelite tradition. This is strong confirmation that the Book of Mormon is what it claims to be—an ancient record brought to light through Joseph Smith by the gift and power of God.

The ritual tradition reflected in the Book of Mormon is not an exact and unchanging duplication of Israelite ceremonial events found in the Bible. Instead, the record shows that it gradually changed and developed over time. Still, one type of sacred festival found in the Book of Mormon—whereby the people renewed their covenant with God—appears to be based upon Israelite traditions.

Like our own traditions, Book of Mormon traditions followed a definite pattern. For example, nearly everyone in the United States who celebrates Christmas observes a common tradition. We put up and decorate evergreen trees, give and receive gifts, picture a figure called Santa Claus, and visit friends and family members. The Christmas tradition differs somewhat in various nations—Sweden, Italy, Holland, Britain, and so on—and it doesn't occur at all in largely non-Christian societies like China. Further, the Christmas traditions in the United States have changed and developed mostly since 1900. But despite the obvious variations, there is a definite pattern for Christmas celebration that gradually changes over time.

Real traditions and real societies are like that. They follow a pattern that changes and develops over time. Moreover, when a certain tradition is described, we can sometimes pinpoint a particular culture and the general time in which the actions occurred. As we would expect, then, traditional celebrations spoken of in the Book of Mormon followed a pattern that changed and developed over time. As we would also expect, the Nephites were

able to maintain certain aspects of their traditions and festivals largely unchanged from the way those features existed among the Israelites they left behind.

## **The Covenant Renewal Tradition in Israel**

Covenant renewal is such a basic Israelite tradition. It is reported in the Bible in Exodus, Deuteronomy, Ezra, and Joshua. The pattern included these eight features:

1. *Gathering of the Nation.* The entire nation was called by proclamation to be present (usually at the temple) for an important event, such as the coronation of a new king or the ordination of a new high priest. Such a proclamation is found in Joshua 24:1: “Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and called for the elders of Israel, and for their heads, and for their judges, and for their officers; and they presented themselves before God.”

2. *Preamble and Designation of Titles.* The covenant ceremony was preceded by a short introduction of the person who would state the terms and conditions of the covenant, standing as the representative of the people before God. We see this in Joshua 24:2: “Joshua said unto all the people, Thus saith the Lord God of Israel.”

3. *Covenant Speech/Mighty Acts of God.* The king or high priest next gave a speech reminding the people of the mighty deeds that God had done for them. The purpose was to demonstrate that they were obligated to enter into a covenant to recognize God as their God and king and to do all things commanded by him. Such a speech is found at Joshua 24:2-13, where Joshua listed the numerous times God had delivered his people from bondage, protected them, made them victorious over their enemies, and given them a promised land by covenant.

4. *The Terms of the Covenant.* After this speech, the leader listed the terms of the covenant, usually specifying obedience. For example, Joshua said to his people: “Therefore fear the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in truth: and put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the flood [Red Sea], and in Egypt; and serve ye the Lord” (Joshua 24:14).

5. *Curses and Blessings.* As in a modern contract, an ancient covenant included both benefits and obligations. Often, the terms were stated in an if-you-do-this, God-will-do-this proposition. Obeying the covenant entitled Israel to promised blessings, just as a person receives specific benefits by keeping a contract made under the rules of our society. However, breaking the covenant would bring curses, just as today one must pay damages for breaching a contract.

The covenant speech in Israel reminded the people of the blessings God had promised them if they obeyed and the cursings he had threatened them with if they failed. See this in Joshua 24:20: “If ye forsake the Lord, and serve strange gods, then he will turn and do you hurt, and consume you” (see also Joshua 8:34). The curses and blessings were sometimes represented by dividing the nation into two camps: those on the left would chant the curses and those on the right would call out the blessings (see Deuteronomy 27:11-13).

6. *Witness Formula.* The people were made witnesses of the covenant and of the events taking place. Witnesses were necessary to make the mutual promises legally binding. A witness formula is found in Joshua 24:22: “Joshua said unto the people, Ye are witnesses against yourselves that ye have chosen you the Lord, to serve him. And they said, We are witnesses.”

7. *Covenant Recorded.* The words of the covenant, and sometimes even the names of those entering into the covenant, were written down so that they could be read later as evidence that the covenant had indeed been

entered into and was valid (see Deuteronomy 29:20-22). Joshua 24:25-27 states that the covenant was recorded so that the people could remember it: “So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and set them a statute and an ordinance in Shechem. And Joshua wrote these words in the book of the law of God, and took a great stone, and set it up there under an oak, that was by the sanctuary of the Lord. And Joshua said unto all the people, Behold, this stone shall be a witness unto us; for it hath heard all the words of the Lord which he spake unto us: it shall be therefore a witness unto you, lest ye deny your God.”

8. *Formal Dismissal*. The gathering concluded when the king or high priest dismissed the people to return to their dwellings. A formal dismissal is found in Joshua 24:28: “So Joshua let the people depart, every man unto his inheritance.”

Covenant renewal festivals in Israel began at least by the time of Moses and were observed for centuries throughout the period of the kings. By the time of King Josiah (621 B.C.), king of Judah, the custom had almost been lost. But a great renewal did take place at that time, inspired by King Josiah’s finding a copy of the almost-forgotten Book of the Covenant inside the neglected temple at Jerusalem. (Most scholars believe that what we know as Deuteronomy comes from the book he found.)

King Josiah and many of the people experienced rekindled interest in the law as a result. This renewed interest came to be observed in a new cycle of covenant-making ceremonies—at least, it was about this time when yearly festivals were begun. The population of the entire nation had to come to the temple to offer sacrifices and gifts to the Lord as part of the renewal of their vows.

### **The Covenant Renewal Festival in the Book of Mormon**

The same pattern and elements of the covenant renewal festivals just outlined appear repeatedly in the Book of Mormon. Although the Nephites’ covenant renewal festivals changed over time, the same basic pattern remained, as shown in several places in the Book of Mormon.

The clearest examples of covenant renewal festivals are found at the time King Benjamin gave his speech (see Mosiah 1-6) and at the time of King Limhi’s gathering (see Mosiah 7). Both Benjamin’s and Limhi’s gatherings clearly follow the covenant pattern used among the Israelites from Moses to Josiah. Note that, although King Limhi gathered his people just three years after King Benjamin’s speech and assembly, Limhi’s people had been separated from the rest of the Nephites and had been in bondage to the Lamanites for perhaps as long as eighty years. Yet the pattern Limhi followed is so similar to the pattern Benjamin used that obviously a strong tradition of ritual existed among the Nephites. It must have been followed long before Limhi’s grandfather Zeniff headed to the land of Nephi in the day when Benjamin’s father Mosiah was king over the Nephites.

Thus this ritual tradition of renewing the covenant in huge gatherings was quite basic among the Book of Mormon people. For example, the traditional nature of the proclamation by which the king called his people to assemble at the temple is evident from the nearly identical language used in both King Limhi’s and King Benjamin’s accounts:

*King Limhi* Now, it came to pass on the morrow that king Limhi sent a proclamation among all his people that thereby they might gather themselves together to the temple, to hear the words which he should speak unto them (Mosiah 7:17).

*King Benjamin* [King Benjamin said:] My son, I would that ye should make a proclamation throughout all this land . . . that thereby they may be gathered together; for on the morrow I shall proclaim unto this my

people. . . . And [Mosiah] proclaimed unto all the people who were in the land of Zarahemla that thereby they might gather themselves together, to go up to the temple to hear the words which his father should speak unto them (Mosiah 1:10, 18).

The preambles to both Limhi's and Benjamin's speeches are also very similar:

*King Limhi* And it came to pass that when they had gathered themselves together that he spake unto them in this wise, saying: (Mosiah 7:18)

*King Benjamin* And it came to pass . . . that the people gathered themselves together throughout all the land, that they might go up to the temple to hear the words which king Benjamin should speak unto them. . . . And these are the words which he spake and caused to be written, saying: (Mosiah 2:1, 9)

The idea underlying covenant renewal in Israel was that God had been merciful to Israel by performing mighty deeds on behalf of his chosen people. He had delivered Israel out of bondage in Egypt and sustained them in their flight from Egypt to Sinai. Thus, the themes of deliverance from bondage and the Exodus were especially prominent when the Israelites renewed their covenant with the Lord (see for example Deuteronomy 4:10-13; 6:20-22). In return for God's grace and the miracles performed on their behalf, the people of Israel were obligated to recognize Yahweh (Jehovah) as their king and their God, and he would in turn recognize Israel as his people and continue his support of them.

Statements of God's acts on behalf of his people were present in both Limhi's and Benjamin's speeches, as we would expect. Benjamin praised God as "him who has created you from the beginning, and is preserving you from day to day, by lending you breath, that ye may live" (Mosiah 2:21). Limhi's speech also reminded his people how much they were in debt to the Lord, reminding them that just as God had delivered the Israelites from bondage in Egypt, so God had also guided Father Lehi to the new world as a type of a second exodus to a promised land.

Moreover, Limhi promised his people that they themselves would soon be delivered miraculously from bondage, just as their Israelite forefathers, if they would obey the covenant that Limhi recited to them:

O ye, my people, lift up your heads and be comforted; for behold, the time is at hand, or is not far distant, when we shall no longer be in subjection to our enemies. . . . Therefore, lift up your heads, and rejoice, and put your trust . . . in the God of Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob; and also, that God who brought the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt, and caused that they should walk through the Red Sea on dry ground, and fed them with manna that they might not perish in the wilderness . . . That same God has brought our fathers out of the land of Jerusalem, and has kept and preserved his people even until now (Mosiah 7:18-20).

After the leaders had each reminded their people about God's many mighty acts on behalf of his people, both repeated the terms of the covenant that would be binding upon them. Those covenants followed a two-part formula, as all divine covenants do. The first part of this formula tells what the people must do. The second part sets forth what God will do if the people are faithful to their part of the covenant. The two-part format of covenant is clear in both speeches:

*King Limhi* If ye will turn to the Lord with full purpose of heart, and put your trust in him, and serve him with all diligence of mind, if ye do this, he will, according to his own will and pleasure, deliver you out of bondage (Mosiah 7:33).

*King Benjamin* All that he requires of you is to keep his commandments; and he has promised that if ye would keep his commandments ye should prosper in the land. . . . Secondly, he doth require that ye should do as he hath commanded you; for which if ye do; he doth immediately bless you (Mosiah 2:22-24).

The purpose of the covenant was to establish a permanent, binding relationship between God and his people. Of course, the relationship could not be established if the people violated the terms. So Benjamin warned: "I would that ye should take upon you the name of Christ, all you that have entered into the covenant with God that ye should be obedient unto the end of your lives. Whosoever doeth this shall be found at the right hand of God. . . . Whosoever shall not take upon him the name of Christ . . . findeth himself on the left hand of God" (Mosiah 5:8-10).

Limhi also recited the cursings and blessings of the covenant to his people. The particular blessing of the covenant that concerned them was deliverance from bondage to the Lamanites. The curse for breach of the covenant was remaining in bondage. Limhi said:

It is because of our iniquities and abominations that he has brought us into bondage. . . . For behold, the Lord hath said: I will not succor my people in the day of their transgression; but I will hedge up their ways that they prosper not; and their doings shall be as a stumbling block before them. And again, he saith: If my people shall sow filthiness they shall reap the chaff thereof in the whirlwind; and the effect thereof is poison. And again he saith: If my people shall show filthiness they shall reap the east wind, which bringeth immediate destruction. And now, behold, the promise of the Lord is fulfilled, and ye are smitten and afflicted (Mosiah 7:20, 29-32).

After the covenant had been agreed to by the people, Benjamin and Limhi each made their people witnesses to the covenant ceremony. The witness formula emphasized that the people should remember the actions that had taken place because the actions were legally binding. An agreement was not enforceable in ancient Israel unless there were witnesses to it. Both Benjamin's and Limhi's speeches contained a similar witness formula:

*King Limhi* And ye are all witnesses this day, that Zeniff, who was made king over this people . . . (Mosiah 7:21)

*King Benjamin* And of all these things which I have spoken, ye yourselves are witnesses this day (Mosiah 2:14).

The references to being "witnesses this day" shows that covenants were not taken lightly and that the day they were entered into was a day to be remembered. To help them remember the covenant, the events of the ceremony were recorded and deposited to be read at later festival occasions when the covenant was to be renewed (see Exodus 19:7; 24:7; Deuteronomy 27:2-4; Joshua 24:26). King Benjamin had the covenant recorded and sealed (Mosiah 6:1). Limhi also renewed the covenant made at Benjamin's coronation ceremony, because he had all of King Benjamin's words read to his people (see Mosiah 8:2-3).

Thus, the Nephites followed the Israelite practice of sealing up the covenant to be read on later occasions. Of course, Limhi's words were recorded and saved, because we have them in the Book of Mormon. The fact that the words of the covenant ceremonies were inscribed on gold plates as a permanent record would have served the same purpose as Joshua's inscribing the terms of Israel's covenant on stone.

King Limhi and King Benjamin dismissed their people to return to their homes in words very similar to those contained in Joshua 24:28. The formal dismissal by the king was necessary because the people had been

summoned to the meeting by him. They therefore needed his permission to leave the ceremony.

*King Limhi* And it came to pass that after he had done all this, that king Limhi dismissed the multitude, and caused that they should return every one unto his own house (Mosiah 8:4).

*King Benjamin* It came to pass that when king Benjamin had made an end of all these things . . . he dismissed the multitude, and they returned, every one, according to their families, to their own houses (Mosiah 6:3).

### **Ancient Background of the Book of Mormon**

There are many features of the Book of Mormon that I believe were beyond the capabilities of Joseph Smith—or of any person living in the early nineteenth century—to devise. Some people have suggested that the Book of Mormon is the kind of book someone could and would write if the author lived in a culture saturated by the Bible, as New England was in the early 1800s. If that were true, then why was Joseph Smith the only one to produce such a book? The Book of Mormon is the only writing coming out of the nineteenth century that faithfully reflects the ancient Israelite covenant tradition. None of the books, articles, or sermons written in Joseph Smith’s day presents the eight elements of the ritual pattern that I have shown are found in the Book of Mormon. Nor do any of his “everyday” writings contain anything like this pattern.

Further, I think it is clear and convincing from the similarity between King Benjamin’s and King Limhi’s presentations that the actions were ritual in nature and were repeated on special occasions. The similarity between the Israelite covenant renewal festivals and what we have recorded from among the Nephites in the Book of Mormon is undeniable. Those who are willing to ignore this type of ancient material in the Book of Mormon overlook what I consider to be compelling evidence.

Notwithstanding the fact that the Book of Mormon is available to us only in English and has passed through the hands of Joseph Smith, its ancient background can be detected throughout the book. The evidence that the Book of Mormon shows the Nephites faithfully carrying out the Israelite ritual tradition, even down to fine details, is for me among the most persuasive of all. It isn’t possible that Joseph Smith just blindly duplicated the old Israelite covenant tradition through luck because he had read the Old Testament a good deal. Rather, the Book of Mormon repeats the same pattern and features it in almost identical language, over and over again.

Moreover, the evidence demonstrates that those responsible for keeping the Nephite records were conscious of the fact that their actions were part of a ritual tradition. The nature of the actions, the similarity of the language, and the understanding of the ancient Israelite covenant are simply too precise to be accounted for in terms of luck or even as a result of the most profound abilities in comparative literature. It seems to me that this is one aspect of the Book of Mormon that even the most skeptical of critics cannot explain away.