

Democratizing Forces in King Benjamin's Speech

“And it came to pass that there was not one soul, except it were little children, but who had entered into the covenant and had taken upon them the name of Christ.” (Mosiah 6:2)

Recently, numerous dimensions of King Benjamin’s masterful speech have been studied and explored to a far greater extent than ever before, both in regard to elements within the speech itself and with respect to its influence in subsequent Nephite generations. These expansive studies have appeared in the recent volume, entitled *King Benjamin’s Speech: “That Ye May Learn Wisdom,”* along with a more popular abridgment of that volume, entitled *Benjamin’s Speech Made Simple*.¹ In particular, one line of investigation introduced in that volume has led us to appreciate the many ways in which Benjamin’s speech paved the way, theologically and politically, for the democratization of the government and politics that flowered in the land of Zarahemla only thirty years after Benjamin’s death.

King Benjamin was known by Nephite historians as one of the best kings they had ever had, and no other Nephite king was remembered in so many positive ways (see Words of Mormon 1:13–18). 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 influential words and deeds produced an important era of religious and political strength for the next one hundred years.²

Although he was a multifaceted man and must have been many things to many people, he was remembered primarily for his righteous and equitable reign. As the records disclose, Benjamin was a faithful, inspired, just, frugal, loving, humble, articulate, and courageous ruler. About thirty years after his death, his son and successor, Mosiah, 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). The contrast that Mosiah draws between his father, Benjamin, and the wicked King Noah is not only explicitly stated in Mosiah’s abdication speech in Mosiah 29, but is also powerfully accentuated by the structure of the book of Mosiah, which places Benjamin at the beginning in parallel with Mosiah at the end and then positions Noah and Abinadi at the overall chiasmic center of the book.³ In so doing, Mosiah clearly signals to his readers that the origins of his democratizing reforms had their roots and their justification in Benjamin’s speech.

King Benjamin prepared the way for democratic developments in many ways. Personally, he was kind and generous toward all his subjects (see Mosiah 2:10–12). He eschewed oppression and prohibited slavery (see Mosiah 2:13–14). He established economic policies that broke down class distinctions by requiring everyone to give to the poor regardless of the person’s status as a widow, orphan, or foreigner (see Mosiah 4:14–28).⁴ These steps would have required his people to rethink many of their social structures, financial credit and debt-collection mechanisms, and other cultural attitudes, all of which moved the society along in the direction of becoming more egalitarian.

Moreover, Benjamin accomplished all of this while ruling over a diverse population of Nephites and Mulekites, a complex situation that was increasingly challenging as the population in Zarahemla became even more diverse upon the arrival of groups led by Alma the Elder and King Limhi soon after Benjamin’s death. In such an atmosphere, Benjamin quite distinctly moved his people more in the direction of respecting individuality,

individual responsibility, and individual rewards and punishments. His was a delicate union, trying to hold together two peoples having very different backgrounds and probably retaining a considerable degree of cultural identity and political distinctness.⁵

Whenever two different cultures such as these come together, the leader of the conglomeration faces certain alternatives: either he can prefer the organic social structure of one of the two groups and impose that regime on the newly merged population, or he can break down old class privileges or social structures and move more toward a political system that places greater emphasis on each individual in the society so as to build a new sense of political identity and civic duty based on individual status and participation.⁶ It would appear that Benjamin set in motion the latter option, as elements of the old order began fading out: for example, direct male descendants in Jacob's lineage ceased to be available to control the records and priestly functions assigned to Jacob (see Omni 1:25), and the "holy men" and "the prophets" who once worked at Benjamin's side to ensure orthodoxy (Words of Mormon 1:17–18) are not mentioned again and seem to step back into a less significant role. Even the priests who normally surrounded the king (see Mosiah 6:3; see also Noah's priests, Mosiah 11:5) soon diminished in social prominence to the point that special interest groups, such as Alma's and Nehor's, were allowed to appoint and define the rights and duties of their own individual priests and followers (see Mosiah 26:8; Alma 1:6). In that environment, Alma the Younger could teach in the next generation that "many" men (and perhaps *any* man) could be ordained to the high priesthood so long as they were exceedingly faithful, repentant, and righteous before God (see Alma 13:10). These factors indicate movement in Nephite society toward a less centrally structured and more individualistic polity. The initial decision in this direction made by King Benjamin was a strong step taken by a strong leader: only an effective and powerful leader could have made such a change that would have favored the populist poor and would have probably unsettled members of the upper class.⁷

Despite Benjamin's long and successful reign as a highly revered king, within a generation after his death the Nephites not only implemented his egalitarian policies but went further than perhaps even Benjamin could have imagined. They abandoned the idea of kingship altogether and moved on to a more democratic form of government led by a chief judge and other judges empowered by "the voice of the people," with other key responsibilities divided among a few specialized religious, military, and administrative leaders (see Mosiah 29).

Such a change in the fundamental structure of a society is usually accompanied by great upheavals and radical social restructuring. Dislodging a royal family, divesting aristocratic property owners, and unseating entrenched officials usually involves demagoguery and disruption, if not violence and revolution. But the transition from kingship to democracy in Zarahemla was accomplished relatively easily. The ruling Nephites themselves engineered and favored the change in government (see Mosiah 29:4–37), and the change was accepted readily by a majority of all enfranchised people in the land (see Mosiah 29:37–41). While it is true that a civil uprising soon followed, led by the so-called kingmen under Amlici who opposed the new regime (see Alma 2–3), ideologically most of the people easily embraced the idea and the ideals of democratization.

The question thus becomes: How is one to explain this remarkably smooth transition? For the nineteen reasons listed below, the answer would seem to be found primarily in King Benjamin's speech. Thirty-three years before the inauguration of the reign of judges, Benjamin's speech paved the way, perhaps unwittingly, for the obsolescence of the monarchy. Ironically, at a coronation ceremony installing his own son Mosiah as king, Benjamin's generous and progressive theology planted seeds that would have contributed significantly to the evolution of his son's kingship into a more democratic form of government. Consider the following factors:

Profound Equality

Benjamin taught powerfully that he as king was no better than any other person in the society (see Mosiah 2:10–11). He told his people that he too was of the dust, an extraordinary concession for any king to make (see Mosiah 2:26). Although his people may have understood this more as an expression of personal humility than as a plank in a political manifesto, the notion that all people in the land were of the dust and were therefore fundamentally equal to each other would have had a strong potential for leveling political attitudes and strengthening democratic tendencies within that society.

Universal Humiliation

One of the elements of an ancient New Year festival, which also happens to appear in Benjamin's speech, was the ritual humiliation of the king,⁸ during which he fell to the earth.⁹ Some scholars have suggested that the king in Israel underwent a similar type of annual humiliation.¹⁰ Notably, Benjamin had all the people participate in this proskynesis. In Mosiah 4:1–3, they all fell to the earth, as normally the king alone would have done, having "viewed themselves in their own carnal state, even less than the dust of the earth" (Mosiah 4:2). By participating in the kingly ritual of humiliation, every person in the crowd would have felt an increased sense of societal equality and involvement.

Royal Diminution

Benjamin's concept of kingship was remarkably modest, even for an Israelite. The so-called "Paragraph of the King" in Deuteronomy 17 imposed a remarkable set of limitations on the lawful power of any king in Israel, assuring that he remained as "one from among thy brethren" (Deuteronomy 17:15) and did not become a demigod as kings became in most other ancient civilizations. Benjamin made sure that his people understood that the only real king was God, the king of heaven and creator of the universe; and if the people owed Benjamin any thanks or praise, then how much more should they render that thanks to their Heavenly King (see Mosiah 2:19). Not only did these declarations keep King Benjamin at the same level as his people, but they also placed all of those people on par with the king in the ritual and moral functions of giving offerings of thanks to God.

Universal Elevation

Another important element of Israelite royal ideology was viewing the king as arising from the dust to exaltation.¹¹ God told the Israelite king Baasha that divine power had raised him to kingship from the dust: "I exalted thee out of the dust, and made thee prince over my people Israel" (1 Kings 16:2). The king's total dependence on God as his source of strength and legitimacy was accentuated by the king's reduction to the status of dust. Accordingly, when Benjamin not only brought himself to the dust (see Mosiah 2:26), but also affirmed that all people are of the dust and therefore belong entirely to God who created them and are dependent upon God for their daily breath and everything that they have and are (see Mosiah 2:20–21; 4:21), Benjamin drew all his people into the realm of royal ideology. He positioned them to be raised in status just as his son, the new monarch, would also be elevated. Like kings or queens, the people asked for forgiveness, and "the Spirit of the Lord came upon them, and they were filled with joy" (Mosiah 4:3), and ultimately they were raised to the level of being sons and daughters of God (see Mosiah 5:7).

Direct Participation in the Political Covenant

The operative power that raised the Israelite king from the dust to his elevated position was the power of covenant. In traditional Israelite coronations, only the king entered into the covenant with God and thereby became his son. Davidic kings, as a type or shadow of the Messiah, were told by God upon their coronation, "I [have] set my king upon my holy hill of Zion. I will declare the decree: the Lord hath said unto me, Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee" (Psalm 2:6–7). The covenant instilled in the king a position of authority or favor. In the coronation of Benjamin's son, however, not only the new king but every person in the kingdom was allowed to enter into the covenant (see Mosiah 5:2–7). Modern readers may have a hard time appreciating how egalitarian this simple, symbolic gesture must have seemed in the minds of the people who were allowed to receive this royal privilege from Benjamin. By affording all people in his land participation in this covenant status at the time of his son's coronation, Benjamin again reduced the distance between king and people, thereby facilitating the transition from kingship to democracy.

Hearing the Voice of the People

When the people answered King Benjamin, "they all cried aloud with one voice" (Mosiah 4:2), confessing their need for the atonement of Jesus Christ and expressing their faith and loyalty toward the Son of God, who created heaven and earth. By allowing the people to express aloud their allegiance to the Lord God Omnipotent, Benjamin also acknowledged the importance of hearing from the voice of the people both in political and religious affairs. Prior to this time, nothing in the Nephite records indicates that "the voice of the people" had been previously consulted. We may see in Benjamin's speech, therefore, an important instance

(if not the inaugural appearance) of the “voice of the people,” a significant element of Nephite politics under the reign of the judges (see Mosiah 29:25–26; Alma 2:7).

Direct Participation in the Religious Covenant

Also relevant is the fact that King Benjamin allowed all of his people to enter into the covenant in Mosiah 5, promising to obey the commandments of God that he should give to them. Benjamin’s assembly, of course, was not the first in ancient Israel to renew the covenant between God and his people. In Joshua 24, for example, Joshua exhorted the people to choose Jehovah and to “serve him in sincerity and in truth” (Joshua 24:14–15), to which “the people answered and said, God forbid that we should forsake the Lord, . . . we will serve the Lord” (Joshua 24:16, 21). On other occasions, however, the people of Israel were simply gathered together to hear the words of the law read to them, after which a covenant renewal may or may not have occurred (see, for example, Deuteronomy 31:12–13). By allowing all of his people—every man, woman, and child—to participate in a direct covenant renewal, not merely a reminder of a covenant previously made, Benjamin intensified the individualistic involvement of his people in the religious and public process.

Recognition of Freedom

Benjamin’s people at first viewed themselves as “even less than the dust of the earth” (Mosiah 4:2), but through the force and effect of their covenant they became spiritually begotten, free, and empowered (see Mosiah 3:17; 5:7–8). Freedom in the ancient world was a rare and precious commodity. Only the rich and the powerful had much latitude in being able to come and go as they pleased. Other people, including slaves, debtors, day laborers, peasant farmers, and simple craftsmen, had little political (let alone economic) capacity to go, to do, to say, to believe, or to effectively think whatever they wanted. With Benjamin’s impressive covenant, however, came the declaration, “And under this head ye are made free, and there is no other head whereby ye can be made free” (Mosiah 5:8). This double declaration of the free status of his people would have hit these covenantors as a bold declaration of independence. It would have moved their world view a major step toward democracy.

Dispensing the New Name

In a world in which a new coronation name was typically given exclusively to the ascending monarch,¹² it is politically significant that Benjamin decided to give the new name, revealed in connection with his son’s coronation, to every person in the crowd (see Mosiah 3:17; 5:7–8). Benjamin recognized that this move was unique—even remarkably daring. In giving the people a new name, he said that they would thereby “be distinguished above all the people which the Lord God hath brought out of the land of Jerusalem” (Mosiah 1:11). Not only was the new name distinctive and unique, but if these people knew anything about traditional coronation ceremonies, they must have been staggered beyond imagination to find themselves the privileged recipients of the new name and the ones who took upon themselves this new name. By dispensing the blessing of the new name as universally as he did, Benjamin countered the humiliation of the king and the people to the dust with the elevation of the people to a privileged status. Again, all of this must have comprised a significant step in the direction of democratizing the prevailing Nephite political atmosphere.

Divine Adoption of All the People

Based on several scriptures, one may well conclude that “as part of the enthronement procedure the divine adoption of the king” occurred.¹³ For example, the Lord spoke of Solomon, “I will be his father, and he shall be my son” (2 Samuel 7:14). Whereas the traditional procedure resulted in only the king being designated as “son,” Benjamin’s covenant ended with the pronouncement, “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” (Mosiah 5:7). As we have previously observed, “What was once reserved for kings at coronation has now been extended in Nephite culture to the people generally.”¹⁴

Standing on the Right Hand

As a result of the covenant, the king in Israel stood in a special position with respect to God: he stood on the right hand of God. Psalm 110, a royal coronation psalm, speaks to the king of Israel and affirms his sonship to God, with the Lord announcing to the king, “Sit thou at my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool” (Psalm 110:1). In Benjamin’s case, by giving his people the name by which they shall be called, Benjamin made it possible for all to “be found at the right hand of God” (Mosiah 5:9). He shared with all his people the cherished place of honor traditionally reserved for the king alone.

Sharing Royal Duties

In ancient Israel, it was typically the obligation of the king to care for the poor. Kings of Babylon boasted that they were guardians over the poor, the widows, and the orphans. Similarly, in ancient Israel, a king was recognized as a just ruler if he afforded or provided social justice for all. With Benjamin's speech, the obligation to assure social justice in his kingdom was placed upon all people, both the rich and the poor (see Mosiah 4:21–30). The demanding obligations of helping those in need of help, giving of one's substance to those who stand in need, and not turning the beggar out to perish (see Mosiah 4:16) were shouldered by all the people, who in effect were asked to assume a burden normally considered to be a preeminently royal obligation.

Civil and Economic Equality

By prohibiting slavery in the land of Zarahemla (see Mosiah 2:13), Benjamin decreed an innovative policy that protected the poor, relieved the indebted, and afforded the lower classes significant civil protection against various forms of economic and social servitude (see Mosiah 4:21–26). Assuming that Benjamin's move was a novel edict (which seems likely because various forms of slavery and bond servitude were permitted but regulated under the law of Moses; see Exodus 21:20; Leviticus 25:6; Isaiah 24:2), Benjamin's policy must have emboldened the lower classes and started the people in Zarahemla thinking about new social arrangements based on a much stronger concept of citizen equality. Benjamin correctly sensed the motivations or policies underlying the lenient rules that regulated and limited the institution of slavery or servitude under the law of Moses, namely that all people belonged to God and therefore could not rightly belong to a slave master, and similarly that God had freed Israel from bondage in Egypt and therefore it was unbecoming for them to turn around and make permanent slaves one of another. By taking these purposes one step further, by not allowing his people (Nephites or Mulekites) in any way (not even for a term of years) to make slaves one of another (see Mosiah 2:13), Benjamin moved his society a major step closer to the ideal of removing economic and social "inequality" from the land (Mosiah 29:32).

Record Distribution

Benjamin caused the words of his speech to be written and then "sent [them] forth among those that were not under the sound of his voice, that they might also receive his words" (Mosiah 2:8–9). According to the Paragraph of the King (see Deuteronomy 17:18), only the king and the priests were typically required to have a copy of the law and to read it all the days of their lives. When King Benjamin distributed to many of his people a copy of his speech, which imposed covenantal obligations with the force and effect of law within his kingdom and under God, he transferred the evidence or testimony of that covenant into the hands of the common man. One may suspect that this action had a significant leveling effect in the society. No longer did each person need to go to the palace or the temple to find a stele posting the prevailing law of the land. Like the king, each person could read in this document all the days of his life.¹⁵

Name Recorded

With each coronation, the name of the new king was recorded or inscribed prominently in the land. Names of new pharaohs were chiseled onto the walls and pillars of temples in ancient Egypt, and royal names were added to king lists in ancient Mesopotamia. In the case of Benjamin's ceremony, every man, woman, and child had their name recorded in the book of the covenant as they entered into this sacred covenant relationship with God.

A New Census

At the beginning of Benjamin's assembly, the decision was made not to number the people. The traditional census was not taken. The rationale given for this departure from normal procedure was "they had multiplied exceedingly" and were so great "that they did not number them" (Mosiah 2:2). Of course, they could have numbered them, for they took down all of their names at the end of the ceremony, but for some reason they decided not to number them at that time. Perhaps Benjamin delayed the "numbering" of his people until after the covenant had been made because under the old system, the people would have been "numbered" by tribes and by families, as one encounters, for example, in Numbers 1:17–54. The last thing that Benjamin wanted at this point was for his people to be divided against each other. Some groups or families were undoubtedly larger or more influential than others; competition among families or tribes over political power or social privileges could have become highly problematical for his son Mosiah as a new ruler. To avert this divisiveness, Benjamin waited to "number" his people until they all stood under a single "head," not under family or tribal heads (see Mosiah 5:8; 6:1–2). This leveling of the society and breaking down the old social structure must have been extremely conspicuous to Benjamin's people, all of whom had gathered around the temple according to their families, each man with his family in his tent (see Mosiah 2:5). We may well imagine that extended family groups and tribal organizations of Mulekites, Nephites, Jacobites, Josephites, and Zoramites would have come to the assembly with their traditional banners, precincts, and loyalties ready to be counted and to assert their conventional presence.

Shared Risks

Kingship brought with it certain risks, particularly that of being swept away in the event that the ruler ever broke the covenant. Just as the king had been elevated from the dust by God, God would return an unrighteous king to the dust and utterly sweep him out of the house, as if by a woman sweeping the dirt out her home (compare 1 Kings 16:3). Similarly, Benjamin placed on his people, in the event that they should fall into wickedness, the awful prospects of being cast out, of the Lord having no place in them, of never-ending torment, and of having their names utterly blotted out (see Mosiah 2:37, 39; 5:11, 14).

Individual Responsibility

In shifting to the people the responsibility for their own spiritual destiny before God, Benjamin used traditional Israelite theology to his political advantage. For many years, the law of Moses had placed personal responsibility on the shoulders of each individual: “The fathers shall not be put to death for the children, neither shall the children be put to death for the fathers: every man shall be put to death for his own sin” (Deuteronomy 24:16). Thus, it was not particularly innovative when Benjamin placed an individual “wo” on each person who was inclined to obey the evil spirit, for “the same drinketh damnation to his own soul” (Mosiah 2:33). Nor was it new when he said that “none shall be found blameless” (Mosiah 3:21) after each person in every nation had been warned and taught of the Lord. But to place this theology so prominently in the midst of a political coronation setting probably added a new democratic element to the Nephite political awareness. This theological point manifested itself politically in the law reform of King Mosiah, who understood equality as requiring that each citizen would have “an equal chance . . . to answer for their own sins” and would no longer be accountable for the iniquities of their king (Mosiah 29:38; see vv. 31–37).

Dissemination of Blessings

Great blessings, however, were also promised to the king in the ancient world. In particular, the Psalms expect that the foes of the king will “bow before him; and his enemies shall lick the dust” (Psalm 72:9). Along the same lines, Benjamin promised his son Mosiah and his people that one of the blessings of obedience was that “your enemies shall have no power over you” (Mosiah 2:31). In other words, the promise of victory over enemies and resurrection from the dust, common themes from Near Eastern enthronement ceremonies, were extended by Benjamin to the common people as well as to the new king in Zarahemla.

Conclusion

When one examines the structure of the book of Mosiah, the first chapter beginning at the height of the reign of kings and the last chapter ending with the commencement of the reign of the judges, the progression of events in this era of Nephite history seems obvious. Benjamin’s speech paved the way for the coming of the reign of judges. In many respects, Benjamin’s speech may be the best royal and religious text to be found anywhere in world literature that shows both king and common folk sharing all of the crucial elements in the traditional ancient set of the interconnected themes of kingship, coronation, covenant, and being raised from the dust to eternal life. Perhaps openly sharing these previously restricted elements, along with publicly disclosing sacred revelations that would normally have been retained among the prophetic elite, contributed to the overwhelming, united reaction of the people who were deeply moved on this occasion by spiritual feelings of love and appreciation for their old and new kings.¹⁶ All this leads to the conclusion that the ultimate elimination of kingship and the subsequent inauguration of the reign of judges by King Mosiah was already a political inevitability embedded in the spirit of this age, propelled forward decisively by the expansive steps taken by King Benjamin in his powerful and masterful oration.

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Notes

1. See John W. Welch and Stephen D. Ricks, eds., *King Benjamin’s Speech: “That Ye May Learn Wisdom,”* ed. John W. Welch and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1998); and *Benjamin’s Speech Made Simple* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1999).

2. See John W. Welch, “Benjamin, the Man: His Place in Nephite History,” in *King Benjamin’s Speech*, 23–54.

3. See John W. Welch, “Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies* 10/1 (1969): 69–84, especially 82.

4. The law of Moses, of course, prohibited people from oppressing those who fit into these specific categories (see Exodus 22:21–24), who were also allowed to glean in the fields (see Deuteronomy 24:19–22); Benjamin, however, required his people to impart of their substance to all those who were in need regardless of their status as widows, orphans, or resident aliens.

5. See Welch, “Benjamin, the Man,” 48–49.

6. I am grateful to Noel B. Reynolds for this observation and line of analysis.

7. See John W. Welch, “A Masterful Oration,” in *King Benjamin’s Speech*, 58.

8. See Helmer Ringgren, “Enthronement Festival or Covenant Renewal?” *Biblical Research* 7 (1962): 45.

9. For more information on this topic, see Terrence L. Szink and John W. Welch, “King Benjamin’s Speech in the Context of Ancient Israelite Festivals,” in *King Benjamin’s Speech*, 147–223; first discussed by Hugh W. Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 3rd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 304.

10. See Aubrey R. Johnson, *Sacral Kingship in Ancient Israel* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1955), 22–25; John H. Eaton, *Kingship and the Psalms*, 2nd ed. (Sheffield: Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, 1986), 133–34; Helmer Ringgren, *Israelite Religion*, trans. David E. Green (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 236–37.

11. See Walter Brueggemann, “From Dust to Kingship,” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 84/1 (1972): 1–18.

12. See Stephen D. Ricks, “Kingship, Coronation, and Covenant in Mosiah 1–6,” in *King Benjamin’s Speech*, 252–53.

13. Ricks, “Kingship, Coronation, and Covenant,” 253.

14. *Ibid.*, 254.

15. Scholars speak of the democratizing of Egyptian religion, which similarly occurred as their burial texts were moved, first from the pyramids onto coffins, and then from coffins into the Book of the Dead, which all people could afford to purchase for their burial. No longer could the aristocracy alone enjoy the privilege of possessing the text necessary for a full burial.

16. See Welch, “A Masterful Oration,” 59.