

# Benjamin's Speech: A Masterful Oration

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As a work of sacred literature and masterful oratory, Benjamin's speech deserves deep respect. In this chapter we seek to understand the speech itself. What made it such a landmark in its own day and such a powerful speech even today?

Many readers have intuitively sensed the profundity of its message. Elder Bruce R. McConkie found that it contained "what well may be the greatest sermon ever delivered on the atonement of Christ the Lord."<sup>1</sup> Milton R. Hunter marveled at King Benjamin, observing that "perhaps no other teacher except the Master has given a more beautiful, humble sermon."<sup>2</sup>

These strong assertions make us wonder: How does Benjamin's speech function as oratory? Does it have a deep aesthetic order? How does it compare with other texts of its kind? What are some of its unique or salient characteristics? How do we account for the popularity of this speech? What makes it so great? To answer these questions, consider twelve features that make Benjamin's speech a masterful oration. Some of the characteristics introduced briefly in this overview will be examined in more detail in subsequent chapters.

## 1. An Embodiment of the Spirit of an Age

A great oration captures and distills the spirit of an age. Historically, significant literature often includes speeches, because these revealing discourses embody the essence of the particular culture. "The history of Britain," it is said, "is told in [its] speeches."<sup>3</sup> Under this criterion, Benjamin's speech qualifies as a major monument in its own culture and time. Delivered about 124 B.C., it was one of the most important and influential speeches ever given in Nephite history, being treasured by righteous Nephites for years thereafter and having a lasting impact on Nephite civilization.

In the histories of most cultures, certain speeches stand out as particularly stirring orations that distill, shape, and propel the spirit of their critical times. Benjamin's was such a speech. In a historical sense, it ranks with Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, Churchill's wartime speeches, Kennedy's inaugural address, Pericles' ancient funeral oration in Athens, and Martin Luther King's verbal shaping of a modern dream. Famous speeches like these are said to "embody and utter, not merely the individual genius and character of the speaker, but a national consciousness—a national era, a mood, a hope . . . —in which you listen to the spoken history of the time."<sup>4</sup> Such speeches depict "the crises and cruxes of history as seen from the [speaker's] platform and interpreted to a [timeless] audience."<sup>5</sup> Benjamin's speech similarly distills the eternal hopes and fears of a nation. It not only stands at a crucial turning point in Nephite history in the second century B.C., but it also speaks to generations down through the ages and into eternity.

No doubt Benjamin faced several crises during his lifetime. As has been discussed above, one of his most urgent needs was to promote unity among his people. The first and last things said in reference to Benjamin in the Book of Mormon are about contentions. Judging by Benjamin's comments to the rich and the poor, class stratification was a problem that had developed among these people. To strengthen his community, Benjamin's first covenantal

stipulation for the people was that parents should teach the youth that they should “not have a mind to injure one another, but to live peaceably” one with another (Mosiah 4:13).

Benjamin would have learned the importance of social unity firsthand. When establishing themselves in the land of Zarahemla, Benjamin and his father Mosiah must have faced many challenges. Unifying two groups of people who spoke different languages and had developed different religious and cultural practices would have been no simple task, especially since the indigenous Mulekite population outnumbered the people of Nephi. Benjamin melded together a pluralistic polity that was to thrive for generations. Only a leadership grounded firmly in the principles taught by Benjamin could have survived the next 150 years of rebellions, dissensions, wars, persecutions, reforms, factions, rumeumptoms, robbers, and various comings and goings to preserve a remnant of a righteous people who eventually received the resurrected Christ. Benjamin’s speech and the ideas that it embodied became a crucial force in promoting unity and harmony at an important juncture in the history of the Nephites when every thread holding their world together threatened to unravel.

It appears that one of Benjamin’s most creative political moves was to promote and solidly establish a strong element of popular egalitarianism in Nephite society. He proudly reported that he had not allowed any of his people in the land of Zarahemla to “make slaves one of another” (Mosiah 2:13). If we assume that prior Nephite and Mulekite practices followed the normal (if not necessary) realities and standard legal rules used in most ancient societies that were economically dependent on some form of slavery or involuntary debt servitude (compare Exodus 21:2–11; Leviticus 25:25–55; Deuteronomy 15:1–6), then we must conclude that Benjamin’s abolition of slavery constituted a major innovation in Nephite political history. Only an effective and powerful leader could have made such a change that would have favored the populist poor and probably unsettled members of the upper class.

Moreover, in a world in which a new coronation name was typically given exclusively to the ascending monarch, it is politically significant that Benjamin decided to give the new name revealed at his son’s coronation to every man, woman, and child in the crowd. Benjamin recognized that this move was unique—even remarkably daring. By giving the people a 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 of Christ, found in Mosiah 5:8, uniquely and distinctively given for these particular people and for this specific occasion, but, even more important, this designation was given to the *people*, not just to the new king. In traditional Israelite coronations only the king entered into the covenant with God and thereby became his son (see Psalm 2:7). In Benjamin’s kingdom, however, every person was allowed to enter into a covenant in connection with Mosiah’s coronation (see Mosiah 5:1–5), and thereby they all became God’s “sons, and his daughters” (Mosiah 5:7). Modern readers may have a hard time appreciating how expansive and egalitarian these simple, symbolic gestures must have seemed in the minds of the people who were allowed to receive these privileges from Benjamin. 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. If these moves by Benjamin were as politically bold as they appear to have been, then Benjamin’s recognition of the people in these ways would have given enormous impetus to democratization and popularization of Nephite government and society. Perhaps the ultimate elimination of kingship with the subsequent inauguration of the reign of the judges, which occurs at the end of the book of Mosiah, was already a political inevitability embedded in the spirit of this Nephite age and propelled by the expansive steps taken in Benjamin’s oration at the opening of the book of Mosiah. Although we cannot document all this reconstruction and analysis as a historical certainty, the crux of these points can definitely be seen as a rhetorical reality in the political fabric of the book of Mosiah.

Benjamin's speech also addressed a significant theological crux: the melding of the Israelite heritage with the messianic expectation in Christ. Benjamin's speech describes a society in transition from its ancient Israelite heritage to its full Christian destiny. Many aspects of his speech capture the essence of the past and at the same time redirect his people's attention toward the coming Christ. Benjamin did not repudiate his Mosaic heritage but infused it with a knowledge of Christ. For example, Benjamin's theology was rooted in the Deuteronomic formula of keeping the commandments and prospering in the land according to the law of Moses. Affirming the righteousness of his own administration, Benjamin turned to Deuteronomy 17:14–20—the Paragraph of the King. In certifying that he had spent his days in the service of his people and had “not sought gold nor silver nor any manner of riches” (Mosiah 2:12), Benjamin drew straight from the Deuteronomy text, which limited the power of Israelite kings to multiply unto themselves gold, silver, or horses. Likewise, Benjamin's humanitarian ethics regarding the poor cannot be properly understood apart from the underlying principles of the Hebrew scriptures, for which it is axiomatic that everything belongs to God, that orphans and widows must be helped, that charity is a duty and not an optional kindness, and that the dignity of the poor must be preserved. Deuteronomy 15 reads: “There shall be no poor among you” (15:4) and “thou shalt not harden thine heart, nor shut thine hand from thy poor brother” (15:7). Benjamin not only assumed but transformed these Old Testament principles in light of his knowledge of the power of the atonement of Jesus Christ; thus he captured the essence of the old and infused it with the outlook of a new age.

The enduring value of Benjamin's classic speech in Nephite history can be confirmed in many ways by internal textual analysis of subsequent texts in the Book of Mormon that remember and draw on his words. Benjamin's influence on other Book of Mormon writers also serves as a subtle check on its historicity; after all, one would expect to hear echoes of this significant speech in later Book of Mormon language. Indeed, as has been shown in the preceding chapter, Benjamin's words were expressly quoted in the Nephite record for many generations to come. The fact that each family was given a copy of this speech must have facilitated its far-reaching impact. Shortly after Benjamin's death, his son Mosiah sent Ammon and fifteen other emissaries to the land of Nephi. When they found Limhi and his people, Ammon “rehearsed unto them the last words which king Benjamin had taught” (Mosiah 8:3), and the people of Limhi followed Benjamin's pattern and “entered into a covenant with God to serve him and keep his commandments” (Mosiah 21:31). Almost a century later, Helaman spoke to his sons Nephi and Lehi, admonishing them to “remember, remember, my sons, the words which king Benjamin spake unto his people” (Helaman 5:9). The fact that Samuel the Lamanite knew key words from Benjamin's speech suggests that Nephi and Lehi indeed remembered and used Benjamin's words among the Lamanites.

Benjamin's monumental speech also became a type of constitutional document in Nephite culture, and specific influences from Benjamin's speech are found in later Nephite law and society. As discussed above, Benjamin reports that he had not allowed his people to do five specific criminal things: they were not to “murder, or plunder, or steal, or commit adultery . . . [nor] any manner of wickedness” (Mosiah 2:13). This exact list appears several other times in the Book of Mormon. In Alma 23:3, the converted Lamanite king 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.” These words were evidently brought to the Lamanites by the four sons of Mosiah, who, of all people, would have remembered and used the words of their grandfather Benjamin. The fact that this five-part list surfaces again in Mosiah 29:36, Alma 30:10, and Helaman 6:23 shows that Benjamin's speech was considered to be a foundational and authoritative oration in its own time and culture.

## **2. A Dramatic Occasion and Presentation**

Memorable oratory is dramatic. “Truly great oratory,” it is said, “is the result only of a great occasion.”<sup>6</sup> The setting, timing, and delivery of Benjamin’s speech make it no ordinary, off-the-cuff conversation. His counsel and testimony were delivered in a powerfully dramatic setting that even today attracts the reader’s attention and contributes to its literary effectiveness. The drama of the situation mounts as readers learn about the preparations for the event, sharing the people’s anticipation as Benjamin promised to reveal to them new names and new insights. One can easily imagine the construction of a special tower beside the temple, *upon* which, not beside which, the text correctly says Benjamin stood to proclaim his dramatic message.

The sacred, festive mood of the occasion enhances the excitement, especially if Benjamin’s speech was delivered in connection with anything like the year-rite ceremony that made such a deep impression on ancient peoples. The solemnity of the occasion is heightened by Benjamin’s tedious effort to write out his text, distribute copies, proclaim the covenant, and crown it all with the coronation of an earthly king as nothing less than a shadow of the heavenly king. Obviously, in all this something important is going on. This is not just an ordinary meeting or a routine state-of-the-union address of the king to his people. Benjamin’s speech is not just another oration or campaign speech. All this drama attracts attention and draws the audience and reader into the text.

### **3. The Sincerity of a Farewell Setting**

Much of the success of Benjamin’s speech resides in its deep and honest sincerity: “The essential element in oratory is simply the ability to talk to the heart of the hearer.”<sup>7</sup> The words of Demosthenes, the most classic of Greek orators, have been praised as “eminently plain and unadorned. His strength lies in his earnest sincerity and sterling character, coupled with remarkable sympathy for his audience, and great skill in appealing to the prejudices and passions as well as the reason of that audience.”<sup>8</sup> All these descriptions can be aptly attributed to Benjamin’s speech, which exudes sincerity and truthfulness born of a sterling character.

The quality of Benjamin’s sincerity is magnified by the fairly obvious but very significant fact that he delivered his speech near the end of his life. It is interesting that many other important speeches in world literature and in the scriptures were also farewell speeches. Perhaps it is only natural that toward the end of his life a great, observant prophet like Benjamin should give his final assessment of what his life had amounted to. What does he see and include as he looks back on life and ahead to meeting God? What does he pass over and leave out? What a speaker omits on such an occasion often reveals as much as what he puts in. For example, Benjamin says nothing of his military victories or his political and administrative achievements, which must have been many.

Interestingly, literary analysts have identified and compared some twenty-two farewell speeches from Greco-Roman antiquity and from the Bible. William S. Kurz has developed a set of twenty elements that are found in this genre of notable literary farewell addresses.<sup>9</sup> On his list were farewell orations by Moses (Deuteronomy 31–34), Joshua (Joshua 23–24), David (1 Kings 2:1–10; 1 Chronicles 28–29), Samuel (1 Samuel 12), Socrates, and others. Based on this analysis, Benjamin’s speech works well as a classic farewell address, containing at least as many elements of a typical farewell speech as any other text. Of course, no single speech contains all the elements identified by Kurz: Moses’ contains the most, with sixteen; Paul’s, fourteen; and Socrates’, eleven. As will be discussed in detail in a subsequent chapter of this book, Benjamin’s features at least sixteen, with other elements implied.

### **4. A Humility That Instills Confidence**

Another hallmark of a great oration is its delivery of “eternal truths uttered with disarming humility.”<sup>10</sup> Throughout his speech, Benjamin’s plain and simple language is effective in creating confidence and transmitting this powerful, stirring discourse. Love of audience is an essential key to penetrating oratory. Benjamin understands this principle, and he communicates the tenderness of his relationship to his people, saying that he is no better than his audience: all people come from the dust and must have sincere concern for the poor and for the children, if everyone is to succeed. Benjamin’s personable nature that is displayed through his humility endears him to his audience, both ancient and modern, and makes them take seriously his instructions to be humble.

## **5. A Voice of Pure Authority**

In addition to speaking with humility, a charismatic orator must talk frankly, with power, and “as one having authority” (Matthew 7:29). Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, the “anecdote of eloquence . . . is a triumph of pure power, and it has a beautiful and prodigious surprise in it.”<sup>11</sup> Combining the authority of his offices as king, teacher, and as representative and messenger of the Lord, Benjamin faithfully and triumphantly delivered the holy message from the angel of God of “glad tidings of great joy” (Mosiah 3:3) to his people. Benjamin spoke with divine power. His speech penetrated the hearts of his people, regenerating their souls. Using mostly simple, everyday words and phrases, Benjamin skillfully discharged his authorized assignment and communicated his thoughts with a surprising and overwhelming display of divine authority and power. William Norwood Brigance has described this manifestation of impact and power in oratory as follows:

Not only is history written with words. It is made with words. Most of the mighty movements affecting the destiny of [nations] have gathered strength in obscure places from the talk of nameless men, and gained final momentum from leaders who could state in common words the needs and hopes of common people. Great movements, in fact, are usually led by men of action who are also men of words, who use words as instruments of power, who voice their aims in words of historic simplicity.<sup>12</sup>

Benjamin gathered not only verbal power but divine authority by using words and phrases given to him from a heavenly source. He shaped in the minds of the people vivid images of an ideal society by looking ahead with prophetic insight to a clearly envisioned world to come and by patterning his own message after the angel’s revealed message. According to Chauncy Goodrich, “Rhetoric endeavors to describe the shape of an undiscovered country and, often as occasion affords, to alter or determine that shape.”<sup>13</sup> Benjamin drew upon the intrinsic power of the words of the angel and was able to shape in the souls of his people the ultimate vision of the blessings of Jesus Christ.

King Benjamin’s divine commission and extensive understanding of the nature of God, as well as his lifelong relationship with his people and his knowledge of sacred material, gave him an authority that was sensed by the people and inspired them to believe his words and act on them by committing themselves to serve and obey God. It is said that “the secret of [Lincoln’s] success was simply this: he realized that power lay in doing what the occasion required and nothing more.”<sup>14</sup> Benjamin too does not overadorn his key points, nor does he digress into tangents. The authority of his office, his style, and his message did not call for going beyond what was required.

## **6. A Purposeful and Effective Organization**

A fine classic speech like Benjamin’s doesn’t happen accidentally. In my opinion, Benjamin prepared for many months or maybe even years to deliver this speech. And consistent with this notion, the entire speech manifests an

extraordinarily purposeful and effective organization. Of Cicero, the paragon of Roman orators, it is said that he “dazzles us with the brilliancy of his rhetoric. His words roll out in perfect oratorical rhythm, his periods are nicely balanced, his figures of speech and his choice of words beautifully artistic, singing through the mind like music and enchanting the ear.”<sup>15</sup> Benjamin’s masterful oration was also carefully written and intricately orchestrated.

At the broadest level, several internal structural facets show that the speech consists of seven segments, with scheduled pauses between them for ceremonial actions and audience responses. The structures within the seven main sections of this speech are analyzed in greater depth in chapter 11. For the present purposes of this rhetorical overview, we note that the sections of the oration are distinctly divided and constructed. Because Benjamin usually placed key points at the center of each section of his speech, which gives the composition a focusing pattern, it helps to read and study the speech according to its natural divisions and central points.

Furthermore, the seven main sections of the speech may be arranged in a general chiasmic manner—that is, as an inverted parallelism. Section 4 contains the central turning point of the speech; sections 3 and 5 are related to each other as testimonies about the works and attributes of God; and sections 1 and 7 are companions in detailing the relationships between God, king, and man. The announcement of the new king at the end of section 1 is paralleled by the covenant to obey the new king at the beginning of section 7. And the death of the Messiah in section 3 contrasts with the long-suffering goodness of the living God in section 5.

Moreover, seeing the overall structure of this oration exposes the brilliantly interwoven threads and highlights the echoes that reverberate through its passages. For example, readers often overlook the fact that Benjamin speaks about service not just once in the speech (see Mosiah 2:17), but three times (see Mosiah 2:17–19, 21; 5:13), and Benjamin’s point remains unclear until all three references are put together. At the outset, Benjamin’s intent is to show that man is less than the dust of the earth. People try to elevate themselves by serving other people, but Benjamin quickly reminds us that, as noble as that may be, “when ye are in the service of your fellow beings ye are *only* [or *merely*] in the service of your God” (Mosiah 2:17). Then, in Mosiah 2:21, the counterpart to Mosiah 2:17, Benjamin makes it clear that even if one “should serve him who has created you from the beginning, . . . if ye should serve him with all your whole souls yet ye would be unprofitable servants.” So where does that leave us as mortals? We cannot say aught of ourselves, not by service to others (for that is only service to God) or by service to God (for he immediately blesses us, and we are still in his debt). So why serve? Benjamin gives us the answer, but not until the conclusion of this point in chapter 5: “For how knoweth a man the master whom he has not served, and who is a stranger unto him, and is far from the thoughts and intents of his heart?” (Mosiah 5:13).

Many other threads like these become visible when one examines the organization in each of the other sections of this grand oration. For instance, an ironic interplay exists in section 3 between Christ’s power over evil spirits (see Mosiah 3:6) and its counterpart: men shall say “he hath a devil” (Mosiah 3:9). The all-important sacred name is given at the very center of section 3 (see Mosiah 3:8), and the crucial terms on which the efficacy of the atonement depend are stated at the precise center of section 4 (see Mosiah 3:18–19).

## **7. An Elegance of Verbal Detail and Arrangement**

Another feature of literary achievement in Benjamin’s speech is its verbal elegance: “In public speaking we have long and rolling sentences, words that fill the mouth, and sustained periods.”<sup>16</sup> Benjamin was a master in the use of impressive expressions and memorable words. His words were carefully chosen and displayed with virtuosity, and this is what makes them memorable. Benjamin’s use of chiasmus compares very favorably with the best examples of the important feature of that biblical style, which is a beautiful and memorable form of verbal organization. An

excellent instance of chiasmus is found in Mosiah 5:10–12. This was the first example of extended chiasmus discovered in the Book of Mormon. This superb example of composition (which I found in 1967 while serving as a missionary in Germany), in a style that was important in Hebrew literature, shows Benjamin’s literary mastery. It comes at the very center of section 7 of the speech in which Benjamin presents six ideas, first in one order and then in the exact opposite order:

Whosoever shall not take upon him the [1] *name* of Christ must be [2] *called* by some other name; therefore, he findeth himself on the [3] *left hand of God*. And I would that ye should [4] *remember* also, that this is the name that I said I should give unto you that never should be [5] *blotted out*, except it be through [6] *transgression*; therefore, take heed that ye do not [6] *transgress*, that the name be not [5] *blotted out* of your hearts. . . . I would that ye should [4] *remember* to retain the name written always in your hearts, that ye are not found on the [3] *left hand of God*, but that ye hear and know the voice by which ye shall be [2] *called*, and also, the [1] *name* by which he shall call you. (Mosiah 5:10–12)

This arrangement made Benjamin’s words stylistically elegant, rhythmically flowing, and also easy to remember.

Another chiasm of virtually the same length is found in Mosiah 3:18–19. It is as if, by creating this second chiasm, Benjamin was trying to make it obvious that these two beautifully matched patterns had not been created by accident. Moreover, this second pattern comes at the very center of the middle section (4), and thus its words fall at the structural turning point of the entire speech—a point rarely noticed. There are 2,467 words of Benjamin—in the English translation, of course—before this midpoint (from Mosiah 2:9–3:18) and 2,476 words of Benjamin and the people after it (Mosiah 3:19–5:15)—the virtual middle of the speech.

In addition to many marvelous literary structures, Benjamin’s facility with language is evident in his use of distinctive words and phrases. One study analyzed 470 phrases in Benjamin’s speech; many of these phrases are sensible, insightful, and memorable verbal gems. Of those phrases, 84 appear for the first time in scripture on the lips of Benjamin; 28 appear to be entirely unique to Benjamin. Interestingly, 27 of those 28 expressions occur in the verses written by Benjamin himself, with only one appearing in the words of the angel in Mosiah 3. Similarly, Benjamin spoke with originality; he does not quote Isaiah, Zenos, or other prophetic predecessors. The sound of Benjamin’s new formulations may well have struck his immediate audience as highly creative and impressive.

Moreover, Benjamin’s testimony of Jesus Christ was couched in distinctly personal terms. For example, Benjamin, as a king himself, was especially concerned with God’s kingship. Himself a strong, benevolent king, he referred favorably to the Lord as the “heavenly King” (Mosiah 2:19), a term unique to Benjamin. Consistent with Benjamin’s personal interests and royal circumstances in life, he was the only Book of Mormon writer ever to use the word *omnipotent*. In fact, Benjamin spoke six times of God’s omnipotence (see Mosiah 3:5, 17, 18, 21; 4:9; 5:15).

## 8. A Trove of Timeless Themes

Of course, sacred literature is not simply a matter of well-crafted words. The enduring classics and orations of world literature address timeless themes of human life and key values of society. They are veritable treasure troves of eternal truths and good sense. The golden art of speech making is “the steadfast use of a language in which truth can be told; a speech that is strong by natural force, and not merely effective by declamation; an utterance without trick, without affectation, without mannerism.”<sup>17</sup> And so it is with Benjamin’s speech. There is nothing trivial or affected here. Each segment goes directly to the essence of what life is all about. Benjamin

reveals eternal doctrines of central importance. Sometimes they are so plainly stated that casual readers miss their theological import.

For example, Benjamin's ultimate concept of sinfulness is impressive. For Benjamin, sin is not merely the physical action of transgressing a commandment of God; it is even more than the mental or intentional commission of misconduct. The essence of sin, as Benjamin explained it (and this comes in the middle of section 2 of the speech), is coming out "in open rebellion against God" (Mosiah 2:37). Indeed, at the core of every sin one is saying to God, "I know you don't want me to do this, but I don't care. I don't care enough about you, or about what you want, for me to refrain. I'm going to do it anyway." How can a person love God and keep the greatest commandment but not care what God wants or feels? By recognizing that this state of rebellion is the essence of all sin, Benjamin helps thoughtful listeners resist temptation by affirming, "But I do care, I do love God, and I keep the great commandment."

Many other similar points can be made from the succinct and incisive themes presented by King Benjamin. Many profound topics in almost every sentence of Benjamin's speech still wait to be pondered and elaborated.

### **9. A Practical Approach in Touch with Real Life**

Benjamin's speech is great oratory not only because it addresses great themes, but because it does so while remaining completely in touch with real life. Benjamin was a very practical man whose wisdom reflected a kind of good sense and keen judgment that comes only from a long life of concrete experience. His comments rise to the level of proverbial wisdom on such varied topics as

¥ *service* ("when ye are in the service of your fellow beings ye are only in the service of your God," Mosiah 2:17)

¥ *leadership* ("I, even I, whom ye call your king, am no better than ye yourselves," Mosiah 2:26)

¥ *human nature* ("the natural man is an enemy to God," Mosiah 3:19)

¥ *responsibility* ("but men drink damnation to their own souls," Mosiah 3:18)

¥ *humility* ("ye cannot say that ye are even as much as the dust of the earth; yet ye were created of the dust," Mosiah 2:25)

¥ *indebtedness* ("and ye are still indebted unto him, and are, and will be, forever," Mosiah 2:24)

¥ *grace* ("ye should remember, and always retain in remembrance, the greatness of God, and your own nothingness, and his goodness and long-suffering towards you, unworthy creatures," Mosiah 4:11)

¥ *obedience* ("watch yourselves, and your thoughts, and your words, and your deeds, and observe the commandments of God," Mosiah 4:30)

¥ *gratitude* ("if you should render all the thanks and praise which your whole soul has power to possess . . . yet ye would be unprofitable servants," Mosiah 2:20–21)

¥ *the importance of children* ("little children . . . they are blessed," Mosiah 3:16)



¥ *human accountability* (“[remember] . . . the awful situation of those that have fallen into transgression,” “consider on the blessed and happy state of those that keep the commandments of God,” Mosiah 2:40–41)

¥ *peace* (“ye will not have a mind to injure one another, but to live peaceably, and to render to every man according to that which is his due,” Mosiah 4:13)

¥ *contention* (“beware lest there shall arise contentions among you,” Mosiah 2:32)

¥ *wealth* (“For behold, are we not all beggars?” Mosiah 4:19)

¥ *charity* (“ye yourselves will succor those that stand in need of your succor,” Mosiah 4:16)

Something as practical as the connection between thanking and praising illustrates Benjamin’s sensible wisdom (see Mosiah 2:20). He rightly links these two ideas: You must render to God all your thanks *and* praise. Indeed, to thank someone truly means to praise that person, not just selfishly saying, “Thanks, I’m glad you gave that to me.” Benjamin’s attention to these themes shows that he was concerned with public issues, and like other skilled orators, wanted his listeners to “do something of a social or political kind.”<sup>18</sup>

Many of Benjamin’s words become even more potent in light of the real-life situations in the ancient world out of which they came. Consider, for example, the ancient catastrophe of indebtedness. That calamity sets the stage for those parts of the speech in which Benjamin spoke pointedly about debt, repaying debts, and acting generously in light of the burden of indebtedness. In ancient society, being in debt and unable to repay that burden meant more than just needing to run to the bank to take out a larger home equity loan. Indebtedness was next to death in terms of personal catastrophe: “Ancient Israel considered permanent slavery the most inhumane condition possible.”<sup>19</sup> It usually meant the crippling loss of all one’s assets—including one’s children capable of gainful employment—complete social degradation, and involuntary debt servitude for the maximum allowable duration, even though many masters were caring and benevolent. Thus when Benjamin talked pointedly and practically about our being eternally indebted, modern readers probably do not sense the magnitude of the extreme disaster that this specter evoked in the ancient mind. Nor does the modern mind sense enough the liberation that comes in Benjamin’s promise that under this head we are made free (Mosiah 5:8)—that is, not free to run around, but free from that eternal debt.

## 10. A Source of Unmistakable Instructions to Enable Success

Fortunately, with all this wisdom Benjamin’s words are not broad platitudes, but like the best of meaningful oratory, his speech gives clear instructions and tells specifically how to achieve the desired spiritual objectives. “Great speeches are concerned chiefly and characteristically with matters of probability, with the taking of action in those questions on which policies must be formed and decisions made without benefit of all the facts”; yet “rhetorique will make [things that are] absent and remote . . . present to your understanding.”<sup>20</sup> Although God’s final judgment is “absent and remote,” Benjamin made that eventuality “present to the understanding” and impelled choice and action by the influence of his instructive rhetoric.

For example, Benjamin wanted his audience, as much as anything else, to have access to God and to build faith in him. Benjamin taught his people eight steps, an early sort of the Articles of Faith (couched in a beautiful eight-part parallelism), which appear at the center of section 5 of the speech (see Mosiah 4:9–10). His eight incremental and sequential steps are

1. believe that he is
2. believe that he created all things
3. believe that he has all wisdom and power
4. honestly admit that man does not comprehend all
5. believe that you must repent and forsake your sins
6. humble yourself before God
7. ask in sincerity of heart for forgiveness
8. if you believe these things, see that you do them

Likewise, the steps involved in claiming the benefits of the atonement are not left as a vague concept. Human beings access the atoning blood of Christ by acquiring seven primary virtues specifically listed as steps in becoming a Saint: being

1. childlike
2. submissive
3. meek
4. humble
5. patient
6. full of love
7. willing to submit to whatever God might inflict on us (see Mosiah 3:19)

In order to help children, students, or other people, a skilled leader will do several things. Benjamin senses the need to help and applies wise counseling techniques in his speech: He discusses openly with the people their goals and ambitions; he recognizes the value of each individual, recording the name of each; he teaches them that increased freedom brings responsibility; he brings them to a realization that everyone in his audience old enough to understand is no longer innocent; he allows them to experience consequences of their actions, clearly stating that the names of wrongdoers will be blotted out; he shares his own struggles, work, and mortality; he acknowledges the positive changes he sees them making as they call for the atoning blood to be applied and enter into the covenant; and he expresses confidence in them, ending with a firm assurance that God will seal them his. Benjamin knows that a successful speech “must so stir a public body that something will be done”;<sup>21</sup> therefore he employs every necessary technique in order to convey the clear instructions of a masterful teacher.

## 11. A Profound Ethical Logic

Persuasive and influential orations supply logical reasons for ethical behavior. And make no mistake—Benjamin was not just a fine social counselor, an energetic leader, or a friendly confidant. He was also blunt, direct, and bold in testifying, and he drove home his instructions with very interesting and compelling forms of ethical logic.

Benjamin based moral obligation on the fact that, by serving his people, he had put them in debt—a debt they ought to repay by serving others and thanking God. For example, the question of why one should care about others or give freely to another is one of the most basic issues of moral philosophy. It is a question that Benjamin’s speech answers like no other. Benjamin’s logic of love, service, and charity is cogent, thorough, and persuasive. He offers at least eight answers to this crucial and persistent problem of ethics and morality.

*We should serve one another because we have received benefits from the service of others.* In Mosiah 2:18–19, at the central crux of section 1 of this speech, Benjamin informs his people that they are morally obligated to serve one another: “Behold, ye have called me your king; and if I, whom ye call your king, do labor to serve you, then ought not ye to labor to serve one another?” (Mosiah 2:18).

*We should serve others because we have been commanded to, and by disobeying that command we come out in open rebellion against God.* The logic of this imperative goes beyond a simple command coupled with a threat of divine punishment for disobedience. Some people today feel that the law of Moses is nothing but a series of wooden rules and that commands (rules) are for kids (and Pharisees). But as Paul has affirmed, the law serves righteous purposes even in Christ: “wherefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good” (Romans 7:12). The only problem with rules comes when we lose sight, in our acts of obedience, of the weightier matters of the law or of the deeper reasons behind the commands.

Underpinning the idea that we should obey God’s commands is the ultimate commandment that we should love God. As mentioned above, the problem in disobeying any of God’s commandments is that disobedient people essentially say that they simply do not care enough about what God wants; such behavior breaks the great commandment to love the Lord (see Deuteronomy 10:12), on which hangs all the law and the prophets (see Matthew 22:40). Thus, as Benjamin puts it, a person who disregards the commandments of God lists to obey the evil spirit and comes out in open rebellion against God. The alternatives are clear.

*We should serve one another because through the atonement of Christ we will stand before God to be judged according to our works.* The law and logic of God embrace both mercy and justice. Moral logic and mercy follow from the fact that one should not expect to find justice in this life. Those who serve their fellow beings will not be rewarded equitably by others, and they should not expect to be. Equity and fairness can be approximated through social justice and by various efforts to redistribute wealth and other social benefits among people, but the only time that people will stand to be judged and rewarded, “every man according to his works, whether they be good, or whether they be evil” (Mosiah 3:24), is in the hereafter. The logical outcome of this knowledge is that we ought to serve now, because what we do now will largely determine the outcome of that judgment.

*Christ’s atonement places us eternally in his debt, and because of his atonement and generosity toward us we are given further reason to serve others.* In Mosiah 3, Benjamin’s speech does not address service or charity directly. In that chapter, the angel emphasizes the atoning blood that takes away all kinds of sin. That sacrifice of Christ creates the ultimate indebtedness that humans owe, which leads directly to Benjamin’s next point: If we view our own nothingness and worthless state, if we recognize the great disparity between man and God that now exists (see Mosiah 4:4–11), and if we see our necessary dependence on Christ’s atonement, we will see the logical

consequences of our own position as beggars: “And has he suffered that ye have begged in vain?” No, he has not. “O then, how ye ought to impart of the substance that ye have one to another” (Mosiah 4:20, 21).

*When we have been truly converted, we serve because we cannot do otherwise.* Benjamin declares that if we remember the greatness of God, we will always rejoice, have no mind to injure one another, not suffer others to go hungry, impart our substance to the poor, return those things that have been borrowed (and repay all our debts), and in the end have (as Benjamin’s people came to acknowledge that they had) “no disposition to do evil” (Mosiah 5:2; see 4:12–14, 16, 28). The questions of why birds fly or why fish swim or why good people serve others all call for the same answer: they do it by nature. When the natural man has been put off, another nature is taken on—a nature of service, love, righteousness, humility, and submissiveness. To such a person, service is natural. For such a person, it would not feel right to do otherwise.

*We should serve because we have made a promise that we will do so.* This is the heart and soul of morality and ethics, if not business and law. Regarding the covenants made within the gospel of Jesus Christ, covenanters agree to serve one another, “to bear one another’s burdens, . . . mourn with those that mourn; yea, and comfort those that stand in need of comfort” (Mosiah 18:8–9), to sacrifice and consecrate for the common good. At Sinai, the Israelites similarly covenanted to serve one another, to watch out for the widow and orphan (see Exodus 22:22), and to love their neighbor as themselves (see Leviticus 19:18). Similarly, Benjamin adds the force of covenant (see Mosiah 5:5) in answer to the question why one should serve.

*We serve each other because we come to view other people as a part of ourselves.* This concept, in turn, adds an interpersonal reason to serve. One result of the covenant, according to Benjamin, is that the covenanters all become the sons and daughters of God, which means that they also become related to each other as if they were siblings. In this sense, one’s self is not an isolated entity but an interconnected and composite being to which many people have contributed through associations and involvements that predate this existence and will postdate this life through a sealing that binds us together eternally (see Mosiah 5:15). Relationships such as these change the concept of service to others, who are in a sense part of ourselves, and we, of course, have no desire or reason to injure ourselves.

*We serve in order to know the Master.* After laying all the foregoing logical groundwork flowing from obligation, commandment, judgment, generosity, nature, promise, and sociality, Benjamin is at last prepared to offer his final solution to the problem that he posed in the first paragraphs of his speech: If we are always going to remain unprofitable servants, why should one ever bother to serve? Mosiah 5:13 adds an eighth and crowning reason why one should serve: “For how knoweth a man the master whom he has not served?” One obtains an important kind of knowledge about the Master from books, the scriptures, manuscripts, and commentaries. But one gets another kind of knowledge from church service—a kind of unity, sympathy, and understanding that helps us understand the Master’s will. People serve so that they may in the process come to know the Master whom they serve and that the Master will also know them; for without service, they will be “a stranger unto him” (Mosiah 5:13). Through service, Christ becomes more prominent in the thoughts and intents of our hearts. True service requires dedication and real intent. Through service the Master becomes a focal point of the thoughts and intents of our hearts. It is hard to imagine a more complete list of reasons why human beings should serve one another than that embedded in the principles set forth in Benjamin’s speech.

## **12. A Compelling Presentation of Ultimate Human Choice**

Benjamin posed ultimate human choices in bold relief. Like all great orations, Benjamin's speech sets forth the question and compels the audience to make a choice. It has been said that the most famous orations in world history have impelled people to critical action. One thinks of the speeches of Churchill or Lincoln. Speaking and hearing alone are not enough; righteousness requires doing.

Benjamin was a man of action who voiced his aims in words of historic simplicity. He stirred his people to repentance and induced "a mighty change" in them, so that they had "no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually" (Mosiah 5:2). From a literary standpoint, Benjamin was able to accomplish this largely by presenting crucial issues in terms of stark contrasts that exposed two clear extremes.

Benjamin's speech is filled with such contrasts: he juxtaposed the mortal and the immortal; the king and the dust of the earth; kingship and servitude; indebtedness and freedom; drinking damnation and becoming a saint; coming out in open rebellion against God and walking with a clear conscience, fully submissive to his will; "the awful situation of those that have fallen into transgression" and "the blessed and happy state of those that keep the commandments" (Mosiah 2:40–41); works, whether they be good or evil; the greatness of God and man's own nothingness (see Mosiah 4:11); the rich and the poor; being found on the right hand (see Mosiah 5:9) or the left hand of God; and feeding among the flocks and being cast out (see Mosiah 5:14). Lehi had earlier taught that an opposition exists in all things (see 2 Nephi 2:11); the literary achievements of Benjamin's speech, filled with stark contrasts that expose these clear eternal extremes, are crowned by placing the ultimate choice of eternal life squarely before the listener—urgently but lovingly.

## Conclusion

Thus, twelve qualities stand out in King Benjamin's speech that make it a masterful oration and consummate work of sacred literature. This speech poses the ultimate human choices in bold relief, it employs a compelling and profound ethical logic, it gives unmistakable instructions to enable success, it addresses practical themes in touch with real life, it reveals eternal doctrines of central importance, it uses eloquent and impressive words and phrases, it manifests purposeful and effective organization, it is presented with authority and humility, it influences readers by its sincere farewell setting and its use of other impressive forms of speech, it attracts attention through dramatic presentation, and it stands as a monument in Nephite religious history. Undoubtedly, other qualities could also be mentioned. All these impressive features are found in an oration that contains only about five thousand words and was translated and dictated by Joseph Smith in approximately a day and a half.

It has taken us as a people a long time for our understanding of this speech to mature. B. H. Roberts viewed the speech as an elementary discussion, as if given, he said, to "little children who were taking first lessons."<sup>22</sup> Sidney B. Sperry saw the speech as "remarkable in many respects," but he thought it was "highly improbable that Benjamin had received much instruction in the making of sermons or speeches."<sup>23</sup> Today careful students can see, even more clearly than ever before, that this masterful speech offers more than people have ever suspected. Benjamin makes his points so clearly that people may mistake his brilliance for something less. But it is the mark of all masters to make difficult feats look easy and to employ complex forms so fluently and fluidly that they draw no attention to themselves but flawlessly convey the intended message and result.

Oratory is the oldest of the arts. Few orations are of supreme merit. The best ones manifest a fluent command of language, superior powers of thought, logical consistency, quickness and brilliancy of conception, control of rhetorical expedients, personal magnetism, and control of the feelings as well as an appeal to the judgment of audience. To be fully appreciated an oration must be heard. "Much of what gave it force and effect is lost when it is

committed to print.”<sup>24</sup> Benjamin does all this; and even though his text is outstanding in print, it must have been superb when delivered.

Webster said that true eloquence is not merely in the speech but “in the man, the subject, and in the occasion.”<sup>25</sup> Worthy though he might be to be called “a master of oratory,” Benjamin would undoubtedly recognize that for any such tribute, he was indebted completely to God for everything in his speech that is magnificent, of good report, or praiseworthy.

## Notes

1. Bruce R. McConkie, *The Promised Messiah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981), 232.
2. Milton R. Hunter, *Conference Report* (October 1955): 65.
3. Andrew Scotland, *The Power of Eloquence: A Treasury of British Speech* (London: Cassell, 1961), v.
4. Rufus Choate, quoted in Houston Peterson, *A Treasury of the World's Speeches*, rev. and enl. ed. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965), xxvii. For another collection of great speeches, see Lord George-Brown, *The Voice of History: Great Speeches of the English Language* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1979).
5. Peterson, *Treasury of the World's Speeches*, xxvii.
6. Sherwin Cody, *A Selection from the World's Great Orations* (Chicago: McClurg, 1917), xvi.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., xiii.
9. For further information, see “Benjamin’s Speech: A Classic Ancient Farewell Address,” in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992), 120–22; this topic is developed further in John W. Welch and Daryl R. Hague, “Benjamin’s Speech as a Traditional Ancient Farewell Address,” in this volume.
10. Peterson, *Treasury of the World's Speeches*, xxix.
11. Quoted in *ibid.*, xxvii.
12. William N. Brigance, *A History and Criticism of American Public Address* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1960), 1:vii.
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14. Cody, *World's Great Orations*, xxxi.
15. Ibid., xiii.
16. Ibid., xxiii.

17. Goodrich, *Select British Eloquence*, xiv.
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19. Victor H. Matthews, "The Anthropology of Slavery in the Covenant Code," in *Theory and Method in Biblical and Cuneiform Law*, ed. Bernard M. Levinson (Sheffield: JSOT, 1994), 124.
20. Goodrich, *Select British Eloquence*, xii.
21. Cody, *World's Great Orations*, xi.
22. B. H. Roberts, "God's Great Men: Jacob and Benjamin," *Millennial Star* 50 (3 December 1888): 774.
23. Sidney B. Sperry, *Book of Mormon Compendium* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1968), 293.
24. Charles Morris, *Famous Orators of the Word and Their Best Orations* (Chicago: Clarkson and Cooper, 1902), ii.
25. Peterson, *Treasury of the World's Speeches*, xxviii.