

# Benjamin's Sermon as a Traditional Ancient Farewell Address

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In many ways, Benjamin's speech and its surrounding texts (Mosiah 1–6) are bound up with ancient and venerable literary and religious traditions, drawing heavily on and conforming extensively to customary Israelite patterns and practices. To our understanding of Benjamin's speech can be added yet another significant dimension. It involves the literary pattern that can be seen in the farewell speeches that were given by several ancient political and religious leaders near the end of their lives. William S. Kurz has studied a large number of farewell speeches found in the Bible and in classical literature from the Greco-Roman world.<sup>1</sup> Kurz has abstracted from his collection of speeches twenty elements that appear regularly in most of these addresses. Because Benjamin's speech was also written and delivered in contemplation of Benjamin's own approaching death, the invitation seems natural, if not irresistible, to analyze Benjamin's discourse and several other farewell speeches in the Book of Mormon in terms of Kurz's list of typical farewell speech elements. The results of this study show that Benjamin's speech possesses as many or more of the characteristics of a traditional ancient Israelite farewell address than any other similar speech on record.

## **Ancient Farewell Speeches from the Old World**

The Old Testament contains many reports of aging prophet-leaders who, at a time when it was obvious that they were about to die, called all or some of their people together one last time to teach them, to exhort them to righteousness, and to confer the responsibilities of leadership on their successors. Four of these accounts, which vary considerably in length, preserve what is known of the farewell speeches of Moses (Deuteronomy 31–34), Joshua (Joshua 23–24), David (1 Kings 2:1–10; compare 1 Chronicles 28–29), and Samuel (1 Samuel 12:1–25). In addition, several other farewell speeches were delivered by prominent religious and political leaders in the New Testament, the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, and Greco-Roman literature. Certain themes appear regularly in all these farewell addresses, as if the speakers were consciously striving to conform their words to a customary prototype or to the traditional expectations of their audiences.

Kurz has found that twenty elements can be identified in these speeches and that many of these elements are generally common to all farewell addresses. While no single speech contains all twenty elements, most contain many of them. For example, Moses' speech contains sixteen of these elements (see Deuteronomy 31–34), Paul's fourteen (see Acts 20), Mattathias's ten (see 1 Kings 2:1–10), and David's nine (see 1 Maccabees 2:49–70).

Kurz's analysis creates a useful literary tool for dissecting, comparing, and assessing the components of farewell speeches. While other scholars might wish to point out further elements in this genre or might place different degrees of emphasis on the various features, Kurz's treatment offers a serviceable description of the standard literature that has emerged in farewell speeches in general. His descriptions of the attributes typical of these kinds of speeches can be summarized as follows:

1. *The summons.* The speaker calls his successors and followers together so they can receive his last instructions.
2. *The speaker's own mission or example.* A description of the speaker's life and calling is followed by a commandment that his followers should do as he has done.

3. *Innocence and discharge of duty.* The speaker declares that he has done his best and has fulfilled his obligations. He has accomplished what he intended to do and cannot be held liable for his people's actions in the future.

4. *Impending death.* The announcement of the speaker's impending death reveals no fear of death. Rather, the speaker shows courage and an acceptance of his fate. Sometimes he commends his soul to God or the gods.

5. *Exhortation.* The listeners are encouraged to remember the teachings that the speaker has given previously and to obey the commands that he will give during his address. The people are also counseled to have courage during times of trial or difficulty. Exhortations help to solidify the lessons of the past and provide comfort for the future.

6. *Warnings and final injunctions.* Warnings about disobedience and its consequences are given. There may also be warnings concerning false teachers who will try to lead the people astray. Commandments and final instructions, designed to aid the people, accompany these warnings.

7. *Blessings.* The speaker usually pronounces or promises blessings in conjunction with his warnings and final instructions.

8. *Farewell gestures.* While the speaker may make some gesture to bid farewell, as seen especially in the Greco-Roman literature, only one of the twelve biblical addresses cited by Kurz mentions a farewell gesture. That instance occurs when Paul knelt down and prayed with the disciples at the end of his speech, after which the disciples fell on his neck and kissed him (see Acts 20:36–38).

9. *Tasks for successors.* Final orders may confer specific responsibilities to successors. Jesus, for example, gave final charges to the apostles at the last supper (see Luke 22:25–38); David commanded Solomon to take vengeance on Joab and Shimei (see 1 Kings 2:5–6, 8–9).

10. *Theological review of history.* A theological review of the past is given, often rehearsing events going back to the beginning of the world, the purpose of which is to emphasize the guidance, protection, and chastisement of God. Moses, for example, recounted the history of Israel and acknowledged God's hand in the protection and development of the children of Jacob (see Deuteronomy 32).

11. *Revelation of the future.* Often the speaker is aware of future events that could threaten his reputation or might involve his followers. Jesus, for instance, predicted Judas's betrayal and Peter's denial (see Luke 22:21, 34).

12. *Promises.* Biblical farewell speeches typically promise the prospect of eternal glory. Thus both Jesus (see Luke 22) and Mattathias (see 1 Maccabees 2) promised glory to their followers after teaching them about the importance of serving one another. This element does not appear in the speeches from the Greco-Roman tradition.

13. *Appointment of or reference to a successor.* The appointment of a successor is a very common feature of farewell speeches in the biblical tradition, and this designation serves to legitimize the authority of the new leader. For example, David's farewell address specifically endorsed Solomon's leadership (see 1 Kings 2:1–4).

14. *Bewailing the loss.* Often the account describes the mourning of the friends and followers of the speaker.

15. *Future degeneration.* Predictions and warnings concerning future heresies and disobedience often appear in biblical farewell speeches. Such predictions transfer responsibility for adverse developments in the future from

the speaker to the coming generations. Moses, for example, declared that Israel would reject the Lord and turn to idolatry (see Deuteronomy 32:32–33, 36–39).

16. *Covenant renewal and sacrifices*. The listeners are enjoined to renew their covenant with God. David's instructions to Solomon ensured the fulfillment of David's covenant with God, and Jesus' actions at the last supper signaled a new covenant symbolized by the bread and wine. The covenant element is unique to the biblical tradition, and in Old Testament times sacrifices would generally accompany the covenant renewal.

17. *Providing for those who will survive*. Since the followers of the aged leader will require guidance and comfort after his death, instructions are given for providing such help. Jesus' command that Peter strengthen the brethren (see Luke 22:23) is an example of this element.

18. *Consolation to the inner circle*. Often, the speaker attempts to comfort his closest associates. Jesus did this at the last supper, when he and his most beloved followers were alone.

19. *Didactic speech*. The speaker may review certain principles to help the followers remember what they should do.

20. *Ars moriendi, or the approach to death*. This element relates to the leader's approach to death itself. Kurz finds this element present only in Plato's *Phaedo*, although he suggests that it may also be implied in Josephus.

## **Benjamin's Farewell Speech**

At least as complete as any farewell address that Kurz has analyzed is King Benjamin's speech. This speech and the events related directly to it comprise a lengthy primary account. It is longer and more detailed than any of the biblical farewell speeches; only the speech of Moses comes close to it. In Benjamin's speech, sixteen elements of the farewell address typology are directly present, with two others clearly implied. Only the elements of bewailing the loss and *ars moriendi* (the least common factor and one evidenced only in the Greco-Roman tradition) fail to appear in Mosiah 1–6. No other single speech manifests more features of Kurz's pattern, and thus Benjamin's speech may well be the best example on record of this ancient rhetorical form of speech.

Kurz has singled out four of his twenty elements as fundamentally characteristic of addresses in the Old Testament and the Old Testament Apocrypha, as opposed to the Greco-Roman tradition: (1) the speaker's assertion of innocence and fulfillment of his mission, (2) the designation of tasks for successors, (3) a theological review of history, and (4) the revelation of future events. All four of these characteristically Israelite elements appear prominently in Benjamin's speech. Furthermore, Benjamin emphasizes the covenant relationship between God and man, and his text ends with an express covenant renewal. No preoccupation with death occurs here, as it does in the Greco-Roman texts. Benjamin's speech is not only one of the most complete ancient farewell addresses known anywhere, but it also strongly manifests those elements that are most deeply rooted in early biblical tradition.

The following overview summarizes and illustrates the elements in Kurz's analysis of ancient farewell addresses as those factors appear in Benjamin's speech:

1. *The summons*. The text begins by telling how Benjamin summoned his people together:

And it came to pass that after King Benjamin had made an end of teaching his sons, that he waxed old, and he saw that he must very soon go the way of all the earth; therefore, he thought it expedient that he should confer the kingdom upon one of his sons. Therefore, he had Mosiah brought before him. (Mosiah 1:9–10)

2. *The speaker's own mission or example.* Near the beginning of his speech, Benjamin pointed to his own life as an example of brotherly service that should be followed by those who would survive him. Having faithfully served many years as their king, Benjamin declared that he had spent his days in the service of his people (see Mosiah 2:12–14). He was explicit that his people should follow his example: “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).

3. *Innocence and discharge of duty.* After Benjamin reported his activities as king, he openly declared his innocence before God: “Yet my brethren, I have not done these things that I might boast, neither do I tell these things that thereby I might accuse you; but I tell you these things that ye may know that I can answer a clear conscience before God this day” (Mosiah 2:15). In the same spirit, Benjamin revealed that one of his purposes in calling his people together was that he might “be found blameless,” “rid [his] garments of [their] blood,” and die peacefully (Mosiah 2:27–28).

4. *Impending death.* Benjamin plainly acknowledged that he was close to death: “And I, even I, whom ye call your king, am no better than ye yourselves are; for I am also of the dust. And ye behold that *I am old*, and *am about to yield up this mortal frame* to its mother earth . . . at this period of time when I am about to go down to my grave” (Mosiah 2:26, 28; see also 1:9).

5. *Exhortation.* Benjamin's speech is filled with imperatives and strong exhortations. For example:

Believe that ye must repent of your sins and forsake them, and humble yourselves before God; and ask in sincerity of heart that he would forgive you; and now, if you believe all these things see that ye do them. (Mosiah 4:10; see 2:9, 40–41; 5:12)

6. *Warnings and final injunctions.* Mosiah, chapter 4, concludes with the following general warnings of this aged leader:

If ye do not watch yourselves, and your thoughts, and your words, and your deeds, and observe the commandments of God, and continue in the faith of what ye have heard concerning the coming of our Lord, even unto the end of your lives, ye must perish. (Mosiah 4:30)

Similarly, the words of the angel in Mosiah chapter 3 end with severe warnings and woes: “They have drunk damnation to their own souls, . . . and their torment is as a lake of fire and brimstone” (Mosiah 3:25, 27). Several other sections in Benjamin's speech contain equally stern warnings (see Mosiah 2:32, 36–37, 39; 3:12; and 5:10–11).

In addition, Benjamin gave various injunctions to his people, especially including commands to care for the poor, the hungry, and the naked, both spiritually and temporally (see Mosiah 4:16–26). He also implored the assembly to care for their children's physical needs and to teach them to walk in the ways of the Lord (see Mosiah 4:14–15).

7. *Blessings.* On several occasions, Benjamin mentioned or pronounced the blessings of God on his people (see Mosiah 2:22, 24, 31, 36, 41; 3:16). He promised that God would immediately bless and prosper his people for

their righteousness (see Mosiah 2:22, 24), and he invited them to reflect on “the blessed and happy state of those that keep the commandments of God. For behold, they are blessed in all things, both temporal and spiritual; and if they hold out faithful to the end they are received into heaven, that thereby they may dwell with God in a state of never-ending happiness” (Mosiah 2:41).

8. *Farewell gestures.* Benjamin declared that he had called the assembly so that he might rid his garments of the people’s blood (see Mosiah 2:28). It is possible that Benjamin ritually shook or cleansed these garments; Jacob, one of Benjamin’s spiritual predecessors, actually took off his garment in front of a similar assembly and shook his clothes to rid himself symbolically of the blood of his people (see 2 Nephi 9:44).

9. *Tasks for successors.* In the course of his speech, Benjamin assigned future tasks and roles to his son, his people, and the priests in his kingdom. For example, before delivering his address, Benjamin gave his son Mosiah “charge concerning all the affairs of the kingdom” (Mosiah 1:15). Then, during his speech, Benjamin pronounced his son Mosiah to be king, publicly charging him with the task of teaching the law to the people (see Mosiah 2:31). After his address, Benjamin appointed priests to teach the people to “know the commandments of God and to stir them up in remembrance of the oath which they had made” (Mosiah 6:3).

10. *Theological review of history.* At two points in his speech, Benjamin briefly discussed historical topics. He reviewed the recent past by summarizing the character and history of his administration. Furthermore, after reminding the assembly that God had always sent prophets to the children of men, he recounted some of the more distant experiences of the early Israelites, describing how Moses showed the Israelites “many signs, and wonders, and types, and shadows” concerning the coming of Christ (Mosiah 3:15), as also did the prophets, but how the Israelites hardened their hearts.

11. *Revelation of the future.* In Mosiah 3, Benjamin revealed things to come. He called special attention to his prophetic words:

And again my brethren, I would call your attention, for I have somewhat more to speak unto you; for behold, I have things to tell you concerning *that which is to come*. (Mosiah 3:1)

Verses 2–10 contain revelations about the future mission of Jesus Christ.

12. *Promises.* Benjamin gave his people many promises. For instance, he promised that if they would remember the greatness and goodness of God and their own nothingness, if they would humble themselves and pray continually, and if they would remain strong in their faith in the advent of Christ, then they would “always rejoice, and be filled with the love of God, and always retain a remission of [their] sins; and [they should] grow in the knowledge of the glory of him that created [them], or in the knowledge of that which is just and true” (Mosiah 4:12).

13. *Appointment of or reference to a successor.* Before his farewell address, Benjamin privately announced that Mosiah would become his successor (see Mosiah 1:15–16), and during the speech he proclaimed his son the new king (see Mosiah 2:31). After the speech, Benjamin formally consecrated Mosiah as king (see Mosiah 6:3).

14. *Bewailing the loss.* The record makes no mention of mourning over Benjamin’s death, probably because he was not on his deathbed at the time he delivered his speech. Perhaps, however, one may see in the response of the people another form of mourning: fearing for their own eternal lives, the people fell to the earth, overwhelmed, having “viewed themselves in their own carnal state, even less than the dust of the earth” (Mosiah 4:2). Perhaps

their cries reflected not only sorrow for sin, but also a lament over the prophesied death of the Lord God Omnipotent, their awareness of Benjamin's approaching death, and their own mortality.

15. *Future degeneration.* Benjamin's speech, though serious and sober, is positive and optimistic. No pessimistic predictions about impending degeneration among his people as a whole are found. Benjamin does, however, implicitly acknowledge that future degeneration is possible. He realized that some of the individuals listening to him would not obey him but rather would obey the evil spirit and remain in a state of open rebellion against God. (See Mosiah 3:23–27; 4:14–15.)

16. *Covenant renewal and sacrifices.* These two factors are clearly visible. Shortly before Benjamin's address commenced, the people offered sacrifices and burnt offerings to God (see Mosiah 2:3). At the conclusion of his speech, Benjamin asked the people if they believed his words, and they replied that they desired to make a covenant with God: "We are willing to enter into a covenant with our God to do his will, and to be obedient to his commandments in all things that he shall command us, all the remainder of our days" (Mosiah 5:5; see 5:1–7).

17. *Providing for those who will survive.* In Mosiah 4, Benjamin commanded his people to care for the children and for the poor, both spiritually and temporally. He imposed these duties on all those who would survive him, and he made the act of providing for the poor a mandatory condition that the people must satisfy in order to retain a remission of their sins (see Mosiah 4:14–26).

18. *Consolation to the inner circle.* In his preparations for transferring the kingdom to his son Mosiah, Benjamin met first with all his sons, his closest circle of family associates (see Mosiah 1). Benjamin extended comfort to the entire assembly at several points in his speech; he viewed his entire audience as family, as his "friends" and "kindred" (Mosiah 4:4), and as an eternal family, the sons and daughters of God (see Mosiah 5:7). In his closing words, Benjamin gave comfort and encouragement to all his people, assuring them that great blessings would be theirs if they lived as he had taught them (see Mosiah 5:15).

19. *Didactic speech.* Many didactic elements are present in Benjamin's speech. Benjamin taught the importance of such things as service, humility, charity, obedience, faith, the atonement of Jesus Christ, and many other practical and spiritual virtues.

20. *Ars moriendi, or the approach to death.* This element is not found in Benjamin's speech, though it might be seen in Mosiah 2:28–30.

Based on this data, a strong case can be made in support of the fact that the pattern of ancient farewell addresses that has been detected by scholars in recent years was illustriously carried out by Benjamin in his classic farewell address. Almost every element found and enumerated by Kurz in a wide array of ancient sources—but especially the aspects pertinent to the biblical tradition—was included by Benjamin.

### **Was Benjamin Following Prior Patterns?**

A logical inference from the foregoing data is that Benjamin was aware of the ancient farewell speech tradition and followed its pattern consciously. This raises the question: which prior precedents did Benjamin know about as he designed and orchestrated his final farewell sermon? Three possibilities present themselves: (1) precedents from previous Book of Mormon prophets and leaders; (2) biblical examples known to him from the plates of brass; and (3) cases in additional texts found on the plates of brass.

Several farewell speeches are contained in the Book of Mormon. Indeed, it seems that it became almost mandatory for a Book of Mormon prophet near the time of his death to deliver his parting words to his posterity, his people, or to future readers. It exceeds the scope of this study to compare all the elements of these farewell speeches in depth, but even a cursory survey shows that most of Kurz's farewell speech elements are present in these seven final statements or discourses in addition to Benjamin's: Lehi (2 Nephi 1–4), Nephi (2 Nephi 31–33), Jacob (Jacob 4–6), Enos (Enos 1:27), Mosiah (Mosiah 28–29), Mormon (Mormon 6:17–7:10), and Moroni (Moroni 10:34).

Benjamin would have been aware of the farewell texts of Lehi, Nephi, Jacob, and Enos. After Benjamin, the tradition continued in the Book of Mormon, though it became much less distinct. Benjamin's speech must be viewed as a part of this longstanding, venerable Nephite literary and rhetorical tradition, which very likely drew much of its strength from biblical sources. Two tables show the elements of the farewell speech protocol included by both Book of Mormon and Old Testament prophets. Four Old Testament accounts are old enough to have been on the plates of brass: Moses (Deuteronomy 31–34), Joshua (Joshua 23–24), David (1 Kings 2:1–10; compare 1 Chronicles 28–29), and Samuel (1 Samuel 12:1–25). Table 1 examines Book of Mormon speeches, and table 2 compares Old World speeches with that of Benjamin. From the information on these tables we can examine the similarities and patterns found in the different records.

It is also possible that Benjamin was aware of other farewell speeches contained on the plates of brass that are not found in the Bible today. In a Hebrew text recorded at least as early as the time of Christ—and quite possibly containing materials that are considerably older—an account appears of a farewell speech delivered by an Israelite leader named Cenez.<sup>2</sup> Without necessarily arguing that this precise text was found on the plates of brass, I suggest that the speech of Cenez (which was not included by Kurz) provides an excellent example of yet another ancient Israelite farewell sermon and perhaps is the kind of additional material Benjamin might have known about and used as a model.

The history of Cenez tells of a prophet-warrior-leader who succeeded Joshua as the first judge in Israel. When the time came for him to die, Cenez called his people together in a large assembly and spoke to them about what the Lord was prepared to do for his people in the last days. Cenez reestablished God's covenant with the Israelites, and his priest Phinehas revealed to the people sacred things that had been shown one night to Phinehas's father, Eleazar, in a dream.

The farewell speech of Cenez seems to manifest twelve of Kurz's elements, namely, 1, 4, 5, 6, 9, 10, 11, 13, 14, 16, 17, and 19.

In addition to Cenez's conformity to the biblical tradition, many other interesting similarities can be found between the account of Cenez and the speech of Benjamin. For example:

¥ The vision of Eleazar is extraordinary. The occasion of an annual assembly, when the people were "gathered together in the assembly," triggered a vision in which the Lord appeared to Eleazar "in a dream by night." Likewise, Benjamin reveals the very sacred words made known unto him "by an angel from God" who woke him up and stood before him and delivered a message (Mosiah 3:2).

¥ Cenez declared that he had been privileged to see those things which had been seen and established "even before the earth was corrupted," which were "fixed in advance," and also to know those things as they had been "prophesied [by others] before" him. In a similar way, Benjamin asserts that the substance of his prophecies had

been shown to previous generations, to Moses and his people, and also to all the “holy prophets” who spoke concerning the Lord’s coming (Mosiah 3:15).

¥ The prophecy of Cenez foresaw the millennial day inhabited by those who will have the name “man.” Benjamin mentions the name that should never “be blotted out, except it be through transgression” (Mosiah 5:11). Parenthetically, the blotting out of names was vividly a part of Cenez’s early ministry, since Cenez wrote the names of sinners on books that were then blotted out of Israel when the books were consumed by divine fire.

The valedictory words of Cenez and others capture the essence of the traditional Israelite farewell sermon, through which the Western mind can more deeply appreciate yet another dimension of the salutatory words and deeds of King Benjamin. Some of the foregoing similarities may be coincidental, but taken together they form an impressive array. The items on this list—the theology, imagery, protocol, and ritual—point consistently in the same direction, to a common Hebrew background.

This chapter has considered several ideas. Above all, Benjamin’s speech is the most complete example of a typical Israelite farewell speech known today. Benjamin’s address epitomizes this genre of traditional Israelite literature, as recently defined in scholarly studies. The account of the funeral speech of Cenez is probably the next best example in existence, followed by Moses’ concluding words in Deuteronomy 31–34. Given the obscurity of this information before the turn of this century, the remarkable affinities between the farewell addresses from the Old World and the final speech of Benjamin become even more impressive.

## Notes

1. See William S. Kurz, “Luke 22:14–38 and Greco-Roman and Biblical Farewell Addresses,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 104 (1985): 251–68. See also William S. Kurz, *Farewell Addresses in the New Testament* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1990).

2. An English translation by D. J. Herrington of this work, which is titled *Biblical Antiquities or Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum*, is available in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1985), 2:297–377. The farewell speech is on pp. 341–42.