

Assembly and Atonement

Hugh Nibley

Public and Private

At a recent general conference we heard of plans for building a larger “tabernacle.”¹ That word taken literally denotes the opposite of an assembly hall, where everybody meets. A tabernacle (Latin *tabernaculum*) is “a little house made of boards,” a quick shelter or booth put together from boards, branches, and bits of clothing. The roots behind the English word *booth* describe its purpose: it is the Semitic *bayt* from the verb *bata-yabitu* (Aramaic), meaning “to spend the night,” and certainly suggests our word *bide* or *abide*. The Hebrew *sukkah* is the same as the Egyptian *seh*, with an ideogram depicting the booth that provided shelter—“shadow in the daytime from the heat, and . . . covert from the storm and from rain” (Isaiah 4:6)—for an individual family living in the open during the Passover (see Leviticus 23:42–43; Nehemiah 8:17)—“Thou mayest not eat within thy gates” (Deuteronomy 12:17; compare 12:18).

The people whom Benjamin commanded to assemble “gathered themselves together throughout all the land” (Mosiah 2:1). And yet they all enjoyed a private family outing, for they “pitched their tents round about, every man according to his family, . . . every family being separate one from another” (Mosiah 2:5). This was the practice observed at the Feast of Tabernacles, and booths are one of the characteristic features of great national assemblies of the ancients throughout the world. At the culmination of the celebration we have both the vast unison of the hallelujah shouts and the private thoughts, secret names, and whispered exchanges of the initiation that preceded and followed with name, seal, mark, and personal registration.²

Some today have trouble making the distinction between what is strictly private in one’s thinking—after all, we are commanded to pray in secret—and what is necessarily shared among members of the church. Some would have uniform political commitment required of all members, and some would have mission and stake presidents prescribe what books may be read and what music may be heard by the individual members. How far does free agency go? How far can individual tastes be assigned? No one was a more stalwart exponent of temperance than Brigham Young; yet when his father asked him to sign the Temperance Pledge, he resolutely refused. What he objected to of course was being officiously told what his principles were.³

Albert Einstein begins his book, *The World as I See It*: “A hundred times every day I remind myself that my inner and outer life depend on the labours of other men, living and dead, and that I must exert myself in order to give in the same measure as I have received and am still receiving.”⁴ And yet no one was ever more aloof, absorbed, private, and original than Einstein, and still his inner and outer life are not to be separated.

Committees do not think; they noodle, throw things around, drop suggestions, send up flags and signals in the hope that someone may react with an original idea. But committees themselves contain nothing of the deep, prolonged, concentrated thought of the individual or the brilliant flashes of insight that may result. Solon, the wisest of the Greeks, said that the Athenians were too smart by half individually but collectively a lot of simpletons. It is always gratifying to discover that the members of a quorum, board, committee, or faculty are individually smarter than they are collectively. That is necessarily the case because each has certain ideas that would not be quite acceptable to everybody. Yet we still come together to consult; we still warm up to each other’s presence. I might say of family, friends, and church members what St. Augustine said of God: “*Fecisti nos ad te et inquietum est cor nostrum donec requiescat in te*—You made us to be with you, and so our heart is restless until we can be with you”⁵ (and when we are all with you, we are of course all together with each other—we are made both to be together and to stand alone but too much of either condition can drive one crazy).

The Great Assembly

Over the years, I have spoken about the “great assembly,” or year-rite. People have asked me just what I mean by this. I can best sum it up from an article I wrote forty-five years ago, now beyond the statute of limitations:

That is the *panegyris*, the great [New Year’s] assembly of the entire race to participate in solemn rites essential to the continuance of its corporate and individual well-being. . . . At hundreds of holy shrines, each believed to mark the exact center of the universe and represented as the point at which the four quarters of the earth converged—“the navel of the earth”—one might have seen assembled at the New Year—the moment of creation, the beginning and ending of time—vast concourses of people, each thought to represent the entire human race in the presence of all its ancestors and gods.

A visitor . . . could have witnessed ritual contests: foot, horse, and wagon races, . . . choral competitions, the famous Troy game, beauty contests, and . . . [especially] the now famous ritual year-drama . . . [in which] the king wages combat with his dark adversary of the underworld, emerging victorious after a temporary defeat from his duel with death, . . . as the worthy and recognized ruler of the new age.⁶

The drama celebrated the creation of the world, the marriage and coronation of the king, and the birthday of the human race. It culminated in a feast of abundance, the king having proven his capacity to bring prosperity and victory to the people. All these elements are present in Benjamin’s celebration. “The ‘origin’ of the drama (both of Greek tragedy and of the dramatic spectacles of the ancient Near East and of Europe),” writes Mircea Eliade, “has been traced back to certain seasonal rituals which, broadly speaking, presented the following sequence: conflict between two antagonistic principles (Life and Death, God and the Dragon, etc.), tragic suffering of the God, lamentation at his death and jubilation to greet his ‘resurrection.’”⁷

King Benjamin sums up the purpose of the meeting as *at-one-ment*, bringing together man with God and also men with each other, but men do not swear loyalty to each other; their common loyalty to God alone unites them in the most perfect possible unity (see Mosiah 5:2–5). In fact, Benjamin explains that the purpose of the meeting is “that they might give thanks to the Lord . . . , that they might rejoice and be filled with love towards God and *all men*” (Mosiah 2:4). That is the spirit of the great assembly everywhere; it recalls the Golden Age, when men and gods lived together in a heaven on earth.

The Coronation Assembly

Since treating the subject of ritual in the Melchizedek Priesthood manual for 1957 (lesson 23),⁸ I have come upon more confirmation, such as in a particularly interesting writing of Nathan the Babylonian, a writer of the tenth century AD who has left us an eyewitness account of the coronation of the Prince of the Captivity or Exilarch in Babylonia. He speaks with the detachment of a gentile though he may have been a Jew.⁹ Since we find no extended description of a coronation in the Old Testament, as we do in the Book of Mormon, and since no one showed interest in the remarkably uniform pattern of ancient coronations until the present century, Nathan’s account provides us with strong evidence for the authenticity of Mosiah’s account.

Because these Jews living in Babylonia had lost their real king and yet wished to continue their ancient customs, it was necessary to choose a candidate. The chief men of the community came together to appoint the new Exilarch from one of the most illustrious families. The elders then set him apart by the laying on of hands and sent out a proclamation that all should come to the coronation, bringing the most costly presents of gold, silver, and textiles that each could afford. Note that Benjamin, in a list of contrasts between himself and the conventional divine kings, expressly forbids that very thing: “I have . . . not sought gold nor silver nor any manner of riches of you” (Mosiah 2:12). In Babylonia, the day before the affair a wooden tower ten feet high and four and a half feet broad was

erected as a speaker's platform, so the king could be seen and heard by the vast multitude. On the top was a throne covered by a *baldachin*, or tent, and on either side at a lower level were seats for two counselors—on the right the head of the School of Sura, on the left the head of the School of Pumbedetha. The tower was covered with costly materials, behind which at ground level a highly trained youth choir was concealed.¹⁰

When King Benjamin finishes his address, he says, "I am about to go down to my grave . . . in peace, and my immortal spirit may join the choirs above in singing the praises of a just God" (Mosiah 2:28). In the account of Nathan the Babylonian, the Exilarch's descent from the tower after his final speech was accompanied by the heavenly voices behind the veil. The *hazzan*, or cantor, representing the old king, began with a blessing on the congregation followed by the antiphonal hymn of praise by the congregation. The people arose and gave the Eighteen Benedictions. Then the king appeared on the tower and sat on his throne between the two lesser thrones. Then all the people sat. The cantor alone sang "Redeemer of Israel" and all the people stood for prayer; all the youths shouted "Holiness to the Lord." And then the *hazzan* put his head and shoulders into the *baldachin*, representing Moses' meeting with the Lord at the *kapporet*, the tent of the covenant (later the veil of the temple), and exchanged words, including the secret name, in a whisper so that only those nearby could hear. When the blessing ended, the boys in the chorus shouted "Amen," all the people keeping silent until the blessings were completed. Then the Prince of the Captivity, having received his authority (he was now the king), spoke openly and taught on the subject of the lesson for that day; an interpreter or translator (Aramaic *meturgeman*) stood by because the people spoke Aramaic and the scripture was Hebrew. The king taught with great passion, keeping his eyes closed, his head wrapped in a *tallit*; as he talked for an hour there was not a peep in the congregation, for if anyone uttered a single word he uncovered his eyes and terror and dread fell upon all the people—even so does Benjamin hold his congregation spellbound in awe and humiliation.

The address was followed by a questioning period; a wise old man, very shrewd and instructed, acted as intercessor. The *hazzan* gave a New Year's greeting of long life: "Long live our Prince of the Captivity; may you all live long." We recall that Benjamin declares, "This day he hath . . . begotten you" (Mosiah 5:7)—it was the universal birthday, the day of creation, the *natalia*; to celebrate it the people bring the first fruits of the New Year and animals for sacrifice (see Mosiah 2:3). To mark the new birthday as a rebirth, King Benjamin gives the people a new name as a covenantal token. As in Mosiah's account, register was taken of the names of those present, acknowledging their donations. Then the Book of the Law was brought, and a priest and a Levite both read from it, after which the cantor—the old king—took the book to the new Exilarch, and all the people rose to their feet as the new Exilarch read to them from the Book of the Law. As in Mosiah's account, the main purpose of the event was to give a refresher course in the Law to the entire nation. To be the interpreter for the royal teacher was considered a very high honor indeed, and a rich and important man was chosen for the privilege. The prince was again blessed by the Book of the Law, which was returned to its place with blessings "forever and ever." The people then fell to and enjoyed the sumptuous feast; Nathan lays special emphasis on the dessert.

As in Mosiah, there were frequent exchanges between the king and the people, the latter reciting in unison. This explains the odd circumstance in which the people "all cried aloud with one voice" (Mosiah 4:2) and proceeded to recite in unison an ecstatic statement of some fifty words. How could they do it spontaneously "with one voice"? Throughout the world such acclamations were led by a special cheerleader, sometimes called a *stasiarch*, who stood before the crowd and received notes from important people or shouts from the audience requesting particular cheers. He would recite a sentence to the people and wave a flag to lead them in a uniform chant (compare Deuteronomy 27:14–26). Sometimes the king himself chose to lead the cheering, and some Roman emperors enjoyed it. There was no limit to what could be shouted in unison, and it could go on for hours.

The Nothingness of Man

Benjamin begins his talk on public policy by distancing himself from the once-conventional model of the divine year-king, disclaiming any supernatural status for himself. Not only is he not “more than a mortal man” (Mosiah 2:10), but he is a sadly typical one, “like as yourselves, subject to all manner of infirmities in body and mind” (Mosiah 2:11). What a confession! And yet we now find everywhere that the nothingness of man is the theme of the great year-drama.

Today the great year-rite is being examined even more closely. Professor Hornung, the most celebrated of today’s Egyptologists, says that the coming together of the Egyptians to rehearse the creation of the world, the fall of man, and all that followed had three purposes. The first was to give some sort of explanation for the utterly wretched human condition on earth, which is always on the brink of failure and always looking forward to death.¹¹ Arthur Koestler and others conclude that “our race is . . . a very sick biological product,” and there is nothing we can do about it; we are programmed for failure.¹² Koestler, after a lifelong search, solved the problem by suicide. But the ancients had a better way—they dramatized the situation. As uniform as the protocol of the feast itself was the drama that went with it. The drama began with the council in heaven discussing the creation, then continued with a dispute over leadership, the casting out of the adversary, the Garden of Eden, and the fall of man. These marvelous temple plays, some of which survive from very ancient times, give solace to our sorry state by lending it some majesty and dignity. The ancients went to the heart of the matter where our troubles are concerned, but tossed up their hands in despair when looking for a solution. It was simply beyond them. The choruses wail and lament; the lead players like the lyric poets wring their hands in despair: “O the human race!” says the chorus, “I have calculated your worth and find it sums up to exactly nothing.”¹³ Benjamin’s sentiments exactly. A long tragic drama or trilogy of tragedies would be followed up by a slapstick comedy to make life endurable by laughing at ourselves.

Hornung’s second point involves the question, Why does God leave men alone to suffer? Plato in the *Republic* accuses Aeschylus of charging God with *aporia*—failure to provide or falling short. Either God was helpless to save men or willingly stood by and let them suffer, an act which would make him either weak or vicious. The ancients never answered that one, as Omar Khayyam reminds us with wicked glee.

The third point was the utter cruelty of the abrupt curtailment of human life, long, long before any individual has had half a chance of using even a fraction of his potentialities—why are we so overendowed and then hustled from the scene before we can make proper use of our talents? It all seems so wrong.

Here, of course, we have the difference between Benjamin’s teachings and those of the Greeks and Egyptians. Many recent studies have shown the close resemblance of the ancient Hebrew Wisdom Literature to that of the Egyptians. Both reach King Solomon’s conclusion about this world:

I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and, behold, all is vanity and vexation of spirit. That which is crooked cannot be made straight: and that which is wanting cannot be numbered. . . . I gave my heart to know wisdom, and to know madness and folly: I perceive that this also is vexation of spirit. For in much wisdom is much grief and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow. (Ecclesiastes 1:14–15, 17–18)

Man is a born loser, but it is here that the ancients part company with Benjamin—they think they have seen it all, and so are guilty of both overrating and underrating themselves. The overrating is quite absurd: “And now I ask, can ye say aught of yourselves? . . . Nay. Ye cannot say that ye are even as much as the dust of the earth. . . . And I, even I, whom ye call your king, am no better than ye yourselves are; . . . I am old, and am about to yield up this mortal frame” (Mosiah 2:25–26). “For even at this time, my whole frame doth tremble exceedingly while

attempting to speak unto you” (Mosiah 2:30). At the normal year-rite, the king was expected to be victorious in combat, majestic, irresistible, a rampant bull.

Then Benjamin really gets serious: “For the natural man is an enemy to God, and has been from the fall of Adam, and will be, forever and ever, unless he yields to the enticings of the Holy Spirit, and putteth off the natural man” (Mosiah 3:19). That is the key to the whole situation—we are dealing with the natural man and the natural man only. Jacob frankly admits that entropy is the fate of the natural man: “This flesh must have laid down to rot and to crumble to its mother earth, to rise no more” (2 Nephi 9:7). Moses, landing on earth as a natural man, is surprised to discover that “man is nothing, which thing I never had supposed” (Moses 1:10). But yet one verse later he announces that he is nothing less than “a son of God, in the similitude of his Only Begotten” (Moses 1:13).

After the Nephite king spoke, he saw that his people had come to view “themselves in their own carnal state, even less than the dust of the earth” (Mosiah 4:2). Benjamin rejoiced to see that “the knowledge of the goodness of God . . . has awakened you to a sense of your nothingness, and your worthless and fallen state” (Mosiah 4:5). “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. . . . If ye do this ye shall always rejoice, and be filled with the love of God, . . . and ye shall grow . . . in the knowledge of that which is just and true. And ye will not have a mind to injure one another” (Mosiah 4:11–13). This definition of the real world makes a nice contrast to what we call “the real world” today, where everyone is advised to learn martial arts, both to avoid and to inflict injury. And then the cruelest cut of all, “For behold, are we not all beggars?” (Mosiah 4:19). If we become too much attached to our earthly carnal state, Benjamin reminds us, in effect, “There is nothing for you here. You can’t stay here. You should be glad that this is not where you belong!”

During his life span on this earth, in which all are in the same situation, “the natural man is an enemy to God”—carnal, sensual, and devilish, or as we would say, oversexed, greedy, and mean, or perhaps lecherous, pampered, and vicious. Obviously things are out of order; but if we are really nothing, how can we save ourselves? Someone has to intervene, and here, with a sigh of relief, we learn that Benjamin has been tutored for this talk by an angel. This shocks us into realizing that we have not seen it all after all. There may be more to life than going to the office every day—this is *not* “all there is!”

Where did we get all those gifts and endowments with which we enter the world and then leave without ever using them? This question of Plato’s was repeated by Lamarck—to Darwin’s immense annoyance; he called it an abominable mystery. If natural selection chooses only those defenses of which the creature has absolute need for survival, why has our brain capacity so outrageously exceeded our needs? Where did we develop it? Where did we need it, if not in a far more sophisticated environment than we have here, where the stupidest species have survived the longest? We are equipped for much greater things than we ever achieve, and we yearn for something better than we can ever expect here and yet envisage most positively. That is what Plato calls *anamnesis*, dim memories of a better world that give us intimations of immortality at the sight of the *kaloskagathos*, something good, true, and beautiful. We are living in a dismal swamp between two glorious uplands. Why this unhappy interruption? For life is an interruption which consists almost entirely of an unbroken succession of interruptions. All this is to try man and to tempt him. For in getting ready for the long pull ahead, we must learn to cope with the worst.

Principles of Government

After discounting all of man’s boasted claims to independence—”of what have ye to boast? . . . can ye say aught of yourselves?” (Mosiah 2:24–25)—and declaring himself satisfied with a place in the choir above, while resigning his royal teaching job on earth, Benjamin lays down the first principle of government, which

may appear very strange to us but is a corollary to the nothingness of man: there shall be no contentions among the people lest they "list to obey the evil spirit" (Mosiah 2:32). *Tendere* means to stretch a rope; *contendere* is a tug-of-war. The Lord's first words to the Nephites, after he had introduced himself to them and told them how to baptize, dealt with contention:

According as I have commanded you . . . there shall be no disputations among you, as there have hitherto been; neither shall there be disputations among you concerning the points of my doctrine, as there have hitherto been. For verily, verily I say unto you, he that hath the spirit of contention is not of me but is of the devil, who is the father of contention, and he stirreth up the hearts of men to contend with anger, one with another. Behold, this is not my doctrine, to stir up the hearts of men with anger, one against another; but this is my doctrine, that such things should be done away. (3 Nephi 11:28–30)

Does he want to do away with the adversarial method, two-party debate, and legal confrontation, which we consider the best means of settling an argument? Exactly. The trouble is that such methods settle nothing. As Karl von Clausewitz noted, political argument leads to war, which simply "continu[es] . . . political intercourse [argument] . . . by other means,"¹⁴ until the exhausted powers fall back on diplomacy again, and so prepare for another war. I spent most of my mission teaching the gospel in villages in Baden, Germany, both in the Black Forest and the Rhine Plain. The villages were either Protestant or Catholic, and there was always tension, mistrust, and dislike between them. Why? Because some learned divines had held formal disputations on Christian doctrine some four hundred years before. Need we say more? The ancient plays likewise are endless discussion and argument with chorus and semichorus, protagonist and antagonist, constantly going at it and only making matters worse. The oldest surviving play begins with the king announcing his program: "My children, we must think this thing through."¹⁵ But the play leaves us with the battle of the sexes, of the races, and nations all going full blast. The ladies' chorus—the Danaids—express their loathing of Egyptian-style marriage and can't stand men of darker skin, and the nations of Egypt and Argos exchange insults and go to war. Such was the result of their endless discussions in tireless debate, and their raging sexism, racism, and nationalism still flourish in the same countries.

How do we solve things then? Benjamin makes it clear:

And now, my brethren, . . . as ye have kept my commandments, and also the commandments of my father, and have prospered, and have been kept from falling into the hands of your enemies [the two things which the king must guarantee], even so if ye shall keep the commandments of my son, or the commandments of God which shall be delivered unto you by him, ye shall prosper in the land, and your enemies shall have no power over you. (Mosiah 2:31)

This looks like autocratic monarchy and bald theocracy, but Benjamin has already settled that issue by his heavy emphasis on both his own mediocre qualifications and the right of the people in common with the royal family to receive revelation for themselves. They too can say, "And we, ourselves, also, through . . . the manifestations of his Spirit, have great views of that which is to come; and were it expedient, we could prophesy of all things" (Mosiah 5:3). Here the people receive their individual revelations. Prophecy means both to foretell and speak out, but here there is a contrary-to-fact or future-less-vivid condition: the individual is expected to receive and follow the promptings of the Spirit for himself, but *not* to introduce his personal revelations into public discussion. It is "expedient" for all to receive "great views" by revelation, but not expedient, unless so commanded, to teach them publicly.

Benjamin feels strongly that people have been on the wrong path in their confrontational politics (see Mosiah 2:32). If they continue that way, they will die in their sins and receive everlasting punishment (see Mosiah 2:33). In

engaging in partisan debate, “ye do withdraw yourselves from the Spirit of the Lord, that it may have no place in you to guide you in wisdom’s paths” (Mosiah 2:36). This is a real and omnipresent danger in society: “And now, O man, remember, and perish not” (Mosiah 4:30). The danger is perennial: “If ye do not watch yourselves, and your thoughts, and your words, and your deeds . . . even unto the end of your lives, ye must perish” (Mosiah 4:30). We are constantly liable to slip into partisan controversy.

This seems contrary to what we have been taught about such things as the importance of debate and the two-party system. But Benjamin is above all that; he wants to transfer our whole activity to another plane. “[Stand steadfast] in the faith of that which is to come,” he says, “which was spoken by the mouth of the angel” (Mosiah 4:11). Benjamin puts it bluntly, “Believe that man doth not comprehend all the things which the Lord can comprehend” (Mosiah 4:9). What you have to do, he says, is to “believe that ye must repent of your sins . . . and humble yourselves before God; and ask in sincerity of heart that he would forgive you” (Mosiah 4:10). Does that sound authoritarian? We seem to forget that these words were handed not only to Benjamin but also to Joseph Smith by an angel from another sphere. Their purpose is to help prepare us for that other sphere. Do not expect the words of the angel to be like other texts, conservative or liberal. Benjamin pleads desperately, “all ye old men, and also ye young men, . . . and [even] you little children who can understand my words, . . . *awake* to a remembrance of the awful situation of those that have fallen into transgression” (Mosiah 2:40). Plainly, things among the Nephites had reached a dangerous state. The people had wandered from the road of keeping the commandments, “both temporal and spiritual” (Mosiah 2:41). What we should be after is not to gain advantage in this world but to “dwell with God in a state of never-ending happiness” (Mosiah 2:41). He knows that it will sound unrealistic. If that suggests our worldly vantage point as some faraway wishful thinking or fantasy, Benjamin brings us around: “O remember, remember that *these things are true*” (Mosiah 2:41). They are not imaginary; it is the everyday world, the light of common day, that is a deception. Far from being expected to accept these things on authority, the people presently are given to see it all for themselves.

The word *power* occurs over four hundred times in the Book of Mormon. Power is the essence of politics where the object of the game is to be the party or individual in power. This is true, even though few would challenge Lord Acton’s famous maxim, “All power corrupts.”¹⁶

But Benjamin, in his speech on government and national policy, uses the word only seven times, of which five refer to God, who “has . . . *all power*” (Mosiah 4:9). The other two passages speak only of powers which no man possesses, that is, the power to express our full obligation to God (see Mosiah 2:20) and the power which our enemies do *not* have over us if we obey the commandments of God (see Mosiah 2:31). What power does that leave to feeble man? There are only two sources of power. One is God, the other the evil one who covets power: “Satan . . . sought . . . that I should give unto him mine own *power*; by the *power* of mine Only Begotten, I caused that he should be cast down” (Moses 4:3). What he wanted was power over others, and so it has ever been with man. From Cain come “oaths . . . given by them of old who also sought *power*. . . [The kinsmen of Akish] were kept up by the *power* of the devil to administer these oaths unto the people, to keep them in darkness, to help such as sought *power* to gain *power*. . . . Whatsoever nation shall uphold such secret combinations, to get *power* and *gain*, . . . they shall be destroyed. . . . Suffer not . . . that these murderous combinations shall get above you, which are built up to get *power* and *gain*” (Ether 8:15–16, 22–23).

How remarkable that a royal discourse on the subject of government and dominion never once refers to power and tells the people bluntly that the king never wanted their money—he could get what was sufficient for his needs by working on the farm! And this total shifting of values takes us directly to the subject of the atonement.

The Politics of Shame

The atonement requires a totally different state of mind from that which men suppose leads them to success. Benjamin makes direct appeal to the hearts of men. In case after case, he teaches what suggests “the politics of shame.” The phrase has been revived in a recent book by Stuart Schneiderman,¹⁷ and the word *shame* has suddenly come into general use by politicians against each other. It is a sense of shame that keeps people from stepping over the line and doing mean and ignoble things. Benjamin knew that when he said that every man’s immortal soul should be awake “to a lively sense of his own guilt, . . . his breast [filled] with guilt, and pain, and anguish, . . . like an unquenchable fire” (Mosiah 2:38). The result is “never-ending torment” (Mosiah 2:39). But nothing could be farther from today’s ethic, which is to feel shame only for what an opponent does and call public attention to it as a ploy to take over power. This relieves the inner tension on both sides, and since “the great American cultural revolution” of the 1960s, Schneiderman writes, “Ostentatious displays of wealth were good, as were exhibitionistic displays of one’s sexual prowess. . . . Obnoxious and insulting behavior became acceptable. . . . Rude language became a sign of freedom.”¹⁸ Fame became more highly valued than shame: “Seeing omens of destruction everywhere we grasp at solutions offered by guilt culture: more police, more courts, more prisons, more litigation, more regulation, more lawyers.”¹⁹ And all that is shameful, and Benjamin turns away from it.

In pointing the way for his people, the king cites case after case where their own immediate reaction should be one of shame. “Believe that man doth not comprehend all the things which the Lord can comprehend” (Mosiah 4:9). This should make me feel cheap and ashamed of my own arrogance, and the reaction is “Believe that ye must repent . . . and humble yourselves before God; and ask in sincerity of heart that he would forgive you” (Mosiah 4:10). Does God have to argue his case? Not “if ye have known of his goodness and have tasted of his love” (Mosiah 4:11). That is another feeling: taste, like shame, is a final argument about which *non est disputandum*—there is no argument. We are the first, last, and only judges of our actions, and our clear and vivid recollection shall testify against us at the judgment. When you compare “the greatness of God, and your own nothingness, and his goodness and long-suffering towards you, unworthy creatures,” the shame will bring you into “the depths of humility” (Mosiah 4:11). Is it not shameful that you should “have a mind to injure one another, . . . [that you should let] your children . . . go hungry, . . . transgress the laws of God, and fight and quarrel one with another, . . . [giving way to] the evil spirit?” (Mosiah 4:13–14). And how shameful to turn your back on the beggar, with some self-serving rationalization that “the man has brought upon himself his misery” (Mosiah 4:17). How do you know that? And you a beggar yourself! For shame! Is it necessary to pass a law against holding back on sharing what God has given you liberally? Or to use verse 27—that “all these things [be] done in wisdom and order, for it is not requisite that a man should run faster than he has strength” (Mosiah 4:27)—as an excuse for withholding your substance until a later time? What is it that prompts us to return what we have borrowed—fear of a lawsuit? (see Mosiah 4:28).

The Hard Question

Eight years ago I wrote a sixty-page article titled “The Meaning of the Atonement.”²⁰ Some things were explained, but the great mysteries remain. “Mysterious, incomprehensible, . . . and inexplicable” are the workings of the atonement, according to the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*.²¹ The first question which such an admission raises is whether all “things which pertain to our religion are only appendages” to what Joseph Smith declared to be the center of our religion—the atonement.²² Is it meant to remain mysterious? Not everything is incomprehensible to everybody: “It is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given” (Matthew 13:11). As the Pearl of Great Price tells us, some mysteries “ought not to be revealed at the present time” (explanation to fac. 2, fig. 9); some are only “to be had in the Holy Temple of God” (fac. 2, fig. 8); some “will be given in the own due time of the Lord” (fac. 2, figs. 12–21). As to others: “If the world can find out these numbers, so let it be” (fac. 2, fig. 11).

The mysteries are on the borderline, depending on our own qualifications. Scientific writers in the 1920s told us there were no more mysteries; today it is all a mystery. Chapters 14 to 17 in the Gospel of John describe in matter-of-fact terms the comings and goings, departures and arrivals that ultimately put into effect the at-one-ment, or joining of the apostles and the Saints with the Father and the Son in heaven. Yet for conventional Christian theologians, all of this is quite unimaginable, without space or motion. So we see that mystery is

knowledge not known to some: “He that hath ears to hear, let him hear” (Matthew 11:15). “Behold my beloved brethren, I will unfold this mystery unto you; if I do not, by any means, get shaken from my firmness in the Spirit, and stumble because of my over anxiety for you” (Jacob 4:18). A people are condemned who “will not search knowledge, nor understand great knowledge, when it is given unto them in plainness” (2 Nephi 32:7). We make our own mysteries; we are not meant to be kept in darkness, and the mysteries of heaven will be unfolded to us as we make an effort to understand them.

This is particularly true of the atonement. Students now beset me with searching questions. Some are genuinely perplexed, and others are set on challenging the rationality of the gospel. I am assailed by eight questions in particular. The first three are those Terrible Questions, listed by Professor Hornung, which the ancients left unanswered. The plan of atonement offers a clear explanation.

1. First is the problem of evil. In our world, evil spoils everything, and it is everywhere, even ingrained into our own carnal, sensual, and devilish natures. Why is that? Answer: It was planned that way. We were once at one with the Father and hope to be so again. But in the meantime we are being prepared for a higher order of glory; our whole life here is a state of probation, as Jacob tells us (see 2 Nephi 2:21), and the adversary is permitted to try us and to tempt us. The existence of Satan is another of those points that leaves the clergy perplexed. Yet the existence of evil is at least as certain as the existence of gravitation; we must accept the reality of these two powerful forces whether we can explain them or not. We cannot proceed into the eternities in ignorance; we must know the worst if we are to cope with the worst and bring the atonement of the Father to others. We come down here to discover those weaknesses and vices that could not come out in the presence of God and angels and to dig out the nitty-gritty of our earthly existence, recognize and acknowledge it in repentance, and wash it away in baptism.

1. Then there is that *aporia*—where is God when we need him? The explanation is to be found in the plan of salvation. The master of the house is one taking a far journey, leaving his servants on their own. He deliberately delays his return, and, when he does appear “like a thief in the night,” catches them completely off guard, doing just what they normally do—some of them beating their fellow-servants to get more work out of them, while they enjoy their perks in drunken dinner parties (see Matthew 24:42–51; Joseph Smith—Matthew 1:46–54). If we are all to be at one again in the hereafter, King Benjamin reminds us, it is to be in a different spirit from that competitive neo-Darwinism, which he so vigorously condemns.

1. The third problem that distressed the ancients is the cruel curtailment of life, which shuts off the lives of almost all living things in midcourse. Why?—“Lest [Adam] put forth his hand and partake also of the tree of life, . . . and live forever [in his sins]” (Moses 4:28). After this life has been declared a vale of tears, we should only be too glad to get out of it as soon as possible, were it not for the uncertainty of the hereafter which gives us pause and makes us decide to stick it out here in this dismal place. Yet the atonement makes this life bearable, even delightful. The doctrine of the atonement gives us permission to enjoy ourselves to the fullest here and now, as we revel in the gospel; time and space drop out of the

question, leaving us completely at ease and inexpressibly happy (see Mosiah 2:41; 3:4, 13; 4:11–12; 5:3).

1. How can we apply the blood of Christ to relieve our present condition? Answer: It redeems us from our sins. To redeem is to buy back, to ransom. We return to the other world loaded with experience, some of it pretty bad, which can be turned to our advantage once we are purged of the vice in our nature. The scriptures use the language of business, of buying and selling, to make the problem clear to a money-minded people. We shall explain the blood presently.
1. But why payment? Cannot we simply acknowledge that all make mistakes, write them off, and “get on with our lives,” as the popular saying goes? Why must we pay the uttermost farthing? (see Matthew 5:26). That question was paramount with the ancients. The great tragedies begin with something seriously wrong in the land—plague, famine, war, etc. Someone has done foolish or wicked things and all are paying the price. We must find the culprit and payment must be made, both to put an end to disaster and to pay for the damage already done. Who shall it be? The king, because he is responsible for the welfare and safety of the state? The periodic sacrifice of kings, whom old age had rendered a liability to their people, was commonplace in primitive and ancient societies. “The king must die!” Oedipus was a king who refused to pay the price and instead placed himself at the head of the investigation and proceeded to accuse everyone else. The chorus reminds him that we are all in this together, and Oedipus admits, “we are all sick, none more than myself.” All are to blame. But how do we assess the blame individually and calculate the penalty? In a lump sum for all, choosing one scapegoat out of the whole community by impartial lottery? Is that fair? Yes, if we all share the suffering, and there is a very real way in which all do.
1. But before we consider sharing, we must ask why the payment must be painful. Why all the agony, on which Benjamin dwells so disturbingly? The Greek *poine* is the clue. It is blood money, the payment of a debt, the evening up of accounts, according to the *Lexicon*,²³ and it is always painful. The English word pain is borrowed from the ancient legal terms *pains* and *penalties*, referring to the payment of a debt. Note that the words *pain*, *punish*, *penalty*, *repentance*, *penitence*, *penitentiary*, and *penal* all imply a feeling of discomfort and at the same time of paying back, the pain remaining until the debt is cleared.
1. But why the emphasis on blood? Benjamin goes to the limit here. Answer: The blood makes it clear that (a) it is a real sacrifice and (b) it goes all the way. Even the interrupted sacrifice of Isaac required the token, but real, shedding of blood in circumcision of the covenant. Benjamin tells us that the Lord would sweat blood from every pore, not from the physical brutality of the Roman soldiers, but because “so great shall be his anguish for the wickedness and abominations of his people” (Mosiah 3:7). There is a limit to physical suffering but not to spiritual. And this answers the final questions.

1. Why should one innocent person, Christ, suffer so horribly for the sins he did not commit? How can all that suffering be transferred from one person to another? Is that justice? The answer: Do not think that anyone is getting off easy. Each suffers to his capacity in time for his own sins: “there could be nothing so exquisite and so bitter as were my pains,” Alma reports (Alma 36:21). And worst of all, “we shall be brought to stand before God, knowing even as we know now, and have a bright recollection of all our guilt” (Alma 11:43). Physical suffering has its limits at which the body shuts off, but not spiritual suffering, which requires the atoning blood of Christ more than any theory or abstraction. “God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). “So loved the world,” says the cynic, that he sacrificed somebody *else*? When you consider who that somebody was, or even who Abraham’s sacrifice was—far dearer to him than his own life, which Abraham had often put on the line—this makes the sacrifice of the Father equal to that of the Son.

But it was only when the angel said “Now I know” (Genesis 22:12) that the ram was substituted—Abraham did not have to make the supreme sacrifice, and although his own life was spared on the altar, he must be given full faith and credit for having been prepared to sacrifice what was more precious to him than his life. Even so, we are expected to “do the works of Abraham” (D&C 132:32) and go all the way—eternal life is not cheaply bought.

All this is made possible by the principle of substitution or proxy or vicarious work, so well-known to Latter-day Saints. It should be clear how one can suffer for another. The work we do for our dead calls for a measure of trouble, inconvenience; we must take some pains in behalf of those for whom we feel responsible as they anxiously await our action for release from long confinement. They are, where possible, our closest relatives for whom we feel most responsible. And we can take further pains in long hours of searching the records, writing the histories, going to the temple at dawn—all very minor sacrifices—but for someone else. The leaders of all the great dispensations—Adam, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Joseph Smith—suffered greatly for others, but there was only *one* who could suffer for all. The word *suffer* is from *sub-ferre*, “to bow under” or “to bear a load.” Only one has the capacity, strength, and greatness to bear the load of all. This is a mystery, but it is a mystery that anyone can understand. Who can deny that “if there be two spirits, . . . one shall be more intelligent than the other,” and, that being the case, that “there shall be another more intelligent than they” (Abraham 3:18–19)? Jesus Christ bore our load because he and only he was able to, his work and his glory being “to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man” (Moses 1:39). He shares all he has, as his Father does, with all who will receive it. That there is such a being is as certain as the proposition that one person can be greater than another.

The ancients saw light and life coming from the sun, and every creature that receives that life and light must pass it on to others. Benjamin insists that all who have received the bounty of God must also pass it on. “Are we not all beggars?” is more than a rhetorical question; we receive what we have not produced. It is a pure gift from God; even by working day and night, no one could hope to earn it. We must pass it on and not divert all the water of the canal to our own use: “For the earth which drinketh in the rain that cometh oft upon it, and bringeth forth herbs meet for them by whom it is dressed, receiveth blessing from God” (Hebrews 6:7); “Wherefore receive ye one another, as Christ also received us to the glory of God” (Romans 15:7).

The sun is only one of countless participants in the pouring forth of energy into the cosmos, according to Moses and Abraham—“worlds without number” (Moses 1:33), “I could not see the end thereof” (Abraham 3:12), and so forth. And all are dependent on each other so that when one perishes “the heavens [shall] weep, yea, and all the workmanship of mine hands” (Moses 7:40), and God himself weeps, so closely are they bound in each other’s affections. “I . . . [gave them a] commandment, that they should love one another . . . ; but, behold, they are without affection, and they hate their own blood” (Moses 7:33). This is the reverse of atonement. In the eternal order of

things, we are all assembled and bound together, at-one, if only by the laws of nature—the four mysterious forces. It can easily be seen how sin—ego-centered, inconsiderate, spiteful—can loosen the bonds of affection, in the manner of entropy. These are far more than imaginary forces. Only the intervention of God himself who “possesses all power” can reverse the process (2 Nephi 9:7). Jacob tells us this in that other great address given by royal sanction in 2 Nephi 6–10, which should always be read along with the great words of Benjamin.

Notes

1. Gordon B. Hinckley, “This Glorious Easter Morn,” *Ensign* (May 1996): 65.
2. For such assemblages celebrating both individual covenants and national unity, see Hugh W. Nibley, *The Ancient State* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1991), 8–9, 41–43, 150–51, and *passim*.
3. Brigham Young, in JD, 14:225.
4. Albert Einstein, *The World as I See It* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1949), 1.
5. St. Augustine, *Confessions* 1.6.
6. Hugh W. Nibley, “The Hierocentric State,” in *Ancient State*, 99–100, reprinted from *The Western Political Quarterly* 4/2 (1951): 226.
7. Mircea Eliade, *The Forge and the Crucible* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1978), 10.
8. See Hugh W. Nibley, “Old World Ritual in the New World,” in *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 3rd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988 [1st ed., 1957]), 295–310.
9. See Ben Zion Halper, *Postbiblical Hebrew Literature* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1946), 1:37–38.
0. See *ibid.*, 39.
1. See Erik Hornung, *Der ägyptische Mythos von der Himmelskuh* (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1982), x.
2. Arthur Koestler, *Janus: A Summing Up* (London: Hutchinson, 1978), 2.
3. Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*, lines 1186–89.
4. Karl von Clausewitz, *War, Politics, and Power: Selections from On War, and I Believe and Profess*, tr. and ed. Edward M. Collins (Chicago: Gateway, 1967), 83.
5. Aeschylus, *The Suppliant Maidens*, line 176.
6. “Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely” (Lord Acton, letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton, 3 April 1887).
7. See Stuart Schneiderman, *Saving Face: America and the Politics of Shame* (New York: Knopf, 1995).
8. *Ibid.*, 124.
9. *Ibid.*, 288–89.
0. See Hugh W. Nibley, “The Meaning of the Atonement,” in *Approaching Zion* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1989), 554–614.
1. Jeffrey R. Holland, “Atonement of Jesus Christ,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 1:86, citing John Taylor, *The Mediation and Atonement* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1882), 148–49.
2. *The Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 121, cited in Holland, “Atonement of Jesus Christ,” 83.
3. See Henry G. Liddell and Robert Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 7th ed., s.v. “poine.”