

King Benjamin's Speech in the Context of Ancient Israelite Festivals

Terrence L. Szink,
John W. Welch

Years of research have identified many threads of evidence in the Book of Mormon that tie back into the observance of ancient Israelite festivals. While traces of several preexilic Israelite festivals have been found in various places in the Book of Mormon, no source has been more fertile than King Benjamin's speech. To a greater degree than most people might have suspected, characteristics of the speech that mark the occasion as a day of holy Israelite observances are both rich and specific. Several texts and surrounding contexts highlight the importance of this public occasion as a significant religious event.

During the first two weeks of each fall season, all the people living under the law of Moses kept certain days holy, marking the celebration of the turn of a new year, the continuation of God's reign, and the abundance of God's goodness. Although it is impossible to reconstruct with precision what transpired in antiquity on those days, it appears that such Israelite celebrations probably included religious convocations, rituals, and festivals that served to renew the allegiance of the people to their heavenly and earthly kings, to purify the group from all unholiness, and to strengthen their commitment to revealed principles of personal and community righteousness. Several kings in ancient Israel selected this time of the year for the official inauguration of their reign or the installation of their successor to the throne. From several similar indications, it would appear that King Benjamin likewise planned to celebrate the culminating day of his life—the coronation of his firstborn son Mosiah—in or around this high and holy season in the traditional Israelite religious calendar. No other time of the year would have been more suited for the installation of a new regent or for renewing the covenant relationship between God, king, and people—the essence of any Israelite monarchy.

The discoveries reported and developed in this chapter are attributable to the research, collaboration, and combined criticism of many people. As early as 1957, Hugh W. Nibley proposed the theory that Benjamin's speech was an ancient year-rite festival, a theme that he develops further in his chapter in this book. Nibley's genius for drawing cultural associations broke new ground forty years ago by inviting Book of Mormon scholars to view Benjamin's speech in an entirely new light. The main question Nibley left unresolved, however, was why an inspired king in the house of Israel would ever be inclined to mimic or dignify the practices of a pagan year-rite cult.

A possible answer to this question began to emerge in the 1970s and took clearer shape in the 1980s. Rather than exploring widely scattered ancient civilizations, Latter-day Saint scholars in those years focused their attention more extensively on the Old Testament as well as many features of subsequent related Jewish history, literature, and ceremony grounded in the Hebrew Bible. Interesting bonds were discovered between Benjamin's speech and the laws, statutes, and ordinances revealed by Jehovah to the prophets of Israel who preceded and influenced Lehi and Nephi. The following chapter consolidates the results of this research and reports ideas contributed by many individuals.¹ The following is only a short abridgment of our much longer reports.

Israelite Festivals in the Book of Mormon: General Considerations and Caveats

Every civilization or culture, it seems, enjoys holidays or special times of the year. Christmas, Thanksgiving, Easter, Halloween, and the Fourth of July are among the main holidays celebrated in the United States. Other nations have similar holidays. Certain traditions associated with each of these days are of characteristic importance to

their native cultures, especially as these celebrations perpetuate and reinforce the main institutions of that society, whether in the domain of church, state, or family. As important as such secular and religious holidays may be in the modern world, religious festivals and holy days carried even greater significance in the ancient world, particularly in Israel.

Under the law of Moses, Israelites were required to observe three main holy days each year (see Exodus 23:14–19). The first was the well-known spring festival of *Pesach* (Passover), which began the Feast of Unleavened Bread. The second was *Shavuot* (Pentecost), occurring fifty days after Passover. The third was an autumn festival complex that later developed into the composite two- or three-week-long observance of the three related celebrations of *Rosh ha-Shanah* (New Year and Day of Judgment), *Yom Kippur* (Day of Atonement), and *Sukkot* (Feast of Tabernacles).

These holy days held enormous religious, political, and family significance, especially because God had commanded their observance: “Three times thou shalt keep a feast unto me in the year” (Exodus 23:14). Details concerning the celebration of each holiday are found in a number of festival calendars and instructions in the Old Testament (for example, see Exodus 23:14–17; 34:18–23; Leviticus 23; Numbers 28–29; Deuteronomy 16). Accordingly, no person could claim to keep the law of Moses and not observe these special holy days, which would have been kept at least as intently as the strictly observed regular weekly sabbaths.

As guided by the Lord and his prophets, Lehi and his people diligently kept the law of Moses. Nephi affirmed, in the sixth century B.C., that his people “did observe to keep the judgments, and the statutes, and the commandments of the Lord in all things, according to the law of Moses” (2 Nephi 5:10), and that they did “keep the law of Moses, and look forward with steadfastness unto Christ, until the law shall be fulfilled” (2 Nephi 25:24). In 74 B.C., some fifty years after Benjamin’s speech, the Nephites were still keeping the law of Moses: “Yea, and the people did observe to keep the commandments of the Lord; and they were strict in observing the ordinances of God, according to the law of Moses” (Alma 30:3). It stands to reason, therefore, that the Nephites in Benjamin’s day would have kept holy observances that were appropriately similar to the festivals and holy days required by the Old Testament.

How the Nephites and Lamanites understood and applied those ancient biblical regulations, however, remains obscure. Jewish practices evolved, at least to some degree, during the period of the Babylonian captivity that began after Lehi and his family left the Holy Land. We do not mean to imply that the Nephites or Lamanites followed “the later varieties of Jewish law that proliferated among various Jewish communities several centuries after Lehi left Jerusalem,”² but it is still logical to conclude that these Nephites and Lamanites were committed to observe the ancient holy days as best they could in the essential forms in which those festivals were known under the preexilic law of Moses.

Moreover, the Nephites kept careful calendrical watch of their times and seasons, a necessary precondition in any society for the timely observance of specific days as legal holidays or annual festivals. One of the unstated reasons why the Nephites kept such careful track of their days, months, and years may well have been to create a strict framework within which they could properly observe their weekly sabbaths, annual holy days, sabbatical years, and jubilee releases.

While the Book of Mormon never mentions the Feast of Tabernacles or any other religious holiday specifically by name, several reasons can be suggested to explain this omission. The ancient writers may have assumed that their readers would naturally understand. A person does not have to say the word *Christmas* to refer implicitly to that special day. Even a casual mention of “wise men” or “decorating a tree” is enough. In just the same way, the words

Passover or *Pentecost* do not need to appear in the Book of Mormon to evoke images alluding to the Israelite holidays. Other Nephite records also existed, and they may well have contained extensive descriptions of their religious and social observances. Indeed, the weekly sabbath is rarely mentioned in the Book of Mormon (see only Jarom 1:5; Mosiah 13:16–19; 18:23), yet is it unthinkable that the righteous Nephites, throughout their history, did not remember to keep the sabbath day; and one must remember that the annual holy days and sabbatical years were also part of the ancient law of the sabbath.

Whether expressly mentioned or not, evidence located in the Book of Mormon, particularly in King Benjamin's speech, supports the claim that those particular festivals which were most likely known to Israel in Lehi's day were indeed observed in the lands of Nephi and Zarahemla. Of course—and we repeat—it is difficult to determine which festivals were observed in preexilic Israel before the destruction of Jerusalem in 587/586 B.C. and how those religious feasts were celebrated in that era of Israelite history. No person alive today, of course, has ever witnessed an ancient Israelite celebration, and biblical scholars differ considerably in their views about the nature of the festivals in ancient civilizations, let alone the possible connections or borrowings between them. Nevertheless, considerable evidence about ancient Israelite practices can be gleaned from many biblical passages. If those biblical texts were written before the time of Lehi, they become particularly useful and relevant to the study of Book of Mormon worldviews.

We are aware that it would simplify and tighten our presentation if we were to limit our sources to the preexilic materials; indeed, we believe that most of our points are supported by early data. We have chosen, however, to include later Israelite and Jewish sources, because research in this area may enrich our understanding. Many of the detailed and elaborate descriptions of Jewish festivals found in the Talmud and other later Jewish literature may well reflect long-standing Israelite traditions, even though it is not always possible to know which texts or details are archaic and which emerged as later innovations.

Of course, we wish neither to overstate nor understate the possible significance of these Jewish comparisons in probing the context of Benjamin's assembly. Thus, in presenting the findings reported below, we usually will identify or signal the time period or source from which each piece of evidence derives. The biblical texts are the earliest and most relevant; the Mishnah (first and second century A.D.) and Talmud (second through fifth centuries A.D.) are later and constitute secondary evidence. Readers are free to weigh these bits of information as they wish.

In spite of these challenges and uncertainties, attempting to identify the possible ancient Israelite holy days or festival season on which or during which a Book of Mormon speech or event may have taken place is significant and rewarding for several reasons: First, finding evidence of such observances tends to confirm the internal consistency of the Book of Mormon by showing that its peoples kept the law of Moses as they claimed. Second, knowing something of the potential background or context of a passage from the Book of Mormon promotes a better understanding of the possible meanings of its words and phrases. Third, because much of the following information about ancient Israelite or Jewish festivals pertinent to King Benjamin's speech was simply unknown by and—as far as we can discover—unknowable to Joseph Smith in 1829, such accuracy supports the claim that the Book of Mormon was translated from an ancient Israelite record, as Joseph Smith explained.

With these general comments and caveats in mind, we turn our attention to the exploration of specific details that link King Benjamin's speech to the main fall festivals celebrated in ancient Israel.

The Autumn Festival Complex

Of the three annual festival times in ancient Israel, the autumn festival complex was the most important and certainly the most popular in ancient Israel.³ In early times it apparently was called the Feast of Ingathering. According to many scholars, the various components of the autumn festival were celebrated as a single season of celebration in the earliest periods of Israelite history.⁴ Its many elements were not sharply differentiated until later times, when the first day of the seventh month became Rosh ha-Shanah (New Year), followed by eight days of penitence, then followed on the tenth day of the month by Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) and on the fifteenth day by Sukkot (Feast of Tabernacles), concluding with a full holy week.

As this study will show, it appears to us that Benjamin's speech touches on all the major themes of these sacred days, treating them as parts of a single festival complex, consistent with what one would expect in a preexilic Israelite community in which the fall feasts were not sharply differentiated but were still closely associated as parts of one large autumn festival. Indeed, Kraus believes that the divisions into distinct Jewish festivals must have taken place around 600 B.C.⁵

The New Year

Of the elements of the autumn festival in ancient Israel one of the most interesting but least certain is the observation of the New Year. Although we cannot be certain, it appears that the following themes and traditions were probably associated with the ancient Israelite New Year. Unlike New Year's Day in most Western cultures, the beginning of a New Year's cycle in the ancient Near East was the occasion of a sacred religious celebration, one of the most important religious days of the year.

Horns. The blowing of horns was certainly a common part of Israelite culture and worship, and the most characteristic ritual of the later Rosh ha-Shanah was the sounding of the *shôfār*, the straight horn of a wild ram (see Numbers 29:1). This is likely related to the "memorial of blowing of trumpets," specifically prescribed for the first day of the seventh month in Leviticus 23:24. Horns are never mentioned in connection with Benjamin's speech, but there is reason to believe that some kind of cue, such as the blowing of a horn or the announcement of an acclamation, would have been given to assemble the people (see Mosiah 2:9), to call them again to attention (see Mosiah 3:1), to call the people to fall simultaneously to the ground (see Mosiah 4:1), and to cry aloud all with one voice (see Mosiah 4:2; 5:2).

Furthermore, Jewish literature gives several commonly cited reasons for blowing the *shôfār*. Most of these circumstances pertain to parts of Benjamin's speech that would have offered several occasions for the sounding of horns, namely when: (1) hailing God as King (see Mosiah 2:19), especially at a coronation (see Mosiah 2:30; see also 2 Kings 9:13); (2) heralding the season of repentance (see Mosiah 2:9; 4:1; and possibly 4:26); (3) remembering the giving of the law on Mt. Sinai to Moses (which is mentioned in Mosiah 3:14; see also Exodus 19:19); (4) declaring the words of the prophets (prophetic declarations are referred to in Mosiah 3:3 and 3:13); (5) causing the people to tremble (see Mosiah 2:30; 4:1); (6) announcing the judgment of God (see Mosiah 3:18, 24–25) and sounding the horn of warning or alarm (see Exodus 20:18; Amos 3:6), or calling the troops to arms (see Judges 3:27); (7) heralding the coming messianic age (see Isaiah 27:13 and Mosiah 3:5; see also Revelation 8–9); and (8) marking the resurrection of the dead (see Mosiah 3:10). Since most of these traditional occasions and purposes for sounding the *shôfār* are so clearly manifest at the ceremonial sectional dividing points in Benjamin's speech, one can easily envision their being accompanied by the sounding of the *shôfār*. See also Alma's wish that he might "speak with the trump of God" (Alma 29:1).

Sacrifice. The typical New Year, like most festivals, evidently began with burnt offerings of animals of “the first year.” “In the seventh month, in the first day of the month, . . . ye shall offer an offering made by fire unto the Lord” (Leviticus 23:24–25). Consistent with this, Benjamin’s people brought “the firstlings of their flocks, that they might offer sacrifice and burnt offerings according to the law of Moses” (Mosiah 2:3).

Judgment. A characteristic theme in both ancient Near Eastern and later Jewish sources is that the New Year is a day of judgment. Because of the importance and danger of this ominous period of the year, a certain uneasiness was in the air. Frankfort describes it as follows: “The mood of the Babylonians at the beginning of the year was peculiar. They not only felt uncertainty as regards the future but feared that their own inadequacy and guilt might have incurred divine wrath.”⁶

The idea of the New Year as a time of judgment is also found in Judaism. According to the Mishnah, it is the day when all mankind is judged.⁷ In the face of this judgment, God is “entreated to show mercy to his creatures,” and confidence in the mercy of God is expressed.⁸ This is the only day on which modern Jews are permitted to “kneel and fall upon their faces.”⁹ On this day, people in the Talmudic era wore white garments, and books of judgment were opened.¹⁰

Similarly, Benjamin’s people faced a day of judgment. In his speech, Benjamin lays bare the fate of those who remain and die in their sins—enemies to God (see Mosiah 2:37–38); he spells out the nature of God’s judgment, “for behold he judgeth, and his judgment is just” (Mosiah 3:18); he makes it clear that all men are subject to this judgment (see Mosiah 3:17), except little children (see Mosiah 3:21); and he declares that these ceremonial words shall stand to judge the people (see Mosiah 3:24–25) “like an unquenchable fire” (Mosiah 2:38).

Just as the Mesopotamians and the Jews were awed by the seriousness of the day, so too were the people of Zarahemla when they heard Benjamin speak about the judgment: “Behold they had fallen to the earth, for the fear of the Lord had come upon them. And they had viewed themselves in their own carnal state, even less than the dust of the earth” (Mosiah 4:1–2). Yet in the face of this judgment, mercy was sought. Benjamin’s people cried out in unison, “O have mercy” (Mosiah 4:2). Mercy is mentioned by Benjamin several other times (see Mosiah 2:39; 3:26; 5:15). There is also mention of cleansing of garments (see Mosiah 2:28) and of writing down the names of all the righteous who have entered into the covenant to keep God’s commandments (see Mosiah 6:1).

Kingship of God. Part of the New Year festival in Mesopotamia involved reciting the epic poem *Enuma Elish*. In this tale the god Marduk slays Tiamat (goddess of the salt-water ocean), uses the body to create the world, and thus attains suzerainty. He then takes his throne at the head of the gods.¹¹ This festival has served for some as one of the foundations for reconstructing the New Year festival in Israel.

Many of the psalms were probably sung on occasions in Israel when God’s kingship was openly celebrated and venerated. Generally God’s kingship is celebrated in the Bible because he is able to subdue people and nations (see Psalm 47:3), has power over chaos as represented by the floods (see Psalm 93:3), and is to be the judge of all (see Psalms 96:13, 99:4). God’s kingship is celebrated by the sounding of trumpets, characteristic of the New Year, and in many of these “God-is-king” psalms, the people are told to sing unto the Lord (see Psalm 47:5–7, for example).

The idea that God, not Benjamin or Mosiah his son, is truly the king is expressly found in Benjamin’s words, “If I, whom ye call your king, . . . do merit any thanks from you, O how you ought to thank your heavenly King” (Mosiah 2:19), and in his instruction that the people should obey “the commandments of my son, or the commandments of

God which shall be delivered unto you by him” (Mosiah 2:31). The same reasons for celebrating God’s kingship, as cited above, are also given by Benjamin, and the power of God is acknowledged in close association with Benjamin’s declaration that God is king (see Mosiah 2:11, 20–21), and the role of God as judge is proclaimed (see Mosiah 3:18). As noted above, the kingship of God was celebrated by singing, thanksgiving, and rejoicing in Israel, and similarly in his speech Benjamin hoped that his spirit “may join the choirs above in *singing* the praises of a just God” (Mosiah 2:28), and he admonished his people to “thank your heavenly King” (Mosiah 2:19) and to “render all the thanks and *praise* which your whole soul has power to possess” (Mosiah 2:20).

Creation. The New Year was also a day on which the creation of the earth was typically celebrated. “In the beginning” was the creation (Genesis 1:1), and thus it was natural for the Israelite mind to think of the creation at the beginning of each new year’s cycle. Psalm 148 would have made a fine hymn for such an occasion. According to Jewish traditions found in the Talmud, the world was created in the first month in the fall, Ethanim (Tishri), and the New Year was an appropriate time to recall the creative work of God in forming a new earth. Gaster has summarized, “The world is reborn from year to year even, in an extended sense, from day to day and from minute to minute; and the primary message of the festival is that the process of creation is continuous, that the breath of God moves constantly upon the face of the waters.”¹²

Perhaps this adds context to the angel’s reference in the Book of Mormon to Christ as “the *Creator* of all things from the beginning” (Mosiah 3:8), and to the people’s appellation of Christ as “the Son of God, who *created* heaven and earth, and all things” (Mosiah 4:2). Benjamin’s statement that God has “created you, . . . and is preserving you from day to day, by lending you breath . . . from one moment to another” (Mosiah 2:20–21), as well as his other frequent references to God’s creative powers (see Mosiah 4:9, 12; 5:15), fits well into these Israelite contexts that highlighted God’s creative works. Likewise, the rebirth of the people—“this day he hath spiritually begotten you” (Mosiah 5:7)—is evidence that one of the main purposes of Benjamin’s ceremony was to see that the people’s relationship with God and each other was renewed and reborn.

Remembrance. In Leviticus 23:23–25, the holy sabbath convocation celebrated on the first day of the seventh month is called a *zikkārôn* (memorial, remembrance). This ancient observance, represented as the New Year, involved the blowing of trumpets, a holy assembly, and the avoidance of work.

Few themes are stressed more emphatically by Benjamin than that of remembrance. The word appears with repeated emphasis throughout the text. For example: “My sons, I would that ye should remember” (Mosiah 1:3, 6, 7); “stir them up in remembrance” (Mosiah 1:17); “ye should awake to a remembrance” (Mosiah 2:40); “O remember, remember that these things are true” (Mosiah 2:41); “I would that ye should remember, and always retain in remembrance” (Mosiah 4:11); “O man, remember, and perish not” (Mosiah 4:30); “I would that ye should remember also, that this is the name. . . . I would that ye should remember to retain the name” (Mosiah 5:11–12). The Nephite priests were even appointed to stir the people up “in remembrance of the oath which they had made” (Mosiah 6:3).

King. The king himself is frequently associated with New Year festivals. This was apparently the preferred time for the coronation of the king and the renewal of the people’s covenant to obey him and God. According to John Eaton, at such great Israelite assemblies, the king served in several ways: he would “exhort men in God’s way” and admonish them to worship God (compare Mosiah 2:18–19); he would “[testify] to the marvels of Yahweh’s salvation and [assert] his superiority to other gods” (compare Mosiah 2:40–41; 3:5, 17; and many others); and he would be God’s witness, appearing “as an evidential sign, an abiding token and reminder of God’s work in the midst

of the nations” (compare Mosiah 2:24, 27, 29; 4:5–9).¹³ Benjamin fulfills all the responsibilities of a king that are outlined in tradition and scripture.

For purposes of comparison, among the Sumerians the responsibilities of the *akītu* (or *zāgmuk*) festival belonged to the king. In the first millennium B.C., the king’s participation in the *akītu*/New Year festival was “obligatory.” Scholars have identified six elements of the festival: (1) a reenactment of the myth of creation issuing in the renewal of the cosmos, (2) a triumphal procession of the god, (3) the death and resurrection of the god, (4) the humiliation and reinstallation of the king, (5) the sacred marriage, and (6) the determination of destiny.¹⁴ Though scholars feel item three is “highly controversial,” and items five and six are absent in Psalms, all elements except item five are clearly present in Benjamin’s speech. Mosiah 2:20–23 and 4:7 refer to creation and the cosmos; the angel describes Christ’s triumphal procession in Mosiah 3:5–9 and his death and resurrection in Mosiah 3:9–11; Benjamin refers numerous times to his own status as a subject to God (“I am also of the dust” [Mosiah 2:26]) and chooses his son to be his successor (see Mosiah 1:10); and throughout his speech he discusses the consequences and the rewards of one’s actions (see, for example, Mosiah 2:31, 40–41; 4:11–12).

Regarding the king’s personal participation in the Mesopotamian temple program for the New Year’s festival at Babylon, the king was led to the temple, where his royal regalia were taken away; he was made to bow down and to declare before the god that he had neither been neglectful in the worship of the god nor had harmed the city or the people. The text of this negative confession is as follows: “I did not sin, lord of the countries. I was not neglectful of the requirements of your godship. I did not destroy Babylon; I did not command its overthrow; I did not [broken] . . . the temple Esagil, I did not forget its rites; I did not rain blows on the cheek of a subordinate. . . . I did not humiliate them. I watched out for Babylon; I did not smash its walls.”¹⁵ He was then struck on the cheek and if tears flowed the god was appeased. The king’s restoration to throne symbolized his continuing ability to stabilize the society and the elements. Some scholars have suggested that certain psalms imply that the king in Israel underwent a similar type of ritual humiliation as part of an Israelite New Year festival.¹⁶

With these concepts of the king’s participation in the New Year festival in Mesopotamia and Israel as points of comparison, one may now better appreciate parts of King Benjamin’s speech and actions in Mosiah 1–6. Clearly the New Year festival time was an appropriate time for Benjamin to effect his son’s coronation. It also seems plausible that Benjamin’s frequent and sincere statements of humility and the accounting of his stewardship as king are in some way related to the general genre of humiliation and negative confession of the king found in other ancient cultures. Benjamin asserts that he is like the people and “subject to all manner of infirmities” (Mosiah 2:11) and is “also of the dust” (Mosiah 2:26), and in rendering the accounting of his stewardship he follows very closely the so-called Paragraph of the King (Deuteronomy 17:14–20), which set standards by which the king’s performance was judged in Israel.

Thus the spirit of the Israelite New Year—as far as that may be known and defined—is reflected with considerable clarity in King Benjamin’s speech. The persistence of these traditions carries down even to the level of customary sayings and greetings. Even today, one greets friends on this occasion with “May you be inscribed (in the book of life) and sealed for a good year.”¹⁷ Suitably, Benjamin gives his people a name that cannot be “blotted out [of the book of life]” except by transgression (Mosiah 5:11), and he hopes that God will seal them his.

Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur)

The next festival aspect of the month of the Feast of Ingathering in preexilic Israel was the all-important Day of Atonement, a day of holy convocations and ritual atonement at the temple (see Leviticus 16; 23:26–32; Numbers 29:7–11). It would later become the most sacred day in the Jewish liturgical year.

The hypothesis that Benjamin's speech was held on or in connection with the Day of Atonement finds initial plausibility in Benjamin's seven explicit references to the atonement. This number seven may be purely coincidental, but doing something seven times is characteristic of rituals performed on the Day of Atonement and during other biblical purification ceremonies prescribed in the book of Leviticus.¹⁸ Benjamin speaks of (1) "the atonement of his blood" (Mosiah 3:15), (2) the "atoning blood" (Mosiah 3:18), (3) the blood which "atoneth" (Mosiah 3:11), (4) the blood of Christ which "atoneth for [their] sins" (Mosiah 3:16), (5) the "atonement of Christ the Lord" (Mosiah 3:19), (6) the "atonement" prepared from the foundation (Mosiah 4:6), and (7) the "atonement" prepared for all mankind (Mosiah 4:7). Examining the speech further reveals substantial cumulative evidence that the rituals and traditions manifest in the Day of Atonement are also to be seen in Benjamin's words and deeds.

Preparations. Special preparations were in order for such a great day, particularly for those in charge, such as the high priest. Rabbinic writings report special efforts taken to keep the high priest awake during the night of Yom Kippur, and pious men followed this example. Benjamin's preparations also were substantial; coincidentally, he was awakened, apparently during part of the night, by the visitation of an angel from God: "Awake; and I awoke. . . . Awake and hear" (Mosiah 3:2–3). Several points in the Jewish ceremony draw on biblical precedents: for example, the priest would wash and change his garments (compare Exodus 19:14). Perhaps this relates to Benjamin's saying that he has assembled his people that he "might rid [his] garments of [their] blood" (Mosiah 2:28). Yom Kippur is the anniversary of Moses' second descent from Mount Sinai after having received the Ten Commandments. This day was declared one of forgiveness and pardon for the Israelites, and this event is remembered each year even to this day. In Mosiah 3:14–15, Benjamin also remembered this event and the law that was received, and throughout his speech can be seen the themes of forgiveness and pardon.

Sacrifice and blood purifications. On this day in Israel, sacrifices were made. First, a special atonement was made by one designated priest. In ancient Israel he would purify various parts of the temple by daubing and then sprinkling blood (see Leviticus 16:16–20), for it was necessary to purify the temple once each year (see Hebrews 9:7). If such a temple purification had just taken place in Zarahemla—or was about to take place—this would have given concrete contextual impact to Benjamin's saying that the Lord "dwelleth not in unholy temples" (Mosiah 2:37).

Second, the priest would cleanse the people from certain kinds of iniquities and transgressions (see Leviticus 16:21, 33), particularly sins against God: "This shall be an everlasting statute unto you, to make an atonement for the children of Israel for all their sins once a year" (Leviticus 16:34). Of primary concern on this particular day were the sins of inadvertence. Even though a transgression occurred unconsciously, the ancient Israelites still viewed this as a transgression that defiled the temple and the people, and thus it was necessary to make an atonement (see Numbers 15:27–29). In addition, of grave import were the sins of rebelliousness, or *pəshā'īm*. Those who "brazenly rebel" are not eligible to have their transgression forgiven through sacrifice (see Numbers 15:30–31).

In much the same way, Benjamin expressed concerns regarding sin and the need for atonement. He explained that the atoning power of the blood of Christ covers inadvertent sins and sinners: "those who have died not knowing the will of God concerning them, or who have ignorantly sinned" (Mosiah 3:11), while he who sins "contrary to his own knowledge" (Mosiah 2:33) receives the harshest condemnation (see Mosiah 2:38–40). Likewise, Benjamin spoke adamantly about the great seriousness of rebellious sin: "Wo unto him who knoweth that he rebelleth

against God!" (Mosiah 3:12). "The man that . . . cometh out in open rebellion against God, . . . the Lord has no place in him" (Mosiah 2:37).

Scapegoat. Leviticus 16:7–10 prescribes the well-known and distinctive scapegoat ritual in which the high priest, on the Day of Atonement, took two goats; by casting lots one goat was declared to be "for the Lord" and the other "for Azazel." A similar dichotomy appears in Mosiah 5:7–12, in which the people are called either by the name of Christ and found belonging at the right hand of God, or are called "by some other name" and found at the left hand of God. According to later rabbinic tradition, if the lot "For the Lord" came up in the left hand, it was permissible to switch the lots with their respective goats so that although the determination of which goat was the Lord's was made by lot, the Lord's goat would be on the right hand while Azazel's goat would be on the left.¹⁹

The goat for the Lord was sacrificed, but the high priest placed his hands on the scapegoat and confessed all the sins of Israel, thereby transferring them to Azazel's goat, which was then taken off into the desert. The man who carried the goat out to the empty wilderness became impure and could not come back into the camp until he burned his clothes and washed himself. Similarly, any individual who broke the covenant was, in Benjamin's mind, to be "consigned to an awful view" of his guilt and "into a state of misery and endless torment" (Mosiah 3:25); he would find himself to be "worthless," in a state of "nothingness" (Mosiah 4:5), and ultimately Benjamin compared those who "know not the name by which [they] are called" to an ass that belongs to a neighbor and is not suffered to feed among the flocks but is driven away and cast out (see Mosiah 5:14–15).

Had Benjamin said that the sinner would be driven out like a goat instead of an ass, these connections with the Day of Atonement would have been more direct. But in fact, the kind of animal used in such settings was not critical among Israel's neighbors in the ancient Near East. Similar Hittite expiatory rituals drove out bulls, rams, mice, and vermin of the ground.

The name. So holy was the Day of Atonement that on this day the ineffable name of God, YHWH, could be pronounced. During the Yom Kippur service at the temple, the priest could pronounce this sacred name aloud. Later Jewish tradition seems to have the priest utter this name ten times during the Yom Kippur liturgy, and to a similar degree, Benjamin employs the expanded names Lord God and Lord Omnipotent seven and three times, respectively.²⁰

Seven of these utterances are in the reported words of the angel to Benjamin (see Mosiah 3:5, 13, 14, 17, 18, 21, 23). It seems more than coincidental²¹ that it is in the mouth of an angel that such names appear seven times and that the number seven reflects a "spiritual" perfection. The other three utterances come in the words of Benjamin (see Mosiah 2:30, 41, and 5:15). These three utterances come at important ceremonial breaking points in the speech, not merely at random or inconsequential places.

The response of the people to the pronouncement of the sacred name was singular. According to the Mishnah, each time the people at the temple in Jerusalem heard the sacred name they would fall prostrate on the ground.²² This can be compared with the reactions to King Benjamin's speech in Zarahemla. When he finished reciting the words of the angel, "he cast his eyes round about on the multitude, and behold they had fallen to the earth, for the fear of the Lord had come upon them" (Mosiah 4:1).

Indeed, Benjamin declared that one of the main purposes of the assembly was to "give this people a name" (Mosiah 1:11). Associated with pronouncing the name of God was the giving of his name to the people. In great solemnity and literary emphasis, Benjamin revealed the name of the Messiah as the following expression: "Jesus Christ, the

Son of God, the Father of heaven and earth, the Creator of all things from the beginning.” He also revealed Mary as the name of Christ’s mother (see Mosiah 3:8). He concluded his speech, telling the people, “this [the sacred name of Christ] is the name that I said I should give unto you” (Mosiah 5:11; see 5:9–14).

Fasting. On this day, according to the ancient custom, all were required to “afflict” their souls (see Leviticus 16:29–31; 23:27–32). Traditionally this has been understood to mean fasting (see Psalm 35:13; Isaiah 58:3, 5); however, it has been argued that this term should not be limited to fasting but should include other forms of self-denial. If Benjamin spoke on a day when the people were afflicting their souls, his deprecating descriptions of humans as being not even “as much as the dust of the earth” (Mosiah 2:25) and an “enemy to God” (Mosiah 3:19), whose “nothingness” makes them “unworthy creatures” (Mosiah 4:11), would have fit powerfully into that context.

If an ancient Israelite did not “afflict” his soul on this day, he was “cut off” from among the people (Leviticus 23:29). Benjamin speaks of blotting such a person out (see Mosiah 5:11) and of casting him out (see Mosiah 5:14), but since all his people complied with the requirement of making the covenant (see Mosiah 6:2), none had to be expelled.

Repentance. Benjamin implored his people to repent before God and to settle with their neighbors: “calling on the name of the Lord daily” (Mosiah 4:11), and imparting of your substance, “for the sake of retaining a remission of your sins from day to day” (Mosiah 4:26). The Mishnah explicitly teaches that the scapegoat’s atonement is effective only when it is accompanied by repentance and that transgressions against one’s fellowman must first be resolved before the atonement can have a beneficial effect.²³

Confession. Also associated with the Day of Atonement and naturally connected with repentance was the process of confession. According to the Talmud, the priest would confess the iniquities of the people—the confessions generally consisting of acknowledging sins and trespasses—and a corresponding expression of remorse from the people would follow.²⁴ This joint declaration is to be compared with the mutual confession of the people of King Benjamin of their carnal and sinful state (see Mosiah 4:2, 5), who adopted the king’s own acknowledgment of his “worthless and fallen state” (Mosiah 4:5): “I am also of the dust, . . . [an] unprofitable servant” (Mosiah 2:26, 21). According to one source, forgiveness is granted to all on this day who thus confess and repent (see Jubilees 34:17–18; see also Mosiah 3:16; 6:2).

Giving to the poor or repaying debts. Over the years, Jewish traditions of asking forgiveness of one another, giving gifts to the poor, and generally appeasing one’s neighbor developed from these ancient teachings in connection with the Day of Atonement. On the eve of the Day of Atonement “it is customary to send gifts to the poor, and a duty to ask forgiveness from one another and to appease each other.”²⁵ “Ye should impart of your substance to the poor,” says Benjamin, “administering to their relief, both spiritually and temporally” (Mosiah 4:26). Expressing the natural human feeling of gratitude and debt that comes with any occasion of profound forgiveness and reconciliation, Jews today recite at Yom Kippur the *Avinu Malkaynu* prayer, which speaks of the deep indebtedness of all humans to God.²⁶

Joy. The Day of Atonement was apparently in all eras a time of “true joy.”²⁷ Similarly, Benjamin and his people experienced “exceedingly great joy” (Mosiah 4:11) and rejoiced (see Mosiah 4:12) abundantly. On the Day of Atonement, Israelites came to feel God’s close association with his creatures, just as Benjamin exulted in the “goodness of God, and his matchless power, and his wisdom, and his patience, and his long-suffering towards the children of men” (Mosiah 4:6).

Blessings. On many occasions in Jewish life, but especially on this day, blessings were pronounced. In Benjamin's case, several blessings were mentioned: "he doth bless and prosper you" (Mosiah 2:22); "ye shall prosper in the land, and your enemies shall have no power over you" (Mosiah 2:31); and remember "the blessed and happy state of those that keep the commandments" (Mosiah 2:41). At the end of the Day of Atonement, Jewish people exchange blessings such as "May you be inscribed for life [in the book of life] and merit many years."²⁸ Likewise, at the conclusion of his speech, Benjamin took "the names of all those who had entered into a covenant with God to keep his commandments" (Mosiah 6:1). In some cases the Israelites immediately began constructing their booths (*sukkot*) in preparation for the next phase of this season's celebrations.

The Feast of Tabernacles (Sukkot)

The next aspect of the great fall celebrations in ancient Israel was the Feast of Tabernacles (Sukkot). The earliest sources refer to it as the Feast of Harvest or Feast of Ingathering (see Exodus 23:16; 34:22). Later it was called the Feast of Tabernacles or Feast of Booths in reference to the booths or huts in which the Israelites dwelt during this celebration. It was also called the "feast unto the Lord" (Leviticus 23:39; Numbers 29:12); "feast to the Lord" (Exodus 12:14); or simply "the feast" (1 Kings 8:2; 2 Chronicles 7:8). It came to be observed on the fifteenth of Tishri, five days after the Day of Atonement. Probably an agricultural festival originally, it eventually came to celebrate historical events associated with the exodus. The Feast of Tabernacles is mentioned frequently in the Bible (see Leviticus 23:33–44; Numbers 29:12–38; Deuteronomy 16:13; 31:9–13; Zechariah 14:16, 18–19; Ezra 3:4; 2 Chronicles 8:13; John 7:2). The description of the Feast of Tabernacles as drawn from the Bible compares very favorably and significantly with further elements in Benjamin's speech. Other important information about this festival is given in the Mishnah, Talmud, and later Jewish writings.

Pilgrimage. The Feast of Tabernacles was a day of national assembly, a great pilgrimage festival. The Mosaic law specified that "all . . . males shall appear before the Lord God" (Exodus 23:17), and in Deuteronomy the entire family was expected to participate: "And thou shalt rejoice in thy feast, thou, and thy son, and thy daughter, and thy manservant, and thy maidservant, and the Levite, the stranger, and the fatherless, and the widow, that are within thy gates" (Deuteronomy 16:14; compare 31:10–12). The people were to congregate at one of Israel's sanctuaries or "in the place which [God] shall choose" (Deuteronomy 31:11).

Similarly, at the occasion of King Benjamin's address, whole families were present. Benjamin caused all the people in his land to "gather themselves together" (Mosiah 1:18) and to assemble together (see Mosiah 2:9, 27), both Nephites and Mulekites (Mosiah 1:10): "every man according to his family, consisting of his wife, and his sons, and his daughters, and their sons, and their daughters, from the eldest down to the youngest, every family being separate one from another" (Mosiah 2:5). They assembled specifically "round about" the main Nephite sanctuary in the days of Benjamin, the temple in Zarahemla (Mosiah 2:6).

Booths/tents. In Zarahemla, Benjamin's people "pitched their tents round about the temple, every man having his tent with the door thereof towards the temple, that thereby they might remain in their tents and hear the words which king Benjamin would speak unto them" (Mosiah 2:6). During the Feast of Tabernacles in the Old World, the ancient Israelites sat in booths or huts made from branches and vines (see Leviticus 23:41–44). According to Leviticus 23:43 the purpose of the booths was to remind the children of Israel that they had been "made . . . to dwell in booths (*sukkot*)" when they were brought out of Egypt. The relationship between such booths and tents has received a fair amount of comment. In particular, the word "booths" (*sukkot*) does not appear in the account of the exodus. Instead we find that the people lived in tents. For example, in Exodus 33:8, "and it came to pass, when

Moses went out unto the tabernacle (*hā-’ōhel*), that all the people rose up, and stood every man at his tent (*’ōhel*) door, and looked after Moses, until he was gone into the tabernacle.”

Tents were specifically mentioned in connection with the celebration of Solomon’s dedication of the temple: “And at that time Solomon held a feast, and all Israel with him, a great congregation. . . . On the eighth day he sent the people away: and they blessed the king, and went unto their tents (*le’ohōleyhem*) joyful and glad of heart” (1 Kings 8:65–66). This feast, in which tents were used, was held in the seventh month (see 1 Kings 8:2) and has generally been thought of as a Feast of Tabernacles.

The Hebrew word *’ōhālīm*, translated in the King James Version as “tabernacles,” is most often rendered “tents.” To the Nephites, their festival use of tents may also have symbolized the time when Lehi and his family had “dwelt in a tent” (1 Nephi 10:16), for Benjamin convenes his celebration in part to remember the distinctiveness of his people, whom “the Lord God hath brought out of the land of Jerusalem” (Mosiah 1:11).

It is evident in Benjamin’s speech that the tents are ceremonially significant. Each family had a “tent with the door thereof towards the temple, that thereby they might remain in their tents and hear the words which king Benjamin should speak unto them” (Mosiah 2:6). Everyone had a tent, not just those who had come from out of town and needed a place to stay. Furthermore, they all remained in their tents during the speech, surely for ceremonial reasons. If it had not been religiously and ritually important for them to stay in their tents, the crowd could have stood much closer to Benjamin and been able to hear him, obviating the need for written copies of his words to be prepared and circulated (see Mosiah 2:8). Apparently Benjamin considered it more important for the people to remain in their tents than to have them stand within close hearing distance of the speaker.

Sacrifice. Numbers 29:12–34 lists the sacrifices connected with the Feast of Tabernacles. These sacrifices were greater in number than those connected with the two previous celebrations. The Book of Mormon has relatively few references to sacrifices and burnt offerings. It is significant, then, that sacrifices and burnt offerings are mentioned in the prologue to King Benjamin’s address: “And they also took of the firstlings of their flocks, that they might offer sacrifice and burnt offerings according to the law of Moses” (Mosiah 2:3).

Law and covenant. During the Feast of Tabernacles, the Israelites celebrated the giving of the law to Moses on Mount Sinai. Ancient Israelites profoundly venerated their laws. Every seven years at the Feast of Tabernacles, the law was read, and a statement of the people’s commitment to the law took place. In postexilic times, this ancient element became so prominent that the ninth day of the feast came to be known as *Simḥat Torah* (Joy-of-the-Torah), in commemoration of the revelation of the law at Sinai.

Thus not only do King Benjamin’s constant references to keeping the commandments of God (see Mosiah 2:13, 22, 31, 41; 4:6, 30) and to God’s appointment of the law of Moses to a stiffnecked people during the exodus (see Mosiah 3:14) fit the Feast of the Tabernacles perfectly, but also in both Jerusalem and Zarahemla this day was a day of covenant renewal. In Israel, on this day the people renewed their covenant with God to be his people and to obey his laws. Benjamin’s people also enter into such a covenant.

Earthly king. The figure of the king seems to have played an important part in the ancient Feast of Tabernacles. As noted above, King Solomon chose this time to dedicate his temple. To do so, he had to wait eleven months—from the eighth month until the seventh month (1 Kings 6:38; 8:2), indicating the importance he placed on waiting until a specific time in the fall. Later Jewish texts attest to the association between the king and the Feast of Tabernacles. The Mishnah gives a good description of the activities of the king:²⁹ the king stands upon a specially

constructed platform,³⁰ and he is given a copy of the law from which he reads various passages from Deuteronomy, including the Paragraph of the King³¹ and other texts dealing with the law and covenant-making. In view of the role of the king in the Feast of Tabernacles, it is not surprising that this was the time for the coronation of a new king both in Israel and among the Nephites.

Heavenly king. Not only did the earthly king play an important part in the Feast of Tabernacles, but God as the Heavenly King is also implied in early sources. The prophet Zechariah, who looked strongly toward the heavenly Lord of Hosts as the eternal king, prophesied that the Messiah would come on the Feast of Tabernacles and that the people would venerate him as king after his coming (see Zechariah 14:16). Such references to God as king call to mind Benjamin's reference to God as the "heavenly King" (Mosiah 2:19) and also Benjamin's discussion of the coming of the Messiah (see Mosiah 3:1–10).

Thanksgiving and praise. Finally, prayers of thanksgiving and praising God were an important part of all ancient Israelite holy days. Over the years, a standard thanksgiving prayer known as the *She-hecheyanu* has been handed down among the Jews. This prayer is recited when eating the first-fruits, offering sacrifices, doing things for the first time (or for the first time in a long time), and at certain other prescribed times, including the beginning of every festival. The words of this prayer today are *Barukh 'attah YHWH 'Eloheinu melekh ha-'olam she-hecheyanu ve-kiyemanu ve-higiyanu laz-zeman ha-zeh*, which is "Praised (or blessed) art Thou, Lord our God, King of the universe, who hast kept us alive, and hast preserved us, and enabled us to reach this [festival] season."³² Although it is impossible for us today to know when the specific words of this short traditional prayer were composed, its sentiments are all found in the Psalms.

Interestingly, King Benjamin's speech contains many of the elements found in the *She-hecheyanu*. Immediately after referring to God as "your heavenly King" (Mosiah 2:19), Benjamin soberly instructs his people to render "thanks and praise . . . to that God who has created you, and has kept and preserved you" (Mosiah 2:20–21).

Sabbatical Years

Benjamin also seems to have timed this great assembly to occur in connection with the conclusion of a sabbatical year, which came once every seven years. Four of the major themes of the sabbatical year can be found embedded in Benjamin's speech.

Land, debt, and servitude. Under the law of Moses, in every seventh year beginning at the Feast of Booths, the fields had to lie fallow and their yield was left to the poor (see Exodus 23:10–11). According to the law set out in Deuteronomy, "at the end of every seven years" the covenant people of Israel were required to "make a release," namely, that "every creditor that lendeth ought unto his neighbour shall release it; he shall not exact it of his neighbour, or of his brother" (Deuteronomy 15:1–2). Moreover, in the year of release all Hebrew slaves were to be set at liberty, particularly those who were enslaved for the nonpayment of debts (see Exodus 21:2–6; Deuteronomy 15:7–18; Jeremiah 34:8–16). The reason for this was that no one could "claim as his own private property a fellow Israelite, who belonged by right of purchase to God alone."³³

Many of these factors are relevant to Mosiah 1–6. If Benjamin's speech came at the end of a sabbatical year, this would explain why King Mosiah, at the end of his coronation, "did cause his people that they should till the earth" (Mosiah 6:7). This royal act would seem to mark specifically the end of the sabbatical year and the ceremonial beginning of a new agricultural period, for it would be odd for a king to command his people to begin tilling the ground unless there had been some reason to cease, or some need to commence this common activity anew. It

would also give new significance to the fact that Benjamin affirms that he has not allowed his people to “make slaves of one another” (Mosiah 2:13) and insists that all people belong to God by virtue of his having created them (see Mosiah 2:24). Furthermore, in the context of a sabbatical year celebration it makes good sense for Benjamin to speak so extensively about service, giving to the poor, and the realization that all people are beggars (see Mosiah 4:15–23). In addition, Benjamin commanded his people to settle their debts with their neighbors and not remain borrowers (see Mosiah 4:28).

The reading of the law. Associated with the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles on the sabbatical year was the reading of the law. The stipulations regarding the reading of the law are found in Deuteronomy 31:10–13, which reads:

And Moses *commanded* them, saying, At the end of every seven years, in the *solemnity* of the year of release [compare Mosiah 2:9], in the feast of tabernacles, When all Israel is come to appear before the Lord thy God in the *place* which he shall choose [compare Mosiah 1:18], thou shalt read this law before all Israel *in their hearing* [compare Mosiah 2:8]. *Gather* the people together, *men, and women, and children* [compare Mosiah 2:5], *and thy stranger* that is *within thy gates* [compare Mosiah 1:10], that they *may hear*, and that they *may learn* [compare Mosiah 2:9], and *fear the Lord* your God [compare Mosiah 4:1], and observe *to do all the words* of this law: and that their *children*, which have *not known* any thing, may hear, and learn to fear the Lord your God [compare Mosiah 3:21–22; 4:15].

The completeness and precision with which Benjamin appears to be fulfilling these technical Mosaic requirements lends weighty evidence to the conclusion that it was at just such a seventh-year Feast of Tabernacles that Benjamin’s speech was delivered.

The Jubilee

Moreover, every seventh sabbatical year was a jubilee year. It is possible that Benjamin not only selected a sabbatical year on which to crown his son king, but that this great occasion also fell on a jubilee year, as the following factors may indicate:

A time of return. The jubilee year was a time when property was returned to its hereditary owner: “Ye shall return every man unto his possession, and ye shall return every man unto his family” (Leviticus 25:10). On a jubilee year, one could expect a king to comment on this extraordinary time of return, as Benjamin indeed does: “Whosoever among you borroweth of his neighbor should *return the thing* that he borroweth, according as he doth agree, or else thou shalt commit sin; and perhaps thou shalt cause thy neighbor to commit sin also” (Mosiah 4:28).

Benjamin’s concern, under one possible reading of this text, is that the very thing that has been transferred should be returned. Substituted property of equivalent value, or money, was apparently not acceptable to Benjamin on this occasion. One wonders why not—perhaps because during a jubilee year the people had to “return every man unto *his possession*” (Leviticus 25:10, emphasis added).

Underlying the jubilee laws was the idea that the land and all the world belongs to God. Private ownership of land in Israel was effectively limited, at least in theory, by the jubilee redemption and fallow laws. A similar concept is also expressly recognized by King Benjamin, who declares concerning the dust of the earth: “behold, it belongeth to him who created you” (Mosiah 2:25). The recognition of God’s ownership of the earth would have been as powerfully felt on a jubilee year as at any time on the ancient Israelite calendar.

Jubilee texts. The jubilee text of Leviticus 25 compares closely with two sections of Benjamin's speech. Leviticus 25 reflects the words and phrases associated with the jubilee in ancient times. A considerable density of phrases and ideas from these chapters can be found in the latter portions of Mosiah 2 and 4, sufficient to indicate a textual dependency of Benjamin's words on these or similar jubilee texts. The main parallels between these passages and Benjamin's speech can be outlined as follows:

¥ Benjamin's "return the thing" (Mosiah 4:28) recalls "return every man unto his possession" (Leviticus 25:10).

¥ His injunction "Ye will *not* have a mind to *injure* one another" (Mosiah 4:13) echoes "Ye shall *not oppress* one another" (Leviticus 25:14, 17).

¥ At the jubilee, it was required, "He shall reckon with him" (Leviticus 25:50; compare 15–16). Similarly, Benjamin said, "Render to every man according to that which is his due" (Mosiah 4:13).

¥ "And if thy brother be waxen poor, and fallen in decay with thee; then *thou shalt relieve* him: yea though he be a stranger or a sojourner; that he may live with thee" (Leviticus 25:35) has the same import as "Ye . . . *will succor* those that stand in need, . . . ye will not . . . turn him out to perish" (Mosiah 4:16).

¥ "I am the Lord your God, which brought you forth" (Leviticus 25:38) implies the same conclusion as "Do we not all depend upon the same Being, even God, for all the substance which we have" (Mosiah 4:19).

¥ The promise in Leviticus reads, "Wherefore ye shall do my statutes and keep my judgments, and do them; and ye shall dwell in the land in safety. And the land shall yield her fruit" (Leviticus 25:18–19); and in Benjamin's speech, "If ye would keep his commandments ye should *prosper in the land*" (Mosiah 2:22).

These relatively specific parallels, coupled with similarities in the overall tone and concerns of the jubilee texts and Benjamin's speech, indicate Benjamin's intense feelings about helping the poor, establishing God's covenant among his people, being conscientious in walking in the paths of righteousness, and realizing man's utter dependence on God for life and sustenance. These may well be attributable to the heightened sense of these principles felt by the ancient Israelites during the jubilee season.

A time of beginning anew. While the jubilee laws served primarily to protect the lives and real property of small individual families from the horrors of bondage and disinheritance, these provisions also expressed powerful ideological values that helped periodically to set the community back on an even keel. Ancient economies were largely unregulated. In such societies, the rich tend to get richer and the poor become steadily poorer; land ownership becomes more and more concentrated in the hands of a few, and debts accumulate and compound without any hope of relief coming from such modern inventions as bankruptcy laws or government subsidies.

Babylonian kings in the second millennium B.C. dealt with this broad economic problem by issuing special edicts at the commencement of their reign or periodically as the need arose. These so-called *mishârum* decrees forgave classes of people their outstanding debts and canceled taxes, and introduced various reforms, thereby setting everyone in the kingdom, to an extent, back on an equal or equitable footing.

During its formative years, however, Israel had no kings. In the ancient Israelite world, no decrees would ever be forthcoming through the coronation edict of a generous new ruler seeking to garner political popularity, putting aside all the old obligations legitimized under his predecessor's authority in favor of giving his new administration

a clean slate. Perhaps the jubilee laws were understood, in part, to fill this ancient need for periodical recalibration of Israelite economy and society.

With this background, it is easy to imagine why King Benjamin would turn to the jubilee texts and sabbatical principles at the end of his reign and at the commencement of the regency of his son Mosiah. Benjamin wanted his son to start afresh; he wanted old claims to be settled before new administrators and officers were put into office (see Mosiah 6:2). Moreover, the ethical content of the jubilee strongly promoted such ideas as showing mercy (see Mosiah 4:16), forgiving indebtedness (see Mosiah 2:23), making people free (see Mosiah 5:8), proclaiming good news to the poor (see Mosiah 3:3; Isaiah 42:1–7; 61:1), settling accounts and returning borrowed property (see Mosiah 4:28), and retaining one's inheritance and favored condition (compare "retain" in Mosiah 4:12 and 26). These precepts are further bound up tightly with such theological themes as obtaining relief from one's debt to God through his mercy and goodness, being redeemed through the atonement of Christ, being held accountable at God's final judgment, and repenting and retaining a remission of forgiveness—doctrines that appear prominently in Benjamin's speech.

A time of peace. Another clue indicating that Benjamin's speech was delivered at the end of a jubilee year is found in Nephite history half a century later. Every seventh seven-year time period ideally occasioned a jubilee celebration, a time of peace. Mosiah reigned a total of thirty-three years after King Benjamin's speech (see Mosiah 29:46). Interestingly, in the sixteenth year of the reign of judges (the forty-ninth year after Benjamin's speech), "there began to be continual peace throughout all the land" (Alma 30:2). This peace lasted all through the seventeenth year of the reign of the judges (the fiftieth year); "there was continual peace" (Alma 30:5). During this time the people were especially "strict in observing the ordinances of God, according to the law of Moses" (Alma 30:3). Since the Hebrew word *yōbēl* (jubilee) literally means "trumpet," and indeed the jubilee was so called because it was opened with the sound of the trumpet, we may further conclude that Alma's wish that he might speak with the voice of "the trump of God" (Alma 29:1) is present and especially appropriate in this second identifiable jubilee season in Nephite history.

Conclusion

The cumulative effect of all the foregoing information, in our opinion, points toward the idea that King Benjamin's speech was delivered in the fall, at the time of the year when all ancient Israelites, including peoples of the Book of Mormon, would have been celebrating their great autumn festival season, which included many ancient elements that later became enduring parts of the Jewish holidays of Rosh ha-Shanah, Yom Kippur, and Sukkot. Most of the known or surmised ancient elements of these festivals are represented in the text of the Book of Mormon. A very substantial percentage of the total number of words and topics found in Benjamin's speech are clearly found in the Israelite or Jewish literature associated with these sacred observances.

The setting for King Benjamin's speech was profoundly religious. On this occasion Benjamin disclosed sacred knowledge to his people about the true nature of divine kingship, the atonement of Christ, and the judgments of God. In addition, Benjamin performed the coronation of his son Mosiah and conducted his covenant renewal celebration—the most important ceremonial day of his life. It appears that he deliberately held this sacred assembly at the holy time of the year when such events were typically performed in ancient Israel, and possibly during a sabbatical or jubilee year. Just as the Israelite traditions shed considerable light on Benjamin's words, his speech represents a Nephite version of the ancient Israelite fall celebration, and as such it may add to our understanding of preexilic Israelite religion.

Notes

1. These include David E. Boruchowitz, Richard Erickson, Jerome Horowitz, Stephen D. Ricks, John L. Sorenson, Terrence L. Szink, Gordon C. Thomasson, John A. Tvedtnes, Benjamin Urrutia, John W. Welch, and Stephen Wood.
2. John W. Welch, "The Temple in the Book of Mormon," in *Temples of the Ancient World*, ed. Donald W. Parry (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1994), 316–17.
3. See Menahem Haran, *Temples and Temple-Service in Ancient Israel* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1985), 297–98; H. J. Kraus, *Worship in Israel*, trans. Geoffrey Buswell (Richmond: Knox, 1966), 208.
4. The fall Feast of Ingathering "had many rites that are now associated with Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Sukkot. It appears that it was only later, after the Babylonian Exile, that the autumn festival was divided into three separate holidays." Hayyim Schauss, *The Jewish Festivals* (New York: Schocken, 1962), 113. See also John Bright, *A History of Israel*, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981), 171. We may find a parallel to this idea of an ancient festival season in the common practice of celebrating Christmas, the New Year, and Hanukkah by sending season's greetings, a practice that combines several holidays in one.
5. See Kraus, *Worship in Israel*, 208.
6. Henri Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 331.
7. See Mishnah *Rosh ha-Shanah* 1:2. "On New Year's Day all that come into the world pass before him like legions of soldiers, for it is written, He that fashioneth the hearts of them all, that considereth all their works."
8. *Leviticus Rabbah* 29:4; see Jerusalem Talmud *Rosh ha-Shanah* 1:3; Louis Jacobs, "Rosh ha-Shanah," in *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1972), 14:307, 309.
9. T. H. Gaster, *Festivals of the Jewish Year* (New York: Morrow Quill, 1978), 121.
10. See Babylonian Talmud *Rosh ha-Shanah* 16b; Jacobs, "Rosh ha-Shanah," 307.
11. See James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 501–3.
12. Gaster, *Festivals of the Jewish Year*, 109. To this effect, Gaster cites generally Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954), 51–92.
13. John H. Eaton, "The King as God's Witness," *Annual of the Swedish Theological Institute*, ed. Hans Kosmala (Leiden: Brill, 1970), 7:27, 29, 31.
14. See Helmer Ringgren, "Enthronement Festival or Covenant Renewal," *Biblical Research* 7 (1962): 45.
15. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 334.
16. See Aubrey R. Johnson, *Sacral Kingship in Ancient Israel* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1955), 22–25; John H. Eaton, *Kingship and the Psalms*, 2nd ed. (Sheffield: JSOT, 1986), 133–34; Helmer Ringgren, *Israelite Religion*,

trans. David E. Green (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 236–37.

17. Schauss, *Jewish Festivals*, 146; see also Jacobs, “Rosh ha-Shanah,” 309.

18. See Welch, “The Temple in the Book of Mormon,” 353. Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 1039, notes that the septenary system was operative in the rites of the Day of Atonement. See Leviticus 4:6, 17; 8:11; 14:7, 16, 27, 51; 16:14, 19.

19. See Mishnah *Yoma* 4:1.

20. The occurrences are Mosiah 2:30, “Lord God doth support me”; 2:41, “Lord God hath spoken it”; 3:5, “Lord Omnipotent who reigneth”; 3:13, “Lord God hath sent his holy prophets”; 3:14, “Lord God saw that his people were a stiffnecked people”; 3:17, “Lord Omnipotent [only means of salvation]”; 3:18, “Lord Omnipotent [atoning blood of]”; 3:21, “Lord God Omnipotent [name of]”; 3:23, “Lord God hath commanded me”; 5:15, “Lord God Omnipotent may seal you his.” Moreover, only in Benjamin’s speech do “Lord God Omnipotent” or “Lord Omnipotent” ever appear in the Book of Mormon, indicating cultic usage here. On the Jewish practice, see Schauss, *Jewish Festivals*, 135, who counts ten such occurrences, representing completeness and perfection. In addition, just as the people responded by saying the word *atone* once in Mosiah 4:12, they pronounce the name Lord Omnipotent once in Mosiah 5:2.

21. The use of these words is remarkable, especially since the angel also uses the name Christ exactly seven times and Benjamin uses the root *atone* seven times in this seven-part speech.

22. See Mishnah *Yoma* 6:2.

23. See Mishnah *Yoma* 8:9: “For transgressions that are between man and God the Day of Atonement effects atonement, but for transgressions that are between a man and his fellow the Day of Atonement effects atonement only if he has appeased his fellow.”

24. See Babylonian Talmud *Yoma* 87b.

25. Moshe D. Herr, “Day of Atonement,” in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 5:1381.

26. See Moshe I. Sorscher, *Companion Guide to the Yom Kippur Prayer Service* (Brooklyn: Judaica, 1994), 50.

27. Herr, “Day of Atonement,” 5:1382, especially citing Philo.

28. Ibid.

29. See Mishnah *Sotah* 7:8.

30. T. Raymond Hobbs, *2 Kings* (Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1985), 142, suggests that the object stood on or was by “some kind of column, podium, or platform.” Kraus, *Worship in Israel*, 224, notes that in the ceremonies of enthronement the king was lifted on to an *’ammud* where he received the homage of the congregation.

31. See John A. Tvedtnes, “King Benjamin and the Feast of Tabernacles,” in *By Study and Also by Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley*, ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS,

1990), 2:224–26.

32. See, for example, *Ha-Sidur ha-Shalem (Daily Prayer Book)*, translated and annotated with an introduction by Philip Birnbaum (New York: Hebrew Publishing, 1949), 678; this prayer is recited on the first day of waving the *lulav* during Sukkot.

33. Christopher J. H. Wright, “Jubilee, Year of,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 3:1026. See, generally, Niels P. Lemche, “The Manumission of Slaves—The Fallow Year—The Sabbatical Year—The Jubel Year,” *Vetus Testamentum* 26/1 (January 1976): 38–59; and Robert North, *Sociology of the Biblical Jubilee* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1954).