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John W. Welch

# Christ and Temples in the Book of Mormon

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## Summary

John Welch proposes that the mission of Christ and the significance of temples intersect in the Book of Mormon. The Book of Mormon teaches the surpassing importance of the temple. There are twenty-seven explicit references to the temple in the Book of Mormon, as well as allusions to the temple found in words and phrases. Temple themes in the Book of Mormon can be better appreciated through an understanding of the law of Moses, including festivals and ritual observances.

Transcript  
Book of Mormon, Christ  
Temple

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# Christ and Temples in the Book of Mormon

John W. Welch

Today, we take up a new and intriguing topic: that of Christ and the temples of the Book of Mormon. I pray that my humble thoughts and efforts today will be worthy of the holy ground that we will be covering, and that these ideas will help you in your thinking and spiritual experiences with Christ and the temple.

The temple and the Book of Mormon are comfortable and close companions, for the Savior's spirit truly permeates both of them. Well is the Book of Mormon subtitled *Another Testament of Jesus Christ*, for on its pages are found the teachings, principles, terms, conditions, and blessings of the covenant relationship that should be established between Jesus Christ and every true believer in him. By focusing on the temples of the Book of Mormon, where the ancient Nephites solemnized and renewed their sacred covenants, in and through their Lord and Savior, I think we can come another step closer to Christ.

In this lecture, I have organized my thoughts to explore, step by step, what we know about temples in the Book of Mormon and how we know what we know; and then, as we go, to point out how the information about temples points us all to Jesus Christ. This is a complex and exciting, though sometimes elusive, topic. But the insights that have come through this study of many Book of Mormon details regarding temples have been among the most rewarding and meaningful to me of all the work that I have done on the Book of Mormon. I have identified here ten steps, in this study, and I will try to explain and illustrate each of them, as time will allow, with a few specific findings.

## 1

In approaching temples in the Book of Mormon, I believe that the first step, step number one, is to *comprehend the importance of holy temples*. We must comprehend the enormous importance of temples as reflected in the Bible, and indeed in many ancient societies. If we're going to understand the temple, either ancient or modern, we all need to set aside and overcome those modern, secular predispositions and attitudes that tend to marginalize sacred things in general and temples in particular.

As any study of the subject will show you, temples were highly important in the ancient world. Those buildings were viewed as the one point on earth where men and women could establish contact with divine spheres. They represented stability and cohesiveness in the community, and temple rites and ceremonies were viewed as essential to the proper function of the society.



The faithful gathered regularly at their temples for their most sacred rites. Death threats were even posted to warn the unworthy and to protect the temple and its sanctity from intruders. Notably, the ancient Temple of Herod, in Jerusalem, had such a warning posted. In principle, it's no different in the world of the Book of Mormon, although I doubt that the righteous Nephites went so far as to kill any people who violated the temple by intruding improperly. (Although I guess I wouldn't have put it past King Noah to have done that.)

Ample evidence indicates that temples occupied positions of immense religious and social importance among the Nephites. Prominent on the landscape of each of the successive Nephite capital cities—of Nephi, Zarahemla, and Bountiful—was a temple, probably one of the most important buildings in town. Here the Nephites gathered for their coronations, for their covenant ceremonies, for religious instructions, and to perform sacrifices and sacred ordinances. Given the frequent Book of Mormon statement that God does not live in unholy temples, surely the Nephites protected the holiness of their houses of God. And holding these holy places in awe helped them, and us, to seek and find their Savior Jesus Christ.

Lesson number one, then, is to approach the Lord and his temple today with a similar sense of holiness. It was no accident that Lehi, Nephi, and Jacob spoke frequently of Jehovah as the Holy One of Israel and spoke of the holiness which was in him. It was no accident that Mormon, Moroni, and other Book of Mormon writers spoke so often about the holiness which is in Christ and the glory of God and the holiness of Jesus Christ. And it is no coincidence today that each temple is marked with the words, "Holiness to the Lord." It is no accident that the righteous Nephites had gathered at their holy temple when they saw and heard the resurrected Jesus, in 3 Nephi 11, the most important event in all of Nephite history.

## 2

Step two is to *examine each explicit reference to temples in the Book of Mormon*. There are some 27 verses that mention temples directly. We don't have time to look at each one of these, but you can do that in your individual study. And this second step is to see what we can learn from each of those references. For example, in Jacob 2 and 3, we see Jacob speaking to his people. And where does he speak? At the newly finished temple in the city of Nephi. I suspect, also, that Jacob's great covenant and atonement sermon, in 2 Nephi 6–10, was given at that same temple; but the text doesn't spell that out explicitly. In Mosiah 7 and 8 we find another example of a gathering, when Limhi assembles his people several centuries later, once again at that same temple in the city of Nephi.

From such accounts, we get a glimpse of why the Nephites gathered and what was done on their temple occasions. Jacob taught them, in Jacob 2 and 3, as is well known, about obedience, especially to the law of chastity, the proper use of wealth, and avoiding pride—or, in other words, the law of consecration. Jacob mentions frequently purity, holiness, and cleanness, states that surely would have been closely associated with the law of sacrifice and atonement as practiced by the Nephites in Jacob's day.

Limhi's gathering in Mosiah 7 and 8 began similarly, this time by reading the historical records, but it ended with the reading of (as the text says) the last words which King Benjamin had taught. Those words were then explained to the people of Limhi, so that they might understand (the text says) "all the words" which Benjamin had spoken. And what were those words about? Well, you have to flip back to Mosiah 2–5 to find those words of Benjamin. But when you do that, you find none other than Benjamin's words about the all-important new name of Jesus Christ; his atonement, the only way by which salvation cometh; and the making of a covenant between the people and the Lord, or a testament, as that word means, between God and his people, testifying that they are willing, as Mosiah 5:5 says, to do God's will, to be obedient to his commandments, and to take upon them the name of Christ.

So here again we find a conjunction between the Redeemer and the temple, helping people to increase their understanding of their covenants with the Lord Jesus Christ. These are important insights into what was going on in the temple in the Nephite world.

From other references we also learn a bit about the structure of the Nephite temple; and we ought to pause to say at least a few words about the building of the temple in the city of Nephi. Nephi states that he constructed this temple, if you'll recall, in the manner that was like unto the Temple of Solomon. This is 2 Nephi 5:16. Now what does this mean, and what does this tell us? It tells us that these two temples, the temple of Nephi and the Temple of Solomon, were similar in their general pattern, their purpose, their layout, and design, although Nephi is quick to add that his little temple was not decorated with nearly as many precious gems or things such as were available to Solomon in the construction of his magnificent temple in Jerusalem.

In the opinions of some scholars, Solomon's temple was somewhat distinctive, in that it consisted of three rooms, one behind the other, on a straight axis or in a straight line, and that the building was the same width all along its length, with the middle room being the largest, and the third or the innermost room being the most holy, known as the Holy of Holies. By the way, recent archaeological discoveries of small Israelite temples in the Old World show that small-scale, simplified models of Solomon's temple were in

fact built and existed elsewhere in ancient Jewish areas. So the idea of Nephi building a temple, a simplified temple, like the Temple of Solomon outside of Jerusalem would not have been aberrational or unusual. As we will see further below, Nephi presumably built his temple in this particular fashion so that it could function in the same way as the Temple of Solomon and perform there the same kinds of ordinances and rituals as were performed in the Temple of Solomon.

### 3

The third step for our study of temples in the Book of Mormon is to *try to understand the words and motifs as the Nephites might have understood them*; in other words, to consider implicit references to temple precepts in the Book of Mormon texts. How would the Nephites have implicitly understood things? Since temples were so important in the minds of these people, we should be alert to the possibility that temple messages exist even in very simple words.

For example, when Lehi blessed Jacob to spend all the days, all his days, "in the service of thy God" (2 Nephi 2:3), we should think in part that Lehi was dedicating Jacob to future service of Christ in the temple. For the Hebrew words for *service*, in the Old Testament, do not primarily describe humanitarian service but more often appear in phrases such as "service in thy holy place" (Exodus 39:1), or "service of the House of God" (1 Chronicles 9:13). Later, King Benjamin intensified this very point when he taught his people that all service, whether service to God or humanitarian service to one's fellow man, is in reality only sacred service to God; teaching again in a temple setting, there in the temple of Zarahemla, the need for Christian and sacred service to God and to others in order to stand approved and to render thanks and praise to the Lord.

Like the word *service*, the word *garments* is used frequently in the Book of Mormon, and it may also have temple meanings. *Garments* often signify temple or priestly vestments. And when the people agonized about the pollutions, or iniquities, or abominations, we should also recall that the ancient mind there would have readily associated such concepts with their temple. We should then complete the thought by remembering that these Nephites also understood that their garments would only be made white again through the blood of the Lamb, as Nephi, Alma, and Moroni clearly state. Having your garments made white by the blood of the Lamb is perhaps an unusual or odd image to a modern reader, but not to an ancient person who saw blood as a purifying and cleansing agent, vividly typifying and purifying the cleansing power of the atoning blood of Jesus Christ.

Even Abinadi's curse that Noah's life would be as a garment in a hot furnace, in Mosiah 12, can be understood in terms of sacred imagery. To me, this picture here is one of God's consuming presence on Mount Sinai, which

ascended as a smoke from the furnace and threatened to consume any unworthy person who set foot on that mountain (Exodus 19). Abinadi similarly says that because of Noah's wickedness, his garments will be consumed as in a fiery furnace, referring, I think here, back to that image of fire burning on Mount Sinai in the presence of the Lord. That same fire threatened, as you know, in Exodus 19, to consume any unworthy person who set foot on that mountain.

That mount, Mount Sinai, as has been frequently noted, was a prototype for the temple mount in Jerusalem; so when we think of the mount of Mount Sinai, we should equally think of things happening there in the temple. As Moses stood in the presence of the Lord on Mount Sinai, so people enter into the presence of the Lord in the temple. Many parallels exist between the temple and that mountain. For example, worthiness to enter the house of the Lord, worthiness to stand in his presence, is presupposed by the idea that the wicked people would be figuratively consumed in his presence.

And thus when Abinadi quotes the ten commandments, from Exodus 20, the very next chapter in the book of Exodus, and he quotes those to the wicked priests of Noah, we should remember that those commandments have been identified by a number of scholars to have been used in antiquity as a kind of ten-point temple recommend for determining worthiness to enter into the house of the Lord. And thus Abinadi's point about worthiness to come unto Christ and his temple comes through even more clearly in his simple condemnation of Noah and him being consumed as a garment in a furnace.

In other words, we have to look for these implicit references. When we hear the word *service* or *garment* or *furnace* we don't naturally think of temples and temple imagery. But as we study the Book of Mormon, there is actually more temple imagery there than we might be alert to, because of the significance of these words as certainly they would have understood them.

#### 4

Step four is to *consider and appreciate the broader contexts of these statements about the temple in the Book of Mormon*; to look at the context of each Book of Mormon statement about the temple and to ask, what can we discern from the setting, or the context, in which this information appears?

For example, consider the context of 2 Nephi 5, which talks about the construction of the temple in the city of Nephi. The context there is the founding of the kingship, when Nephi became the king of his people in the city of Nephi. This tells us something important, particularly that the temple was a significant factor in the founding of that kingship and in legitimizing Nephi as a king. And given the importance of the temple to ancient kings and societies generally, it is no wonder that Nephi, and again King Zeniff 400

years later, was so zealous to build such a temple and to redeem that temple city. And, that Zeniff's own son, Noah, as wicked as he was, still spent much time and money refurbishing this temple, again because of the significance of having temples, in the minds of ancient kings.

But it also tells us why Nephi was so reluctant to become a king. Unlike wicked kings, who saw themselves as divine beings, almost, Nephi knew that Christ was the only true king, and that nothing should detract from our loyalty and our obedience to him, our Heavenly King. Benjamin himself reiterates this point from his temple, as he explains, "If I, whom ye [have called] your king, . . . do merit any thanks from you, O how [ye] ought to thank your heavenly King!" (Mosiah 2:19).

So we see frequently the concepts of kingship and temple linked in the Book of Mormon. Interestingly, scholars like John Lundquist and others have shown that the building of a temple was an integral part in the formation of any typical ancient Near Eastern state. And so, it's significant again that 2 Nephi 5–10 follows all of the traditional steps of ancient kings in establishing a kingship.

In 2 Nephi 5 (and you can follow along in your text if you'd like) you can see Nephi utilizing the temple in ways that would establish a legitimate and, in his case, a righteous kingship. Ancient kings typically affirmed their divine calling as a part of their becoming a king; Nephi points, in 2 Nephi 5, to his calling from the Lord Jesus Christ. As a first order of business, ancient kings would typically reconfirm the continued validity of the law in their state; Nephi also, in 2 Nephi 5:10, as one of his first orders of business, reaffirms that his people will continue to observe the law as revealed to the prophet Moses. Like Nephi, many ancient kings then built a temple and issued a new law at the time of their coronation; Nephi's new law, at the end of 2 Nephi 5, prohibited the Nephites from intermarrying with the Lamanites.

Ancient kings like Nephi also consecrated priests and teachers. And Nephi made, in this same chapter, a new set of plates. We know them as the small plates of Nephi. And this suggests, again from the context, that these plates, in addition to serving their religious purposes, served the traditional function of a testimony that was set up as a monument to the creation of most new kingships.

New kingships in the ancient Near East were then traditionally submitted to what is called a ritually prepared community, at the temple, for the people to accept the new king as their lord and ruler. And this seems to be what is going on in Jacob's speech in 2 Nephi 6–10. We know that it was a covenant speech; 2 Nephi 9 begins by telling us that. And so once again we see, in connection with the temple, the all-important covenant or testament theme.



We also see that Nephi placed priority on building a temple for many other reasons. Nephi had risked his life to obtain the brass plates, so that the Nephites could obey the law of Moses, and it would have been impossible for them to obey that law without a temple. Why? The law required that their men, women, and children should assemble three times a year; Deuteronomy 31:12 commands the people to "gather . . . together, men, women, and children, and thy stranger that is within thy gates, that they may hear, and that they may learn, and fear [or revere] the Lord your God, and observe to do all the words of this law."

Or how could they live the law of Moses without a temple where they could redeem their firstborns, which was a legal requirement under Exodus 13? Where they could offer atoning sacrifices for their transgressions? Where they could perform sacred ordinances after the order of the Son of God and stand in the presence before the Lord?

So that's step four, to look at this context and see what's going on in the texts around these temple messages; to begin to understand a little more fully why the temple is referred to, what the Nephites did at the temple, especially how Christ and his gospel was a focus of attention in their ordinances and ceremonies there.

## 5

Let's turn, then, to step five. Step number five is to *look a little harder at the law of Moses, and to understand the richness of the law of Moses*. We have to appreciate many rich and sacred parts of the law of Moses, and this doesn't always come easy to us. We don't read the law of Moses very often. We know that it has been fulfilled, in large part, except for its ethical portions and the eternal portions that, of course, continued even after the teaching of Jesus. Jesus reaffirmed and reinterpreted many portions of the law of Moses, but of course some sections, especially the sacrifice by the shedding of blood, were ended at the time of his atoning sacrifice. But, as Christians, we don't always go back and appreciate the richness and the fulness of the gospel that was given to Moses, one of the greatest prophets who ever lived upon this earth. And indeed, that was a law given to Moses by none other than Jehovah, Jesus Christ himself.

As difficult as it may be for us to see, the Jews, and I think the Nephites as well, took things like the book of Leviticus as probably one of the most sacred books of all; and actually they did so for good reason. Most modern LDS readers overlook the very profound and underlying sacred temple themes that are found in this holy book, the book of Leviticus, which is a book, after all, named after the Levitical priests who officiated in the temple in ancient Israel.

What are the main concerns of the book of Leviticus, and what do they have to do with the temple? The main concerns of that book, implemented in the cultural milieu of the ancient Israelites, have obvious relevance to the temple even today. That book begins with its version of the law of sacrifice and obedience; chapters 1–7 specify in great detail certain sacrifices that should be made. And also chapter 17 comes back to talk about the scapegoat offering and other sacrifices there.

The book of Leviticus then goes on to talk about the bestowing of the priesthood and the clothing of its recipients. That's in chapters 8–10. Leviticus then talks of the need to ensure the purity of the people of Israel; chapters 11–16 are the purity laws. They are different than the purity laws that we would live, but the underlying principle, you see, is the same. For we, too, strive to be holy and pure people through our temple obedience and obedience to the other commandments that we've been given.

The book of Leviticus then gives guidelines for righteous living and loving one's neighbor. Chapter 19 in particular is very profound in helping people to understand what I would consider to be the law of the gospel, a law very similar to the gospel principles taught by Jesus. In fact, when Jesus was asked what is the greatest commandment, you remember that he answered, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God," and "the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." He's quoting, in the first instance, from the book of Deuteronomy; in the second instance, "love thy neighbor as thyself" is Leviticus 19:8. Again we appreciate the importance of what we're seeing here in the book of Leviticus.

The book then defines in its own way the law of chastity, which is chapter 20. It goes on to talk about blasphemy, or evil speaking of the Lord, in chapter 24. And then it concludes with three chapters on caring for the poor, especially during the jubilee years, and the implementation of the jubilee laws, all of which remind Israel that all property belongs to the Lord, which to my mind is nothing more than an implementation of their understanding of the law of consecration. That's chapters 25–27.

Certainly this is a familiar pattern indeed. So that's step number five: to understand and appreciate the real richness of the law of Moses itself, because so much of the law of Moses has to do with the temple, and not just superficially.

## 6

Nephi's statement that he and his people kept "the judgments, and the statutes, and the commandments of the Lord in all things, according to the law of Moses" (2 Nephi 5:10) brings us to step six, which is to *ask, what was the law of Moses like in the year 600 B.C.?* And we will come soon to a related question, step seven, which is to *ask, How did the Nephites understand and*

*apply that law?* Did they keep it all, or only some of it? In answering these questions, even tentatively, we have to look at a number of details and use all available resources, both ancient and modern, historical and revealed.

Unfortunately we can't always be sure about the state of the law in Jerusalem in 600 B.C. We don't know exactly what version of the five books of Moses Lehi had. Many biblical scholars feel that the final versions of some of the books of Moses, and the legal texts in the Bible, were finalized after Lehi's time, possibly by the prophet Ezekial. I'm not sure I agree with all of those conclusions, but still we don't know for sure what version of the law of Moses stood on the plates of brass. Latter-day Saint doctrine, of course, leaves some room for the possibility that all of the words of Moses have not come down to us exactly as he originally gave them. The book of Moses, in the Pearl of Great Price, is ample evidence of that.

These factors complicate our view, as we try to understand what Nephi meant when he said that he and his people kept the law of Moses, and did so strictly. Most of the provisions in the Pentateuch were clearly older than the time of Lehi, and indeed the Book of Mormon quotes frequently, paraphrases from, and presupposes texts that assure us that the Nephites knew the law of Moses substantially as it appears in the Bible today.

Moreover, we must not confuse biblical law with later varieties of Jewish law that proliferated after Lehi left Jerusalem. Sometimes when we look at Nephi saying that they lived the law of Moses we get confused, because we think of him being some kind of a rabbinic Jew in the fourth century A.D. But the Sadducees, the Samaritans, the Pharisees, and the rabbis, the people at Qumran, all had very different legal systems, all based on the same law of Moses. So in saying that the Nephites observed the law of Moses, this does not mean that Lehi was a rabbinic Jew of a later period of time.

What we need to know is what the law was like during Lehi's time. And then we can understand better how he would have understood and applied it. So, for example, we must not assume that the Nephites offered sacrifices in their temple in a manner that sacrifices came to be offered later by the Jews after the time that Lehi left. But assuming that passages like Exodus 29 and Numbers 28, which require sacrifices day by day, were somehow a part of the law of Moses in Lehi's time, then we should probably conclude that the Nephites offered sacrifices in their temple, in some way, day by day. We don't know exactly what that would mean, but to the extent that that was a part of their law of Moses, however they understood it—perhaps they understood it simply to mean from time to time, or daily during a certain period—but however they understood that provision of the law, we can certainly conclude that they lived it in some way.

Likewise we should not assume that the Nephites observed the post exilic festivals of Purim or the fast of Esther, Hanukkah, and other features of festivals that were, again, first introduced into Judaism after the time that Lehi left. But, to the extent that certain ritual holy days were a part of the preexilic law of Moses, then we must assume that the Nephites lived and understood those laws in some way or other. Since those festivals were particularly significant to the temple, and because they had such wonderful symbols of the coming Atonement of Jesus Christ, I think it's helpful for us to look into those early preexilic festivals and learn, again, what we can from them about the temple and its practices in the Nephite world.

Everyone seems to agree that the Nephites lived the ethical and eternal portions of the law of Moses. About the only thing that really remains puzzling and uncertain to us is the extent to which they might have observed these festivals and the daily sacrifices. And because of that, let me spend just a little more time looking at those particular festivals and sacrifices to see what we can learn from them.

Concerning the sacrifices, we have the following evidence in the Book of Mormon. Begin with Mosiah 2:3. We know that Benjamin's people brought to the temple firstlings of their flocks to make sacrifice and burnt offerings. These were the firstlings, firstborn male animals, and this fact shows that they took the law of Moses seriously, for it required that the firstlings be taken to the temple and sacrificed. You read about that in Deuteronomy 12. Of course, since the days of Adam this sacrifice of firstlings symbolized none other than the sacrifice of God's first and Only Begotten Son. By the way, the blood of these animals was then sprinkled upon the alter in their temple, and the fat of the animal was burned (Numbers 18 tells you that). What was left was then given to the individual and to his household, to be eaten at the temple. This symbolized, I think, the shedding of Christ's blood and his giving to his disciples saying, "Take, eat, this is my body."

Second, in Alma 30, Alma tells us that the Nephites "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" (verse 3). This text tells us that they kept both the commandments and the ordinances. Now, what might those ordinances have been? Well, because 4 Nephi 1:12 tells us that the performances and ordinances of the law of Moses were fulfilled in Christ, I think we should conclude that the word *ordinances* in Alma 30 most likely refers to the same blood sacrifices and burnt offerings that were overruled and superseded by Jesus in 3 Nephi 9.

Or take again a look at Korihor. He accused the Nephites of observing foolish ordinances and performances laid down by the ancient priests—another reference, I take it, to the public sacrificial portions of the law of Moses.

Abinadi also gives us another interesting detail. He said that the performances and ordinances of the law of Moses were to be "observed strictly from day to day" (verse 30). There again we have the "day to day" point, right in Mosiah 13. And nowhere does Abinadi hint that these daily performances were inappropriate; but he understood them, once again, as proper symbols of Christ and as representations of God's support and mercy from day to day, of mankind's need to remember God from day to day, and offering daily prayer. Abinadi accused Noah and his priests of many things. I think if they had not been attending to those kind of daily requirements of the law, which they at least claimed to live outwardly, I believe that Abinadi surely would have held that against them too.

And interestingly, Amulek taught that the great and last sacrifice of Jesus would not be a sacrifice "of beast, neither of any manner of fowl" (Alma 34:10). By mentioning beasts and fowl, Amulek hits precisely the legally acceptable beasts and animals, the two acceptable categories of sacrificial animals mentioned in Leviticus 1. My point here is that if the Nephites no longer offered such sacrifices, it is unlikely to me that Amulek would have brought up this detail to his Zoramite audience, who only a short time earlier had separated from the Nephites over a very disagreement about the living of the law of Moses itself.

So once again we see that the Book of Mormon tells us that they understood the law in these ways. The law, as they understood it as symbols of Christ, was something that they still practiced, down to the coming of Jesus Christ. They would have done these sacrifices in their temples, looking forward to the coming atonement of Jesus. That all changed, of course, with the coming of Jesus in 3 Nephi 9. The voice was heard from heaven, saying to the people there, "Ye shall offer up unto me no more the shedding of blood; yea, . . . I will accept none of your sacrifices and your burnt offerings" (verse 19). Those very words of Jesus imply that the Nephites had offered such sacrifices down to the time that they heard Jesus say those words, when they knew that they had been fully accepted and the law fulfilled.

So we see that the Nephites understood, in rich and symbolic terms, the law of sacrifice; and they understood it as a type and a shadow of the great and last blood sacrifice, the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ. And they learned, as we learn today, that the law of sacrifice is still in force, bringing us to Christ in the way that the Lord asks of us, namely through the sacrifice of a broken heart and a contrite spirit.

What about the preexilic festivals and their observance at the temples in ancient Israel? Now we learn the same thing: that the Nephites knew and observed those festivals to a considerable extent, and that the temple was a place where these events took place.



Benjamin, for example, gathered the people at the temple in Mosiah 2-5. And King Benjamin's speech is especially rich in evidence that that assembly followed the ancient Israelite law. I'm impressed with evidence that has already been published by John Tvedtness and others that Benjamin's people gathered at the temple at the time of the Feast of Tabernacles, just as the book of Deuteronomy requires. Every man, with his wife and his children, pitched his tent near the temple to hear, among other things, the paragraph of the king, from Deuteronomy 17, which by the way is closely associated with the Festival of Tabernacles and also with parts of Mosiah 2.

Now the presence of tents and families at the temple in King Benjamin's speech is significant. Benjamin could have avoided the very significant and tedious task of having to copy his speech so that each person in their own family could have a copy of what he was saying, if he had simply had the people leave their tents outside of the temple precinct so they could all gather closer to the temple to hear his words; but he went to the enormous effort of copying his speech and building a tower so that he could stand on that, and they could hear him, all the while they remained in their tents. If those tents or booths were not that important to some observance of the Nephite Feast of Tabernacles (the word *tabernacles* means either booth or tent), why wouldn't Benjamin have just said to the people, "Why don't you leave your tents down at the local KOA campground," and made life a lot simpler for him?

So we could see the Festival of Tabernacles figuring in the background of what King Benjamin is doing. What I would like to suggest today is that more attention should also be paid to the similarities between King Benjamin's speech and the ancient Israelite Day of Atonement, the day on which the temple and symbols of Christ figured more prominently than on any other day on the preexilic Israel holy calendar. And by the way, the Day of Atonement and the Feast of Tabernacles fell on about the same day, around the same season, so we may not be off base by seeing both of those festivals functioning in some way in Benjamin's coronation ceremony.

I'm impressed how Benjamin has taken all of the main themes of the Day of Atonement, worked them into his discourse, and overlaid them with his clear Christian principles, perspectives, revelations, and insights, as he gives his people a rich covenantal temple experience, giving them a new name and sealing them as children of God.

In connection with the Day of Atonement, for example, Benjamin refers explicitly to the Atonement. In fact, he does so seven times in his speech. Now that may be purely coincidental, but doing something seven times is saliently characteristic of rituals performed on the Day of Atonement and other purification ceremonies prescribed in the book of Leviticus. Jacob Millgrom, for one, doubts that such numerology in the book of Leviticus is

accidental. I would think that such numerology in King Benjamin's speech is also not accidental.

On the Day of Atonement all people in Israel were required to afflict their souls; remember that Benjamin says that human beings are not even so much as the dust of the earth, whose nothingness makes them unworthy creatures. There's afflicting of the soul going on there. On the Day of Atonement, of great concern were the sins of inadvertence and sins of rebelliousness; Benjamin too speaks of inadvertent sins, sins of those who have sinned ignorantly, he says (3:11), and of those who come out "in open rebellion against God" (Mosiah 2:37).

In the midst of his words about the Atonement, Benjamin tells his people that the Lord had indeed given them many signs, wonders, types, and shadows of the coming of Jesus Christ. Leviticus 16 prescribes the well-known scapegoat ritual on the Day of Atonement, one of the most obvious symbols of Christ. Perhaps Benjamin had that very idea in mind as he spoke of driving out an ass from among the people, "even so shall it be among you if ye know not the name by which ye [shall be] called" (Mosiah 5:14). The Israelites similarly put the sins and wickedness upon the scapegoat and drove him out from among the people, if he was not worthy—to expel the evil and so on.

Settling with your neighbors, giving gifts to the poor, experiencing exceeding great joy and rejoicing were also things that occurred on the Day of Atonement in the law of Moses in Lehi's day. And these too are themes that are found in Benjamin's speech.

So holy was the Day of Atonement that on this day alone, according to later Jewish texts, could the unspeakable name of God, *Jehovah*, be pronounced. And when it was spoken the people were to fall down on the ground out of reverence and respect. Of key significance in Benjamin's speech was the giving out loud of the most holy name of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Father of Heaven and Earth, the Creator of all things from the beginning. And after the people had heard this name, together with other utterances of the name Lord God, they do what? They fall down prostrate on the ground.

Well such factors together build, cumulatively, I think, a plausible case for concluding that Benjamin's speech was, among other things, a thoroughly Christian observance at the temple of the basic elements and principles of the Day of Atonement.

## 7

Let's go now to step seven. As I mentioned above, step seven in our effort to understand temples in the Book of Mormon was to ask, *How did the*

*Nephites understand this law of Moses?* And surely from what we have seen above we can be constantly alert to the crowning Christian superstructure as well as the persistent Mosaic underpinnings here. The Nephite record bridges both Jewish and Christian backgrounds. The world of the Book of Mormon is really neither Christian nor Jewish, but both, if these words are properly understood. The Book of Mormon's ability to unify both testaments of the Bible, the old covenant and the new, and its ability to speak to both Jew and Gentile, is perhaps one of its most important and yet most often overlooked strengths.

Jesus himself continued to observe the law of Moses until it was fulfilled. He not only healed the leper in Mark 1, but purified him and sent him to the temple to make sacrifices according to the law of Moses. There is evidence that Jesus observed the Feast of Tabernacles, going up to Jerusalem with his disciples to do so, and of course the Feast of Passover. By suggesting that the Nephites were strict to observe the law of Moses, I only mean that they were as Jewish as Jesus himself. And of course they understood the deadness of the law without the all-important provisions of the atoning sacrifice of Jesus.

## 8

Next is step eight, which is to *identify changes that occurred in Nephite history and civilization that have an impact upon the temple*. Over time, important developments occurred. Not changes, of course, in the eternal aspects of the gospel of Jesus Christ, but changes in certain practices, priestly and ecclesiastical organization, and emphasis. The greatest change in Nephite religious history, of course, came when the voice of Jesus spoke out of the darkness, proclaiming the fulfillment of the old law. But other changes occurred along the way, leading up to the coming of Christ.

For example, the abandonment of kingship, in the land of Zarahemla around 90 B.C., certainly had a political impact upon the use of the temple. No more would they have to gather at the temple to crown a king, because they had abandoned the kingship. And so the political function of the temple appears to have been virtually eliminated with the reign of the judges.

And also other Israelite elements so visible in Benjamin's speech become far less obvious in the books of Alma and Helaman. Alma's emphasis was on teaching the plan of salvation, cultivating personal righteousness, and decentralizing the temple—taking the temple out into the seven churches and other congregations. We see this reflected in the teachings that I'll explain in a minute.

Reconstructing an adequate picture of life around the temple in Zarahemla during the changing era around 90 B.C. is very difficult for us because we don't have very many records. During the reign of Benjamin, it seems, there had only been one temple in the land and religion was very

closely regularized. But then came Alma the Elder and his covenant group. They didn't particularly merge into Nephite society but remained separate, probably due to the fact that they had made a covenant to bear one another's burdens and to live as a distinct fold of God, in Mosiah 18. Alma's group had lived for over 30 years away from any temple and without a king. His priests functioned exclusively as teachers, preaching only repentance and faith on the Lord Jesus Christ.

Alma's group was given considerable autonomy in Zarahemla. He was given power to organize seven churches that were independent of the king and apparently of the temple, at least of the temple precinct, as the king continued to administer it under King Mosiah, to the extent he did. We don't know exactly what the relationship there between temple, king, and priest was. Since King Mosiah probably kept control over the temple, however, it seems that Alma's group continued to have little to do with that particular temple but took the principles and ordinances of the temple out into the congregations of the church. Alma became a high priest of the church, and soon there was a high priest over the people of Ammon and another high priest in the land of Gideon.

At the same time, there now were several other local temples, sanctuaries, and synagogues, which the text says were built after the manner of the Jews. So during this period we see this proliferation, and the Book of Mormon tells us that there were other sanctuaries and temples operating, which is consistent with the picture we see politically of what's going on with Mosiah, the reign of judges, Alma, and the decentralization or almost the splintering of Nephite society into a number of smaller groups. In less that a generation many circumstances had changed; and those certainly affected the roles of the temple in Zarahemla, as certainly seems to be reflected in the temple texts of Alma 12-13 and finally in 3 Nephi 11-18.

## 9

Indeed, step number nine, then, is to *identify the Book of Mormon's temple-related texts and to study the things which they contain*. We have several temple texts in the Book of Mormon. In addition to Jacob's speech in 2 Nephi 6-10, Benjamin's speech, and the brother of Jared's text, which also may have important temple symbols, Alma 12-13 and 3 Nephi 11-18 are the most notable. I define a temple text as a text that gives the most sacred teachings of the plan of salvation; not to be shared or profaned indiscriminately, one that ordains or otherwise conveys divine powers, through ceremonial or symbolic means, together with commandments, especially a certain set of commandments, received by sacred oath, that allow the recipient to stand ritually in the presence of God.

Alma 12-13, those chapters, are just such a text. They say much about the holy order after the Son of God, and here we see again many important

temple themes. Let's look at Alma 12–13. You might want to follow along again in your Book of Mormon. What's going on here? Beginning with Alma 12:9. Alma teaches that God will provide men access to certain mysteries, but only according to the heed and diligence that they give them. Now the word *mysteries* in scripture often describes not a puzzle but sacred ordinances and ceremonies. Alma then said that people who received these mysteries were placed under a sacred and strict command of confidentiality, to impart "only according to the portion of his word which he doth grant."

Alma next explains the fall of Adam, prefigured by Adam's transgression (that begins in verse 12); and of course an understanding of the fall is a precursor for any proper understanding of the need for a Savior. Alma then tells how messengers were sent to reveal the plan of mercy through the Son (verse 29), how mankind was then given a second set of commandments (verse 32), accompanied by an oath.

Alma then describes in chapter 13 what I think is a Nephite ordinance, evidently a symbolic ritual performed, he says, in a manner that looked forward to the redemption of the Son of God (13:2). The participants were ordained, he says, taking upon them the name—taking upon them the high priesthood of the holy order of his Son, those who had been called and prepared from the foundation of the world, and who were in and through the atonement of the Only Begotten Son. Alma says that these people were thereby sanctified by the Holy Ghost, their garments were washed white through the blood of the Lamb (verse 11), and they thereby entered into the rest of the Lord (verse 12).

Alma seems to me to be reflecting, in carefully veiled terms, temple precepts; all of which he says, in verse 16, were a type of Jesus' word, so that the people might look forward to Jesus for the remission of their sins. There is more about the temple here in the Book of Mormon than most people realize. It is likewise important to note that Jesus himself appeared at the temple in Bountiful, in 3 Nephi 11.

## 10

Finally, then, step ten is to *allow the Spirit to direct you in making connections, in both directions, between your own temple experiences and these temple texts in the Book of Mormon*. Several things in Jesus' sermon at the temple bear far more than an accidental similarity to the Latter-day Saint temple experience. The people identified Jesus there as a divine heavenly being, by experiencing the marks on his hands and in his side. The priesthood was given, and Jesus instructed the people to give strict heed to the words of his disciples (3 Nephi 12:2).

The commandments then issued in chapters 12–13 are not only the same as the main commandments always issued at the temple (remember these



themes from Jacob's temple speech and from the Book of Leviticus), but they appear largely in the same order. Obedience and sacrifice is mentioned first, in verse 19. Evil speaking of the brethren comes up—whosoever says to a brother, fool. Chastity and a higher understanding of marriage and divorce was then taught—"but I say unto you, whosoever looketh on a woman, to lust after her," and so on. Loving one's enemies, and living the law of love, turning the other cheek—in other words, the law of the gospel. And giving to the poor and consecrating ones life to God.

Jesus instructed the people that before they might come unto him they should first be reconciled with their brothers and sisters (12:23–24). The people received instruction concerning the offering of group prayers; we know this is the Lord's prayer. And then the making of oaths, in chapter 12:33, 37. He exhorted them to become perfect, a word that implies not only ethical perfection but full Christian initiation. The sermon at the temple conveyed knowledge and power so holy that it could not be given improperly to other people. The threatened penalty was death, "lest they turn again and rend you" (14:6).

In the end, the people were invited to make a three-fold petition: to ask, to seek, and to knock, so that the Father might open and allow the righteous to enter into the kingdom of heaven. The Doctrine and Covenants speaks in clear terms of the unfortunate condition of those who might take lightly the covenant, even the Book of Mormon. The sermon at the temple similarly describes the sad state of those who will come and request admission into the presence of the Lord, saying "Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name, . . . and in thy name done wonderful works?" But to some the Lord will have to say, "Depart," "I never knew you."

We've spent our time in this lecture examining temples in the Book of Mormon. Its pages consistently lead us back to the holy covenant settings embodied still today in the holy temple of our Lord Jesus Christ. Approached correctly, almost every subject of study in or about the Book of Mormon leads the reader to Christ, a conclusion that is not always stated explicitly but is often left for readers to draw for themselves. There is more in the Book of Mormon than we have previously dreamed or imagined. Discovering these treasures requires heed and diligence, as Alma 12 says. Those who take this book lightly find themselves under condemnation. But those who will take it seriously, I testify, will find the greatest treasures of joy, even salvation in and through Jesus Christ. In his name, amen.