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“And Behold, They Had Fallen to the Earth”: An Examination of Proskynesis in the Book of Mormon

MATTHEW L. BOWEN

Historically, ritual prostrations have constituted an important part of religious activity. They are frequently accompanied by prayer and are connected with temple practices. Ancient literature attests their antiquity and universality. Egyptians of the third millennium BC practiced them,¹ as do Muslims today.²

1. A wonderful example of proskynesis is found in the Egyptian daily temple liturgy of the temple at Karnak. Immediately following the chapter superscripted as “The Incantation for Seeing God, The Words Spoken” (*r n m33 n1r, Dd mdw*) is “The Incantation for Kissing the Ground, The Words Spoken” (*r n sn t3, Dd mdw*). The priest, prostrating himself and kissing the ground, chants words to match his actions: “As I kiss the earth, so shall I embrace Geb” (*sn=i t3 Htp gb*). “Ritual für den Kultus des Amon und für den Mut,” in *Hieratische Papyrus aus den Königlichen Museen zu Berlin* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1901), Pl. 3005, IV, 6–7 (in-class translation by John Gee). This example is particularly interesting because it not only associates proskynesis with seeing God (theophany) in a temple setting but also alludes to a ritual embrace of Deity. Geb was the Egyptian earth-god and crown prince of the pantheon. Thus the clause “so shall I embrace Geb” not only signifies the ritual embrace of the deity but is also a sublime metaphor for proskynesis, Geb being metonymic for the ground. Ritual prostration is also prominent in the story of the shipwrecked sailor. See Aylward M. Blackman, *Middle-Egyptian Stories* (Brussels: Fondation égyptologique reine Élisabeth, 1932–), 41–48.

2. A salâm: Muslims prostrate themselves toward Mecca with their foreheads touching the ground five times a day. For some other excellent examples of ritual prostration in ancient cultures see appendix note twenty-two to Hugh Nibley’s article “Old World Ritual in the New World,” in *An Approach to the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1988), 504–5.

The Significance of Proskynesis

Ritual prostrations are abundantly symbolic. “Actions speak louder than words,” says one modern cliché. But indeed, this saying is the principle behind such cultic actions. Examining ritual prostration in biblical and nonbiblical sources reveals some of the symbolism. Although a large monograph could be devoted to this subject, here are three major ways prostration is symbolic:

1. Ritual prostrations are the visible demonstration of one’s love for and complete submission to deity.
2. Ritual prostrations signify the presence (and power) of deity himself, a divine being (e.g., angels), or some kind of divine manifestation.
3. Ritual prostrations symbolize reverence, awe, or even fear of deity and are an acknowledgment of one’s comparative smallness on a cosmic scale.

Each instance of ritual prostration found in ancient sources contains one or more of the above symbolisms.

Proskynesis in the Bible

The Greek noun *proskynēsis*³ has become the technical term for ritual prostration. It is cognate with the verb *proskyneō*, which Bauer defines as “the custom of prostrating oneself before a person and kissing his feet, the hem of his garment, the ground, etc.; the Persians did this in the presence of their deified king, and the Greeks before a divinity or something holy.”⁴ In the Greek Septuagint, *proskyneō* answers to the Hebrew verb *hištahwāh* in the Masoretic text and signifies “*bow[ing] down, prostrat[ing] oneself, before a monarch or superior, in homage, etc.*”⁵

3. Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott define *proskynēsis* as “adoration, obeisance, a salām,” *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1889), 693.

4. Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 716–17.

5. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951), 1005.

Instances of proskynesis are numerous in the Bible, particularly in the Old Testament. In most cases, God is the object,⁶ but there are many instances in which angels,⁷ other deities,⁸ and even humans⁹ are revered in this way.

Proskynesis in the Book of Mormon

Ritual prostrations play a salient role in many important Book of Mormon events, particularly in events connected with temples. And while examining instances of this cultic action certainly adds to our understanding of this ancient text, no other ancient document better illuminates the subject of proskynesis and demonstrates its symbolism. The occurrence of proskynesis within the Book of Mormon adds to its validity as a historical document. Because of this, the obligation rests upon us to deepen our understanding of ritual prostration and its occurrence within the Book of Mormon text, as well as to understand the message intended for us by its authors.

Proskynesis by Nephi's Brethren

The first instances of proskynesis occur in Nephi's account of his family's journey from Jerusalem to the New World. He records how on two occasions his brothers bow down to him following a manifestation of divine power. The first time followed a rebellion and an attempted return to Jerusalem on the part of Laman, Lemuel, and some members of Ishmael's family, after Nephi prays for the Lord's help in breaking the bands with which his brothers have bound him. Although the divine power already manifested in the loosening of Nephi's bands initially serves to make his brothers angrier, the pleas of the women in the group soon soften the hearts of the men.

And it came to pass that they were sorrowful, because of their wickedness, insomuch that they did *bow down before me*, and did

6. Cf. 2 Chr. 7-18; 20:18; 29:28-30.

7. Cf. Judges 13:8; Rev. 22:8-9.

8. Cf. 2 Chr. 25:14, 33:3; Ezek 8:16; Dan. 3:7.

9. Cf. Gen. 42:6; 43:26-28; 48:12; 49:8.

plead with me that I would forgive them of the thing that they had done. (1 Ne. 7:20; emphasis added)

Their subsequent sorrow is accompanied by “bow[ing] down before” Nephi. Their bowing down is clearly a gesture of reverence but perhaps it is also a recognition of Nephi as a superior¹⁰ and one who belongs to the divine realm.¹¹ They are certainly reverencing the divine power present in Nephi.

This manifestation of divine power and the bowing down of Nephi’s brethren might seem incidental to Nephi’s wider narrative were it not for a similar occurrence during the building of the divinely designed ship that transported the Lehites to the New World.¹² The Lord commands Nephi to stretch forth his hands and shock his brethren “that they may know that I am the Lord their God” (1 Ne. 17:53). When a manifestation of divine power follows, his brothers react thus:

And now, they said: We know of a surety that the Lord is with thee, for we know that it is the power of the Lord that has shaken us. And they *fell down before me*, and *were about to worship me*, but I would not suffer them, saying: I am thy brother, yea, even thy younger brother; wherefore, *worship the Lord thy God*, and honor thy father and thy mother, that thy days may be long in the land which the Lord thy God shall give thee.¹³ (1 Ne. 17:55; emphasis added)

10. In 1 Nephi 2:22, the Lord declares to Nephi, “And inasmuch as thou shalt keep my commandments, thou shalt be made a ruler and a teacher over thy brethren.” This motif recurs throughout Nephi’s writings (1 Ne. 3:28–30; 15; 16:1–5, 36–38; 18:10; 2 Ne. 1:24–29; 5:1–4). Nephi saw this promise as having been fulfilled by the time the Nephites separated themselves from the rest of the Lehites (cf. 1 Ne. 5:19).

11. Bauer, 716.

12. Interestingly, Nephi received the pattern for building the ship (1 Ne. 17:7–14) on a mountain, just as Moses received the pattern for the tabernacle atop Mt. Sinai (Ex. 25–31). Noah and the brother of Jared both built sea vessels according to divinely revealed patterns (Gen. 6:14–16; Ether 3:16–25). Presumably, Noah received his instructions on or near a mountain, if the ark was built in an elevated place. The brother of Jared received his instructions on the pristine seashore—a functional temple. Perhaps the sacred vessels themselves were viewed as temporary sacred space until each party arrived at its respective land of promise, hence the Lord’s anger when Laman and his supporters began to live riotously aboard the ship amid the ocean voyage (1 Ne. 18:9–10).

13. John’s Apocalypse contains a similar episode: “And when I had heard and seen, I *fell down to worship before the feet of the angel* which shewed me these

Nephi precludes their cultic gesture by invoking the first, second, and fifth commandments from the Decalogue. His charge to “worship the Lord thy God” coalesces the prohibitives: “Thou shalt have no other gods before me” (Ex. 20:3) and “Thou shalt not *bow down thyself* to them” (Ex. 20:5; emphasis added). These are the commandments his brothers are in danger of breaking by prostrating themselves before him. Nephi appropriately counsels his brothers to direct such reverence to *YHWH*¹⁴ alone. Nephi then cleverly adds another charge from the Decalogue: “Honour thy father and mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee” (Ex. 20:12), which is precisely the commandment that Laman and Lemuel have been breaking all along.¹⁵

Proskynesis in the Tree of Life Visions

Cultic prostrations figure subtly but significantly in the visions of Lehi and his son Nephi. Lehi, recounting his vision of the Tree of Life, describes two groups of people who “press forward” to the tree and partake of its fruit and then “lose their way,” “[wander] off,” or “[fall] away” (1 Ne. 8:23, 28). This type of language in the scriptures and in other ancient religious literature often refers to an apostasy from orthodox worship. Lehi then climactically describes the approach of a third group to the tree:

Behold, he saw other multitudes pressing forward; and they came and caught hold of the end of the rod of iron; and they did press their way forward, continually holding fast to the rod of iron, until they *came forth* and *fell down* and partook of the fruit of the tree. (1 Ne. 8:30; emphasis added)

things. Then saith he unto me, see thou do it not: for I am thy fellowservant, and of thy brethren the prophets, and of them which keep the sayings of this book: *worship God*” (Rev. 22:8–9; emphasis added). John’s prostration before the angel meets with a rebuke, similar to the rebuke Nephi gives his brethren. Cultic prostration is properly directed toward God alone.

14. *YHWH* is the transliteration of the Hebrew יהוה, often rendered Jehovah or Yahweh in English. In the King James Version of the Old Testament it was rendered LORD, following the Jewish custom of pronouncing *Adonai* (*lord*) in place of the divine name יהוה, because of its sacredness. Because it is spelled with four consonants, it is often called the Tetragrammaton.

15. Laman’s and Lemuel’s disrespect for their parents, a capital offense in the law of Moses (see Ex. 17:21; Lev. 20:9), is well chronicled in Nephi’s record (see 1 Ne. 2:11; 8:17–18; 16:37; 17:22; 18:17–18).

Lehi's language is abundantly symbolic. For Lehi, the people's coming forth and falling down is cultic, as well as a display of true worship. The people of this third group are the true worshipers, and the tree of which they partake is functionally the true God, Jesus Christ.

Not long afterward, God shows Nephi the things that his father saw in the Tree of Life vision. This divine teaching takes place in the temple setting of an "exceedingly high mountain" (1 Ne. 11:1). In the process of this teaching, the angel grants Nephi a vision of the mortal ministry of Jesus:

[And] he said unto me: Look! And I looked, and I beheld the Son of God going forth among the children of men; and I saw many *fall down at his feet and worship him*. (1 Ne. 11:24; emphasis added)

Nephi's vision anticipates the recognition of the Messiah's divinity among those to whom he would minister. Their prostration, in recognition of the Divine Presence and in reverence, accords with a cultic formula found throughout the Gospel of Matthew.¹⁶

Proskynesis in the Isaiah Passages of 1 Nephi

Images of ritual prostration also occur in the Isaiah passages quoted from the brass plates.¹⁷ At least one of these passages was significant in the Nephite view of themselves and of the house of Israel as a whole. Isaiah chapter 49 foretells the gathering of Israel in the last days by the agency of the Gentiles.

And kings shall be thy nursing fathers, and their queens thy nursing mothers; they shall *bow down to thee with their face towards*

16. Matthew 2:11 and 18:26 contain the exact formula found in 1 Nephi 11:24, expressed in Greek with the verbs *piptō* + *proskyneō*. Matthew 9:18, 15:25, and 20:20 contain the formula (*proserchomai* + *proskyneō* "to come (unto Deity) and to worship" (i.e., kiss the ground in the Divine presence). Clearly, both expressions are cultic. Compare the Evangelist's other uses of the verb *proskyneō*: Matthew 2:2, 8; 28:9; and 28:17. For Matthew *proskyneō* is a motif, and Jesus is almost always the object. By making Jesus the object of proskynesis, he specifically identifies Jesus as יהוה (YHWH).

17. Note the image in an earlier verse: "Kings shall see and arise, princes also shall *worship*, because of the Lord who is faithful" (Isa. 49:7; 1 Ne. 21:7; emphasis added).

the earth, and lick up the dust of thy feet; and thou shalt know that I am the Lord; for they shall not be ashamed that wait for me. (Isa. 49:23, 1 Ne. 21:23; emphasis added)

Isaiah's image of gentile kings and queens prostrating themselves before Israel powerfully suggests Israel's destiny as a kingdom of divine kings and queens, priests and priestesses. Jacob quotes this passage in his discourse at the coronation of Nephi¹⁸ (see 2 Ne. 6:7) foretelling Zion's triumph over all her enemies:

Wherefore, they that fight against Zion and the covenant people of the Lord shall *lick up the dust of their feet*; and the people of the Lord shall not be ashamed. For the people of the Lord are they who wait for him; for they still wait for the coming of the Messiah. (2 Ne. 6:13; emphasis added)

Presenting an evocative image, Jacob's paraphrase of Isaiah is a prophecy that those who fight against the Lord's work will one day reverence the Lord's people.

Proskynesis as Instructed by Nephi

In a significant passage, Nephi explicitly commands cultic prostration as an essential act of Christian devotion. The injunction comes during his explanation of why it was necessary for his people to keep the law of Moses (see 2 Ne. 25:24):

And now behold, I say unto you that the right way is to believe in Christ, and deny him not; and Christ is the Holy One of Israel; wherefore ye must *bow down before him*, and *worship* him with all your might, mind, and strength, and your whole soul; and if ye do this ye shall in nowise be cast out. (2 Ne. 25:29; cf. Deut. 6:5; emphasis added)

This gesture must be undertaken, Nephi says, with all of one's might, mind, strength, and soul to be effective. In saying this,

18. John W. Welch states: "The 'covenant speech' given by Jacob under the direction of Nephi (see 2 Nephi 6-10) [was], in my opinion, most likely delivered at the temple. They were probably proclaimed at or around the coronation of Nephi." See Donald W. Parry, *Temples of the Ancient World* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co.; Provo, UT: F.A.R.M.S., 1994), 328.

Nephi makes an unmistakable allusion to the *Sh'm'a*,¹⁹ a recitation of scripture that had ritual importance to the Jews anciently, as it does now: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord: And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might” (Deut. 6:4–5).

In quoting this passage, Nephi substitutes “thou shalt love the Lord thy God” with “ye must bow down before [Christ] and worship [Christ].” This not only reemphasizes Nephi’s view that the entire Torah anticipates the Messiah but also makes ritual prostration before Deity the ultimate visible demonstration of love for Deity.²⁰

Proskynesis in the Sherem Pericope

Prominent in the record of Jacob, the brother of Nephi, is his confrontation with Sherem. Jacob says that Sherem is a powerful orator, one with “a perfect knowledge of the language of the people” (Jacob 7:4). According to Jacob, he is also one who believed that the law of Moses did not anticipate a Messiah. Sherem challenges Jacob’s messianic views and dramatically demands a sign. Jacob accommodates his request, and a manifestation of divine power follows: “And it came to pass that when I Jacob, had spoken these words, the power of the Lord came upon him, insomuch that he *fell to the earth*” (Jacob 7:15; emphasis added).

It is noteworthy that Jacob describes Sherem’s experience in vague terms: “The power of the Lord came upon him, insomuch that he fell to the earth.” This does not tell us exactly what Sherem saw, heard, or felt. However, it is entirely possible that Sherem did see

19. It is called *Sh'm'a* because it is the first word in the recitation. Jastrow defines *Sh'm'a* as “the confession of faith in the morning and evening prayers” (recitation of Deut. 6:4–9; 11:13–21; Num. 16:37–41). Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (New York: Judaica Press, 1996), 1599.

20. Amulek’s words to the Zoramites accentuates the spiritual importance of this reverential act: “And now, my beloved brethren, I desire . . . that ye contend no more against the Holy Ghost, but that ye receive it, and take upon you the name of Christ; that ye *humble yourselves even to the dust, and worship God, in whatsoever place ye may be in, in spirit and in truth*” (Alma 34:37–38). Both Nephi’s and Amulek’s statements accord well with what Jesus says to the woman at the well in John 4:19–26, “the true worshipers (*hoi alethinoi proskynētai*) shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth” (John 4:23). Note: *proskynētē* is a “hapax legomenon”; that is to say, it occurs once in the New Testament.

or hear someone since he obviously felt something. We note the incapacitating effect of theophanies and visions on Moses, John, Alma, Joseph Smith,²¹ and Sidney Rigdon. Sherem's subsequent physical incapacitation is certainly consistent with a theophanic experience—a theophany for which he was not at all prepared spiritually.

John W. Welch observes that “the Temple would . . . have been the most arresting place for Sherem to have confronted Jacob with his accusations of blasphemy, false prophecy, and leading the people into apostasy . . . and to have submitted himself to the divine ordeal of asking for a sign from God.”²² Moreover, the Temple is the ideal place for theophany. It is entirely possible that Sherem's “divine ordeal,” or the sign he requested, was a vision of some divine being. As has been noted, prostration, as well as some measure of physical incapacitation,

21. Their collective experiences may shed some light on what happened to Sherem: Of Moses we read: “And the presence of God withdrew from Moses, that his glory was not upon Moses; and Moses was left unto himself. And as he was left unto himself, *he fell unto the earth*. And it came to pass that *it was for the space of many hours before Moses did again receive his natural strength like unto man*; and he said unto himself: Now, for this cause I know that man is nothing, which thing I never had supposed. But now mine own eyes have beheld God; but not my natural, but my spiritual eyes” (Moses 1:9–11; emphasis added). It is also important to note Moses' total unwillingness to prostrate himself before Satan, when Satan comes after the theophany and demands obeisance (Moses 1:12–22).

John relates his vision of the resurrected Lord: “And when I saw him, *I fell at his feet as dead*. And he laid his right hand upon me, saying unto me, Fear not; I am the first and the last; I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen” (Rev. 1:17–18). John falls at his feet perhaps out of fear or reverence, or because of the physically incapacitating effects of the presence of a divine being.

For more on Alma the Younger's theophanic experience see Mosiah 27:11–37. Note his physical incapacitation.

Joseph Smith describes his condition following his vision of the Father and the Son: “When I came to myself again, I found myself lying on my back. . . . *When the light had departed, I had no strength*; but soon recovering in some degree, I went home. . . . And as I leaned up to the fire-place, mother inquired what the matter was. I replied, ‘Never mind, . . . I am well enough off’” (JS–H: 1:20; emphasis added).

His condition after three visitations from the angel Moroni, and preceding the fourth visitation: “I shortly after arose from my bed, and, as usual, went to the necessary labors of the day; but, in attempting to work as at other times, *I found my strength so exhausted as to render me entirely unable*” (JS–H 1:48; emphasis added).

22. John W. Welch, “The Temple in the Book of Mormon: The Temples at the Cities of Nephi, Zarahemla, and Bountiful,” in *Temples of the Ancient World*, ed. Donald W. Parry (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1994), 339.

almost invariably accompanies theophany. Given these facts, it may be inferred that Sherem's falling to the earth was either a ritual gesture, the result of the physically incapacitating effects of theophany, or both.²³

Before his death, Sherem requests a convocation of the people of Nephi whereat he acknowledges his error before God and the people. The logical place for this confession, as in the instance of his confrontation of Jacob, would have been the Temple.²⁴ Following Sherem's *mea culpa* and death, Jacob records the reaction of the people thus:

And when the multitude witnessed that he spake these things as he was about to give up the ghost, they were astonished exceedingly; insomuch that the power of God came down upon them, and they were overcome that *they fell to the earth*.
(Jacob 7:22; emphasis added)

An outline of the Sherem pericope shows how Jacob emphasizes parallels between Sherem's sign-seeking and confession and between the manifestation of divine power that compelled Sherem to fall to the earth and the manifestation that induces the people to prostration:

- a. Sherem confronts Jacob [at the temple]
 - b. Sherem denies Christ and accuses Jacob of blasphemy, false prophecy, and propagating apostasy
 - c. Sherem says: "show me a sign"
 - d. Sherem experiences a divine manifestation
 - e. Sherem falls to the earth
-
- a. Sherem asks [Jacob] for a convocation [at the temple]
 - b. Sherem confesses Christ, acknowledges his own blasphemy, false teaching, and propagating apostasy
 - c. Sherem dies

23. Significantly, Sherem never fully recovers from the divine manifestation. Where the effects were temporary for Moscs, Alma, and Joseph Smith, and Sidney Rigdon—physical incapacitation for several hours or days—Sherem had to be "nourished for the space of many days" (Jacob 7:15). Ultimately, this experience results in his physical death (Jacob 7:17–20).

24. See Welch, "The Temple in the Book of Mormon," 339.

- d. The people experience a divine manifestation
- e. The people fall to the earth (Jacob 4:6–22)

Concerning this second divine manifestation and the resultant prostration of his people, Jacob acknowledges that it was “pleasing unto me, Jacob, for I had requested it of my Father who was in heaven” (Jacob 7:22). Perhaps Jacob believed that it was necessary to submit his people to the same “divine ordeal” as Sherem, in order to thoroughly purge the people of Sherem’s teaching. The result was that all his people, like Sherem, fell to the earth in total submission to God.²⁵

Again, Jacob does not explicitly say what the divine manifestation was. We don’t know what the people saw, heard, or felt. We know only that the “power of God came down upon them, and they were overcome that they fell to the earth” (Jacob 7:21). We can infer that it may have accompanied a theophany, for which the temple would have been, of course, the ideal location. Certainly a temple context for all of the above suggests that Sherem’s divine ordeal and prostration were more than nineteenth-century revivalist experiences, as some suggest. The aforementioned evidence is sufficient to establish the possibility that these divine manifestations were theophanies and that the subsequent prostrations were cultic in nature. Mormon’s description of events connected with King Benjamin’s address at the temple in Zarahemla makes the case even stronger.

Proskynesis during King Benjamin’s Address

Mormon records King Benjamin’s powerful address to his subjects on the occasion of his son’s coronation. John W. Welch and Terrence Szink, among others, have suggested a Feast of Tabernacles or autumn festival complex setting for the speech.²⁶

25. Jacob concludes the Sherem pericope with all of his people prostrate on the earth and the declaration that “the love of God was restored again among the people” (Jacob 7:23). This is a possible allusion to Nephi’s statement (2 Ne. 25:29) equating the love of God with *proskynesis*.

26. Terrence L. Szink and John W. Welch, “An Ancient Israelite Festival Context,” in *King Benjamin’s Speech: “That Ye May Learn Wisdom,”* ed. John W. Welch and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo, UT: F.A.R.M.S., 1998), 147–223.

One passage connected with the speech is particularly relevant to the use of ritual prostrations among the people of the Book of Mormon. In the middle of the speech, after King Benjamin's rehearsal of the angel's words concludes, Mormon inserts a description of the people's reaction:

And now, it came to pass that when king Benjamin had made an end of speaking the words which had been delivered unto him by the angel of the Lord, that 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; emphasis added)

Hugh Nibley identifies the people's action as proskynesis.²⁷ Szink and Welch connect their prostration with the ritual prostrations that accompanied the pronouncement of the Divine Name, *YHWH*, by the High Priest on the Day of Atonement:

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. This can be compared with the reactions to King Benjamin's speech in Zarahemla. . . . It is possible that Benjamin's people would have fallen down in profound reverence and awe several times when Benjamin spoke the holy name of God, as the Israelites did on hearing the tetragram, according to the Mishnah.²⁸

This observation is significant. It demonstrates a clear parallel between the ritual prostrations found in Israelite temple practices and those connected with Nephite temple practices. It should not be overlooked that King Benjamin gives his speech in a temple (Mosiah

27. Hugh Nibley, "Old World Ritual in the New World," in *An Approach to the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1988), 304. He adds: "The proskynesis was the falling to the earth (literally, "kissing the ground") in the presence of the king by which all the human race on the day of coronation demonstrated its submission to divine authority; it was an unailing part of the Old World New Year's rites as of any royal audience. A flat prostration upon the earth was the proper act of obeisance in the presence of the ruler of all the universe."

28. Szink and Welch, 179.

2:1–7). Were the speech given at some other location, and were there an absence of so many other textual evidences suggestive of a sacred festival setting, it would be much easier to view the prostration of the Benjamin's people as something other than ritual.

Mormon's description of a "multitude" that had "fallen to the earth, for the fear of the Lord had come upon them" (Mosiah 4:1) is almost the exact language that Jacob uses to describe the scene after Sherem's *mea culpa*. This description adds weight to the suggestion that Sherem's confrontation with Jacob and subsequent *mea culpa* speech took place at the Temple and that the prostrations that took place there were ritual in character.

In the next verse, Mormon proposes why the multitude prostrated themselves, that "they had viewed themselves in their own carnal state, even less than the dust of the earth" (Mosiah 4:2). They are reverencing God because of his greatness and acknowledging the cosmic insignificance of fallen man.

Proskynesis in the Account of the Lamanite Conversions

The cycle of stories documenting the missionary efforts of the sons of Mosiah, and the conversion of large numbers of Lamanites, is rife with theophanic manifestations that are accompanied by prostrations. Each is described in language that evokes earlier and similar manifestations in the Book of Mormon and other scripture. The first occurs when Lamoni believes Ammon's teaching and cries:

O Lord, have mercy; according to thy abundant mercy which thou hast had upon the people of Nephi, have upon me, and my people. And now, when he had said this, *he fell unto the earth, as if he were dead.* (Alma 18:41–42; emphasis added)

Lamoni's physical incapacitation lasted two days and two nights. He then arises, declares that he has seen his Redeemer, prophecies the Messiah's birth by a mortal, and falls prostrate again. His declaration is so moving that the queen, and then Ammon himself, both fall prostrate, "overpowered with joy" (Alma 19:14). Then the servants do likewise:

Now, when the servants of the king had seen that they had fallen, they also began to cry unto God, for *the fear of the Lord had come upon them also*. . . . And it came to pass that they did call on the name of the Lord, in all their might, even until they had all fallen to the earth, save it were one of the Lamanitish women. (Alma 19:15–16; emphasis added)

It is significant that Mormon mentions, “the fear of the Lord had come upon them also.” This is the same language that he uses to explain the proskynesis of the people while at the Zarahemla temple, suggesting a kinship in the nature of their experiences. Though the events during King Benjamin’s speech occur in a more formal setting, the divine manifestations at Lamoni’s palace must have been very similar. The falling to the earth of the people in each instance is both the result of the immense power of the Divine Presence, and a ritually significant event. In successive verses Mormon describes the scene at Lamoni’s palace, how the Lamanite people enter the palace and behold “the king, and the queen, and their servants [and Ammon] *prostrate upon the earth*” and that “they all lay there as though they were dead” (Alma 19:18; emphasis added). Mormon’s language implies that these events are to be interpreted as being partly or wholly cultic in nature.

The event that culminates in Lamoni’s father’s conversion is powerfully cultic in nature. Aaron instructs the Lamanite king to bow himself down and to supplicate the Lord for the desired blessing of eternal life:

But Aaron said unto him: If thou desirest this thing, if thou wilt *bow down before God*, yea, if thou wilt repent of all thy sins, and will *bow down before God*, and call on his name in faith, believing that ye shall receive, then shalt thou receive the hope which thou desirest. And it came to pass that when Aaron had said these words, the king did *bow down before the Lord, upon his knees*; yea, even he did *prostrate himself upon the earth*, and cried mightily, saying: O God, Aaron hath told me that there is a God; and if there is a God, and if thou art God, wilt thou make thyself known unto me, and I will give away all my sins to know thee, and that I may be raised from the dead, and be saved

at the last day. And now when the king had said these words, he was struck as if he were dead. (Alma 22:16–18; emphasis added)

Thus the Lord makes himself known to Lamoni's father. The Lamanite king obtains a divine vision, a covenant relationship with God, and the promise of salvation. His conversion results in the conversion of thousands of his Lamanite subjects as well as a seismic shift in the ethnic and religious landscape leading up to the time of Christ. Mormon's depiction of the king's conversion attests the power of ritual prostration as a profound expression of one's love of God, as a reflection of one's reverence for God's grandeur, as well as an acknowledgment of one's relative smallness on the cosmic scale.

Proskynesis in Connection with Prayer

That cultic prostration often accompanied prayer among the Nephites (and later the Lamanites) is clearly demonstrated in the conversion of Lamoni's father. This fact is also elucidated in a number of passages. Previous to the covenant-making ceremony of the rending of the garments,²⁹ Moroni prostrates himself and prays:

And he took the pole, which had on the end thereof his rent coat, (and he called it the title of liberty) and he *bowed himself to the earth*, and he prayed mightily unto his God for the blessings of liberty to rest upon his brethren. (Alma 46:13; emphasis added)

Mormon also tells how Nephi, saddened by his unrepentant people, "*bowed himself* upon the tower which was in his garden" and poured his soul out unto God in prayer (Hel. 7:10–11; emphasis added). The account of the climactic events at the Temple in Bountiful records that Jesus "*bowed himself to the earth*" while praying to the Father (3 Ne. 19:19, 27).

29. See Mark J. Morrise, "Simile Curses in the Ancient Near East, Old Testament, and Book of Mormon," in *The Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2 (1981): 132.

Proskynesis in Connection with Kingship

At least two passages in the Book of Mormon show that the ancient Near Eastern custom of prostrating oneself before kings was common among the Lehwites in the Western Hemisphere. In many of the great civilizations of the ancient Near East, kings were considered divine and were revered as members of the pantheon. In Ancient Israel, kings were considered the surrogates of *YHWH*, and prototypes of the Messiah, Israel's Divine King. The manner in which the people paid homage to the earthly king anticipated the Divine King. The first instance is when Ammon is released from prison and is given audience with King Limhi. He accords Limhi the customary reverence:

And now, when Ammon saw that he was permitted to speak, he went forth and *bowed himself before the king*; and rising again said: O king, I am very thankful before God this day that I am yet alive, and am permitted to speak. (Mosiah 7:12; emphasis added)

Though in this instance, Ammon's reverential act was not an acknowledgment of the king's divinity, it acknowledged the king as the divine surrogate and acknowledged Ammon's reverence for kingship.

The second instance is even more elucidating. In the following passage, Mormon notes that the custom of prostrating oneself before the king was borrowed from Nephite culture into Lamanite culture:

But behold, as the king came out to meet him Amalickiah caused that his servants should go forth to meet the king. And they went and *bowed themselves before the king, as if to reverence him because of his greatness*. And it came to pass that the king put forth his hand to raise them, as was the custom with the Lamanites, as a token of peace, which custom they had taken from the Nephites. (Alma 47:22–23; emphasis added)

Here we find it documented that the custom of prostrating oneself before the king signified reverencing the king "because of his greatness." The king was great, at least in part, because he was

the divine surrogate. The Nephite–Lamanite custom thus typified the ritual prostration done before Israel's True King.

Proskynesis as Practiced by the Jaredites

As is the case in so many aspects of their society, details are somewhat scant with respect to proskynesis among the Jaredites; however, the Book of Mormon text does yield some clues regarding this practice. Two passages in the Book of Ether show that it was familiar to them. In each instance, the events depicted are set in temple settings and have temple significance. Ritual prostration is connected with the Brother of Jared's experience atop Mt. Shelem.³⁰

And the veil was taken from off the eyes of the brother of Jared, and he saw the finger of the Lord; and it was as the finger of a man, like unto flesh and blood; and the brother of Jared *fell down before the Lord*, for he was struck with fear. (Ether 3:6; emphasis added)

The brother of Jared's falling down at seeing the Lord's finger takes on added significance if we do not view his reaction as pure instinctive fear, but as fear coupled with ritual reverence. It is important to consider that the Nephites at the temple in Bountiful, though astounded at the sudden Christophany, *knew* how to act with ritual propriety. So did the brother of Jared. By falling down prostrate before the Lord he acknowledges not only a divine presence and power, but also reverential awe for him, and his own cosmic insignificance.

The account of the Jaredite arrival in the promised land gives us an additional brief glimpse of proskynesis among that people. Moroni gives us this account of their arrival in the Western Hemisphere:

And they did land upon the shore of the promised land. And when they had set their feet upon the shores of the promised land they *bowed themselves down* upon the face of the land, and *did*

30. For more on the ritualism of this experience, see M. Catherine Thomas, "The Brother of Jared at the Veil," *TOTALW* (1993): 388–98.

humble themselves before the Lord, and did shed tears of joy before the Lord, because of the multitude of his tender mercies over them. (Ether 6:12; emphasis added)

The prostration of the Jaredites on the seashore was an acknowledgment of their awe for God and his goodness, as well as an acknowledgment their dependence on him.

Proskynesis during the Christophany at the Temple in Bountiful

In 3 Nephi 11, Israel's True King finally manifests himself to his people in his divine and glorified state. Significantly, these events—the most climactic, stirring, and spiritually important events of the entire Book of Mormon—take place at the Temple. And all at once, centuries of ritual become reality.

Notwithstanding the voice of the Father from heaven introducing his Beloved Son as the Son descends, the people do not immediately recognize him, “for they thought it was an angel that had appeared unto them” (3 Ne. 11:8). Then Jesus identifies himself as the Messiah, their Divine King:

Behold, I am Jesus Christ, whom the prophets testified shall come into the world. And behold, I am the light and the life of the world; and I have drunk out of that bitter cup, which the Father hath given me, and have glorified the Father in taking upon me the sins of the world, in the which I have suffered the will of the Father in all things from the beginning. (3 Ne. 11:10–11)

This is the moment of recognition. The people immediately prostrate themselves:

And it came to pass that when Jesus had spoken these words the whole multitude *fell to the earth*; for they remembered that it had been prophesied among them that Christ should show himself unto them after his ascension into heaven. (3 Ne. 11:12; emphasis added)

Their falling to the earth is not mass fainting. The people do exactly what their system of religious beliefs and rituals has stipulated for thousands of years; what holy persons have done in

the presence of God from the beginning. The God whom they have worshiped as *YHWH*, whose Spirit has been present in their temples, is now present in his own physical tabernacle. As irrefutable proof of the Divine Presence, the people are allowed to handle the tokens of his Messiahship. Having done this, the people again prostrate themselves:

And when they had all gone forth and had witnessed for themselves, they did cry out with one accord, saying: Hosanna! Blessed be the name of the Most High God! And they did *fall down at the feet of Jesus, and did worship him*. (3 Ne. 11:16–17; emphasis added)

Then to Nephi, the spiritual leader of the people, the Christ accords a singular privilege:

And it came to pass that he spake unto Nephi (for Nephi was among the multitude) and he commanded him that he should come forth. And Nephi arose and went forth, and *bowed himself before the Lord and did kiss his feet*. (3 Ne. 11:18–19; emphasis added)

There is no better description of proskynesis anywhere in literature, ancient or modern, than this. It perfectly fits Bauer's definition of the practice,³¹ as well as the etymology of the word.³² It is worth noting that Nephi needed only to be told to "come forth." His gesture of kissing the Lord's feet is the highest and most transcendent visible expression of a love for Deity that any human can undertake.

Later on, as Jesus heals all the maladies among the people, others receive the same privilege as Nephi:

And they did all, both they who had been healed and they who were whole, bow down at his feet, and did worship him; and as many as could come for the multitude *did kiss his feet*,

31. "The custom of prostrating oneself before a person and kissing his feet, the hem of his garment, the ground, etc. The Persians did this in the presence of their deified king." Bauer, 16.

32. *Proskyneō* = *kynēō* (to kiss) + *pros* (before, in the presence of, etc.). Liddell and Scott, 457, 684.

insomuch that they did bathe his feet with their tears. (3 Ne. 17:10; emphasis added)

This passage is as clear as the previous one, adding the detail that the people literally “bathed his feet with their tears.” Together the two passages are the realization of everything symbolized by proskynesis. The sacred actions Nephi and his people perform are the supreme visible manifestation of human love for Deity. They signify the Deity’s presence and power—in this case, his bodily presence. These actions symbolize the Nephites reverence and awe for their Savior, Redeemer, and God, and acknowledge man’s own comparative and cosmic smallness. There cannot be another passage in ancient or modern writings that teaches us more about ritual prostrations than does Mormon’s account of the Christophany at the temple in Bountiful.

Proskynesis was an important rite of worship among the peoples of the Book of Mormon. Besides being performed in a temple setting and being connected with the most climactic and sacred events chronicled in that religious text, these ritual prostrations were the most profound expression of love for God. They signified his presence among the people, in body and in spirit. They demonstrated reverence and awe for God and were an acknowledgment of fallen man’s comparative cosmic smallness, and humanity’s dependence on him. The events at the temple in Bountiful best illustrate this symbolism and perhaps teach us more about ritual prostration than any other ancient text.