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in the Book of Mormon: Preliminary Observations

Gordon C. Thomasson¹

Nephi, within a brilliant discussion of the necessity of cultural understanding in relation to the interpretation of scriptures, informs us that he intentionally did not teach the people the "manner" and "things of the Jews" (2 Ne 25:2,6). I doubt that he would have even bothered to say this if he were thinking of hair length, clothing styles, or other trivia about which a culture becomes obsessed. It is fair to assume, I would argue, in line with the practices of other desert sectaries, that he is instead concerned with interpretation of scriptures, ritual practices, etc. He would not be repudiating

the ordinances of God, according to the law of Moses; for they were taught to keep the law of Moses until it should be fulfilled. (Alma 30:3)

Instead there would be a concern to purify the ordinances, removing layers of pagan accretions from the observances and restoring their true nature. If this is the case, then the major, scripturally mandated Israelite patterns of worship, including those of the home, synagogue, sanctuary, and temple, as well as festivals and Holy Days² should have been practiced by the Book of Mormon peoples, though we should not necessarily expect them to be identical with what we find in other Old World sources. There would be differences, not just in terms of deletions, but also in adaptations based upon these peoples' own collective history as a covenant and a

¹I am indebted to a number of individuals for suggestions concerning specific aspects of the festivals, including Benjamin Urrutia, Robert F. Smith, Stephen Wood, and David Boruchowitz.

²It should be noted that a common misspelling in published editions of the Book of Mormon is the substitution of "rights" for the word "rites," thus giving a false political connotation to a religious statement (cf. Alma 43: 45,47, where verse 47 reads "rites" in the original and printer's manuscript, which parallels verse 45). Alma 44:5 preserves "rites" as it should be, whereas Alma 51:6 follows the printer's manuscript in reading "rights" while the original manuscript employs the word "rites" and makes much more sense in context. See the forthcoming F.A.R.M.S. Book of Mormon Critical Text, (Provo, Utah: F.A.R.M.S., 1984).

diaspora people. I would suggest that this is in fact the case, and it is time that we seriously pursue a discussion of ritual/religious life among the peoples of the Book of Mormon.³ What follows is intended as a springboard for such discussions.

FESTIVALS

Tabernacles

The most well-known occurrence of ritual in the Book of Mormon is the Sukkot or Feast of the Tabernacles as a festival related to divine kingship as discussed in Mosiah 1-6.⁴ I have also found a second instance of this royal ritual pattern in Alma 20. As is well known, after the conversion of Lamoni, Ammon and this vassal king, son of the overlord or "king over all the land" (v. 8), are proceeding to Middoni to attempt to free Ammon's brethren. This "king of kings" is, judging from the text, in a belligerent mood. His first question is the key:

Why did ye not come to the feast on that great day when I made a feast unto my sons [at least one of which, he who became Anti-Nephi-Lehi, was almost certainly also already a vassal king], and unto my people? (Alma 20:9, emphasis added)

For a vassal king not to attend the year-rite was treason. There is little question that the great day referred-to was the annual coronation, and that Lamoni's father had mounted a punitive expedition to suppress the rebellion which King Lamoni's non-attendance normally would have signified. His anger at Ammon probably reflects

³Book of Mormon authors and editors would have taken for granted the many religious practices we are here concerned with, and would hardly have thought to mention them explicitly for the benefit of gentile readers. Moreover, our own lack of familiarity (to say nothing of a lack of expectation or "looking for" certain data) with Israelite religion would also blind us to what for them would be very obvious allusions and references.

⁴See especially H. Nibley, An Approach to the Book of Mormon, (Salt Lake City, Utah: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1957). Also see Gordon C. Thomasson, "Mosiah: The Symbolic Complex and the Complex Symbolism of Kingship in the Book of Mormon," a F.A.R.M.S. Preliminary Report, (Provo, Utah: F.A.R.M.S., 1983), and "Togetherness is Sharing an Umbrella: Divine Kingship, the Gnosis, and Religious Syncretism," as well as John A. Tvedtnes, "The Nephite Feast of Tabernacles," both in Tinkling Cymbals: Essays in Honor of Hugh Nibley, ed. John W. Welch, (Los Angeles, Cal.: n.p., 1978).

his suspicion that Ammon had incited Lamoni to rebellion, following a common pattern among Nephite dissenters in Lamanite history. In deed, Lamoni's father takes Ammon to be Lamoni's champion, and after being vanquished offers him (or ritually offers through him to Lamoni?) half the kingdom. After his life is spared he in fact makes Lamoni his equal rather than his vassal, ceding to him "his kingdom from this time and forever; and I will govern him no more" (Alma 20:26).

Rosh Hashanah--Yom Kippur: The Days of Penitence

In Alma 28 we see that the Amalekite-inspired Nephite-Lamanite war ended with widespread death and destruction.

And now, surely this was a sorrowful day; yea, a time of much fasting and prayer. And thus endeth the fifteenth year of the reign of the judges over the people of Nephi . . . and the fifteenth year of the reign of the judges is ended. (Alma 28:6-7,9, emphasis added)

After the end of the fifteenth year, and I feel it can justifiably be assumed that warfare did not continue up to the very last day of that year, we find that a curious combination of statements occurs.

[B]ut it came to pass after they had buried their dead, and also after the days of fasting, and mourning, and prayer, (and it was in the sixteenth year of the reign of the judges over the people of Nephi) there began to be continual peace throughout all the land. Yea, and the people did observe to keep the commandments of the Lord; and they were strict in observing the ordinances of God, according to the law of Moses; for they were taught to keep the law of Moses until it should be fulfilled. And thus the people did have no disturbance in all the sixteenth year of the reign of the judges over the people of Nephi. (Alma 30:2-4, emphasis added)⁵

Since the war was over, and the phrase "buried their dead" normally would include a process of mourning, I would argue that we are justified in putting emphasis on the phrase "and also after" as setting off a reference to the period of 1-10 Tishri (the days of "fasting, and mourning, and prayer"). This is almost certainly a refer-

⁵Based on chronological work being done by Robert F. Smith, this sixteenth year of the reign of the judges may have been a sabbatical year. As Benjamin Urrutia suggests, this is a "Good question to pursue. Did Nephites and Lamanites respect the sabbatical year truce? Most of the time? Some of the time?" If they did, it suggests that both groups were still using essentially the same calendar system, many centuries into their history.

ence to the Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur "Days of Awe," which the text uses explicitly ("and it was in") to introduce the sixteenth year. Alma's "Thanksgiving Hymn" (Alma 29) would seem to be a most appropriate liturgical creation for the Holy Days after so bloody a war.

Passover

While Alma 36 has been analyzed very thoroughly in terms of its style and chiasmic structure,⁶ the question of why so much effort would be expended in a written record also needs to be asked. In fact, when the two most complex chiasmic texts in the Book of Mormon, Benjamin's discourse and Alma 36, are examined, I would suggest that the intricate "literary" form results from these being carefully composed as liturgical texts. To begin to see this in Alma 36-42 one should preface its reading with the question:

What mean ye by this service? (Exo. 12:26)

By citing the traditional first question asked by a child to begin a Passover seder I am intentionally suggesting that Alma 36-42 is either structured upon or in fact is a Passover service. The questions asked by a child are a very good place to begin, since the normal Passover service contains answers a father may give to four different kinds of sons. To the wise son a father must "expound the laws of the Passover."⁷ Alma's son Helaman, to whom the religious "birthright" (as it were) is ultimately conveyed, is given a very complex lesson in Alma 36-37. For a "simple son" or one so young as to "not know how to ask" the seder specifies other answers.⁸ For the former there should be a "concise reply couched in elementary terms."⁹

⁶See John W. Welch, "Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon," F.A.R.M.S. videotape, (Provo, Utah: F.A.R.M.S., 1983), for a thorough illustration of the chiasm in Alma 36.

⁷Haggadah for Passover: Copied and Illustrated by Ben Shahn, With a Translation, Introduction, and Historical Notes by Cecil Roth, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company-Paris: Trianon Press, 1965), p. 20. The text of this Haggadah is based on the Ashkenazi tradition and on Cecil Roth's 1934 edition.

⁸ibid., p. 29.

⁹ibid., p. 26.

Shiblon receives just the first half of the chiasm that is contained in Alma 36, without elaborations (Alma 38). For the latter case--really a variation of the previous one--the father must tell the child; and medieval manuscripts pictured this as a ritual opening of the mouth for the child.¹⁰ To a "wicked son" a father should reply in such a way as to "set his [son's] teeth too on edge."¹¹ Alma's sermon to his son Corianton in chapters 39-42 certainly fills this requirement. I am suggesting, in other words, that Alma's statements to his three sons fall within the expected pattern of Passover ritual. But this alone would not justify our relating this to either an actual Passover observance or a personalized internalization of the communal covenant of Israel with God. To see the high degree of resemblance one must proceed to the text itself.

As George Tate has noted, the typology of the Exodus pattern is found throughout the Book of Mormon.¹² The Passover seder is a ritual reenactment and celebration of those historical events as recorded in the scriptures. Alma 36 begins and ends chiastically with a recitation of the basic events of the Exodus and the commandments associated with them. In so doing it is bringing to mind these crucial events just as they were to be recalled by Israelites through all generations.

And this day shall be unto you for a memorial; and ye shall keep it a feast to the Lord throughout your generations; ye shall keep it a feast by an ordinance for ever. . . .And ye shall observe this thing for an ordinance to thee and to thy sons for ever. And it shall come to pass, when ye be come to the land which the Lord will give you, according as he hath promised, that ye shall keep this service. (Exo. 12:14, 24-25, emphasis added)

¹⁰ibid., p. 26.

¹¹ibid., p. 20.

¹²George S. Tate, "The Typology of the Exodus Pattern in the Book of Mormon" in Literature of Belief (Salt Lake City: Religious Studies Center, 1978), pp. 245-262, also a F.A.R.M.S. Reprint (TAT-81) (Provo, Utah: F.A.R.M.S., 1983). See also Lisa Hawkins and Gordon C. Thomasson, "I Only Am Escaped Alone to Tell Thee: Survivor-Witnesses in the Book of Mormon," F.A.R.M.S. Preliminary Report, (Provo, Utah: F.A.R.M.S., 1984), and my manuscript in progress, "Refugees and Survivors: Two Environmentally Unpredictable Themes in the Book of Mormon."

The crucial passages from Alma 36 will be examined in parallel columns to both illustrate the chiasm (in **boldface**) and Passover themes (underlined).

1) My **son**, give ear to my words, for I swear unto you, that inasmuch as ye shall keep the commandments of God ye shall prosper in the land.

2) I would that ye should do as I have done, in remembering the captivity of our fathers; for they were in bondage, and none could deliver them except it were the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob; and he surely did deliver them in their afflictions.

30) But behold, my **son**, this is not all; for ye ought to know as I do know, that inasmuch as ye shall keep the commandments of God ye shall prosper in the land; and ye ought to know also, that inasmuch as ye will not keep the commandments of God ye shall be cut off from his presence. Now this is according to his word.

29) Yea, and he has also brought our fathers out of the land of Jerusalem; and he has also, by his everlasting power, delivered them out of bondage and captivity, from time to time even down to the present day, and I have always retained in remembrance their captivity; yea, and ye also ought to retain in remembrance, as I have done, their captivity.

The crux or pivot of this chiasmus in Alma 36 is in verses 17-18. Quite appropriately this is Jesus Christ, who, for the messianic Israelite Nephite community, although he is not explicitly named as such in this particular passage, is clearly alluded to as the lamb slain before the foundation of the world of which the Passover lamb is only a type and an image.

Passover imagery and structure in Alma 36, whether by allusion or explicit mention, includes many other details. On every Sabbath night, and especially on Passover it is appropriate for a father to bless his children. An angel calls Alma to leave his former way of life/slavery to sin (v. 8), and threatens destruction if he does not (remembering that Alma is his father's firstborn, this parallels the death of the Egyptian firstborn). The three days and nights of torment Alma experienced (v. 10), is a double-allusion harking back to the plague of darkness in Egypt (Exo. 10:21-23), and looking forward to the darkness in the Nephite lands

during the time Christ spent in the tomb. The pillar of fire which guided Israel in the wilderness (Exo. 14:24) is pointed to by citing Lehi's vision (v.22, quoting 1 Ne 1:8) which, for those familiar with it, would also recall that patriarch's vision of a pillar of fire (1 Ne 1:6). I am sure there is much more that a detailed study of rabbinic literature (for example the tractate Mo'ed) and an historical study of the Haggadah would reveal.

Pentecost

At first glance it was not apparent that the Israelite Pentecost was to be found in the Book of Mormon as is the more obviously Christian Pentecost (Acts 2, 3 Ne 19). Upon analysis of the crucial details, however, several possible references to Pentecost were found. Remembering that the festival involved Moses being encircled by fire and smoke on the mountain, conversing with God and bringing down the tablets of the law, after which he shone to such a degree that the people had him veil his face (Exo. 35:29 ff.), there are several possibilities.

The first possible case is structurally similar. This is Nephi's intimate conversation with the Spirit which constrained him to kill Laban, thus obtaining the plates and bringing them back to the Lehite camp (1 Ne 4).¹³ If this seems strained, it should be recalled that the very imagery which Nephi uses is that of being "strong like unto Moses" (v. 2) and comparing Laban to the Egyptians. In line with the idea that "it is better that one man should perish" (v.14) there is the fact that human death and/or sacrifice seems to have been an early and recurring part of Pentecost. In fact, at the first Pentecost, Hur, thought to have been groomed as a successor to Moses (Exo. 17:12, 24:14), is supposed to have been:

[M]urdered by the people for courageously opposing their demand to make the golden calf.¹⁴

¹³Or is the arrival of Nephi with the plates in the Lehite camp comparable to Simhat Torah? See below.

¹⁴See the article "Hur" in the Encyclopaedia Judaica, also Exodus Rabba 48:3, Sanhedrin 7a.

Moreover, the sons of Levi killed about three thousand men (Hur's wife Miriam was a Levite. Was this in retaliation?) after Moses came down from the mountain (Exo. 32:26-28). That human sacrifice may have been linked with at least corrupted celebrations of Pentecost is not an unprecedented idea.

The most likely candidate so far for a type of Pentecost is in Helaman 5. The young Nephi and Lehi were taken prisoner by Nephite dissenters and Lamanites. Rather than being killed outright they are held in prison "many days" after which their captors:

[G]o into the prison to take them that they might slay them. (He 5:22)

The two missionaries could easily have been slain at the time of their capture. Instead they are held for a specific occasion. Before they can be killed, however, Lehi and Nephi are "encircled about as if by fire" (He 5:23. see also Acts 2:3). A heavenly message calling their captors to repent follows (See especially He 5:30, compare Acts 2:2). Then the Lamanites ask "What shall we do?" (He 5:40, compare Acts 2:37--is this formulaic?), and receive the reply to repent and have faith in Christ (He. 5:41, see also Acts 2:38). If this occurred on a ritual occasion such as Pentecost the effect on the Lamanites would have been all the more impressive. Compare also the narrative of Elijah in 1 Kings 19:11-12. This incident, at least, bears further study, and I suspect that other pentecostal type events will yet be discovered in the Book of Mormon.

Simhat Torah

I tend to be more impressed with the celebration at the Lehite camp upon return of Nephi's party with the brass plates as paralleling Simhat Torah rather than Pentecost (1 Ne 5:9). Also, it would seem to fit the probable overall chronology better, as at the moment Passover seems the most likely time for Lehi's group to have first left Jerusalem.

Minor Festivals

I have not yet recognized any of the minor festivals.

OTHER RITUAL PRACTICES

Briefly, ritual practices include prayers of many types, non-Levitical thank offerings upon altars (1 Ne 2:7), and sacrifice and burnt offerings that may or may not have been Levitical in nature.¹⁵ (1 Ne 5:9) Reading the scriptures seems to have been a ritual practice. Marriage rituals seem to be taken for granted (1 Ne 7). Divination for various purposes (including "place divination" Alma 16:5) took several forms, including using the Urim and Thummim and the Liahona (1 Ne 16:10, Mosi 8:13). Prophecy seems to have had a role in ritual and worship services, as a didactic mechanism. Baptism is mentioned (1 Ne 10:9, Mosi 18:13 [in fact, here, re-baptism]). There are specific mourning and funerary practices (1 Ne 16:34-35). Bearing witness or testifying is also a specific practice, (1 Ne 22:31) as is the taking/making of oaths and covenants (1 Ne 4:32, Alma 24:15-19, Alma 37:27). "Patriarchal" blessings are frequently given (2 Ne 4). Various liturgical type texts seem to have been employed, and numerous Old Testament Psalms are cited, as well as new ones such as the Psalm of Nephi (2 Ne 4:16-35), and the Thanksgiving Hymns of Ammon (Alma 26:11-37), and Alma (Alma 29:1-17). Temple worship of a Levitical nature seems to have been common throughout the Nephite lands from the building of the first Nephite temple (2 Ne 5:16). Temple worship of a non-Levitical nature, perhaps paralleling what the Coptic Gospel of Phillip describes as a temple with

¹⁵Was Zoram a Levite who had resided in the Northern Kingdom and had been attached in a priestly capacity to Lehi's clan or Laban's family in particular? If so this would account for Levitical ritual among the Nephites prior to their joining with the Mulekite refugees, who very probably would have had both Levitical and Aaronic functionaries as part of the retinue. If Zoram had a priestly function would this account for his seeming link to the brass plates? Also, are the descendants of Mulek the original "kingmen," raising their hereditary claims against those of the Nephites? Is there any connection between Zoram and Zoramite ritual (the Rameumptom, etc.)? Even today, those of priestly descent are first among equals in the Jewish synagogue.

a Holy of Holies and a "Bridal Chamber," involving the Melchizedek priesthood covenant also is present (Alma 9-14). Writings in Apocalypse style also have a high liturgical function, (see the Apocalypse of Benjamin, Mosi 3:2 ff.) while a number of Midrashim seem to be created for low liturgy and/or sermonizing (see the Isaiah Midrash by Nephi in 2 Ne 25 ff.). There is public covenanting (Mosi 6:1) associated with some of the large festivals. Polygyny is practiced by various peoples (Jacob 2, Mosi 11:14, and Alma 10:11). Ritual self-abasement is practiced as a sign of repentance (Mosi 11:25). "Spring" (equinoctial ?) festivals may have been common (Mosi 20:1-2). Religious conversions and attending rituals (name changes, rites de passage, etc.) are common throughout the text. Priests were ordained (Mosi 25:19), excommunication was practiced (Mosi 26:36), and at certain times warfare seems to have been ritualized.

RITUAL PLACES

Besides the temples, sanctuaries [following the pattern of Northern Kingdom or Lehite worship?--perhaps involving "high places"] and synagogues ["built after the manner of the Jews" reflecting the Kingdom of Judah and Mulekite practices?] were common (Alma 16:13, 23:2). Alma teaches and baptizes refugees from Noah's kingdom in the forests and the "Waters of Mormon." (Mosi 18:5-8) Ammon teaches the Amalekites in their synagogues and the Lamanites in their "assembly[s]" (Alma 21:16). The Zoramites gathered together once a week in a synagogue to pray (Alma 31:12), whereas Alma questions the supposition that one must either be in a synagogue to worship or only do so once a week (Alma 32:10-11). In his Midrash on Zenos' teaching (Alma 33:3-11), Amulek seems to reflect the more common Israelite practice of praying three times daily (Alma 34:21).

INCONCLUSION (AS IN INCONCLUSIVE)

With the foregoing I feel I have barely scratched the surface of the problem. I would suggest a F.A.R.M.S. Seminar, similar to the Metonymy Seminar, opening up

some of the issues advanced here. I'm sure not everyone will agree with my analysis of the festivals, ritual practices and places (I've not pretended to do more than list the ones I see--certainly not to fully describe or explain them). Lists and descriptions can be amended, added to or subtracted from, but in any case we will sensitize ourselves to the problem of understanding "religion" in the Book of Mormon.