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## The Nephite Purification Ceremony

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## THE NEPHITE PURIFICATION CEREMONY<sup>1</sup>

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*And the people told the men of Gideon that they had slain the king, and his priests had fled from them farther into the wilderness. And it came to pass that after they had ended the ceremony, that they returned to the land of Nephi, rejoicing, because their wives and their children were not slain; and they told Gideon what they had done to the king. (Mosiah 19:23-24)*

In Mosiah 19:23-24, we read that, after the Nephite soldiers slew king Noah they “ended the ceremony” before returning to their homes. What ceremony? Its nature is not described in the text. Is this an inadvertent error in Joseph Smith’s writing, or is it further evidence of the authenticity of his translation? Examination of other ancient Near Eastern sources—including the Bible—not only provide evidence for the latter, they allow us to make a guess at what this ceremony was.

### ***RITUAL PURIFICATION IN THE BIBLE AND OTHER CULTURES***

Ritual purification of the manslayer is common to many societies throughout the world. In ancient Greece, the individual would flee to a king for pardon and would be assigned certain tasks

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<sup>1</sup> This article, though written in the 1970s, was presented as a paper at the sixth annual Spend a Day with the Book of Mormon symposium, October 6, 1990, sponsored by the Foundation for Research in Ancient America. It is published here for the first time.

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to complete in order to be purified, as in the story of Hercules. The law of Moses, while not allowing the murderer to live, required that the accidental killer remain in one of the cities of refuge until the death of the current high priest, whereupon he was free to continue his normal life (Numbers 35:9-28).

The very act of touching a dead body brought ritual impurity in ancient Israel, calling for ablution (Numbers 19; 31:19). As a consequence, one would expect that soldiers returning from battle would undergo the purification rite, making them ritually clean.

In the Book of Mormon, Jacob performed a rite that may, in fact, be related to the ritual purification in Mosiah 19. "I take off my garments, and I shake them before you," he said, "I shook your iniquities from my soul . . . and am rid of your blood" (2 Nephi 9:44). This act may have been performed at the temple, where Jacob sometimes resorted to address the people (Jacob 1:17; 2:2, 11).

In the fourteenth-century B.C. texts found at Ugarit in northwestern Syria, we find Anat, goddess of war, bespattered by blood and gore as she slays men on the earth. She casts her filth into the sea and receives rain from her husband, the sky-god Baal, to wash her clean.<sup>2</sup> The annual rains were seen by the Canaanites and related peoples to be Baal's means of cleansing the blood of the slain from the body of his wife, who was the earth.<sup>3</sup>

There are several places in the scriptures where purification of the land is evidently related to the concept of Anat, the earth-goddess, being cleansed after the summer battles, when the

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<sup>2</sup> See the text and translation in Umberto Cassuto, *The Goddess Anath* (trans. Israel Abrahams) (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, 1971), 88-89.

<sup>3</sup> The idea of washing away "filthiness" is found in Proverbs 30:12 and Isaiah 4:4 (where the word parallels "blood"). In both passages, the Hebrew word for "filth" is cognate to the Ugaritic word used in the story of Anat.



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fall rains come. A prime example is found in Moses 7:48, where the earth is said to cry, “Wo, wo is me, the mother of men; I am pained, I am weary, because of the wickedness of my children. When shall I rest, and be cleansed from the filthiness which is gone forth out of me? When will my Creator sanctify me, that I may rest, and righteousness for a season abide upon my face?”

The passage would fit very well in the Ugaritic context, where the earth-goddess Anat, called the “mother of men,” is cleansed from her filthiness by Baal, here paralleled by the “Creator.” When the Lord found the earth corrupt, he decided to cleanse it by means of water, resulting in the flood of Noah (Genesis 6:11-17). In the last days, the earth, because of the blood which pollutes it, is to be cleansed by fire (2 Nephi 26:3-6).

After the earth received Abel’s blood, it ceased producing crops for Cain, who was a farmer (Genesis 4:9-12). This leads one to wonder if the purification ceremony did not go hand-in-hand with the prayers for rain. It would appear that, in order for the earth to produce crops beginning in the spring, it had to be cleansed by ceremony and by rains during the winter. Interestingly, it is the blood of sacrificial animals which, in part, purifies the earth of the blood of men shed during war.

In the Bible, the cleansing of the earth<sup>4</sup> comes both by means of water and by means of fire, perhaps referring to lightning or “fire from heaven” (see 2 Kings 1:10), which the Canaanites believed to be Baal’s spear. Ezekiel 21-24 is a good example. The prophecy is addressed against Jerusalem and the “land of Israel” (Ezekiel 21:2). The wicked are to be slain by the sword (Ezekiel 21:3-5; 9-19, 28-31), and there is blood in the land (Ezekiel 21:32) and bloodshed in Jerusalem (Ezekiel 22:2-4). “In thee have they humbled her that was set apart for pollution” (Ezekiel 22:10; see also verses 6, 9, 12-13, 27).

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<sup>4</sup> The Hebrew word is rendered both “earth” and “land” in the King James Bible.

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The Lord will punish Jerusalem and Israel by fire (Ezekiel 22:18-22, 31) and will consume the filthiness in the land (Ezekiel 22:15). Then follows the key passage: "Thou art the land that is not cleansed, nor rained upon in the day of indignation" (Ezekiel 22:24). Because of the pollutant blood, the wicked of Jerusalem are to be destroyed by sword and by fire, in order that evil might be removed from the land (Ezekiel 23:46-48; 24:6-13).

In Ezekiel 36, we find that the water which comes down to bring cleansing also brings crops, clearly indicating that rain is meant.

Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you,  
and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and  
from all your idols, will I cleanse you . . . I will  
also save you from all your uncleanness; and I will  
call for the corn, and will increase it, and lay no  
famine upon you. And I will multiply the fruit of  
the tree, and the increase of the field, that ye shall  
receive no more reproach of famine among the  
heathen. (Ezekiel 36:25, 29-30)

This clearly reflects the ideas found in the law of Moses concerning rain and crops being the result of obedience to the Lord's commandments.<sup>5</sup> Isaiah, too, discusses the same subject, writing, "Your hands are full of blood. Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes." Sins, though scarlet, will be as white as snow and though red like crimson will become like wool (Isaiah 1:15-18). The tie between blood and sin is clear.

Isaiah further wrote that if the people would obey, they would eat the good of the land (Isaiah 1:20), which, of course,

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<sup>5</sup> Note especially Leviticus 25 & 26; Deuteronomy 11; even Jeremiah, in Chapter 14, notes that the Lord punishes the wrongs of his people by withholding rain.



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comes from abundant rains. On the other hand, if they rebelled, they would be devoured with the sword (Isaiah 1:20) and burned (Isaiah 1:31). In Isaiah 4:4, we read of the time “when the Lord shall have washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion, and shall have purged the blood of Jerusalem from the midst thereof by the spirit of judgment, and by the spirit of burning.”

The tie between the baptism of the earth at the flood and the “burning” of the last days (especially in connection with Elijah’s coming, predicted in Malachi 3-4) is of prime importance, particularly when one notes the symbolic ties to the baptisms of water and fire required of each of us in order to become “clean from the blood of this generation” (D&C 88:85; see also verses 74-75, 86, 138, and 109:42).

Of interest in this connection is Psalm 24, known to have been borrowed from Canaanite literature, with a change in the divine name. “The earth is the Lord’s” (Psalm 24:1) reminds us that Baal (who is the Canaanite parallel to Jehovah or “the Lord”) was the husband of Anat, the earth, just as Jehovah is the husband of Israel (who, in the passages quoted above, is filthy with blood and must be washed clean). “Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? or who shall stand in his holy place? He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart” (Psalm 24:3).

In the Ugaritic texts, Anat, after battle and prior to going into the palace of her father, El, was cleansed of the blood which had polluted her. Several scholars have compared her victory march (after slaying Yamm) with the passage in Psalm 24:7-10, declaring Jehovah’s victory in battle. While marching through the fields, Anat was cleansed by water sent by her consort, Baal, the sky-god.

Wars in the ancient Near East took place during the summer, when the land was not muddy and the rivers were not overflowing and thus difficult to traverse. The Assyrian and Egyptian records make it clear that it was typical to mount military campaigns into the Syro-Palestine region during this time. The same is true of the Israelites and of their predecessors, the

**Canaanites.**

The Israelites, when they first entered into the “rest of the Lord,” crossed over the Jordan, significantly at the same spot which later became the site of Jesus’ baptism by John (Beth Abarah, meaning “house of the crossing”). The crossing into the land of Canaan probably took place shortly before Passover, for we read that they encamped at Gilgal and there were circumcised and celebrated the Passover (Joshua 5). It is significant that they did not go to war until after the Passover had been observed—again indicating that wars typically took place during the summer interval separating Passover and Yom Kippur (or even Rosh ha-Shanah).

The rains in the Holy Land come in the fall, after the Jewish festivals of the month of Tishre: Rosh ha-Shanah (new year), Yom Kippur (day of atonement) and Sukkot (feast of tabernacles). Indeed, the prayers for rain are offered at the feast of Sukkot. It is possible that the coming of the rains was seen as a purification of the earth after it had been defiled by the blood and sins of mankind. Human beings became ritually pure on Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement), just four days prior to the onset of Sukkot. In preparation for the purification, Jews still go to running water, such as the sea or a stream, and empty their pocket lint (symbolic of sins) into the water.

The casting out of the pocket lint during the month of Tishre, paralleled by Anat’s casting of her filth into the sea, is reminiscent of 1 Nephi 15:33-34, where we read that those who remain filthy must be cast out of the kingdom of God. The kingdom, from the evidence of Zechariah 14, is to be established during the feast of Tabernacles.

The necessity for cleansing the earth by rain at the time of the fall festivals reflects the fact that war was conducted during the long dry season between rains (that is, between the Jewish festivals of Passover and Tabernacles).

The casting of Lamanites slain in battle into the River Sidon by the Nephites in Alma 3:3; 44:22 appears to be related to



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the ritual purification of the land after the summer season of war.<sup>6</sup> This may be compared with Elijah's casting of the corpses of the slain prophets of Baal into the River Kishon, whence they would have washed into the nearby Mediterranean Sea (1 Kings 18:40).<sup>7</sup>

Significantly, Elijah's contest appears to have taken place around the time of the first rains when, according to Canaanite belief, Baal resurrected for the winter-time and returned to the sky, whence he could send down rains to cleanse his wife, the earth-goddess Anat. Mt. Carmel, beside which the Kishon River runs, is the ideal representation of Anat, for it is a prominent piece of the goddess' body, the region that receives the greatest amount of rain and lightning (ostensibly from Baal), and the spot where the earth (Anat), represented by the mountain, juts out into the sea (Yamm), symbolic of the battle between Anat and Yamm.

Elijah's prayer for rain while the false prophets were being slain might imply that it was, in fact, the feast of Tabernacles.<sup>8</sup> The enthronement of Jehovah as king took place immediately thereafter, as Elijah, his earthly representative, ran the foot-race to Jezreel, thus making Jehovah the winner of both the spear or lightning throw and the foot-race contests required of the king as successor to Baal, according to the Ugaritic texts. Ahab, even in his chariot, lost that race, indicating his rejection as king.<sup>9</sup> When, at length,

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<sup>6</sup> Here, we refer to the seasonal pattern in the Near East, which need not parallel that of Mesoamerica.

<sup>7</sup> For a detailed explanation of how Elijah deliberately flaunted the Canaanite religion before the people during the contest atop Mount Carmel, see the author's article, "Elijah: Champion of Israel's God," *Ensign*, July 1990.

<sup>8</sup> Praying for rain while putting prisoners to death is a feature found in Mesoamerica. The Aztecs, in order to supplicate the storm-god Tlaloc for rain, would tie children to stakes and shoot them with arrows. The tears of the children acted like sympathetic magic, while their blood fertilized the ground.

<sup>9</sup> It was Elijah who was commissioned to anoint Jehu as king to overthrow the house of Ahab (1 Kings 19:16).



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Ahab died, it was in a battle which may have been at the end of the dry season.<sup>10</sup>

Final retribution against Ahab's family came when Jehu, then in battle at Ramoth-Gilead (where Ahab had been wounded), was proclaimed king, and returned to Jezreel to destroy the kings of Israel and Judah, along with Jezebel (2 Kings 9).<sup>11</sup> Then, in celebration—again, perhaps at the feast of Tabernacles—he slew both the sons of Ahab and the priests of Baal (2 Kings 10).<sup>12</sup> The priests may have gathered together to celebrate the fall festival, when Baal arose from the dead, for the assembly took place in the temple of Baal and Jehu pretended that he would offer sacrifice to the weather-god.

### *TIMING OF THE NEPHITE PURIFICATION CEREMONY*

On the surface, one might simply conclude that the “ceremony” mentioned in Mosiah 19:24, while probably purificatory, has no relationship to any of the Old Testament festivals. However, there is additional evidence that the event, in fact, took place during the seventh month (Tishre). Note, for example, that the Lamanite attack which had precipitated the entire incident was discovered by king Noah as he fought Gideon atop the “tower” near the temple in the city of Nephi (Mosiah 19:4-5f). The tower may have been constructed, as previously suggested in

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<sup>10</sup> After the battle, the Israelite soldiers all returned home (see 1 Kings 22:36-37).

<sup>11</sup> The ceremony marking Jehu's selection as king had elements from the feast of tabernacles, when kings were often anointed, as pointed out in the author's “King Benjamin and the Feast of Tabernacles,” in John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks (eds.), *By Study and Also by Faith (Essays in Honor of Hugh Nibley)*, Volume 2 (Salt Lake City: Deseret and FARMS, 1990).

<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, in Judah, the royal seed were also killed off by Athaliah, the sister or daughter of Ahab (2 Kings 11).

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regard to the speech of King Benjamin, for the feast of tabernacles.

Soon after the battle, Noah's priests came to capture Lamanite girls whom they saw dancing (Mosiah 20:1-5). The incident is so similar to the story in Judges 20:19-23 as to suggest that, in fact, the dance was at a sacred place and was part of the celebration of the feast of tabernacles.<sup>13</sup>

The Lamanites, unhappy at the capture of the girls and suspecting the inhabitants of the city of Nephi of the deed, began assembling their warriors for an attack. It was at this moment that Limhi, who had replaced his father as king, spied their preparations from atop the tower (Mosiah 20:8).

The choice of Limhi as the new king of the Nephites in the land of Nephi is another minor bit of evidence for placing this incident at the feast of tabernacles (Mosiah 19:26). To be sure, Limhi's appointment would have been necessary because his father was dead. But one wonders at the timing of Gideon's attempt to overthrow King Noah in the first place. Was the feast of tabernacles chosen for the revolt, in order to enthrone a righteous man as the Lord's representative on earth?<sup>14</sup> We are reminded of Hugh Nibley's study of the slaying of the Egyptian king at the *hb sd* festival.<sup>15</sup> Though Gideon was unsuccessful in his attempt, it was to this noted warrior that the slayers of King Noah reported their own success.

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<sup>13</sup> Here, too, we find the Benjaminite men stealing dancing girls as wives after a great battle has been waged. In the case of the Bible story, we are specifically told that it took place in Shiloh (where the Tabernacle was located) at feast-time. The name Shiloh bears a superficial resemblance to Shemlon, the place where the Lamanite women were captured.

<sup>14</sup> The text, even before mentioning Limhi's appointment as king, takes pains to mention Limhi's awareness of his father's iniquity and the fact that he deserved to die—though Limhi wanted to save him.

<sup>15</sup> Hugh Nibley, "A New Look at the Pearl of Great Price", *Improvement Era*, June-August 1969.



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As an afterthought, it would be well to note a possible reason for which Israelite girls used to dance before the tabernacle in ancient times. In Canaan, the coming of the rains in the fall symbolized the marriage union between the sky-god Baal and his earth-goddess wife Anat. Impregnated by these rains, she produced vegetation in the early spring. Hence, the fall was a time of the *hieros gamos* or sacred marriage.<sup>16</sup> The feast of tabernacles would have been an ideal time for marriage for the Israelites as well, both from a symbolic and a practical point-of-view. With the young men out to war during the dry summer months, this was the first opportunity to marry.

Sexual abstinence during wartime is a common practice in many societies throughout the world. Typically, while warriors or hunters are away from the village on an expedition, neither they nor their kinsfolk at home engage in sexual relations.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> I.e., during the summer months, when Baal was not sexually active, men were at war and away from their wives. Rape of captive women would not have had the same meaning in the ancient Near East as intercourse with one's own wife.

<sup>17</sup> The Toaripi or Motumotu tribe of southeastern New Guinea not only enjoins men to abstain from sex from the night before a hunting, fishing or war expedition, but also requires that all who remain behind in the village must so abstain while the men are away. A Toaripi man who has slain another, whether in battle or in anger, is considered impure and must live apart from his wife until the following new moon. The Creek and related Amerind tribes required warriors to refrain from sex for three days and nights before and after a military expedition. The Melanesians of New Britain believe that if a man has sex in wartime he will be killed or wounded. The Kiwi Papuans of British New Guinea also believe that sex prior to battle will cause a man's death. Men preparing for war avoid speaking to women; they sit together in the men's house and refuse to eat food prepared by married women. The Ba-Pedi and the Ba-Thonga tribes of South Africa believe that if men at war or even those who stay behind engage in sex, thorns will grow on the ground traversed by the warriors. In a number of societies, sexual continence is required of returning warriors if they have slain an enemy. The period of abstinence ranges from several days for some Dyak tribes (when enemy heads were taken), to a week for the inhabitants of Logea Island on the southeastern end of New Guinea (where the warriors were shut up), to ten days for warriors living in the Washington group of

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This situation is reflected in the Biblical story of King David. "At the time when kings go forth to battle,"<sup>18</sup> David remained behind at Jerusalem, and got into trouble by committing adultery with the wife of one of his officers. Trying to cover up her illegitimate pregnancy, David called for Uriah to return home and then invited him to spend the night with his wife Bath-Sheba. Uriah refused, on the grounds that his comrades were engaged in battle in the field (2 Samuel 11).

### *CONCLUSION*

In summary, then, it is suggested that the "ceremony" of Mosiah 19:23-24 is one of purification associated with the onset of the fall festivals of the month of Tishre, at which time citizen-soldiers in the ancient Near East returned home to engage in the fall harvest. Seen in this light, it is further evidence that the Nephites and Lamanites continued to observe Old World traditions which are reflected in the law of Moses.

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the Marquesas Islands (who were considered taboo during that period). This may be the idea behind the Old Testament law which exempts a newly-married man from military service for a full year (Deuteronomy 24:5).

<sup>18</sup> Identified in 2 Samuel 11:1 as "after the year was expired," hence after the beginning of the year which, under the law of Moses, took place in the month of Abib or Nisan (March/April).