Book of Mormon Central

On the Right or Left: Benjamin and the Scapegoat

28

ON THE RIGHT OR LEFT: BENJAMIN AND THE SCAPEGOAT

"Ye shall be called the children of Christ . . .
and there is no other head whereby ye can
be made free." (Mosiah 5:7–8)

Over the years, scholars have found in King Benjamin's speech much that is at home in the ancient Israelite autumn festivals surrounding the Day of Atonement.[1] An essential part of that day was the scapegoat ritual.

As prescribed in Leviticus 16, two goats were set before the high priest. From an urn, he drew two lots to determine which goat was to be declared "for the Lord" and which "for Azazel," a term which most likely referred to a desert-dwelling demon.[2] The high priest then placed the lots on the heads of the goats. According to rabbinic writings, if the lot "for the Lord" came up in the priest's left hand, he was permitted to place that lot on the goat on the right so that the Lord's goat would always be on the right hand while Azazel's would be on the left.[3] The goat for the Lord was then sacrificed and its blood was used to purge the temple. The high priest transferred Israel's sins to the other goat, and it was then taken out into the desert.

Such factors have prompted further examination of Mosiah 5:7–12. In these verses, Benjamin speaks in terms of a dichotomy that is similar to the paradigm of the two goats. He gives his people a name (see 5:7–8), for they, like

the goats, must either be "called by the name of Christ" (for the Lord) and "be found at the right hand of God" (5:9), or they "must be called by some other name" and find themselves "on the left hand of God" (5:10, 12).

Verse 8 contains an unusual mention of a "head" that makes one free: "And there is no other head whereby ye can be made free." When Benjamin spoke the word "head," one might imagine that he looked to his right at the head of the sacrificial animal that symbolized Christ and whose blood would be used in purifying the people.

In the course of his speech Benjamin used the term "evil spirit(s)" four times (Mosiah 2:32, 37; 3:6; 4:14). Perhaps this "evil spirit" is to be connected with Azazel. Indeed, three of these references are associated with sins of rebellion and quarreling, the types of sins the scapegoat carried away to Azazel. In the third (see Mosiah 3:6), Benjamin prophesied that evil spirits will be "cast out" by Jesus, perhaps an event that was foreshadowed by the scapegoat being cast out by the high priest.

Just as the goat carrying the sins of Israel was driven away, so any individual who might break the covenant was, in Benjamin's words, to be "consigned to an awful . . . state of misery and endless torment" (Mosiah 3:25), and lost in a "worthless and fallen state" of "nothingness" (Mosiah 4:5). Such a transgressor would ultimately be driven away and cast out (see Mosiah 5:10–14). The dramatic banishment of the goat of Azazel into an empty wilderness must have vividly portrayed the fallen and miserable fate of such a transgressor.

Had Benjamin said that the sinner would be driven out like a goat instead of an ass, these connections with the Day of Atonement would appear even stronger. But it was not critical among Israel's neighbors in the ancient Near East what animal was used in such rituals.[4]

Thus, elements in Benjamin's address seem to presuppose the scapegoat ritual. Through such a ceremony, Benjamin's people would have understood that anyone who received the name of the Lord was consecrated to be sacrificed to God, giving emphatic meaning to their own irrevocable covenant to serve God "with all [their] *whole souls*" (Mosiah 2:21) and to be diligent "even unto the *end* of [their] life" (Mosiah 4:6).

Research by Terrence L. Szink and John W. Welch, originally published as a FARMS Update in Insights *(January 1995): 2.*

NOTES

1. See John A. Tvedtnes, "King Benjamin and the Feast of Tabernacles," in *By Study and Also by Faith,* ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1990), 2:197–221; Terrence L. Szink and John W. Welch, "King Benjamin's Speech in the Context of Ancient Israelite Festivals," in *King Benjamin's Speech: "That Ye May Learn Wisdom,"* ed. John W. Welch and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1998), 147–223; 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, 1994), 352–58.

2. Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 1020–21; see Hayim Tawil, "ʿAzazel the Prince of the Steppe: A Comparative Study," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 92 (1980): 43–59.

3. See Babylonian Talmud, *Yoma* 40b.

4. See Delbert R. Hillers, *Covenant: The History of a Biblical Idea* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1969), 40–41.