

## General Comments on the Book of Mosiah

Mormon takes over as author/editor of the Nephite history and, as such, the reader should be asking themselves what his intentions are in presenting us with the text. This is not history, it is a theological treatise intended for the future remnants of the Lehites. Just like Nephi, et al., wrote selective records focusing on religion, so is Mormon.

When looking at the Book of Mosiah, we see two parallel accounts of two different groups. Mormon's intent is to contrast these two groups with the theological difference being the acceptance or rejection of Messianism.

<u>Main body at Zarahemla</u>	<u>Small group at land of Nephi</u>
Mosiah (good)	Zeniff (good)
Benjamin (good)	Noah (bad)
Mosiah (good)	Limhi (good)
Messianism promoted at Sukkot by good king and accepted	Messianism promoted at Shavuot by prophet and rejected by bad king
Win wars with Lamanites Prosper	Lose wars with Lamanites Suffering
Mosiah rejects monarchy because of sons	Limhi rejects monarchy because of father

Mormon contrasts the two groups in the light of the middle kings and whether the people accept or reject the doctrine of Christ. Benjamin is a good selfless king who does not tax his people or exploit his power, where Noah is a selfish king who does tax and exploit his people. The people prosper or suffer under their king's rule, depending on which king they are under.

Mormon then uses this to set up king Mosiah's rejection of monarchy in ch. 29, where judges are put into the place with checks and balances to keep them in line, to protect the people from one bad king dragging them all down. In this case, the bad kings would be his sons, whom are doing well at the time of the decision, but were formerly a real danger to the Nephites (cf. 27:8-9, 28:4, 29:9). The twenty-four plates of Ether likely influenced the decision as well (cf. 28:17-18, 29:7).

The book of Mosiah is Mormon's theological masterwork. Assuming WofM 1:3 suggests he wrote in reverse chronological order, the book of Mosiah would have been his last major work. He would have had years of experience before writing this book, and, perhaps upon finding the small plates of Nephi, he had more time to compose the present text. Regardless, the text is exceptionally well crafted.

From an apologetic standpoint, the book of Mosiah argues persuasively Smith could not write this book out of his imagination. The text is remarkably complex in the number of different groups moving throughout, and the interplay between them, which frequently runs counter to seemingly obvious conclusions and defies easy explanation. The theology is robust and brilliantly presented in two contrasting examples seated against classic OT covenant theology. The allusions to the Regalim are subtle, but undeniable. Noah's priest's Isaiah-based argument against Abinidi's messianism and Abinidi's mastery of the Law of Moses and ability to counter using Isaiah are similarly beyond Smith's capacity. The book then ends in a reversal of the OT Judges-Samuel-Kings pattern of rejecting judges in favor of kings, by rejecting kings in favor of judges. Had Smith written this from his own imagination it would have been linear and predictable, with straightforward, obvious theology. The book of Mosiah is anything but.

## General Comments on Mosiah 1-5

The effect of the contents on chapter 3 on the audience is stunning. The force of what Benjamin says is overwhelming to them. But, to us, the speech is not overwhelming. Why?

The people are overwhelmed by a heavy dose of Messianism (cf. 3:2-22) followed up by a strongly worded warning of eternal damnation (cf. 3:23-27). We have to assume the general audience needed both, as king Benjamin later says that this is the reaction he wanted (cf. 5:6).

Reviewing details of events preceding those of the current text provides context:

- The Nephites come into contact with the Mulekites in the land of Zarahemla. The Mulekites have no written record of the Law and have slid into general apostasy and secularism, cf. Omni 1:14-17.

- The Mulekites substantially outnumber the Nephites, cf. Mosiah 25:2. The Nephite remnant is a minority immigrant group.

- Nephites are familiar with Messianic doctrine and concepts because they have been consistently taught it by Lehi, Nephi, Jacob, etc. The Mulekites had no contact with the Nephites during this time.

- After the two groups come into contact there were false Christs and false prophets among them, cf. Omni 1:15-16.

- Less than one natural lifetime (~30-60 yrs) has passed since the Nephite remnant and the Mulekites joined, so some of the generation of the Mulekites who were apostate and secularized are probably still present.

- Benjamin's speech (i.e., the words of the Lord delivered by the angel) focuses squarely on Messianism, the stiff-neckedness of those who observe the Law without accepting its Messianic implications, and the condemnation of the stiff-necked.

From these things general conclusions can be drawn about what is happening with the people Benjamin is addressing. It is clear at the beginning that when the Nephites first arrived in

Zarahemla they would have formed a core of faithful worshipers, but were among a larger population that was largely secularized.

The Mulekites were apparently very interested in the Law of Moses (cf. Omni 1:14) and apparently embraced it again upon obtaining a record of the Law, but were either apathetic, ambivalent, or opposed to the Messianic implications of the Law. Perhaps even the Nephites were being persuaded into apathy by the Mulekite majority.

Thus, Benjamin receives his mission from the angel to set them on the course of Messianism again, and he does so with powerful consequences. Note the people's confession in Mosiah 4:2, which is king Benjamin's desired effect. As it is, then prior to this they were not believing these things.

Perhaps some mitigating factors were the Mulekite's Jewish roots, so they were more inclined to observe the Jewish record than the Nephite record. Another might have been the false Christs and false prophets. The false Christs may have soured the people on the whole idea of Messianism.

The audience's reaction, the theme of the message, and the few historical facts available in the text all suggest the population was drifting away from Messianism in specific and perhaps religion in general.

This might also account for why Benjamin had to formally announce a big change in monarchy in order to get the people to come up to the Temple when they should have been there anyway for Yom Kippur and/or Sukkot. If the people were growing casual about the Law of Moses, then they would have had to of had some other reason to go to the Temple. So perhaps Benjamin wisely uses the setting of change in monarchy (i.e., new name of political ruler) to get the people to listen to a religious lecture as well (i.e., new name of spiritual ruler).

## **The Semitic Nature of King Benjamin's Farewell Speech**

The text of Mosiah 1-5 contains rhetoric and imagery that is eminently Semitic. The overall context is that of one of the three pilgrimage feasts of ingathering prescribed by the Law of Moses (Exod. 23:14-17, Exod. 34:18-23, Deut. 16), the Regalim, very likely the feast of Tabernacle, or Sukkot (Lev. 23). For more context, see:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Three\\_Pilgrimage\\_Festivals](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Three_Pilgrimage_Festivals)

<https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/749?lang=bi>

Mos. 1:10, 1:18, 2:1, "the people gathered themselves together throughout all the land that they might go up to the temple", Benjamin times his farewell speech to a temple ingathering, bringing in the religious faithful as well as those who are secularized, because he is announcing his son as a new king.

Mos. 2:3, "the firstlings of their flocks", all of the Regalim required temple sacrifice, cf. Num. 29 for Tabernacles/Sukkot specifically.

Mos. 2:4, "to keep the commandments of God, that thereby they might rejoice", Israelites are required by the Law of Moses to participate in the Regalim so they might remember their history and rejoice in the blessing the Lord has given them:

40 And ye shall take you on the first day the boughs of goodly trees, branches of palm trees, and the boughs of thick trees, and willows of the brook; and ye shall rejoice before the Lord your God seven days.

41 And ye shall keep it a feast unto the Lord seven days in the year. It shall be a statute for ever in your generations: ye shall celebrate it in the seventh month.

42 Ye shall dwell in booths seven days; all that are Israelites born shall dwell in booths:

43 That your generations may know that I made the children of Israel to dwell in booths, when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God. (Lev. 23)

Sukkot is an autumn harvest feast where the people give thanks to the Lord for a bounteous harvest. This is what the American tradition of Thanksgiving is patterned after. The Regalim are all eight days long, which explains why King Benjamin had time to build a tower, have his written text distributed among the large crowd and then send for an answer from them, and then respond to that answer. This was not a single day event.

Rejoicing is a prominent theme of King Benjamin's speech (cf. 2:4, 2:20, 3:4, 3:13, 4:12, 5:4) and he explicitly draws a parallel between the ancient Exodus from Egypt and the Lehite and Mulekite exodus from Jerusalem in 2:4. In modern and historical Judaism, Sukkot is considered *zeman simchateynu* or the "the season of rejoicing".

Mos. 2:5, "pitched their tents", the Hebrew word "sukkah" can be translated to "tent, booth or tabernacle". During Tabernacles, people dwell in "sukkot", cf Lev. 23:42.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sukkah>

Mos. 2:20, The text of this verse closely parallels the Jewish prayer known as the Shehecheyanu, an ancient Jewish prayer used on special occasions and holy days, like the Regalim, and specifically the blessing on the sukkah:

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shehecheyanu#Text>

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sukkah#Blessing>

Mos. 2:37, "he dwelleth not in unholy temples", The ancient biblical Temples were all dedicated during during the feast of Tabernacles (cf. 1 Kings. 8, Neh. 8, 2 Macc. 10). King Benjamin is connecting the theme of Temple dedication to the theme of personal dedication. He wants his audience to think about their mortal bodies as temporary tabernacles, or sukkah, and dedicate them to the Lord, the way the Messiah will dedicate his mortal body to their salvation in 3:5.

Mos. 4:19-20, King Benjamin uses the context of the feast of Tabernacles, a feast of harvest thanksgiving, to remind the audience that they depend on the Lord for everything, not just physical things, but spiritual things.

Mos. 4:20, "poured out his Spirit upon you, and has caused that your hearts should be filled with joy", pouring out water on the altar was part of the Sukkot ritual. King Benjamin is drawing on this imagery to convey the spiritual message associated with it.

[The rituals of] the lulav and the aravah are for six or seven [days]; The Hallel and the rejoicing are for eight [days]; The sukkah and the water libation are for seven [days]; The flute is for five or six [days].  
([https://www.sefaria.org/Mishnah\\_Sukkah.4.1?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Mishnah_Sukkah.4.1?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en))

How was the water libation [performed]? A golden flask holding three logs was filled from the Shiloah. When they arrived at the water gate, they sounded a teki'ah [long blast], a teru'ah [a staccato note] and again a teki'ah. [The priest then] went up the ascent [of the altar] and turned to his left where there were two silver bowls. Rabbi Judah says: they were of plaster [but they looked silver] because their surfaces were darkened from the wine. They had each a hole like a slender snout, one being wide and the other narrow so that both emptied at the same time. The one on the west was for water and the one on the east for wine. If he poured the flask of water into the bowl for wine, or that of wine into that for water, he has fulfilled his obligation.

([https://www.sefaria.org/Mishnah\\_Sukkah.4.9?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Mishnah_Sukkah.4.9?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en))

For a lengthy description, see:

[https://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/1971019/jewish/The-Joyous-Water-Drawing-Ceremony.htm](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/1971019/jewish/The-Joyous-Water-Drawing-Ceremony.htm)

Mos. 4:22, King Benjamin is using an ancient Semitic style of logical argument called the "Kal V'khomer", or "simple and complex", see the following:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talmudical\\_hermeneutics#Detailed\\_rules](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talmudical_hermeneutics#Detailed_rules)

5:10,12, These verses contain word play based on the right or

left hand. The name Benjamin (Hebr:BinYamin) means "son of the right hand." The audience would understand the king's name and example is connected to this statement. It is possible King Benjamin was using this as a pun, but it is more likely he is using his own example, the subject of ch. 2, to say that if you are not like him then you will be rejected as someone on the left hand of the Lord.



## Comments on Mosiah 1

As discussed in the comments on WofM, Mormon had abridged the Nephite history from Lehi through to king Mosiah, but that record is presently unavailable to us. Thus, with the Book of Mosiah we start that portion of the Nephite history abridged by Mormon. One thing that mark's Mormon's abridgement is editorial comment inserted as he goes. He doesn't simply abridge the larger plates. His inclusions are selective and he editorializes as he goes.

As such is the case, we as readers should always take into account what Mormon's underlying intentions are as he edits and editorializes. Why does he include this? Why does he editorialize that? Is he including it for continuity, or does he have some implicit message which otherwise goes unsaid?

Case and point would be this chapter. Herein, Mormon selects two quotations from king Benjamin. One quotation reflects on Benjamin the father (v. 3-7), and the second reflects on Benjamin the king (v. 10-14). We know some of the secular history from Mormon's brief synopsis in WofM 1:12-18. Mormon's attention now turns to the religious. Note both quotes deal with religious matters while commenting on what kind of man Benjamin was. Clearly, Mormon didn't just pick the first two quotes he ran into, he picked the two that best conveyed what he wanted to get across to the reader. And what is that? His intention probably was to hold up Benjamin as an ideal father and king, one under whom wickedness was banished and righteousness established. Isn't this the kind of man all men should be?

He also presents Benjamin as the ideal prophet-king. If all political leaders were righteous men filled with the Spirit, what kind of an impact would that have on society? The idealized kings of Israel were those of David and Solomon, both of whom were prophet-kings as well.

**1 AND now there was no more contention in all the land of Zarahemla, among all the people who belonged to king Benjamin, so that king Benjamin had continual peace all the remainder of his days.**

v1 This verse closes Mormon's historical segue from the end of the WofM. The contention among the Nephites (cf. WofM 1:12-16) ends, resulting in peace among them for the rest of Benjamin's reign. Mormon's comment contrasts the rather bad situation in

the early part of his reign, with the very good conditions at the end of his reign.

"in all the land of Zarahemla", note WofM 1:14 indicates the Nephites regain all of the lands of their inheritance from the Lamanites. However, they do not return to the ancestral capital in the land of Nephi. They stay put at Zarahemla. This means the Temple they gathered in to for Benjamin's speech was not the same Temple Nephi built and Jacob spoke in. Someone must have built a new temple, but we are left uninformed if it was before or after the Nephite remnant joined with the Mulekites.

2 And it came to pass that he had three sons; and he called their names Mosiah, and Helorum, and Helaman. And he caused that they should be taught in all the language of his fathers, that thereby they might become men of understanding; and that they might know concerning the prophecies which had been spoken by the mouths of their fathers, which were delivered them by the hand of the Lord. 3 And he also taught them concerning the records which were engraven on the plates of brass, saying: My sons, I would that ye should remember that were it not for these plates, which contain these records and these commandments, we must have suffered in ignorance, even at this present time, not knowing the mysteries of God. 4 For it were not possible that our father, Lehi, could have remembered all these things, to have taught them to his children, except it were for the help of these plates; for he having been taught in the language of the Egyptians therefore he could read these engravings, and teach them to his children, that thereby they could teach them to their children, and so fulfilling the commandments of God, even down to this present time.

5 I say unto you, my sons, were it not for these things, which have been kept and preserved by the hand of God, that we might read and understand of his mysteries, and have his commandments always before our eyes, that even our fathers would have dwindled in unbelief, and we should have been like unto our brethren, the Lamanites, who know nothing concerning these things, or even do not believe them when they are taught them, because of the traditions of their fathers, which are not correct.

6 O my sons, I would that ye should remember that these sayings are true, and also that these records are true. And behold, also the plates of Nephi, which contain the records and the sayings of our fathers from the time they left Jerusalem until now, and they are true; and we can know of their surety because we have them before our eyes.

7 And now, my sons, I would that ye should remember to

search them diligently, that ye may profit thereby; and I would that ye should keep the commandments of God, that ye may prosper in the land according to the promises which the Lord made unto our fathers. 8 And many more things did king Benjamin teach his sons, which are not written in this book.

v2-8 Mormon now turns his attention to Benjamin's sons and their education. In Gen. 18:19 the Lord praises Abraham because He knows he will teach his children the Lord's ways. In Deut. 4:9 Moses commands the Israelites to teach the Law to their children, lest they forget. Here, we have the example of Benjamin teaching his three sons the language of the plates so they may study the Law and Prophets firsthand (v. 2). He points out to them that if it were not for the plates they would have been ignorant of the Lord's word (v. 3) because it would have been impossible for Lehi to remember it all to teach and hand down (v. 4). Thus they would not have had access to the Lord's teachings, and they would have ended up like the Lamanites (v. 5). He tells his sons the records are true, and they can know for themselves they are because they can study them firsthand (v. 6). He then exhorts them to search the plates diligently so they keep the commandments and therefore prosper in the land according to the Lord's covenants (v. 7). Benjamin also taught them a great deal more, its just not documented here (v. 8).

v2 "Mosiah", Benjamin named this son, presumably the oldest given the order of names give, after his own father, cf. Omni 1:12.

v4 "language of the Egyptians", the brass plates, referenced in v. 3, are written in this "reformed Egyptian" script (cf. Mormon 9:32), hence the need for Lehi to familiar with the language of the Egyptians. This is apparently why the writing on the various plates of Nephi is in reformed Egyptian.

v5 "mysteries", i.e., the revelations of God per v. 3, also cp. D&C 42:61. They are "mysteries" to men because man cannot perceive them on their own.

"like unto our brethren, the Lamanites", The example of being ignorant of the Law and Prophets without the plates is also manifested by the Mulekites as well (cf. Omni 1:17). However, Benjamin doesn't use them as an example, he chooses the Lamanites instead. Why? I would assume because their reaction to separation from the records is more extreme. In v. 5

Benjamin characterizes the Lamanites as presently being ignorant of the word of the Lord, and rejecting it even if it is taught to them. However, the Mulekites are excited when they discover the Nephites have the Law of Moses (cf. Omni 1:14), and they readily return to it. Thus, in using the Lamanites Benjamin rhetorically paints a more polarized picture of the potential consequences of not keeping up on the Law.

9 And it came to pass that after king Benjamin had made an end of teaching his sons, that he waxed old, and he saw that he must very soon go the way of all the earth; therefore, he thought it expedient that he should confer the kingdom upon one of his sons. 10 Therefore, he had Mosiah brought before him; and these are the words which he spake unto him, saying: My son, I would that ye should make a proclamation throughout all this land among all this people, or the people of Zarahemla, and the people of Mosiah who dwell in the land, that thereby they may be gathered together; for on the morrow I shall proclaim unto this my people out of mine own mouth that thou art a king and a ruler over this people, whom the Lord our God hath given us. 11 And moreover, I shall give this people a name, that thereby they may be distinguished above all the people which the Lord God hath brought out of the land of Jerusalem; and this I do because they have been a diligent people in keeping the commandments of the Lord.

12 And I give unto them a name that never shall be blotted out, except it be through transgression. 13 Yea, and moreover I say unto you, that if this highly favored people of the Lord should fall into transgression, and become a wicked and an adulterous people, that the Lord will deliver them up, that thereby they become weak like unto their brethren; and he will no more preserve them by his matchless and marvelous power, as he has hitherto preserved our fathers. 14 For I say unto you, that if he had not extended his arm in the preservation of our fathers they must have fallen into the hands of the Lamanites, and become victims to their hatred.

15 And it came to pass that after king Benjamin had made an end of these sayings to his son, that he gave him charge concerning all the affairs of the kingdom. 16 And moreover, he also gave him charge concerning the records which were engraven on the plates of brass; and also the plates of Nephi; and also, the sword of Laban, and the ball or director, which led our fathers through the wilderness, which was prepared by the hand of the Lord that thereby they might be led, every one according to the heed and diligence which they gave unto him. 17 Therefore, as they were unfaithful they did not prosper nor progress in their journey, but were driven back, and incurred the displeasure of God upon them; and therefore they were smitten with famine and sore afflictions, to stir them up in

## remembrance of their duty.

v9-17 The section of text contains a quotation of Benjamin to his son Mosiah, presumably the oldest. Benjamin's motive in the quote is twofold, first he informs Mosiah he will be revealing two names to the people, Mosiah as their political ruler (v. 10) and their spiritual ruler (v. 11), both of which have been provided to the people by the Lord.

The second motive is to make it clear to Mosiah it is in fact the Lord who is king and deliverer of the people and not himself or Mosiah (v. 13-14). Note in WofM 1:13 Benjamin personally participated in combat with the Lamanites. The people were surely impressed by something like this, a king in combat leading them to a miraculous victory over the Lamanites. So much so that they are driven entirely from all of the Nephite lands. This was certainly an impressive military accomplishment. Yet, Benjamin completely defers to the Lord. Benjamin revisits this theme in his public address in 2:10-11. In doing so he is telling Mosiah, in front of the people, who has the real authority.

Benjamin is approaching the end of his mortal life, so he wants an orderly transfer of kingship (ct. Hela. 1:3). He decides to pick one of his sons (v. 9). Benjamin apparently receives either a revelation or some kind of confirmation that Mosiah should be king given the last line of v. 10. According to 2:30 the "Lord God...commanded me...Mosiah is a king and a ruler over you". So, he has Mosiah brought before him and he tells him what is about to happen. He tells Mosiah to have everyone to gather in the next day so he will announce to them who their new king is (v. 10) as well as give them a new name, which we later find out is the name of their spiritual leader (cf. 5:8), because of their righteousness (v. 11).

This new name will not blotted out from them unless they turn wicked (v. 12). For if they turn wicked, then the Lord will abandon them and no longer preserve them (v. 13). Because, had He not preserved them, they would have been destroyed by the Lamanites (v. 19, cp. WofM 1:13-14).

Benjamin charges his son concerning how the kingdom ought to be administered (v. 15). He also turns over the plates, the sword of Laban, and the Liahona to Mosiah (v. 16), and Mormon editorializes on what the Liahona represents spiritually (v. 17).

v9 "he must very soon go the way of all the earth", he ended up dying about 3 years later, cf. 6:5.

v10 The people summoned are only those in the land of Zarahemla. As the time restriction is that of being addressed "on the morrow" it affords no time for others outside of Zarahemla's immediate vicinity to be notified and then travel.

v16 Notice what Benjamin doesn't turn over to Mosiah: the Urim and Thummim. While Benjamin is stepping down as king, he appears to remain the spiritual leader of the people until his death, some 3 years later.

The division of church and state appears to have been blurred with king Benjamin. However, when Mosiah later takes over he appoints Alma to be the religious leader of the people (cf. 26:8) and subsequently turns over the Urim and Thummim and plates to Alma Jr. (cf. 28:20). One would assume from this Mosiah obtained the Urim and Thummim at Benjamin's death and retained them up until he gave them to Alma Jr. as is plain from 28:13 he made use of them in the mean time. He then establishes the system of judges (cf. 29:11), so that effectively separates church and state again.

v16-17 The latter half of v. 16 and v. 17 might be a quotation or summary of what Benjamin said to Mosiah concerning the Liahona. But, it seems more likely that Mormon is editorializing on the spiritual significance of the Liahona as he documents the transfer, given Mormon stops quoting Benjamin at the start of v. 15.

Whoever is speaking, it is unfortunate they didn't editorialize on the spiritual significance of the sword of Laban as well. Or, perhaps the lack of editorializing on it indicates there really wasn't any, and it was just a socio-political symbol of their Israelite-Nephite history.

**18 And now, it came to pass that Mosiah went and did as his father had commanded him, and proclaimed unto all the people who were in the land of Zarahemla that thereby they might gather themselves together, to go up to the temple to hear the words which his father should speak unto them.**

v18 After Benjamin's commands to his son Mosiah, Mosiah goes out and tells the people to gather up to the Temple to hear what the king has to say. As the gathering likely coincided with one of the three Biblically instituted ingathering feasts, Mosiah's

task was likely one of reinforcement of the necessity of participating something already known about.

Copyright © 2020 by S. Kurt Neumiller <kurtn@cybcon.com>. All rights reserved. No part of this text may be reproduced in any form or by any means for commercial gain without the express written consent of the author. Digital or printed copies may be freely made and distributed for personal and public non-commercial use.