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The ancient temple and its ritual

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17. “The temple and its ritual are enshrouded in secrecy. This secrecy relates to the sacredness of the temple precinct and the strict division in ancient times between sacred and profane space”¹¹²

A key to that secrecy is the word *mysterion*¹¹³

We have already discussed the Book of Mormon's linguistic sacred and profane spaces, and that, even though the message of the sacred language is “enshrouded in secrecy,” the prophets of the Book of Mormon frequently teach us about the importance of knowing the mysteries of Godliness. In the Book of Mormon that word is emphasized in its first verse where Nephi includes his “great knowledge of the goodness and the mysteries of God” among his qualifications for writing. (1 Nephi 1: 1)

After that, not only Nephi, but many other prophets of the

112Lundquist, “Common Temple Ideology,” 59. See Nibley, “On the Sacred and the Symbolic.” *In Temples of the Ancient World*; Nibley, “Return to the Temple,” *Temple and Cosmos*, 61-66; Packer, “Chapter 2, These Things Are Sacred,” *The Holy Temple* 25-37.

113The distinguished Biblical scholar, Raymond E. Brown, has shown that the meaning of the Greek word *mysterion* (translated “mystery” in the English versions of the New Testament) and of the Hebrew word *sode* (translated “secret” in the English versions of the Old Testament) is essentially the same. *Mysterion* is more specific since it refers to secrets disclosed during initiation into sacred religious rites, [Strong 3466: “the idea of silence imposed by initiation into religious rites”] while *sode* is more general in that it refers to the deliberations (or decisions) of either a religious or a secular council. Brown observes that the New Testament *mysterion* refers to the Council in Heaven. He shows that in the Old Testament *sode* sometimes refers to that Council or its decisions (as in Amos 3:7), though it is sometimes used to describe any gathering, whether legal, or illegal and conspiratorial. (see Raymond E. Brown, *The Semitic Background of the Term “Mystery” in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968), 2-6).

Understanding these words casts a fascinating light on the manner in which the Book of Mormon was translated. The Nephites most likely spoke Hebrew or some other Semitic language, not Greek, so the Greek word *mysterion* was probably not a part of their language, whereas the Hebrew word *sode* (with its English equivalents) was likely familiar to the ancient Book of Mormon peoples. In the Book of Mormon, as in the Bible, *sode* might refer to a Council in Heaven *sode* experience, or a ceremony related to the temple drama representing a *sode* experience, or even the secret decisions of conspirators. In this, the English translation of the Book of Mormon is very precise. When the underlying word *sode* used in the negative sense it is translated as “secret,” as in “secret combinations.” However, when the underlying word *sode* is used in the positive sense—indicating a temple or temple-like experience—it is always translated as “mystery,” equivalent to the English New Testament translation of the Greek *mysterion*. Thus, Nephi writes of “having had a great knowledge of the goodness and the mysteries of God” (1 Nephi 1:1).

Book of Mormon emphasized the importance of knowing the mysteries and issued repeated invitations to their readers to seek to understand.¹¹⁴

There is a veil that separates the things of this world from the things of God. One of the most important functions of the Holy Ghost is to help us penetrate that veil of misunderstanding and be comfortable on its other side—in a spiritual, emotional, and intellectual place that is different from the profane places where people of this world meet to exchange their wisdom and their prejudices.

Nephi described that veil to his brothers when he explained the meaning of his father’s vision of the tree of life. He taught them about the iron rod, the river, and the struggles we make to overcome the world. He told them that there “was an awful gulf” that separated the wicked from the tree of life, and also from the saints of God. He also mentioned a veil of light (the shechinah¹¹⁵) through which the wicked could not pass. He said:

And I said unto them that our father also saw that the justice of God did also divide the wicked from the righteous; and the brightness thereof was like unto the brightness of a flaming fire, which ascendeth up unto God forever and ever, and hath no end. (1 Nephi 15: 27-30)

Beyond that veil of light are the things kept hidden from the foundation of the world. They have always been hidden; they are hidden now, and always shall be hidden. In the Book of Mormon they are hidden by a linguistic veil that can only be found and penetrated by those who come to the tree with a broken heart and contrite spirit, and who:

1141 Nephi 10: 17-22; Alma 12: 9-11; Alma 40: 3; Mosiah 1: 3-5. See also Alma 37: 4; Alma 26: 22; Mosiah 2: 9; 1 Nephi 2: 16; Jacob 4: 18; Mosiah 2: 9.; 3 Nephi 1-12.

115The Shechinah is the first thing one sees, and sometimes the only thing the prophets mention, when they are brought into the presence of God. It is described many ways, but always as a bright light—sometimes a fire, sometimes a cloud. Examples are Lehi’s report that “there came a pillar of fire and dwelt upon a rock before him” (1 Nephi 1:6); Moses’s experience when “the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush: and he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed.” (Exodus 3:2); The story in Ether where, “the Lord came down and talked with the brother of Jared; and he was in a cloud, and the brother of Jared saw him not” (Ether 2:4); and the Prophet Joseph’s “I saw a pillar of light exactly over my head, above the brightness of the sun, which descended gradually until it fell upon me” (Joseph Smith-History:16).

Joseph’s making a point of describing the Shechinah in connection with his account of the First Vision is another evidence that he was telling the truth. For additional information about the Shechinah see that word in the dictionary at the back of the LDS Bible.

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7 Ask, and it shall be given unto you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you.

8 For every one that asketh, receiveth; and he that seeketh, findeth; and to him that knocketh, it shall be opened. (3 Nephi 14: 7-8)

These are the things that must be known but cannot be taught except by the Holy Ghost.