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Old World Ritual in the New World

Author(s): Hugh Nibley

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Old World Ritual in the New World

In the writer's opinion, this lesson presents the most convincing evidence yet brought forth for the authenticity of the Book of Mormon. Very likely the reader will be far from sharing this view, since the force of the evidence is cumulative and is based on extensive comparative studies which cannot be fully presented here. Still the evidence is so good, and can be so thoroughly tested, that we present it here for the benefit of the reader who wishes to pursue the subject further. Since Gressmann, Jeremias, Mowinckel, and many others began their studies at the start of the century, a vast literature on the subject of the Great Assembly at the New Year and the peculiar and complex rites performed on that occasion has been brought forth. Yet nowhere can one find a fuller description of that institution and its rites than in the Book of Mormon. Since "patternism" (as the awareness of a single universal pattern for all ancient year-rites is now being called) is a discovery of the past thirty years, the fact that the now familiar pattern of ritual turns up in a book first published in 1830 is an extremely stimulating one. For it is plain that Mosiah's account of the Great Year Rite among the Nephites is accurate in every detail, as can be checked by other year-rites throughout the world.

Ancient Society was "Sacral"

Within recent years scholars have become aware as never before of the completely "sacral" nature of ancient society in the Near East. The order of the state, as Kees says of Egypt, as well as of the universe itself, goes back to the time of the gods.¹ State and cult are inseparable in the ancient East, and all things center in a single supreme rite, performed in its completeness only at a particular place, the shrine that stands at the center of the earth, and a

particular time, the New Year's day, when all things are born and the earth is created anew.² Since everyone was required by law to be present at this great event, to do homage to the king and receive his blessing for the new age, the result was a tremendous assembly.

At hundreds of holy shrines, each believed to mark the exact center of the universe and represented as the point at which the four quarters of the earth converged — "the navel of the earth" — one might have seen assembled at the New Year — the moment of creation, the beginning and ending of time — vast concourses of people, each thought to represent the entire human race in the presence of all its ancestors and gods. A visitor to any of these festivals . . . would note that all came to the celebration as pilgrims, often traversing immense distances over pre-historic sacred roads, and dwelt during the festival in booths of green boughs.

What would most command a visitor's attention to the great assembly would be the main event, the now famous ritual year-drama for the glorification of the king. In most versions of the year-drama, the king wages combat with his dark adversary of the underworld, emerging victorious after a temporary defeat from his duel with death, to be acclaimed in a single mighty chorus as the worthy and recognized ruler of the new age.

The New Year was the birthday of the human race and its rites dramatized the creation of the world; all who would be found in "the Book of Life opened at the creation of the World" must necessarily attend. There were coronation and royal marriage rites, accompanied by a ritual representing the sowing or begetting of the human race; and the whole celebration wound up in a mighty feast in which the king as lord of abundance gave earnest of his capacity to supply his children with all the good things of the earth. The stuff for this feast was supplied by the feasters themselves, for no one came "to worship the King" without bringing his tithes and first fruits.³

Thus we wrote some years ago, citing a dozen well-

documented cases in widely separated parts of the ancient world to show that this identical year-rite took place everywhere. But in more than two hundred separate descriptions of this festival gathered over a number of years we never thought to include one of the most impressive of all – for who would think to turn to the Book of Mormon for such information?

Yet it is there, and very conspicuously so. We have already found abundant evidence in the Book of Mormon for the religious orientation of the believing *minority*; but if the people as a whole took their culture directly from the Old World, as we have so emphatically maintained, then we should also expect the worldly majority to have *their* traditional piety and express it on formal occasions in ritual patterns based on the immemorial usages brought from the old country. And that is exactly what we do find. In the Book of Mormon we have an excellent description of a typical Great Assembly or year-rite as we have briefly described it above. Though everything takes place on a far higher spiritual plane than that implied in most of the Old World ritual texts, still not a single element of the primordial rites is missing, and nothing is added, in the Book of Mormon version. In the Old World itself the rites were celebrated at every level of spirituality, from the gross licentiousness of Rome and Babylon to the grandiose imagery and austere morality of Pindar and some of the old apocalyptic writings. It is the latter tradition that meets us in the national rites of the Nephites.

King Benjamin and the Ways of the Fathers

There was a righteous king among the Nephites named Benjamin, and he was a stickler for tradition. He insisted that his three sons “should be taught in all the language of his fathers” (Mosiah 1:2), just as Nephi had been of old; “and he also taught them concerning the records which were engraven on the plates of brass,” being convinced

that without such a link to the past they “must have suffered in ignorance” (Mosiah 1:3). He cited the case of Lehi, who learned Egyptian and had his children learn it so that they could read the old engravings “that thereby they could teach them to *their* children,” and so on, “even down to this present time” (Mosiah 1:4; italics added). Without these written records, Benjamin observed, his people would be no better off than the Lamanites, who had nothing but the corrupt and incorrect traditions of their fathers to guide them (Mosiah 1:5). It would appear that the grand passion of King Benjamin’s life was the preservation intact of the mysteries and practices of his people as they went back to the beginning, as set forth, for example, in the brass plates (1 Nephi 5:11-16).

When King Benjamin “waxed old, and saw that he must very soon go the way of all the earth, . . . he thought it expedient that he should confer the kingdom upon one of his sons” (Mosiah 1:9). Now the transfer of kingship is the central act of the great rite to which we referred above, no matter where we find it. And it is this rite which is fortunately described by Mosiah in considerable detail.

The “Year Rite” in America

Let us mark the various details descriptive of the rite in the Book of Mormon, numbering them as we go. The first thing King Benjamin did in preparation was to summon his successor, Mosiah, and authorize him (for it is always the new king and never the old king that makes the proclamation) to (1) “make a proclamation throughout all this land among all this people, . . . 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. And moreover, (2) 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 Je-

rusalem" (Mosiah 1:10-11). Then (3) "he gave him charge concerning all the affairs of the kingdom" (Mosiah 1:15) and consigned the three national treasures to his keeping: the plates, the sword of Laban, and the Liahona, with due explanation of their symbolism (Mosiah 1:16-17).⁵

The Order of the Meeting

Obedient to Mosiah's proclamation, (4) "all the people who were in the land of Zarahemla . . . gathered themselves together throughout all the land, that they might go up to the temple to hear the words which king Benjamin should speak unto them" (Mosiah 1:18; 2:1, in which the formula is repeated). There was so great a number, Mosiah explains, (5) "that they did not number them," this neglect of the census being apparently an unusual thing (Mosiah 2:2).⁶ Since these people were observing the law of Moses and their going up to the temple was in the old Jewish manner, (6) "they also took of the firstlings of their flocks, that they might offer sacrifice and burnt offerings according to the law of Moses" (Mosiah 2:3). The "firstlings" mark this as (7) a New Year's offering, and just as the great *Hag* was celebrated after the Exodus in thanksgiving for the deliverance from the Egyptians, so the Nephite festival was (8) to "give thanks to the Lord their God, who had brought them out of the land of Jerusalem, and who had delivered them out of the hands of their enemies" in the New World (Mosiah 2:4).

The multitude (9) pitched their tents round about the temple, "every man according to his family . . . every family being separate one from another" (Mosiah 2:5). (This is the Feast of Tabernacles practice according to the Talmud.) (10) Every tent was erected "with the door thereof towards the temple" (Mosiah 2:6). This, then, was a festival of the "booths." Throughout the ancient world, whether among the Greeks, Romans, Celts, Germans, Slavs, Egyptians, Babylonians, Persians, Indians, Arabs, Hebrews, etc., the

people must spend the time of the great national festival of the New Year living in tents or booths, which everywhere have taken on a ritual significance.⁷

In theory, these people should all have met "within the walls of the temple," but because of the size of the crowd the king had to teach them from the top of (11) a specially erected tower (Mosiah 2:7).⁸ Even so, "they could not all hear his words," which the king accordingly had circulated among them in writing (Mosiah 2:8).⁹

King Benjamin's Address Explains All

This formal discourse begins with (12) a *silentium*, that is, an exhortation to the people to "open your ears that ye may hear, and your hearts that ye may understand, and your minds that the mysteries of God may be unfolded to your view" (Mosiah 2:9).¹⁰ The people were there for (13) a particularly vivid and dramatic form of instruction unfolding to view the mysteries of God. Then Benjamin launches into his discourse with a remarkable discussion of the old institution of divine kingship. (14) Throughout the pagan world the main purpose of the Great Assembly, as has long been recognized, is to hail the king as a god on earth;¹¹ Benjamin is aware of this, and he will have none of it:

I have not commanded you to come up hither that ye should fear me, or that ye should think that I of myself am more than a mortal man. But I am like as yourselves, subject to all manner of infirmities in body and mind; yet I have (15) been chosen by this people, and consecrated by my father, and was suffered by the hand of the Lord that I should be a ruler and a king over this people (Mosiah 2:10-11).

So far he will go in the traditional claim to divine rule, but no farther: he has been elected by acclamation of the people, as the king always must at the Great Assembly,¹²

and the Lord has “suffered” him to be a ruler and a king. In all this part of his speech concerning his own status, Benjamin is plainly aware of the *conventional* claims of kingship, which he is consciously renouncing:

I say unto you that as I have been suffered to spend my days in your service . . . and have not sought gold nor silver nor any manner of riches of you (Mosiah 2:12).

This is a reminder that (16) the king at the Great Assembly everywhere requires all who come into his presence to bring him rich gifts as a sign of submission.¹³ Benjamin leans over backwards to give just the opposite teaching: “Neither have I suffered that ye should be confined in dungeons, nor that ye should make slaves one of another. . . . And even I, myself, have labored with mine own hands that I might serve you, and that ye should not be laden with taxes” (Mosiah 2:13-14). Here again he deliberately and pointedly reverses the conventional role of kings: “and of all these things (17) . . . ye yourselves are witnesses *this day*. . . . I tell you these things that ye may know that I can answer a clear conscience before God *this day* (Mosiah 2:14-15; italics added).

“This day” is the formally appointed time for settling all accounts between the king and the people, as it is for making and concluding all business contracts — not only the New Year, but specifically the Great Assembly of the New Year in the presence of the king is everywhere the proper time to enter and seal covenants, while restating the fundamental principles on which the corporate life of the society depends.¹⁴ Benjamin states these principles with great clarity, “that ye may learn that when ye are in the service of your fellow beings ye are only in the service of your God. Behold, ye have called me your king; and if I, whom ye call your king, do labor to serve you, then ought not ye to labor to serve one another? . . . And, if I . . . merit any

thanks from you, O how you ought to thank your heavenly King!" (Mosiah 2:16-19).

Here King Benjamin tells the people that they are there not to acclaim (18) "the divine king," but rather "your heavenly King, . . . that God who has created you, and has kept and preserved you, and, caused that ye should rejoice, and . . . live in peace one with another— . . . who has created you from the beginning, and is preserving you from day to day, . . . even supporting you from one moment to another" (Mosiah 2:19-21). Fifteen years ago in an article on the Year-Rite, the author described how the king on that occasion would scatter gifts to the people "in a manner to simulate the sowing of the race itself on the day of creation, with all the blessings and omens that rightly accompany such a begetting and amid acclamations that joyfully recognize the divine providence and miraculous power of the giver."¹⁵ These are the very two motifs (we will call them 18 and 19) emphasized by Benjamin in the sentences just quoted. He continues in this vein, reminding his people that they are completely dependent on one source for all the blessings of life and for life itself, that in and of themselves men are entirely without power, "And I, even I, whom ye call your king, am no better than ye yourselves are; for I also am of the dust" (Mosiah 2:25-26).

Then comes (20) the king's farewell, when he declares that he is "about to yield up this mortal frame to its mother earth" (Mosiah 2:26), "to go down to my grave, that I might go down in peace, and my immortal spirit may join the choirs above in singing the praises of a just God" (Mosiah 2:28). "I have caused that ye should assemble yourselves together, that I might declare unto you that I can no longer be your teacher, nor your king" (Mosiah 2:29). Now one of the best-known aspects of the year-drama is the ritual descent of the king to the underworld— he is ritually overcome by death, and then ritually resurrected or (as in the Egyptian *Sed* festival) revived in the person of his son and

successor, while his soul goes to join the blessed ones above.¹⁶ All this, we believe, is clearly indicated in King Benjamin's farewell. The "heavenly choir" (21) is a conspicuous feature of the year-rite, in which choral contests have a very prominent place, these choruses representing the earthly counterpart of "the choirs above."¹⁷

And now comes the main business of the meeting: the succession to the throne. Benjamin introduces his son to the people and promises them that if they "shall keep the commandments of my son, or the commandments of God which shall be delivered unto you by him" (22) *prosperity* and *victory* (23) shall attend them, as it always did when they kept the commandments of the king (Mosiah 2:30-31). In this passage Benjamin shows very plainly how he is shifting from the conventional formulae—"ye have kept my commandments, and also the commandments of my father . . . keep the commandments of my son"—to a humbler restatement and correction: they are really the commandments of God. The people will have prosperity and victory (the two blessings that every ancient king *must* provide if he would keep his office) provided they remember "that ye are eternally indebted to your heavenly Father" and (24) preserve the records and traditions of the fathers (Mosiah 2:34-35). If they do that they will be "blessed, prospered, and preserved" (Mosiah 2:36), "blessed in all things, both temporal and spiritual; and if they hold out faithful to the end they are received into heaven, that thereby they may dwell with God in a state of never-ending happiness. O remember, remember that these things are true" (Mosiah 2:41). Also they should keep "a remembrance of the awful situation of those that have fallen into transgression" (Mosiah 2:40).

After this (25) blissful foretaste of "never-ending happiness" which is always part of the year-rite,¹⁸ King Benjamin proceeds to look into the future, reporting a vision shown him by an angel in a dream (Mosiah 3:1-2). (26)

Divination of the future is an essential and unfailing part of the year-rite and royal succession everywhere, especially in the Old World,¹⁹ but again Benjamin gives it a spiritualized turn, and what he prophesies is the earthly mission of the Savior, the signs and wonders shown the ancients, being according to him "types and shadows showed . . . unto them concerning his coming" (Mosiah 3:15). The whole purport of Benjamin's message for the future is (27) that men should be found blameless before the Great King, who will sit in judgment (Mosiah 3:21), exactly as the king sat in judgment at the New Year.²⁰

On the theme of eternity, (28) the closing sound of every royal *acclamatio*,²¹ King Benjamin ended his address, which so overpowered the people that they "had fallen to the earth, for the fear of the Lord had come upon them" (Mosiah 4:1). This was the kind of *proskynesis* at which Benjamin aimed! (28) The *proskynesis* was the falling to the earth (literally, "kissing the ground") in the presence of the king by which all the human race on the day of the coronation demonstrated its submission to divine authority; it was an unfailing part of the Old World New Year's rites as of any royal audience.²² A flat prostration upon the earth was the proper act of obeisance in the presence of the ruler of all the universe. So on this occasion King Benjamin congratulated the people on having "awakened . . . to a sense of your nothingness . . . [and] come to a knowledge of the goodness of God, and his matchless power, . . . and also, the atonement which has been prepared from the foundation of the world, . . . for all mankind, which ever were since the fall of Adam, or who are, or who ever shall be, even unto the end of the world" (Mosiah 4:5-7). The King then discourses on man's nothingness in the presence of "the greatness of God" (Mosiah 4:11), and the great importance of realizing the equality of all men in the presence of each other. This is (29) a very important aspect of the year-rites, which are everywhere supposed to rehearse and

recall the condition of man in the Golden Age before the fall, when all were brothers and equals.²³ Benjamin does not mince matters: "For behold, are we not all beggars? Do we not all depend upon the same Being, even God, for all the substance which we have. . . . And now, if God, who has created you . . . doth grant unto you whatsoever ye ask that is right. . . . O then, how ye ought to impart of the substance that ye have one to another" (Mosiah 4:19-21). The second half of chapter 4 is taken up entirely with the theme of how the whole population can be secured in the necessities of life.

When this speech was finished the people approved it by (30) a great *acclamatio*, when they "all cried with one voice," declaring, when the king put the question to them, that they firmly believed what he had told them, and that they "have great views of that which is to come" (Mosiah 5:1-3).²⁴ Then they took a significant step, declaring, "We are willing (31) to enter into a covenant with our God to do his will, and to be obedient to his commandments in all things . . . all the remainder of our days" (Mosiah 5:5). To which the king replied: "Ye have spoken the words that I desired; and the covenant which ye have made is a righteous covenant" (Mosiah 5:6). Then Benjamin gave them (32) a new name, as he promised his son he would:

And now, because of the covenant which ye have made ye shall be called the children of Christ, his sons, and his daughters; for behold, *this day he hath spiritually begotten you*; . . . therefore I would that ye should take upon you the name of Christ, all you that have entered into the covenant with God that ye should be obedient unto the end of your lives (Mosiah 5:7-8; italics added).

As we noted above, the year-rite everywhere is the ritual begetting of the human race by a divine parent.²⁵

Next Benjamin makes the interesting remark that whoever complies "shall be found at the right hand of God,

for he shall know the name by which he is called" (Mosiah 5:9), all others standing "on the left hand of God" (Mosiah 5:10). At the Great Assembly when all living things must appear in the presence of the King to acclaim him, (32) every individual must be in his proper place, at the right hand or left hand of God.²⁶ "Retain the name," Benjamin continues, "written always in your hearts, that ye are not found on the left hand of God, but that ye hear and know the voice by which ye shall be called, and also the name by which he shall call you" (Mosiah 5:12). "If ye know not the name by which ye are called," he warns them, they shall be "cast out," as a strange animal is cast out of a flock to whose owner it does not belong (Mosiah 5:14). To avoid this, the king "would that . . . (33) the Lord God Omnipotent, may *seal* you his" (Mosiah 5:15; italics added).²⁷

All this talk of naming and sealing was more than figurative speech, for upon finishing the above words "king Benjamin thought it was expedient . . . that he should take the names of all those who had entered into a covenant with God to keep his commandments" (Mosiah 6:1). And (34) the entire nation gladly registered (Mosiah 6:2). Some form of registering in the "Book of Life" is typically found at every yearly assembly.²⁸ Having completed these preliminaries, the king "consecrated his son Mosiah to be a ruler and a king over his people . . . and also had appointed priests to teach the people . . . and (35) to stir them up in remembrance of the oath which they had made."²⁹ Then he (36) "dismissed the multitude, and they returned, every one according to their families, to their own houses" (Mosiah 6:3).

Other Assemblies in the Book of Mormon

At this same time, among the people of Lehi-Nephi, who happened to be in bondage to the Lamanites, "king Limhi sent a proclamation among all his people, that thereby they might gather themselves together to the

temple, to hear the words which he should speak unto them" (Mosiah 7:17). Apparently such assemblies were a general practice and not invented by Benjamin. A year later Benjamin's son Mosiah again "caused that all the people should be gathered together" (Mosiah 25:1) in a national assembly of a political nature in which the people of Nephi and the people of Zarahemla "were gathered together in two bodies" (Mosiah 25:4). One of the tribes attending this meeting "took upon themselves the name of Nephi, that they might be called the children of Nephi and be numbered among those who were called Nephites" (Mosiah 25:12), while at the same time "all the people of Zarahemla were numbered with the Nephites" in a general census and re-shuffling of tribes (Mosiah 25:13). This assembly was organized "in large bodies," and the priest Alma went from one to another speaking to them the same things that Benjamin had taught his people (Mosiah 25:14-16). Then the king "and all his people" asked to enter the covenant of baptism (Mosiah 25:17), and so Alma was able to establish his church among them.

Over a generation later when one Amlici was able to exert great political pressure to get himself elected king, "the people assembled themselves together throughout all the land . . . in separate bodies, having much dispute and wonderful contentions one with another (Alma 2:5). Here the system is abused by an illegal claimant to the throne who insists on holding his own coronation assembly. When a vote was taken, "the voice of the people came against Amlici, that he was not made king" (Alma 2:7), that is, he failed to receive the acclamation that every ancient king had to have, and so his followers "gathered themselves together, and did consecrate Amlici to be their king" (Alma 2:9). It was illegal, yet all recognized that the claim to the kingship had to have an assembly and a consecration.

In another land, King Lamoni was chided by his father: "Why did ye not come to the feast on that great day when

I made feast unto my sons, and unto my people?" (Alma 20:9), from which it is apparent that such royal public feasts were the rule. Over a hundred years later the Nephite governor Lachoneus "sent a proclamation among all the people, that they should gather together their women, and their children, their flocks and their herds, and all their substance, save it were their land, unto one place" (3 Nephi 3:13). The order was quickly and efficiently carried out with incredible speed; the people "did march forth by thousands and by tens of thousands . . . to the place which had been appointed" (3 Nephi 3:22). The people were used to such gatherings. Particularly significant is it that they brought with them "provisions . . . of every kind, that they might subsist for the space of *seven years*" (3 Nephi 4:4; italics added), since, as Dr. Gordon has shown, the purpose of the Great Assembly in ancient Palestine had always been to insure a seven-year food supply, rather than an annual prosperity.³⁰

A New Discovery

Years ago the author of these lessons in the ignorance of youth wrote a "doctoral dissertation" on the religious background and origin of the great Roman games. Starting from the well-known fact that all Roman festivals are but the repetition of a single great central rite, he was able to show that the same great central rite and the same typical national festival was to be discovered among half a dozen widely scattered cultures of the ancient world. He has developed this theme through the years in a number of articles and papers read to yawning societies. And all the time it never occurred to him for a moment that the subject had any bearing whatsoever on the Book of Mormon! Yet there can be no doubt at all that in the Book of Mosiah we have a long and complex description of a typical national assembly in the antique pattern. The king who ordered the rites was steeped in the lore of the Old World king-cult, and as

he takes up each aspect of the rites of the Great Assembly point by point he gives it a new slant, a genuinely religious interpretation, but with all due respect to established forms. Our own suspicion is that this is not a new slant at all, but the genuine and original meaning of a vast and complex ritual cycle whose origin has never been explained—it all goes back in the beginning to the gospel of redemption. Were it not for the remarkable commentaries of Benjamin, we would never have known about the great year-rites among the Nephites where, as in the rest of the world, they were taken for granted.

The knowledge of the year-drama and the Great Assembly has been brought forth piece by piece in the present generation. One by one the thirty-odd details noted in the course of our discussion have been brought to light and associated in a single grandiose institution of the royal assembly or coronation at the New Year, an institution now attested in virtually every country of the ancient world.³¹ There is no better description of the event in any single ritual text than is found in the Book of Mosiah.

Questions

1. What is a “sacral” society?
2. How could King Benjamin have produced Old World ritual practices in detail without knowing about them? How could he have known about them?
3. What indication is there that he did know about them?
4. What in Benjamin’s address indicates that he is commenting on familiar and established practices?
5. What indication is there in the Book of Mormon that the great gathering was not King Benjamin’s original idea?
6. What did Benjamin wish to do by way of reforming the ancient practices?
7. Is the Great Assembly in other parts of the world a spiritual or a purely secular event? Is a king a religious or a civil officer?

8. Where does the idea and practice of a universal assembly survive in the world today?
9. What is a possible origin of the Great Assembly at the New Year found throughout the world?
10. By what method can question 9 be answered?