

King Benjamin's Speech A Masterful Discourse

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Introduction

King Benjamin, addressing his people approximately 156 years prior to the coming of the resurrected Christ to minister among them, placed the name of Christ upon them, declaring:

ye shall be called the children of Christ, his sons and daughters; for behold, this day he hath spiritually begotten you . . . and there is no other name given whereby salvation cometh; therefore I would that ye should take upon you the name of Christ (Mosiah 5:7-8).

Benjamin was the son of Mosiah, the first Nephite king of Zarahemla. Mosiah had begun his reign in the land of Nephi, but was warned of the Lord that he should take as many as would follow and "flee out of the land of Nephi" (Omni 1:12). They were led by the Lord to this land called Zarahemla, which was inhabited by a numerous people under the leadership of Zarahemla. This people, also claiming descent from the Jews of Jerusalem, were delighted to learn that Mosiah possessed the Brass Plates, the record of their forefathers. Without a written record the language of these people of Zarahemla had become corrupted and they did not know God. Mosiah taught them and they made him their king.

As the Book of Mosiah begins, we meet Benjamin at the very end of his reign as King over the land of Zarahemla. The occasion is the crowning of Benjamin's eldest son, Mosiah, to be the new King. Benjamin's reign has been long and prosperous. He has been a good king. He has been both the political and spiritual leader of his people. A wise and able defender of their liberties and a righteous servant of God. He is deeply loved and respected by his people.

His farewell speech and the coronation of his son is both a solemn and festive occasion. The location is the sacred temple. All the inhabitants of the kingdom are invited to attend with their families. They fill the land with their tents, each pitched with its opening facing the temple. A special tower has been erected from which Benjamin will address his people. Written copies of the speech are distributed to the people so that all may receive their King's message. And this is not just a speech. It is a very formal ceremonial event. At scripted points, the people respond in unison to the words of their King.

FARMS has recently publish a **massive volume** (640 pages), making available to the Book of Mormon student the latest insights coming from the scholarly study of this great speech. In that volume Jack Welch lists twelve characteristics of this speech which qualify it for a position of greatness in the annals of the world's oratory. This discussion of King Benjamin's speech will use Jack Welch's twelve characteristic as its outline and will for the most part be an abridgement of his content.

1 - An Embodiment of the Spirit of an Age

"A great oration captures and distills the spirit of an age," claims brother Welch in his opening sentence of this discussion. He then discusses the "spirit" of Benjamin's age. Two diverse cultures had only recently been merged into one. As we look back on Benjamin's time from the perspective of subsequent Nephite history it's obvious that this merging was not seamless. Undoubtedly some of the stresses which were later manifest in apostasy and civil war were apparent in King Benjamin's day. Benjamin's reign had been a time of Nephite prosperity and we would be surprised if pride and class distinction, the common companions of prosperity, were not also a problem in Benjamin's kingdom. Thus, his warnings to beware of contention and to not turn away the beggar may have had more than general application. Perhaps even his council on how to avoid contention in the family and how to live peaceably were directed at specific examples of iniquity seen amongst his people.

There can be no question of the influence of this speech on the hearers and their descendants. Those present, every one, entered into a covenant with God that they would keep his commandments. Years later the words of this speech are used in teaching and exhortation. I believe that the Nephites would have revered its written record as scripture just as we do today. Jack Welch summarized its value to the Nephites:

Benjamin's speech qualifies as a major monument in its own culture and time. Delivered about 124 b.c., it was one of the most important and influential speeches ever given in Nephite history, being treasured by righteous Nephites for years thereafter and having a lasting impact on Nephite civilization.

2 - A Dramatic Occasion and Presentation

At the temple in Zarahemla. From a tower. Part of a sacred festival. The coronation of a new king. A written text. The words of an angel. The circumstances surrounding this speech were very dramatic.

Book of Mormon scholars now believe that King Benjamin's speech was delivered as part of the Nephite commemoration of the Day of Atonement. The tents or *booths* in which families stayed for this occasion suggest the Feast of the Tabernacles. Bible scholars tell us that in the early years of Jewish history these festivals were combined.

3 - The Sincerity of a Farewell Setting

A literary analysts, William S. Kurz's, has published a study of famous farewell speeches from biblical and classical times. His study identified twenty elements that he concludes are characteristics of great farewell speeches. While no address studied contained all of these elements, Kurz found that all of the speeches studied contained a significant percentage. The most was sixteen elements found in Moses' farewell speech (Deuteronomy 31-34).

In addition to this general characterization, Kurz found that there were identifiable differences between biblical farewell addresses and those from the Greco-Roman tradition. Particularly, he noted that a preoccupation with dying, which was a usual characteristic of classical farewell speeches was generally absent in biblical speeches.

Since Benjamin's speech is a farewell speech, it has been only natural that it should be analyzed against Kurz's

20 element criterion. The finding, as given by Jack Welch: "Benjamin's speech possesses as many or more of the characteristics of a traditional ancient Israelite farewell address than any other similar speech on record." Sixteen of Kurz's elements are clearly present. One other is implied. One other is just not appropriate to this speech. And, there is no preoccupation with dying. Here's a quick summary of this analysis:

Speech Characteristics	Presence in Benjamin's Speech
(1) The summons of followers	<i>obviously present</i>
(2) The speaker's own mission or example.	<i>obviously present</i> (Example 2:18)
(3) Innocence and discharge of duty.	<i>obviously present</i> (See 2:27-28)
(4) Impending death.	<i>yes</i> (See 2:26)
(5) Exhortation.	<i>certainly</i> (Example 4:9-10)
(6) Warning and final injunctions.	<i>obviously present</i> (See 4:29-30)
(7) Blessings.	<i>yes</i> (Examples 2:22, 24, 31, 41)
(8) Farewell gestures.	hard to judge
(9) Task for successors.	<i>certainly</i> (Example 2:31)
(10) Theological review of history.	<i>yes</i> (See 2:12-14 & 3:13-14)
(11) Revelation of the future.	<i>yes</i> (Best example 3:1-5)
(12) Promises.	<i>certainly</i> (Examples 2:22, 31; 4:11-16; 5:9, & 15)
(13) Appointment of or reference to successor.	<i>obviously present</i>
(14) Bewailing the loss.	No (but Benjamin was not yet gone)
(15) Future degeneration.	implied (positive & upbeat, but there are warnings)
(16) Covenant renewal and sacrifices.	<i>throughout</i> (Example 5:1-7)
(17) Providing for those who will survive.	<i>yes</i> (4:14-26)
(18) Consolation to the inner circle.	<i>yes</i> (Example 4:4)
(19) Didactic speech.	<i>very</i>
(20) The leaders view of death.	Not a word (and not a general characteristic of biblical speeches)

4 - A Humility That Instills Confidence

A literary authority referenced by Jack Welch describes great oratory as the delivery of "eternal truths uttered with disarming humility." There could hardly be a more appropriate description of Benjamin's speech. Humility is not just an expression for this king. He describes a life of true service to his people, "laboring with mine own hands that I might serve you." Is not this the very essence of humility: condescending to serve those from whom you might by right demand servitude and tribute.

5 - A Voice of Pure Authority

Just as the gracious teachings of the mortal Christ are distinguished by their perfect blend of humility and authority, so the humble expressions of King Benjamin are at the same time powerful statements of truth spoken with that unique authority only manifested by authorized servants of God.

Benjamin *knew* that he was God's servant, God's prophet, God's spokesman. Benjamin was not sharing his philosophical musings. Benjamin *knew* that what he taught was truth. This was *truth* in that absolute sense which the *wisdom* of the world is prone to reject.

6 - A Purposeful and Effective Organization

Jack Welch has pointed out that Benjamin's speech is organized into seven rather distinct and identifiable segments. Most of these segment boundaries are marked by a pause in the presentation. Welch describes these as "scheduled pauses" intended to provide for "ceremonial actions and audience response." This response does seem to be well orchestrated. We read in chapter 4 verse 2 that "they all cried aloud with one voice." And again in chapter 5, verse 2, "they all cried with one voice." We know that in ancient Hebrew ceremonies this was common. The people were given a scripted role to play with (see, for example, Exodus 24:3).

These seven segments are related in a **chiastic structure**, each segment also structured chiasitically. As this discussion of King Benjamin's discourse progresses it will become apparent that an awareness and understanding of this structure is necessary to the full appreciation of the power and meaning of Benjamin's message.

7 - An Elegance of Verbal Detail and Arrangement

Jack Welch rightly states that "Benjamin was a master in the use of impressive expressions and memorable words. His words were carefully chosen and displayed with virtuosity, and this is what makes them memorable." Yet, most of us will fail to recognize more than the tip of this iceberg of verbal elegance. Like an iceberg, much of the literary power of Benjamin's expression is hidden beneath the surface.

An example of this hidden beauty is **Mosiah 5:10-12**. This obviously is a powerful passage stressing the significance of the name of Christ. However, what many of us will miss as we read these meaningful verses is the careful and even artistic structure of Benjamin's words. This passage was the first *chiasmus* found in the Book of Mormon. It serves as an almost perfect example of this ancient form of literary artistry. Six expressions: *name, called, left hand, remember, blotted out, and transgression*, are first given in that order, then repeated in the opposite order.

But, Mosiah 5:10-12 is only a very small sample of this hidden treasure. The artistry, beauty, and significance of Benjamin's very careful choice of words will be further examined in following lessons. Benjamin's discourse is a truly a diamond which for most of us remains uncut. Fortunately, the Lord has recently brought skilled and inspired hands to the task of exposing its many facets. As we examine closely the product of their labors we will be amazed by the exposed beauty of this scriptural gem.

8 - A Trove of Timeless Themes

As with all great discourse, Benjamin's speech is much more than literary artistry. Jack Welch declares, "There is nothing trivial or affected here. Each segment goes directly to the essence of what life is all about." The timeless and eternally significant themes addressed in this inspired discourse include: the nature of man; the nature of sin; the significance of the fall; the nature and mission of Christ; the importance and scope of his atonement; the sanctifying mission of the Holy Spirit; the meaning and significance of service; the necessity of maintaining a covenant relationship with Jesus Christ; human accountability; the nature of righteous leadership; responsibility; humility; indebtedness; grace; obedience; gratitude; peace; contention; wealth; and charity.

This multitude of themes might suggest that there could be little more than superficial consideration given to any of these topics. Yet, this is far from the case. Even today, these teachings of Benjamin, on most every topic listed, rank among the most significant, the most complete, the most insightful of any available from any source.

9 - A Practical Approach in Touch with Real Life

Jack Welch says that "Benjamin's speech is great oratory not only because it addresses great themes, but because it does so while remaining completely in touch with real life." Just as Christ drew his illustrations from the experiences of the people, so Benjamin's exhortations relate to the common experiences of his day and ours. He speaks of service, taxes, the air we breath, and the dust of the earth. He warns of contentions, rebellion, and pride. The little child is his example of humility, of innocence, and of responsibility. Even the beggar becomes the teacher of gratitude, and charity.

10 - A Source of Unmistakable Instruction to Enable Success

Welch rightly observes that "Benjamin's words are not broad platitudes, but like the best of meaningful oratory, his speech gives clear instructions and tells specifically how to achieve the desired spiritual objectives." An example is his eight step formula for obtaining salvation, and the blessings of the Spirit (Mosiah 4:9-10): (1) Believe that God is; (2) Believe that he created all things; (3) Believe that he has all wisdom and power; (4) Honestly admit that man does not comprehend all; (5) Believe that you must repent and forsake your sins; (6) Humble yourself before God; (7) Ask in sincerity of heart for forgiveness; and (8) If you believe these things, see that you do them.

11 - A Profound Ethical Logic

Few elements of Benjamin's speech are more impressive than his ability to say so much with such compelling power in so few words. He is direct, to the point, and logically profound. Welch says it well: "Benjamin was not just a fine social counselor, an energetic leader, or a friendly confidant. He was also blunt, direct, bold in testifying, and he drove home his instructions with very interesting and compelling forms of ethical logic."

The power and efficiency of his logic is extraordinary. For example, this is the logical progression with which he teaches the necessity of serving one another:

- | *"We should serve one another because we have received benefits from the service of others."*
- | *"We should serve others because we have been commanded to, and by disobeying that command we*

come out in open rebellion against God."

- | *"We should serve one another because through the atonement of Christ we will stand before God to be judged according to our works."*
- | *"Christ's atonement places us eternally in his debt, and because of his atonement and generosity toward us we are given further reason to serve others."*
- | *"When we have been truly converted, we will serve because we cannot do otherwise."*
- | *"We should serve because we have made a promise that we will do so."*
- | *"We serve each other because we come to view other people as a part of ourselves."*
- | *"We serve in order to know the master."*

12 - A Compelling Presentation of Ultimate Human Choice

Jack Welch concludes: "Benjamin was a man of action who voiced his aims in words of historic simplicity. He stirred his people to repentance and induced 'a mighty change' in them, so that they had 'no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually' (Mosiah 5:2). From a literary standpoint, Benjamin was able to accomplish this largely by presenting crucial issues in terms of stark contrasts that exposed two clear extremes." There is very little gray in Benjamin's discourse, all sin is black and white requires the absolute absence of sin.

Benjamin makes it clear that to be on salvation's path you must be possessed of the Lord's Spirit; and, that Spirit "*cannot dwell in an unclean temple*." However, it's man that makes the choice. If you do what you know that God wants you to do, then he will be bless you with his Spirit "*to guide you in wisdom's paths that ye may be blessed, prospered, and preserved*." But, that rebel who in effect says to God, "I know what you want me to do, but I'm not going to do it," the Spirit can have no place. And, without repentance, "mercy hath no claim on that man; therefore his final doom is to endure a never-ending torment."

References:

The organization and all quotations are from John W. Welch, "Parallelism and Chiasmus," in *King Benjamin's Speech*, John W. Welch, Ed., 1998.