

**The Temple Drama
of the Ancient Israelite Feast of Tabernacles
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Overview: The sequence and storyline of the Feast of Tabernacles temple drama are found throughout the Book of Mormon.

This second section of our book is quite different from the first section. The first section defined the rites and drama of the New Year festival. This section assumes that information, and stays quite close to the Book of Mormon chronology. Our purpose is not to describe the festival events—that has already been done—rather it is to show how the prophets of Book of Mormon taught their people by continually reminding them of the covenants, principles, pattern, and instructions of the drama.

Lehi left Jerusalem and began their journey to America only a few years before the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and its Temple and the curtain came down for the last time on the magnificent Feast of Tabernacles drama. For Lehi, Sariah, and the other members of the party, the ceremonies of the New Year festival would have been as much a part of their lives as Christmas is to ours – but far, far more important. Those ceremonies were an annual renewal of the covenants that held their families and their nation together – and which reaffirmed the covenants of Jehovah with the nation of Israel and her king. The temple rites of the festival culminated in an anointing ceremony where the king was adopted as son and legitimate heir of Jehovah. Israel’s relationship with God was a covenant relationship, and the king was the living token of that covenant.

But the ceremony was much more than that. While the people witnessed that was happening to the king, symbolically it was also happening to each of them as well. So the covenants between the king and Jehovah were also covenants between Jehovah and each person who participated. As Johnson observed.

What is more, it is clear from the outset that the king is both dependent upon and responsible to Yahweh for the right exercise of his power; for his subjects, whatever their status in society, are one and all Yahweh's people.

The Book of Mormon does not describe the drama, its authors assume we have the books of the Law and that we understand the nature of the festivals, and they continually use them as a point of reference. Consequently, there is enough information scattered throughout the narratives and sermons of the Book of Mormon, to enable one to confidently assert that the Nephites observed all of the Israelite festivals that were required by the Law of Moses, including the New Year festival with the Feast of Tabernacles drama, just as the pre-exilic Jews did, and as they were known to Lehi and Nephi before they left Jerusalem.

One should not be surprised that the Book of Mormon contains frequent references to the ancient festival—unless, of course, one supposes Joseph Smith wrote it. In that case it would be a great surprise, because the drama was not known to Bible scholars until a hundred years after the Book of Mormon was published. Yet its authors were so well versed in its sequence and principles that it is the superstructure around which the whole book was formed.

Not just the Book of Mormon, but the other ancient LDS scriptures also shed a great deal of light on the meaning of the festival drama. For example, if the great Bible scholars of the past generation had access to only the Book of the Abraham, that would have saved them all sorts of

trouble as they tried to work out the sequence events in the Feast of Tabernacles drama. There we learn that the intelligences, who were born as spirit children of our Father in Heaven, were the noble and great ones who were the members of the Council in Heaven, and were called “the gods.”(Abraham 3-5) In the last few verses of Abraham chapter 3, we find this sequence of events: Elohim chose his leaders. They discussed the criteria by which one could keep one’s first estate, enter into the second estate, and “have glory added upon their heads for ever and ever.” We learn that it was after that discussion that Satan rebelled, and he and his followers were expelled. Then the gods created the heavens and the earth. Most important of all, we learn the part that Jehovah played in all those events. That sequence, which is familiar to every boy and girl in the Church, is found nowhere else in the scriptures, or in the non-canonical works—it is only found in the Book of Abraham. It is invaluable to us because through it we can understand the meaning and relevance of events that occurred in our premortal lives. And in that context, we can understand a great deal about the meaning and relevance of our lives in the present situation—and we can project those meanings into future worlds.

Even more frequently than in the Abraham, the Book of Mormon incorporates so much of the drama into its sermons and narratives, that it gives us great insight into the what the Bible teaches.

Hooke has pointed out another area where the pattern of the drama of the New Year’s festival is evident. He has observed that apocalyptic works such as the Enoch and canonical writings like Revelation reveal the same pattern as the Festival. Similarly, James has found the same pattern in the story of the life of Jesus and the Easter Drama. This is also to be expected, because many of those works, and we can add Nephi’s vision of the Tree of Life to the list, begin in the premortal life, then talk about the events of this world, the triumphal second coming of the Saviour, and the eternal life of those who have endured to the end. The pattern is already there, it is seen in the visions sermons and sermons of the prophets and apostles.

The whole cosmic history portrayed in the drama of the Feast of Tabernacles was a cyclic continuum of making and keeping covenants. The first scene was in the Council when Jehovah was anointed to be King and Protector of Israel, and the prophets and kings of Israel were similarly chosen and given their respective assignments. The gods created the heavens and the earth, and placed man here. Then followed the Lord’s covenants with Adam and Eve. Those covenants included the most important of all—the promise that death would preclude the danger that they might have to stay in their earthly state forever. After they left the Garden, the king and queen were given the powers and blessings they would need to fulfill their eternal covenants. He receives Melchizedek Priesthood (Psalm 110), and the Abrahamic Covenant(Psalms 47, 105, 106). The king received the blessings of Moses, which included the authority to administer in the rites, offerings, and sacrifices of the Aaronic Priesthood. (Psalm 77, 95, 103) He was then given all the blessings of the Lord’s covenant with David, (Psalm 72. 89) so he held all the offices of king and priest. In the drama, after the king had obtained all the requisite preparatory powers, he was engaged in a ritual combat whose conclusion precluded the possibility that he could keep his eternal covenants. Jerusalem and the Temple were symbolically destroyed and the king sent into the confines of death. However, Jehovah interceded and restored that possibility to him. Jehovah himself descended into the underworld, defeated death and hell, and restored the king to the world of the living. On the morning of the seventh day of the drama, Jehovah (represented by the Ark of the Covenant, the king, and all the people met, and in a triumphal procession walked around the city, measuring it with their steps, redefining it as sacred space. There was a New Jerusalem, a new Temple, and they entered the city as Zion. They entered the Temple, and there

the king (and symbolically, each person who had participated in the drama) received the rites of coronation and adoption. (presumably those described in Isaiah 61: wash, clothe, anoint, crown, and receive a new royal king-name). The next day, the eighth and final day of the drama, the festival concluded with sacrifices, feasting and rejoicing that symbolized eternal peace, happiness, and prosperity. The whole story followed perfectly the sequence of the cosmic myth.

[footnote: The Cosmic myth is discussed in the first part of this book. There, it is shown that the cosmic myth is the universal story that always in the pattern of a chiasmus. In its simplest form it looks like this:

The hero is required to leave home.

He is given a seemingly impossible task.

He confronts overwhelming odds and certain failure

He succeeds in accomplishing the task.

He returns home, triumphant.]

In the Book of Mormon, there are at least four major re-tellings of the festival drama using the correct sequence of the cosmic myth. One is the entire book of First Nephi. A second is where the story is acted out in reality in Third Nephi. The largest may be in the outline of the entire Book of Mormon. There are also many shorter versions. The earliest are in the first few pages of First Nephi. One of the most obvious is in Alma 12. There are several within Third Nephi. Some are relatively detailed, some only one verse. Many of these will be discussed below.

It is this writer's absolute conviction that one of the great wonders of the Book of Mormon's English translation is that it employs the language of the King James Version of the Bible with such precision and care that one can use the translated English wording in one ancient scripture to understand the same words of the other. There are many examples, but one of the first we encounter is "mystery" in the first verse of the Book of Mormon. As observed earlier, the Greek word translated "mystery" in the New Testament is the same as the Hebrew *sode* that is translated "secret" in the Old Testament. That being true, we can know that Nephi's intent in the first verse of the Book of Mormon was to teach us that he is—by definition—a true prophet.

...having been highly favored of the Lord in all my days; yea, having had a great knowledge of the goodness and the *mysteries* of God...

With those words he tells us that he has had a *sode* experience, and therefore (given the criterion established by Jeremiah 23:18-23) he is a true prophet who has the right and responsibility to speak the words God has instructed him to speak.

To Nephi, that simple declaration—that he knows the mysteries—is sufficient for himself, because he will give us details of his *sode* experience later in his narrative. But for his father Lehi, Nephi gives us all the information we need to judge that he is also true prophet. In Nephi's account of his father's vision, Nephi mentions all of the classic elements of a true *sode* experience: (1) Lehi was taken in vision to the premortal Council in Heaven where he saw "numberless concourses of angels in the attitude of singing and praising their God." (2) "He saw God sitting upon his throne." (3) He received his earthly assignment from Jehovah who "gave unto him a book, and bade him that he should read." Lehi's assignment was given to him through the words of the book. and (4) he was promised that he would be able to fulfill his covenants. That promise is not explicitly stated, but it is strongly asserted by Lehi's response to the information he received in the vision.

And it came to pass that when my father had read and seen many great and marvelous things, he did exclaim many things unto the Lord; such as: Great and

marvelous are thy works, O Lord God Almighty! Thy throne is high in the heavens, and thy power, and goodness, and mercy are over all the inhabitants of the earth; and, because thou art merciful, thou wilt not suffer those who come unto thee that they shall perish! (1 Nephi 1:14)

Thus, Nephi begins his account in exactly the way we would expect from a true Israelite prophet. He says that both he and his father have had *sode* experiences—that they have revisited the Council in Heaven, have received instructions from God, and have received the authority to speak his words—and are therefore true prophets.

First Nephi is a magnificent chiasmic poem that took Nephi ten years to compose. One can deduce that time from his statement in Second Nephi.

28 And thirty years had passed away from the time we left Jerusalem.

29 And I, Nephi, had kept the records upon my plates, which I had made, of my people thus far.

30 And it came to pass that the Lord God said unto me: Make other plates; and thou shalt engraven many things upon them which are good in my sight, for the profit of thy people.

31 Wherefore, I, Nephi, to be obedient to the commandments of the Lord, went and made these plates upon which I have engraven these things.

32 And I engraved that which is pleasing unto God. And if my people are pleased with the things of God they will be pleased with mine engravings which are upon these plates.

33 And if my people desire to know the more particular part of the history of my people they must search mine other plates.

34 And it sufficeth me to say that forty years had passed away, and we had already had wars and contentions with our brethren. (2 Nephi 5:21-34)

Earlier in the record, Nephi explained the purpose for this set of small plates. He wrote,

3 And after I had made these plates by way of commandment, I, Nephi, received a commandment that the ministry and the prophecies, the more plain and precious parts of them, should be written upon these plates; and that the things which were written should be kept for the instruction of my people, who should possess the land, and also for other wise purposes, which purposes are known unto the Lord.

4 ... and that these plates should be handed down from one generation to another, or from one prophet to another, until further commandments of the Lord. (1 Nephi 19:3-4)

That the plates were to be “handed down ...from one prophet to another” implies that their purpose was to be a kind of spiritual rudder to prevent the people from wandering off into strange religious paths, as had happened to the people in Jerusalem. To achieve that end, Nephi recorded the vital story of his colony’s spiritual beginnings, but he also wanted those prophets to understand that the primary purpose for their leaving Jerusalem (apart from saving their lives) was to preserve the pure religion of the Jews. It was probably for that reason that he repeatedly chose the pattern of the Feast of Tabernacles temple drama as an encoded testimony that he did, in fact, have “a great knowledge of the goodness and the mysteries of God.”

That also probably explains why he introduced himself and his father within the context of that drama, for in the first six verses of First Nephi he mentions, in their correct order, every one of the most significant concepts in the festival drama. He divides it into the same three acts that we found in the 23rd Psalm.

Act 1.

1 I, Nephi, having been born of goodly parents, therefore I was taught somewhat in all the learning of my father;

Act 2

He enters the “valley of the shadow of death,” and tells his qualifications and purposes for writing.

and having seen many afflictions in the course of my days, nevertheless, having been highly favored of the Lord in all my days; yea, having had a great knowledge of the goodness and the mysteries of God, therefore I make a record of my proceedings in my days.

He says his writing will include a sub-text.

2 Yea, I make a record in the language of my father, which consists of the learning of the Jews and the language of the Egyptians.

He bears a powerful legal testimony

3 And I know that the record which I make is true; and I make it with mine own hand [writing words with one’s hand, is not evidence that it is true. In a court of law, raising the right hand is legal evidence of the veracity of one’s testimony]; and I make it according to my knowledge.

Those elements of testimony (the assertion that it is true, the symbolism of the hand, and the affirmation of personal knowledge) make Nephi’s testimony as legally binding upon his listeners as can be done with written words.

He now mentions kingship:

4 For it came to pass in the commencement of the first year of the reign of Zedekiah, king of Judah,

He mentions priesthood leadership:

(my father, Lehi,

He mentions sacred space:

having dwelt at Jerusalem in all his days);

He affirms covenants and their fulfillment:

and in that same year there came many prophets, prophesying unto the people that they must repent,

He predicts the reality of the combat:

or the great city Jerusalem must be destroyed.

He mentions prayer:

5 Wherefore it came to pass that my father, Lehi, as he went forth prayed unto the Lord, yea, even with all his heart, in behalf of his people.

He mentions the veil (the Shechinah)

6 And it came to pass as he prayed unto the Lord, there came a pillar of fire and dwelt upon a rock before him;

Act 3. As in the 23rd Psalm, Act 3 is very brief. Here it is simply:

and he saw and heard much. (1 Nephi 1:1-13)

In that sub-textual colophon, Nephi has taken us through the festival drama with such care that it is apparent that he wished us to identify his writings with the drama. Then, apparently to make sure we would not think that reciting of the drama was only a only happenstance, he immediately repeated the drama’s sequence again in the first two chapters of his book. This time he used a first-person version of its sequence.

(1) The sequence begins with his father’s *sode* experience in the Council in Heaven. He does not

tell the Adam and Eve story with its promise that death will bring deliverance from this world. Rather he tells its near equivalent in the boldest of up-to-date terms—only rather than the promise that death will bring deliverance, is focus on the proposition that death is the consequence of unrepented sin.

18 Therefore, I would that ye should know, that after the Lord had shown so many marvelous things unto my father, Lehi, yea, concerning the destruction of Jerusalem, behold he went forth among the people, and began to prophesy and to declare unto them concerning the things which he had both seen and heard.

19 And it came to pass that the Jews did mock him because of the things which he testified of them; for he truly testified of their wickedness and their abominations; and he testified that the things which he saw and heard, and also the things which he read in the book, manifested plainly of the coming of a Messiah, and also the redemption of the world. (1 Nephi 1:18-19)

(2) Lehi's Melchizedek Priesthood is shown in the next verse, not by telling when he received it, but by showing that he had the authority to exercise its power.

... But behold, I, Nephi, will show unto you that the tender mercies of the Lord are over all those whom he hath chosen, because of their faith, to make them mighty even unto the power of deliverance. (1 Nephi 1:20)

(3) The Abrahamic Covenant includes the blessings of priesthood, and the assurances of family and a promised land. Nephi mentioned them all. His father was a prophet ("the Lord commanded my father, even in a dream"), he mentions family ("that he should take his family"); and he implies the promised land as the destination of their travel ("and depart into the wilderness").

(4) Only a few verses later, Nephi demonstrates that his father can establish sacred space, "he had traveled three days in the wilderness, he pitched his tent...." Each time Nephi mentions his father's tent, it is, like this one, in conjunction with sacred rites or events, showing that it was the family's "Tabernacle"—that is the central tent of the camp was sacred space. The next verse shows that Lehi had the authority to officiate in the ordinances of the Aaronic Priesthood.

And it came to pass that he built an altar of stones, and made an offering unto the Lord, and gave thanks unto the Lord our God. (1 Nephi 2:7)

(5) For Nephi the ritual combat of the drama is very real. He next introduces us to his personal nemeses, his brothers Laman and Lemuel,

Now this he [Lehi] spake because of the stiffneckedness of Laman and Lemuel; for behold they did murmur in many things against their father, because he was a visionary man, and had led them out of the land of Jerusalem, to leave the land of their inheritance, and their gold, and their silver, and their precious things, to perish in the wilderness. And this they said he had done because of the foolish imaginations of his heart. (1 Nephi 2:11)

(6) Nephi shows that notwithstanding their attempts to prevent him from keeping his covenants, Jehovah himself would intercede in his behalf.

And it came to pass that the Lord spake unto me, saying: Blessed art thou, Nephi, because of thy faith, for thou hast sought me diligently, with lowliness of heart." (1 Nephi 2:19)

(7) The coronation ceremony of the seventh day of the drama is made reality when the Lord promised Nephi that he would be a king and a priest, thus establishing his own authority and the legitimacy of his new dynasty.

19 And it came to pass that the Lord spake unto me, saying: Blessed art thou, Nephi, because of thy faith, for thou hast sought me diligently, with lowliness of heart.

20 And inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments, ye shall prosper, and shall be led to a land of promise; yea, even a land which I have prepared for you; yea, a land which is choice above all other lands.

21 And inasmuch as thy brethren shall rebel against thee, they shall be cut off from the presence of the Lord.

22 And inasmuch as thou shalt keep my commandments, thou shalt be made a ruler [king] and a teacher [priest] over thy brethren. (1 Nephi 2: 19-22)

(8) In that same blessing is the hope of the final scene of the festival drama, “ye shall prosper, and shall be led to a land of promise; yea, even a land which I have prepared for you; yea, a land which is choice above all other lands.”

Thus, in only the narrative of the first two chapters of his Small Plates, Nephi has twice directed our thoughts through the entire sequence of the Feast of Tabernacles temple drama. It is significant that he did this without calling attention to the drama itself. For, as he wrote at the outset, he would teach us it double speech: “Yea, I make a record in the language of my father, which consists of the learning of the Jews [the temple drama sub-text] and the language of the Egyptians [the everyday speech of the surface-text]. (1 Nephi 1:2) He not only told us that he would do it, but he immediately showed us how he would do it.

Consistent with his word, and as further evidence that his intent was to preserve an understanding of the festival drama, Nephi patterned the entire book of First Nephi after the cosmic myth, that is, after the same pattern as the festival drama.

Nephi and his family must leave home.

They are given a seeming impossible task

They receive all necessary empowerment

They nearly starve to death in the wilderness.

They receive Liahona

They fulfill their task at Bountiful

Go to a promised land

The prophet Mormon seems to have followed somewhat the same principle. An examination of the outline of the entire Book of Mormon suggests the Mormon may have been following some sort of festival-related outline. If one does a hopscotch across the pages of the book and only lands on the major sermons and on an occasional outstanding ecclesiastical event, the following is what one finds. No doubt, if one did a different kind of hopscotch—landing on only major historical or military events—one would find a different outline altogether. Whether one can see the festival in the following is questionable, but the hopscotch is fun.

1) Nephi begins by saying that he and his father are true prophets, and gives evidence that they have each had a sode experience.

2) Lehi and his family make the necessary preparations to fulfill that assignment.

3) They cross the chaotic waters and go to the new world.

4) When they get there, Lehi teaches his sons about Adam and Eve and the fall.

5) Nephi’s psalm asks why are we here when it is so difficult.

6) Jacob teaches about the atonement.

7) Nephi quotes a lot of Isaiah which shows that God is the God of this world, and Satan is not.

- 8) Nephi teaches about faith, repentance, baptism and the gift of the Holy Ghost.
- 9) Jacob teaches about the importance of keeping the commandments.
- 10) Enos teaches that one must pray.
- 11) King Benjamin teaches his people about the importance of obedience. They make a covenant that they will obey, and they receive a new name.
- 12) Abinadi teaches Alma the gospel. He does it by explaining the Saviour's sacrifice, then we see Abinadi's sacrifice also.
- 13) At the Waters of Mormon the people are baptized. But Alma's prayer does not mention baptism for the remission of sins, rather this baptism seems to be the token of a covenant that the people will support each other, the church, and the kingdom.
- 14) In the wilderness Alma's followers briefly live the law of consecration.
- 15) In Alma 5 and 7 the prophet sums up many of the principles of the gospel and admonish the people to keep their covenant.
- 16) The Zoramites are plotting to take over the government, so in chapters 12 and 13 Alma teaches Zeezrom about the eternal legitimacy of priesthood and kingship.
- 17) Alma 29 is a psalm about one's missionary responsibilities.
- 18) Alma 32 teaches one how to partake of the fruit of the tree of life, and eventually how to become as a tree of life.
- 19) When Alma talks to his three sons.
 - 19a) He teaches his oldest son he must keep sacred things sacred.
 - 19b) He teaches the second that he must be true to the law of his own being.
 - 19c) He tells the third about the importance of the laws of chastity.
- 20) There are many wars in Book of Mormon history as the people struggle to overcome the aloneness of this world. But Mormon chooses to give the most detail to this one that he identifies as a sacred war between good and evil. He introduces it with a whole series of covenants and covenant names. (There are always new names associated with covenants)
 - 20a) Moroni tears off a piece of his coat (after that it is called "garment" so it is his outer clothing).
 - 20b) He writes a chiasmic poem on it. The poem is a covenant, and he gives it the title of "Liberty."
 - 20c) There Mormon inserts the information that those who believe in Christ are called Christians.
 - 20d) Moroni then identifies the land in terms of its geographical boundaries (measuring it and defining it is as sacred space) and gives it the same name as the poem— "the land of liberty."
 - 20e) The people come and join in the covenant— that they will keep his commandments and the Lord will protect them in their Liberty.
 - 20f) Shortly thereafter we are told that the sons of Heleman make a covenant with the Lord and take upon them the name of "Nephites."
 - 20g) It is in the context of these covenants and covenant names that Mormon then tells the story of the war. The point being that the boys who made and kept their covenants were protected—some were badly hurt, but they all survived.
- 21) After the war, Nephi, Lehi, and the Lamanite leaders are baptized with fire and the Holy Ghost.
- 22) Nephi is given the sealing power

- 23) Nephi is told that the Saviour will soon be born and the covenant of the atonement is about to be fulfilled.
- 24) Samuel the Lamanite tells the people the Saviour is coming, and urges them to get ready to see him.
- 25) The world is cleansed of its unrighteousness, and the Saviour comes to his temple.
- 26) The Saviour organizes his church and kingdom, and teaches the people how to keep their covenants. He blesses them and their children, and gives them explicit instructions about how they should conduct their lives, and how they should pray.
- 27) Then in Fourth Nephi the people do keep their covenants and live the law of consecration.
- 28) The book of Ether is the story of people who do not keep their covenants.
- 29) The Book of Mormon concludes with a mixed story. Some people are keeping their covenants, others are not.
- 30) The message that is the Book's crescendo is repeated three times: in Ether 12, Moroni 7, and Moroni 10. There the reader is taught about the meaning of faith, hope, and charity.
- 31) Then, in the last verse of the Book of Mormon, Moroni says essentially, "I am going to heaven; I hope you come too."

While the sub-text of First Nephi is primarily concerned with the sequence and message of the festival drama, the surface text approaches its principles from a different point of view. The story—the one told in the drama, ritual, and songs of the ancient Israelite New Year's festival, as well as in Mormon's Third Nephi—is about the sanctity of kingship. That includes the Kingship of Jehovah, of sacral kings who are not ruling monarchs, and of temporal kings who are. Both the word and concept of "king" is understood in all three senses, but it is important that one also understand that the word "king" is often indented to have the same connotation as the phrase, "son of man," and the name, "Adam." That is, the word is intended to convey the notion of both king *and* queen, just as "son of man" and "Adam" meant "human being," and included both men and women. The meaning of Adam's story is as universal as the application of his name. Mowinckel summed that up very nicely when he wrote, "In the form of legend the God-inspired truth about man is asserted about the first man as well as the last, about me and about you."

[That sort of ends at the beginning of a new thought, but it gives you an idea of where I am going from there.]