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"This Day"

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“THIS DAY”

Mosiah 2:9 “Hear my words which I shall speak unto you this day.”

The phrase “this day” may be very significant in the scriptures. This solemn and emphatic concept appears, for example, in the famous covenantal text at the end of the book of Joshua: “Choose you *this day* whom ye will serve. . . . Ye are witnesses against yourselves that ye have chosen you the Lord, to serve him. And they said, We are witnesses. . . . So Joshua made a covenant with the people *that day*” (Joshua 24:15–25). It seems that words of this nature were especially used in antiquity in reference to religious or ceremonial holy days.

The words “this day” appear eighteen times in the Book of Mormon. Six occurrences are regular expressions meaning “at this time,” and one in Alma 30:8 quotes Joshua 24:15. But the remaining eleven all appear in conjunction with holy Nephite gatherings at their temples.

King Benjamin uses the phrase “this day” five times in his monumental speech, and each time it occurs at ritual and covenantal highpoints in the text: He enjoins the people to give heed to “my words which I shall speak unto you *this day*” (Mosiah 2:9). He calls the people as “witnesses *this day*” that he has discharged his duties as king according to the law and has a pure conscience before God “*this day*” (Mosiah 2:14–15; compare Deuteronomy 17:14–20). He declares “*this day*” that his son Mosiah is their new king (Mosiah 2:30). He affirms that “*this day* [Christ] hath spiritually begotten you” (Mosiah 5:7). These usages are important covenantal markers. It seems likely that Benjamin is using this phrase not as a mere literary embellishment, but as a term with legal and religious import.

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All Israelites were commanded to assemble at their temple “before the Lord God” three times a year on their high holy days (see Exodus 23:17). The Nephites were “exceedingly strict” in observing the law of Moses (in their looking forward to the Christ whom that law typified; see 2 Nephi 5:10; 11:4; Jarom 1:5; Alma 30:3). It thus follows that they also regularly gathered in holy assemblies on such days. Indeed, the following texts may be read as evidence that they marked those occasions with special reference to “this day.”

Jacob tells of coming “up into the temple *this day*” to rid his garments of the people’s sins and to declare the word of God (Jacob 2:2–3). He pronounces a curse upon those who remain impure on this particular day: “Wo, wo, unto you that are not pure in heart, that are filthy *this day* before God” (Jacob 3:3). Why “this day”? Is it because Jacob chose a holy day, perhaps even the purifying Day of Atonement, on which to preach his powerful sermon against unchastity and greed, and to rid his people of sin and wickedness?

Similarly, when Alma delivers his most powerful sermon on the Atonement in the city of Gideon, he requires the people to witness their righteousness to God “*this day* by going into the waters of baptism” (Alma 7:15). Elsewhere, the phrase “this day” also appears in connection with Limhi’s assembly (Mosiah 7:12; 7:21). Jacob’s farewell sermon also seems to be set in a ritual context, and he asks his audience, “Yea, *today*, if ye will hear his voice [a liturgical image], harden not your hearts; for why will ye die?” (Jacob 6:6).

Beyond Joshua 24:15, further corroboration for these pointed uses of “this day” in the Book of Mormon can be found in Hebrew literature. In Hebrew the word *etzem* is significant. It appears, for example, in Exodus 12:17, “Ye shall observe the feast of unleavened bread; for in *this selfsame day* [*b’etzem hayom hazeh*] have I brought your armies out of the land of Egypt.” Abraham Bloch has recently concluded that “this descriptive word was not a mere literary flourish” but a technical term of art with some unknown special significance.¹

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For further insight, Bloch turns to the medieval Jewish jurist Nahmanides, who “noted with great amazement that *etzem* [‘selfsame’] was used only in connection with the observance of Yom Kippur [the Israelite festival of the Day of Atonement] and Shavuot [the biblical festival of the Firstfruits, or Pentecost].”² The implication is that this term was used to indicate that these high holy days in and of themselves produced a binding legal effect or holy religious status.

Evidently, in Nephite language and rhetoric, the phrase “this day” often indicated the covenantal and legal status of a holy day, much as “this day,” “today,” or “this selfsame day” did in Hebrew.

Based on research by John W. Welch, Donald W. Parry, and Stephen D. Ricks, April 1990.

Notes

1. Abraham Bloch, *The Biblical and Historical Background of the Jewish Holy Days* (New York: KTAV, 1978), 114.
2. Cited in *ibid.*