

Deification: Divine Inheritance and the Glorious Afterlife in the Book of Mormon and Ancient Mesoamerica

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Good morning everyone. It's a pleasure to be here today. I've been coming to these FAIR conferences for several years now, and it's funny how different I feel being on this side of the podium. As I was looking at the FAIR website the other day and I noticed that they have two different titles listed for my presentation- one has the generalized title "The Book of Mormon and Mesoamerica" and another has the more specific title "Deification: Divine Inheritance and the Glorious Afterlife in the Book of Mormon and Mesoamerica". I'm glad both titles are listed, because I'm going to need to lay a general Mesoamerican foundation before I can get into the specifics of my topic. There are actually a few different concepts I would like to discuss today, and all of them build upon each other and are in fact interconnected, so bear with me. My ultimate aim is to shed light on the doctrine of deification - the believe that humans can become gods - as taught in the Book of Mormon, but before I can do that, we need to put it into an historical and cultural context.

Whether we admit it or not, our understanding and even our application of the Gospel is often mediated through our culture. Even our mental images of God and His Kingdom are heavily influenced by the way others in our culture have described or depicted him. From time to time I visit the Museum of Church History and Art in Salt Lake City, and I am always fascinated by the contributions made by members of the Church from foreign countries. They depict events from the scriptures and from Church history in ways that I never would have imagined. Take this painting, for example [SLIDE OF CHINESE PAINTING]. Had I not seen this in the Church museum I never would have guessed that it was created by a Latter-day Saint artist. The title of this painting is "With an Eye Single to the Glory of God", and depicts this Taiwanese artist's interpretation of Doctrine and Covenants Section 4, which contains an admonition from the Lord to search the scriptures diligently. I don't know about most of you, but anytime I hear D&C 4 even mentioned, here's what I imagine [SLIDE OF LOTS OF MISSIONARIES] - a room full of missionaries gearing up to sing "Called to Serve". I certainly don't picture an aged Chinese man kneeling on a floor examining a scroll.

The reason I mention this is because we need to understand that as we search for evidence of the Book of Mormon in Mesoamerica, we need to keep in mind that the people of the Book of Mormon would have used local, culturally significant images to depict their beliefs. That's just what people do. If Christian art from the Renaissance is to be believed, Jesus and his apostles dressed like European aristocrats.

We also need to be aware of the use of metaphor in artistic representations in both ancient and modern times. For example, this painting is entitled "Rock of Our Salvation" [SLIDE] - the artist is obviously referring of Christ, and the painting is rich with imagery whose meaning is clear to modern Christians. But would a Christian in Christ's day have

recognized it as such? Would an ancient Nephite recognize the symbolism if he were to see it? Conversely, and to my point, would we recognize Nephite artistic depictions of Christ or his Gospel? What symbols did they use? What were the cultural artistic norms of their time? As we seek for evidence of the Book of Mormon in ancient Mesoamerica, we must try to think like they did, rather than assuming they depict things the same way would.

The next foundational concept I need to discuss is what it actually means to be a god in the Mesoamerican mindset. Unlike our Westernized concept of God as a perfect, eternal, immortal, omnipotent and omnipresent being, Mesoamericans believed gods were fallible, subject to death, at times prideful, mentally weak, and generally far from perfect. Although some great advances in Mesoamerican studies have been made in the past few decades, there is still an awful lot that we don't know, especially concerning the stuff that dates back to Book of Mormon times.

To begin, we need to have a clear understanding of ancient Maya conceptions of the nature of gods, and the terminology used by scholars to describe them. [SLIDE OF DEFINITION] The terms 'god' and 'deity' are used interchangeably in the scholarly literature to refer to "supernatural sentient beings that appear in sacred narrative" – I need you to remember this definition, because I'm going to be coming back to it throughout this presentation. As I already mentioned, our western concept of gods as perfect, immortal, and discrete beings simply doesn't apply to the Mesoamerican pantheon. The Maya pantheon is better understood as a series of deity complexes or clusters, which are composed of a small number of underlying divinities, each having various aspects, or manifestations

[SLIDE WITH IMAGES OF COMPLEXES/MANIFESTATIONS]. A 'deity complex' refers to a variety of distinctive gods that could be lumped together into a single category based on a core cluster of features, usually based on their physical features, their costume elements, as well as their known roles or traits. Conversely, a single god could be represented with a variety of differing characteristics or manifestations. Their names, their attributes, and their domains of influence were fluid, yet they retained their individual identity. For example, one of the principle gods among the modern Ch'orti' manifests itself as a solar being during the dry season but transforms into a corn or maize spirit during the rainy season. So in other words, this one god is either a sun god or a corn god, depending on what time of year it is. To make it even more confusing, when he is in the form of the sun god during the proper season, he has multiple manifestations throughout the course of a single day:

They say that the Sun has not just one name. The one which he is best known by people continues to be Jesus Christ. They say that when it is just getting light its name is Child Redeemer of the world. One name is San Gregorio the Illuminator. One name is San Antonio of Judgment. One name is Child Guardian. One is Child Refuge. One is Child San Pascual. One is Child Succor. One is Child Creator. They say that at each hour, one of these is its name (Fought 1972:485).

I should note that among the Ch'orti', San Antonio is the fire god, San Gregorio emits beams of light, and San Pascual is Venus as morning star. Keep in mind that these all refer to the *same being*! They are just describing different manifestations, or aspects, of this one god.

Now, we may hesitate to think of it in these terms, but when we look through the lens of Mesoamerican scholarship, when we use their definitions instead of our own, the Nephites clearly had deity complexes that were composed of multiple gods as well as individual gods that could manifest themselves in multiple ways. Among the Nephites, [SLIDE OF FATHER, SON, HG] the principle deity complex – referring to distinct gods that share attributes – was composed of “Christ the Son, and God the Father, and the Holy Spirit,” which were nominally lumped into a single category, “one Eternal God” (Alma 11:44). Unlike a Trinitarian concept of modalism, which essentially views the three members of the trinity as different modes of God's activity rather than as separate and distinct individuals, the Book of Mormon maintains that each deity had their own identity and at times they were described in terms of their different manifestations, just like the Mesoamerican gods.

Christ clearly has multiple manifestations throughout the Book of Mormon. He appeared as an unembodied premortal spirit to the brother of Jared (Ether 3:13), he was seen by Nephi in vision as an infant (1 Nephi 11:20), and he descended as a resurrected being to the righteous in Bountiful (3 Nephi 11). He is known variously as a creator deity (Jacob 2:5), a destroyer (3 Nephi 9), a rain god (Ether 9:35), a god of agricultural fertility (Alma 34:24), like the modern Ch'orti' Maya believe he is a solar deity (1 Nephi 1:9; Helaman 14:4,20) and a fire god like San Antonio (1 Nephi 1:6; Helaman 13:13), a king (Mosiah 2:19), a god of medicine (Alma 46:40), and a shepherd (Alma 5:38). And similar to Maya gods, Christ is also metaphorically associated with animals and inanimate objects: he is referred to as a lamb (1 Nephi 14), and even a rock (Helaman 5:12).

Now you'll have to forgive me if this sounds heretical, but according to the standard Mesoamericanist definition of gods that I gave you as “supernatural sentient beings that appear in sacred narrative,” Satan would also qualify as a deity. This shouldn't be a foreign concept in Christianity - even 2 Corinthians 4:4 refers to him as the “god of this world”. As would be expected in a Mesoamerican context, there are clearly multiple manifestations of this ‘god’ in our sacred narrative, the Book of Mormon. For example, Satan is variously described as a serpent (Mosiah 16:3), a fallen angel (2 Nephi 2:18), a death god (Jacob 3:11), a ruler of the underworld (2 Nephi 2:29), a trickster (Alma 30:53), and a storm god (Helaman 5:12). But because the devil is also described as a church founder (1 Nephi 14:3), a covenant-giver (3 Nephi 6:28), the head of an earthly kingdom (1 Nephi 22:22), a shepherd (Alma 5:39), and a father (Alma 10:28), one could argue that he and Christ form a ‘deity complex’ since these distinct gods shared a ‘core cluster of features’. Interestingly, among the ancient Maya, we have examples of celestial gods and underworld gods who are at once oppositional yet dependent upon each other to fulfill their respective roles. As Father Lehi taught, there must needs be an opposition in all things, and the concepts of duality and opposition are central to Mesoamerican religions as well.

To take the concept of gods in the Book of Mormon a step further, by analyzing the Book of Mormon using definitions employed by scholars to discuss Mesoamerican religions, it becomes clear that the Nephites maintained a belief in a wide range of supernatural beings,

which would all be labeled “gods” by Mesoamericanists. To be clear, I am not saying that the Nephites worshiped multiple gods, but rather their theology included a wide array of “supernatural sentient beings” that were functionally similar to ancient Maya gods. Aside from God the Father, Christ the Son, the Holy Ghost, and the devil, the Book of Mormon also mentions benevolent supernatural beings such as angels and ministering spirits (Moroni 10:14), translated beings such as the Three Nephites (Mormon 8:11), but it also mentions malevolent supernatural beings such as devils –note the *plural* (Alma 30:53) and unclean spirits (1 Nephi 11:31).

To be clear, I’m not trying to impose a foreign concept on the Nephites – I believe they would have viewed these malevolent beings as “gods” as well. We know the Brass Plates contained the Five Books of Moses, which includes Deuteronomy, and Deuteronomy 32:17 equates “devils” with “gods”: “They sacrificed unto devils, not to God; to gods whom they knew not, to new gods that came newly up, whom your fathers feared not.” Idols and idolatry are mentioned 26 times throughout the Book of Mormon, and Jacob links idols to both the Devil and devils when he said “wo unto those that worship idols, for the devil of all devils delighteth in them” (2 Nephi 9:37), and Mormon specifically calls them “idol gods” (Mormon 4:14).

There are plenty of times when the Book of Mormon just sort of glosses over these beings, but it might do us well to recognize that each of those entities was in fact an individual, supernatural, sentient being.

[SLIDE – VASE OF 7 GODS] What would an ancient Maya depiction of ‘God sitting upon his throne, surrounded by concourses of angels’ look like? Would Maya scholars recognize it as such, or would they call it a “little understood pantheon of gods” and lump it together with the other “little understood pantheons of gods”?

As Maya scholars, we still have much to learn concerning their gods. One thing we do know is that each and every Maya city had its own unique set of gods that populated their local pantheon. [SLIDE – TRIADS] Significantly, the major polities, such as Tikal, Caracol, Naranjo, and Palenque not only had unique pantheons, but they each had their own distinct triad of deities that were the most prominent of their local gods. None of these major political centers shared the same triad. Unfortunately, very few of these gods have phonetically spelled names and so epigraphers have to rely on nicknames to identify them. For example, the most well understood and extensively studied group of deities in all of the Maya area is the Palenque Triad, which consists of GI, GII, and GIII - the “G” stands for god and was assigned to these gods 100 years ago. It’s only been in the last few years that epigraphers deciphered the name of GII as *U’nen K’awiil*, or ‘Baby K’awiil,’ but they still can’t read GI or GIII’s names phonetically, despite some earlier attempts based on faulty decipherment. Think of that for a second – here we have the most thoroughly studied and well understood of these Triads, and we still don’t even know what their names were. In fact, we have identified very few gods from the Classic period by name, so we continue to call them by the letter designations that were assigned to them 100 years ago.

Triadic groupings were not unique to the Maya at this time.[SLIDE – TIQUISATE] Non-Maya cities in Mesoamerica also had local triads. For example, some vessels dating to

the 5th century site of Tiquisate in Escuintla, Guatemala depicts the local triad, which has been dubbed the ‘Tiquisate Trinity’. Like most Mesoamerican gods from that period, the names of these three deities are lost to history, so archaeologists have nicknamed them Curly Face, Beady Eye, and Sour Mouth, based on their facial features.

The point I am trying to get at is that the Nephites would have fit perfectly well into the larger Mesoamerican religious system due to their belief in a localized triad of deities – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as well as a large population of other supernatural, sentient beings, called “gods” by Mesoamerican scholars. Critics of the Book of Mormon say there is no evidence for monotheistic Christianity in Mesoamerica, and to be honest, I think they are right. But what I’ve tried to show is that we shouldn’t expect evidence for that, because that isn’t what the Book of Mormon describes, when viewed through the lens of Mesoamerican scholarship. Complicating the problem is the fact that each and every polity had its own unique localized set of gods, and only about half of one percent of known Maya sites have been extensively excavated. We literally would have to dig up every site. And even those known sites that have been excavated whose gods are pictured or even named in the text, there are only a handful that have names that we can actually read! The fact that the experts resort to alphanumeric naming systems for major gods (like GI, GII, and GIII) or nicknaming them based on their features (like Curly Face, Beady Eye, and Sour Mouth); that should urge us to use caution in making definitive statements as to who these gods were or were not.

Part II - Deification

Now that we’ve established what it means to be a god, let’s turn our attention to how one actually becomes a god. This is a belief shared by modern Latter-day Saints and ancient Mesoamericans alike. I won’t get into Old World and early Christian concepts of deification, because frankly, I’m a New World guy and I have enough to worry about as it is. But if you’re interested, I highly recommend the monographs by Keith Norman and Jordan Vajda, both of which are published by FARMS.

Let’s look at the big picture in order to orient our discussion. [SLIDE – PALENQUE] Among the Classic Maya, it seems that the primary qualification for becoming a god was being anointed king. In order to become king, there are a number of important rituals that are associated with the enthronement process, and it is in fact the enthronement rituals that set the king on the trajectory to become a god, and we’re going to talk about some of those rituals in a moment. The enthronement rituals did not just confer a political office, they actually endowed the ruler with a sacral quality – they transformed him from a fully human man into a sacred being. That said, you should know that there is currently a debate concerning how divine these kings were in life. In fact, one of my dissertation committee members believes that Maya kings were sacred and even holy but not really divine in the sense of being a god, but my committee chair believes that they were full-blown gods on earth. Since my dissertation is a study of kingship among the Classic Maya, that puts me in kind of a pickle, and even as now as I am in the process of writing my dissertation, I keep going back and forth in my mind whether they were truly gods on earth or not. The jury is still out.

What is not debated is the fact that these kings were deified after death. They expected to resurrect like their god of corn and to become deified celestial beings like their sun god. And although they are depicted as the Sun God after death, they maintained their individual identities from their mortal state. They receive the Glory of the Sun, as it were. Significantly, they did not replace the Sun God in the pantheon. They became like him, even as if they were one with him, but the principle Sun God was still a unique entity and supreme in the pantheon, whereas the deified version of the king was viewed as a deified ancestor.

The Book of Mormon describes various aspects of kingship as practiced by the Jaredites, Nephites, Lamanites, and Mulekites. Some outstanding research has been done that compares specific ceremonies and concepts surrounding the institution of kingship that are discussed in the Book of Mormon to Old World practices and beliefs. However, since virtually all of the earthly kingdoms discussed in the Book of Mormon were located in the New World, I think a comparison of the practices and beliefs described in the Book of Mormon to those attested to in the New World seems appropriate. To reiterate, my discussion assumes that the peoples of the Book of Mormon lived among the larger Mesoamerican culture, participated in it, and were influenced by it, but they were not one and the same with it. What I hope to do now is demonstrate that the beliefs and practices concerning kingship and the afterlife that are discussed in the Book of Mormon reflect certain Mesoamerican practices and beliefs, which I believe adds strength to the claim that the Book of Mormon took place there.

[SLIDE – EMBLEM GLYPH] Among the Classic Maya, the supreme rulers of the largest polities wielded the title *k'uhul ajaw*, which has been variously translated as “holy,” “sacred,” or “divine” lord. As I stated, the issue of how ‘divine’ these rulers actually were during mortality is still a matter of debate among Mesoamericanists, but it is clear that during certain rituals, they stood as intermediaries that bridged the gap between the natural and supernatural realms. We frequently find long-dead royal ancestors depicted as deified, active participants in rituals that were being performed by the living rulers. The problem is, the rulers seldom, if ever, made direct claims to being living gods on earth, but they did clearly depict themselves in direct communion with deities on their monumental art, and by doing so they emphasized that they had a special role as intermediaries between the human and supernatural realms.

There are passages in the Book of Mormon that suggest the concept of divine kingship was known among the Nephites. Throughout this paper I will rely heavily on King Benjamin and the occasion when he passed the throne to his son Mosiah. For example, I believe King Benjamin was speaking to this issue when he said, “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” (Mosiah 2:10). Were the concept of divine kingship completely unknown among the Nephites, Benjamin wouldn’t need to explicitly caution them against thinking he is “more than a mortal man.” Interestingly, the great Aztec emperor Motecuhzoma (Montezuma) is alleged to have made a similar statement to the translator named Doña Marina (called La Malinche by the Aztecs):

Malinche, I know that these people of Tlascala with whom you are so friendly have told you that I am a sort of god or *Teule*, and keep nothing in any of my houses that is not made of silver and gold and precious stones...See now, Malinche, my body is made of flesh and blood like yours, and my houses and palaces are of stone, wood, and plaster

It would seem that the Lamanites also had an understanding of divine kingship, as illustrated by the statements made by King Lamoni and his servants in regards to Ammon's supernatural powers of strength and discernment. They thought of him as both the "Great Spirit" (Alma 18:11) and a "powerful or great king" (Alma 18:13). They weren't far off - Ammon was in fact the grandson of the great King Benjamin and one of the designated heirs to King Mosiah²'s throne at Zarahemla, even though he refused it along with his brothers (Mosiah 29:2-3). Just as King Benjamin had to emphasize his humanity to the Nephites, his grandson, Prince Ammon, had to do the same thing among the Lamanites. Arguably, they had both had experiences that elevated them above mere mortals and qualified them as divine rulers. For example, both Benjamin (Mosiah 3:2) and Ammon (Mosiah 27:11) had interacted with an angel - a supernatural sentient being - which makes them intermediaries between the natural and supernatural realms.

[SLIDE - BLOODLETTING] As part of the accession rituals, Maya rulers would pierce themselves with thorns, stingray spines, or obsidian blades with the intention of drawing their own blood. They would drip their blood onto bark paper and then burn it within a sacrificial bowl as they would incense, and the smoke was considered to be both an offering to the gods and a medium for the gods to manifest themselves to the kings. Blood was considered the most sacred of substances to the Maya, and offering it to the gods was a way to feed and sustain them. In return, the gods would provide rain and fertility for the king and his kingdom - the ruler was conducting these rituals on behalf of the community as a whole. Amulek may have been speaking against the practice of bloodletting when he taught the destitute Zoramites that "it shall not be a human sacrifice" (Alma 34:10) that will save them, for,

there is not any man that can sacrifice his own blood which will atone for the sins of another...Therefore, it is expedient that there should be a great and last sacrifice; and then shall there be, or it is expedient there should be, a stop to the shedding of blood; then shall the law of Moses be fulfilled (Alma 34:11;13).

Although there is some evidence that human sacrifice among the later Aztec civilization served an expiatory function, there is currently no evidence that bloodletting by earlier Mesoamerican rulers was done to atone for the sins of his people. Bloodletting was associated with agricultural fertility, which is linked to the cycle of death and rebirth, but it was not an expiatory sacrifice on behalf of his people. The Nephites, living among the larger Mesoamerican culture, would surely have been aware of the sacred nature of royal blood and the power it had to bring new life. King Benjamin, however, emphasized the fact that Christ was their Heavenly King (Mosiah 2:19) and that his blood had a power far beyond that of any earthly king - the power to atone for the sins of the world (Mosiah 3:11).

[SLIDE – BENJAMIN] It is fascinating, however, to read the reaction of Benjamin’s people after their eyes are opened to how desperately in need they are of Christ – they cry out, “Apply the atoning blood of Christ that we may receive forgiveness of our sins, and our hearts may be purified; for we believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God”. But who are they crying out to? Is it the Lord? No - they are crying out to Benjamin. As a people enculturated in the larger Mesoamerican system, they cry out to their king, who they see as an intermediary between themselves and their god.

The ritual component of this gathering is sometimes overlooked. The people of Zarahemla had gathered that day not only to hear the words of their king, but also to perform rituals of animal sacrifice and burnt offerings at the temple (Mosiah 2:3). Moreover, after hearing Benjamin convey the words given to him by an angel, a supernatural sentient being, his people entered into a covenant with God (Mosiah 5:5).

[SLIDE – TIKAL] The temple was the favored place for public royal rituals among the Maya. Maya temple complexes were designed with public performances in mind, whereas private rituals could be performed in the seclusion of royal palaces or at sacred natural features, such as caves. Mesoamerican temples served as a ‘focusing lens’ to concentrate attention on ideal models of existence and behavior.

[SLIDE – SAN BARTOLO] For example, archaeologists have agreed that the recently discovered murals of San Bartolo, Guatemala were used anciently for didactic purposes; as teaching tools in the temple. They date to the Preclassic Maya period, about 100 BC. Non-LDS archaeologists interpret the iconography found within the walls of this sacred temple as dealing with issues of creation and leaving paradise, the offering of sacrifice to gods, blood sacrifice by a god, and ultimately enthronement of both a god and a mortal king. Without divulging anything inappropriate, I will merely state that our own temple rites deal with issues of creation, sacrifice, and ultimately enthronement.

Unfortunately, the specific functions of temples is not discussed in much detail in the Book of Mormon, although it is clear that it was a place for gathering (3 Nephi 11:1), gospel instruction, including creation themes (Jacob 1:17; Alma 16:13), a place for sacrifices and burnt offerings (Mosiah 2:3), covenant-making (Mosiah 5:5), a place to learn to pray and the order of prayer (3 Nephi 13:5-13; 3 Nephi 17:13-16), a place where God could manifest himself (Alma 10:2; 3 Nephi 11:8), a place where kings could address their people (Mosiah 2:5; Mosiah 7:17), and a place for kings to accede to the throne.

Concerning accession, the terms *anoint* and *consecrate* are both used in association with Book of Mormon rites of accession, although the distinction is not clearly drawn in the text. What is clear, however, is that someone oversees the enthronement and effectually places the king on the throne. While there are no Maya glyphs that have been translated as *anoint* or *consecrate*, there is an expression that is commonly used that suggests a similar, if not identical, concept.

[SLIDE – TEMPLE XIX] The phrase *u-kab-j-ij* designates a hierarchical relationship between two elites and is used in contexts where one elite individual is ‘overseeing’ or somehow responsible for the enthronement of the new ruler. For example, in the Temple XIX texts from Palenque, the high priest ‘oversees’ the king’s enthronement and presents him with the royal insignia.

[SLIDE – TEMPLE XIX] Interestingly, the text also explicitly states that this is a reenactment of the premortal enthronement of GI (the principle member of the Palenque Triad) under the hands of the supreme creator deity *Itzamnaaj*.

The anointing of a new king among the Maya began with a private ceremony held in the royal palace, attended by priests, scribes, and a select few elites. The public presentation of the new king occurred later at the temple, where he would be displayed in his full royal regalia. Likewise, according to Stephen D. Ricks, “Mosiah was first designated king in a private setting, presumably at the royal palace (Mosiah 1:9-12), and then presented to the people in the public gathering at the temple”.

For the ancient Maya, the right to rule clearly came by descent from the gods, but often these gods were historical ancestors that only became gods after their deaths. [SLIDE OF ALTAR Q] On Altar Q from Copan, we see a literal ‘passing of the torch’ of rulership from *K'inich Yax K'uk Mo*, the dynasty’s long-dead but apotheosized ancestor, to the sixteenth ruler, *Yax Pasaj Chan Yoaat*. By claiming descent from a deified ancestor, a king imbued himself with a portion of his ancestors’ divinity through birthright, and his legitimacy as ruler thus became firmly established in the minds of the people.

[SLIDE – KINGLIST POST] In the Book of Mormon, rulers placed a similar emphasis on tracing their genealogies to their dynastic founders; often back to members of the original party that left Jerusalem. For example, Lamoni traced his genealogy back to Ishmael (Alma 17:21), King Ammoron (Alma 52:3) traced his genealogy back to Zoram (Alma 54:23), and among the Nephites, “the kingdom had been conferred upon none but those who were descendants of Nephi” (Mosiah 25:13). Even after the institution of kingship was eliminated, many of the chief judges that sat in rulership were Nephi’s descendants (Alma₂, Helaman₂, Nephi₃). Even Nephi, the first king among his people and the dynastic founder, is careful to tell us he is a son of Lehi, who is a descendant of Joseph, ruler over Egypt (1 Nephi 5:14). Among the Jaredites, Ether traced his genealogy through nearly thirty predecessors, back to Jared, their dynastic founder (Ether 1).

King Benjamin, ever the egalitarian, doesn’t rehearse his own genealogy back to a prominent apotheosized ruler in an effort to aggrandize himself. Rather, he declared that all of his people were descended from the “heavenly King” (Mosiah 2:19) because they had become “children of Christ, his sons, and his daughters; for behold, this day he hath spiritually begotten you” (Mosiah 5:7). All of King Benjamin’s people were given a divine ancestor at the temple that day, the significance of which we will return to later (Mosiah 15:11).

Ancient Maya kings had at least two names, their ‘youthful’ or childhood name, and a new name received upon accession to the throne. According to Jacob, the Nephite rulers were also called by a new name upon accession:

The people having loved Nephi exceedingly . . . wherefore, the people were desirous to retain in remembrance his name. And whoso should reign in his stead were called by the people second Nephi, third Nephi, and so forth, according to the reigns of the kings; and thus they were called by the people, let them be of whatever name they would (Jacob 1:10–11).

The new names chosen by Maya kings were almost always associated with a celestial deity, often one used by a predecessor. Most supreme rulers also prefixed their name with the title *K'inich*, the name of the sun god. By naming themselves after gods, they emphasized their divine authority and elevated themselves above everyone else. King Benjamin, perhaps in an effort to distance his dynasty from the pattern of self-aggrandizement and reinforce the concept of equality among his people, gave all those that entered into the covenant a new name, that of their celestial deity, the name of Christ (1 Nephi 1:9).

Which brings us to the main focus of my paper. As we understand the doctrine, as Children of Christ we are heirs to the kingdom, even joint heirs with Christ. As heirs, we are entitled to all the Father hath, even thrones in the celestial kingdom. Among the Classic Maya, to be a god was to be apotheosized as the Sun God and to sit on a throne in the celestial kingdom.

[SLIDE – CHUM] The ancient Maya glyph that denotes accession is *chum*, which means “to be seated”, and every time it is used in the glyphic corpus it refers to accession to some office. Significantly, the Book of Mormon uses the phrase “sit down” nine times, and in each and every instance it is in the context of accession to the throne. We are encouraged several times to look forward to the day when we can “sit down with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob”, who we know from Section 132 have already received their exaltations and sit upon thrones in glory.

As I mentioned earlier, Classic period rulers certainly considered themselves holy, but they never explicitly claimed that they were gods during their lifetime, but after death, they typically resurrect as the maize god and are then apotheosized as the sun god, and for obvious reasons; the Maize God and the Sun God were both linked to cycles of birth, life, death and resurrection – the sun in its daily journey, and maize in its seasons of planting and harvest. [SLIDE PAKALS SARCOPHOGUS] Perhaps the most well-known example of resurrection as the maize god comes from Pakal’s sarcophagus at the site of Palenque. The scene depicts Pakal’s simultaneous descent into the jaws of the underworld and his resurrection as the maize god. [SLIDE – ROSALILA] A beautiful example of apotheosis as the sun god comes from the Rosalila temple, which was built to honor *K'inich Yax K'uk Mo'*, the founder of the Copan dynasty. The head of the sun god (*K'inich*) is shown emerging from the mouths of serpent-winged birds, which are marked with features of both quetzal birds (*k'uk'*) and macaws (*mo'*). The imagery not only visually depicts the name *K'inich Yax K'uk' Mo'* but conveys the message that he had merged with and had therefore been apotheosized as the sun god after his death.

Similarly, the Nephites expected to be apotheosized after death, conceptually merging themselves with both the Father and the Son:

And for this cause ye shall have fulness of joy; and ye shall sit down in the kingdom of my Father; yea, your joy shall be full, even as the Father hath given me fulness of

joy; and *ye shall be even as I am, and I am even as the Father; and the Father and I are one* (3 Nephi 28:10) (emphasis mine).

Just as the ancient Maya kings expected to be merged with the sun and/or maize gods – gods of death and rebirth – so too the Nephites expected to be made one with the resurrecting Christ and with the Father.

[SLIDE TIKAL 31] The ancient Maya associated the sky with the glorious celestial realm and frequently depicted deified ancestors looking down from the skyband or heavens, as opposed to looking up from the dark underworld. For example, on Tikal Stela 31, the deceased *Yax Nuun Ayiin* takes on the form of the ancestral sun god as he overlooks his son *Siyaj Chan K'awiil II*. This practice of depicting ancestors or gods overseeing the affairs of the earth from the heavens has its origins in Olmec art (Martin and Grube 2000:26-27). In the Book of Mormon, Ammon explained a similar concept to King Lamoni:

The heavens is a place where God dwells and all his holy angels. And king Lamoni said: Is it above the earth? And Ammon said: Yea, and he looketh down upon all the children of men; and he knows all the thoughts and intents of the heart; for by his hand were they all created from the beginning. (Alma 18:30-32)

[SLIDE – XIBALBA] There is a common misconception that the only afterlife expected by ancient Mesoamericans was the dark underworld, known by names such as Metnal or Xibalba (which means Place of Fright). Recent scholarship has shown that there was clearly a belief in a celestial paradise as well, reserved for those who could overcome the gods of the underworld. Evidence from the Classic period Maya suggests that only those who were kings or other high nobles could look forward to resurrection and a return to this celestial paradise, called 'Flower World' or 'Flower Mountain'.

[SLIDE – FLOWER MOUNTAIN] Flower Mountain is depicted in Maya art not only as the desired destination after a ruler's death, where he would be deified as the sun god, but also as the paradisiacal place of creation and origin. Evidence for the belief in Flower Mountain dates to the Middle Formative Olmec – around 900-400 B.C. – and is also attested to among the Late Preclassic and Classic Maya as well, from about 300 B.C. – A.D. 900. The tradition even continued into modern Native American groups in American southwest. The great Mesoamerican scholar Karl Taube argues that, "although the notion of a floral paradise recalls Christian ideals of the original garden of Eden and the afterlife, the solar component is wholly Mesoamerican" (Taube 2004:70). To Latter-day Saints, of course, the "solar component" of the afterlife likely feels 'wholly Mormon,' as we hope we will be among those "whose bodies are celestial, whose glory is that of the sun, even the glory of God, the highest of all, whose glory the sun of the firmament is written of as being typical" (D&C 76; cf. 1 Corinthians 15:41).

Now, if only kings could be receive the glory of sun among the ancient Maya, how do we resolve this with the doctrine taught in the Book of Mormon that *all* may be saved in the kingdom of God through Christ? King Benjamin gave us the answer. The same rituals that were used to deify kings were made available to all the saints. Give everyone a divine ancestry through becoming a spiritually begotten child of Christ, give them a new name, rely on the blood sacrifice of their Heavenly King, put them under covenant at the temple, and have them arise from the dust and sit down upon thrones as heirs to celestial kingdom, whose glory is that of the sun.

[SLIDE - SUNSTONE] In conclusion, accession rituals transformed ancient Mesoamerican heirs into kings, and after death, these kings inherited, in the most literal sense, the celestial paradise of the sun. Likewise, our ancient Book of Mormon forebears and we Latter-day saints claim a divine birthright and engage in rituals that are designed to make us kings and queens, even heirs to the Celestial Kingdom. As Alma so eloquently stated, “And then shall the righteous shine forth in the kingdom of God” (Alma 40:25).

Thank You.