



10-1-1980

A Certain Testimony: A Mormon Epic R. Paul
Cracroft

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Recommended Citation

Tate, Charles D. Jr. (1980) "A Certain Testimony: A Mormon Epic R. Paul Cracroft," *BYU Studies Quarterly*: Vol. 20 : Iss. 4 , Article 13.
Available at: <http://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol20/iss4/13>

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BOOK REVIEWS

CRACROFT, R. PAUL. *A Certain Testimony: A Mormon Epic*. Salt Lake City: Epic West, 1979. 479 pp. \$10.65.

Reviewed by Charles D. Tate, Jr., editor of *BYU Studies* and professor of English at Brigham Young University.

Those who argue that there is little good Mormon poetry would do well to read Paul Cracroft's epic poem, *A Certain Testimony*. Although there have been claims of epic poetry among earlier Mormon writers, Cracroft's is the first that fits the definition of epic accepted in literary circles: "A long narrative poem in elevated style presenting characters of high position in a series of adventures which form an organic whole through their relation to a central figure of heroic proportions and through their development of episodes important to the history of a nation or race."¹

A Certain Testimony is a long narrative poem (over 15,000 lines) divided into twelve books like Virgil's *Aeneid* (13,237 lines in Mandelbaum's translation) and Milton's *Paradise Lost* (10,546 lines). Although its style is elevated above that of everyday language, it is significantly less poetic than Milton's. Reading through *Paradise Lost*, one often stops to savor its poetic beauty, but one finds few truly poetic passages to stop for in *A Certain Testimony*.

The characters and episodes of the poem fit the definition of epic poetry. The epic hero is Jehovah-Jesus Christ, but his presence in the poem is not as dominating as is Aeneas' nor his characterization as clearly drawn as is the Lord's in Book III of *Paradise Lost*. Nevertheless, Jehovah-Jesus Christ is the prime moving force of all that happens.

Beginning at the Creation of the world by Jehovah-Jesus Christ, Cracroft traces the religious history of the world as recorded in the Bible through to the Tower of Babel. Then from the Tower, his narrative goes to the Americas with the Jaredites as recorded in the Book of Mormon. The detail of begettings in the Book of Ether proves to

¹William Flint Thrall and Addison Hibbard, *A Handbook to Literature*, 2nd ed. rev., ed. C. Hugh Holman (New York: Odyssey Press, 1960), pp. 174-75.

be too much to keep track of even for the Book of Mormon student. It would have helped us all had Cracroft summarized some of the lineage passages rather than try to tie them all into his poem.

After showing the destruction of the Jaredites because they rejected Jehovah-Jesus Christ, Cracroft picks up the narrative with Lehi's being instructed to leave Jerusalem and go into the wilderness. The narrative then follows the Book of Mormon episodes to the hiding up of the record plates by Moroni (books 5 through 11). Book 12 gives a brief summary of the present-day involvement of Jehovah-Jesus Christ in the lives of the prophets of the Restoration from Joseph Smith to Joseph Fielding Smith (who was President when the poem was finished), followed by a concern that the environment will turn "sour, with water, air and soil in league/ with Lucifer to harass man and cry/ for studied end to mankind's progeny" (p. 472). Yet he is optimistic that "the Eagle and the Dove/ will lift man's eyes once more to God in love" (p. 473).

The whole is closed off by a five-page Epilogue which argues for fuller understanding and acceptance of creative work such as *A Certain Testimony*, with the final claim that the poet by writing as he must can "make himself a man, / So with the Church to fortify God's Plan" (p. 479).

That *A Certain Testimony* comes in a ways behind the accepted epic giants in the literature of the Western World does not say that it is not a good poem. Few poems can match Virgil's *Aeneid* or Milton's *Paradise Lost*. *A Certain Testimony* is a very significant poem, especially because the poet is willing to use the form of the giants to express his insights and views of life of this world and to be compared to the *Aeneid* and *Paradise Lost*. While his message is of greater import because it presents fuller truth, his presentation is at times didactic and yet at other times overlooks important points of understanding that would show his message more fully. The presentation of the visit of the Resurrected Christ to the Nephites as recorded in 3 Nephi reflects a shallow reading of the source material and a weak rendition of one of the most overt moments in the life of the epic hero. The poem also suffers from a twentieth-century equating sin with sex. Any time there is a problem with sin in the narrative of the poem, such as when the Nephite boats were driven backwards by the storms of the sea because of wickedness, the poet sees that wickedness as sexual.

Whatever its shortcomings, *A Certain Testimony* is the best epic poem by a Mormon writer produced thus far. Paul Cracroft must be praised, first for his willingness to write the poem, which took years of

work and writing, and second for fighting the publication fight to get it published. I read the poem in manuscript several years ago and recommended its publication, but increased printing costs and an anticipated small interest in literary works on the part of Mormon readers kept the poem in manuscript form until Paul set the type himself (and did an excellent job; I saw very few typographical errors) and then published it, much at his own expense. A milestone in Mormon literature, *A Certain Testimony* ought to be in the library of everyone who loves good literature.