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### Annual FARMS Lecture: The Book of mormon, Designed for Our Day

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**Abstract** Rust, in the third annual FARMS Book of Mormon lecture delivered on 27 February 1990, examined literary aspects of the book that develop the primary purposes set out on the title page. He discussed the elements characteristic of an epic that will allow modern-day Lamanites to trust in the Lord's deliverance and detailed literary (especially poetic) presentations of covenants in the Book of Mormon. Literary elements combine with the influence of the Spirit to testify of the purposes of the Book of Mormon.

# The Book of Mormon, Designed for Our Day

Annual F.A.R.M.S. Lecture  
27 February 1990

Richard Dilworth Rust  
University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

It's a pleasure to speak with you this evening; I'm grateful to Noel Reynolds and the other directors of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies for inviting me. I wish to share some thoughts about how literary elements are a part of the fabric of the Book of Mormon to help meet its purposes of reaching Lamanites, Jews, and Gentiles today.

"The Book of Mormon . . . was written for our day," President Benson asserted recently. "Under the inspiration of God, who sees all things from the beginning," he said, Mormon "abridged centuries of records, choosing the stories, speeches, and events that would be most helpful to us."<sup>1</sup> Hugh Nibley, who might be called the patron saint of F.A.R.M.S., has similarly said that "the matter in the Book of Mormon was selected, as we are often reminded, with scrupulous care and with particular readers in mind. For some reason there has been chosen for our attention a story of how and why two previous civilizations on this continent were utterly destroyed."<sup>2</sup> Our own world at the end of the twentieth century, Nibley believes, "is

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<sup>1</sup> Ezra Taft Benson, "The Book of Mormon: Keystone of Our Religion," *Ensign* (November 1986): 4-7. In October 1986, President Benson reaffirmed what he had said in the April 1975 General Conference: "The Book of Mormon was written for us today. God is the author of the book. . . . Mormon, the ancient prophet after whom the book is named, abridged centuries of records. God, who knows the end from the beginning, told him what to include in his abridgment that we would need for our day" ("The Book of Mormon Is the Word of God," *Ensign* [May 1975]: 63). Daniel H. Ludlow expressed much the same view in his article, "The Book of Mormon Was Written for Our Day," *The Instructor* (July 1966): 265: "Through the power of vision and prophecy, these writers were shown the people of our day, for whom they were writing their records. Thus, from the voluminous records at their disposal, they were able to select those principles and experiences which would be most useful in helping us to meet our challenges and solve our problems."

<sup>2</sup> Hugh Nibley, *The Prophetic Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1989), 365.

the world with which the Book of Mormon is primarily concerned.”<sup>3</sup>

Looking at this world, Moroni declares, “I speak unto you as if ye were present, and yet ye are not. But behold, Jesus Christ hath shown you unto me, and I know your doing” (Mormon 8:35). Writers such as Moroni and his father are, however, actually secondary authors of the Book of Mormon; the primary author is Jesus Christ. As Mormon affirms, “I . . . do write the things which have been commanded me of the Lord” (3 Nephi 26:12). Likewise, the premortal Savior told Joseph the Patriarch that Joseph Smith would write “the words which are expedient in my wisdom should go forth unto the fruit of thy loins” (2 Nephi 3:19).

The Book of Mormon, then, is prophecy designed specifically and intentionally for our day. When I say “designed,” I mean not only planned with a purpose but shaped artistically so that form and content are totally integrated as in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Handel’s *Messiah*, or Michelangelo’s Sistine chapel paintings. My love of great literature and my testimony of the gospel of Jesus Christ converge in a consideration of the Book of Mormon as literature. I have come to realize that the literary aspects of the Book of Mormon are essential to its purposes. In the book, God speaks to us in the most powerful, effective way possible by interconnecting truth, goodness, and beauty.

To speak of beauty in this way is to say that literary elements such as form, imagery, poetry, and narratives help teach and motivate us in ways that touch our hearts and souls as well as our minds. We “see feelingly,” as Gloucester puts it in another context in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*; we gain what Nathaniel Hawthorne calls “heart-knowledge.”

By looking at the intended latter-day purposes of the Book of Mormon, let us see some ways the Book of Mormon is a work of immediacy which, as great literature does, *shows* as well as *tells*. These purposes are set out in the title page—which Joseph Smith says Moroni put on the last leaf of the plates. They are (1) to show a remnant of the House of Israel—the Lamanites—the “great things the Lord hath done for their fathers” and help them know “the covenants of the Lord,” which assure them “that they are not cast off forever,” and (2) to convince “the Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the Christ, the

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 500.



Eternal God, manifesting himself unto all nations.” Of course, what is true for one of the three audiences for the Book of Mormon can be applied to another.

**To show “what great things the Lord hath done for their fathers”**

To show “what great things the Lord hath done for their fathers” (title page). The initially most important “great thing” is the Lord’s deliverance of Lehi and his family from destruction in Jerusalem and miraculously bringing them across waters to the promised land in a manner reminiscent of the exodus of the children of Israel from Egypt (see 2 Nephi 1:1; Mosiah 27:16; Alma 9:9; 3 Nephi 5:20; and Ether 7:27). To have a feeling for this deliverance—which is also a spiritual deliverance—it is first essential that modern-day Lamanites know their cultural history. Just as the brass plates had been essential to the cultural and spiritual preservation of the Nephites, so the Book of Mormon is necessary to the ultimate spiritual preservation of Lehi’s living descendants. Lamanites today can “arise from the dust” (2 Nephi 1:23) in learning their true identity from the precious record which itself is brought forth “out of the dust” (Moroni 10:27).

Although readers might not recognize it as such, the literary form of the epic is part of the design of the Book of Mormon to involve latter-day Lamanites in a discovery of their origins and history, of their possibilities for physical and spiritual fulfillment in the land of promise in which they have been placed, and of God’s relationship with them in times past, present, and future. Especially as we consider the Book of Mormon as a living epic, we can see how the book helps the children of Lehi realize that the “great things” the Lord has done for their fathers are continuing for them today.

So how is the Book of Mormon an epic? First, an epic comes out of a crisis. This is certainly true here: Mormon is abridging the entire history of the Nephite nation at the time when that civilization is being annihilated. And the Book of Mormon contains the elements characteristic of an epic: amplitude; nationalistic emphasis, with narrative motifs including warfare and rulership; an historical impulse, with allusions to key events in the life of a nation; a supernatural

context in which the action occurs; and an epic structure of episodic plot with recurrent patterns or situations.<sup>4</sup>

We can see five main features that Meyer Abrams notes literary epics commonly have:

1. The hero is a figure of great national or international importance.
2. The setting is ample in scale, sometimes world-wide, or even larger.
3. The action involves heroic deeds in battle or a long and arduous journey intrepidly accomplished.
4. In these great actions supernatural beings take an interest and an active part.
5. An epic poem is a ceremonial performance and is deliberately given a ceremonial style proportionate to its great subject and architecture.<sup>5</sup>

Some other characteristics of most epics are that events are related to a central action or theme, a muse is invoked, and the narration starts in the middle of the action and at a critical point.

## 1. Hero

The word "hero" in connection with the Book of Mormon brings a number of persons immediately to mind: great prophet-warriors such as Nephi, Gideon, Ammon, Captain Moroni, Moronihah, and Mormon. Lehi himself, as Hugh Nibley has shown in *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, is a product of an Heroic Age.<sup>6</sup> The book contains many captivating individual

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<sup>4</sup> Leland Ryken, *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1987), 127-29.

<sup>5</sup> Meyer H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 5th ed. (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1988), 52.

<sup>6</sup> Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, vol. 6 in *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley*, 3d ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1988), 29-35. In "Tenting, Toll, and Taxing," *The Western Political Quarterly* 19 (1966): 599, Nibley says regarding an epic milieu, "It was not until early in the present century that H. M. Chadwick [in *The Heroic Age*] pointed out what should have been obvious to everyone, namely that epic literature, a large and important segment of the human record, is the product not of unrestrained poetic fancy but of real years of terror and gloom through which the entire race has been forced to pass from time to time. We now have good reason to believe . . . that the

deeds of valor, courage, and strength such as Nephi's lone quest for wild game, Alma's hand-to-hand combat with Amlici, Ammon's protecting the king's flocks at the waters of Sebus, and Captain Moroni's bearing valiantly his title of liberty at the head of freedom-loving forces. Yet unlike heroes in an epic such as Homer's *Iliad*, Book of Mormon heroes humbly give credit to the Lord whenever strength or resourcefulness is shown. Moreover, like Captain Moroni, they seek peace and do everything they can to avoid bloodshed.

In an epic there is a vicarious attachment of readers or hearers to the hero; in this respect, it is important for latter-day Lamanites to acknowledge Nephi as their hero and leader. Just as the Lord used Nephi the person as the leader of Lehi's family to the promised land, so the record of Nephi will do a great thing in leading the Lamanites to a heavenly promised land. It is appropriate, then, that all mortal heroes are contained within one hero, Nephi, and that he, in turn, is a representative of Christ. At the fountainhead of his nation and people, Nephi is a prophesying after whom subsequent kings are titled (much as "Caesar" also became synonymous with "emperor") and from whom the central Book of Mormon group is named. Further, we find leaders such as Alma, Amulek, and Mormon claiming to be pure descendants of Nephi and identifying with him (see Mosiah 17:2; Alma 10:2-3; Mormon 1:5).

"I, Nephi," the first words of the Book of Mormon, thus suggest not only "I, individual," but "I, king," and "I, people"—indeed, a whole race of people going down through time. In the frame of the book, Mormon becomes in effect the last Nephi, a spokesman for his nation who comments on its main spiritual events and, with his son, concludes its record and preserves it in condensed form for future generations.

The truly central hero of the Book of Mormon is Jesus Christ. It is he who gives direction to the other heroes and whose redeeming power is affirmed throughout the book, climaxing at his personal visit. He is the hero whom the others represent. As Ammon declares, "I know that I am nothing; as to my strength I am weak; therefore I will not boast of myself, but I will boast of my God, for in his strength I can do all things"

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violence of the elements that forms the somber backdrop of the 'Epic Milieu' was more than a literary convention."

(Alma 26:12). Throughout the book, it is Jesus Christ who lifts, heals, and redeems.

## 2. Setting

Looking at the second major element of epics, we recognize at once that settings in the Book of Mormon are indeed vast and involve large-scale migrations of peoples and populations of whole lands and islands of the sea.

The setting of the main story is implicitly the known Mideastern world, the Indian and Pacific oceans, and the promised land of America. The Jaredite story has a similarly vast setting, and is a concentrated epic contained within the Nephite story as a second witness to the extremes of the Nephite rise and fall of a civilization.

Each setting also has a spiritual plane, the world of God's eternal purposes "prepared from the foundation of the world" and the ultimate destiny of mankind (Alma 42:26).

## 3. Action

As there are both physical and spiritual dimensions to the setting, so the action of the Book of Mormon takes place on human and divine levels. The human is mainly a cycle of humbling leading to repentance leading to prosperity leading to pride leading to destruction; on the divine level, ultimate blessings or punishments are promised.

In this story of a people (indeed, of any people who possess the land) there is a firm connection between righteousness and existence as a nation. This is evident on the larger scale with the Nephite civilization, and is shown in a relatively brief example in the fate of the Jaredites, who "did not repent; therefore they have been destroyed" (Alma 37:26). As with the Nephite civilization, this is the dark end of an earthly society—but against that is the continuation of a divine society: Ether and Moroni end their records with references to being "saved in the kingdom of God" and having "rest in the paradise of God."

While the book's epic stories do not actually begin "in the middle of the action," we are told what will happen in the future before getting the details of major events such as the destruction of the Nephites, the annihilation of the Jaredites, the coming of Christ to the Nephites, the destruction of the wicked city Ammonihah, and the success of the sons of Mosiah. Especially



at the beginning of his record, Mormon focuses on why the Nephites were destroyed and on the question of the eventual eternal destiny of the people, a remnant of whom, Mormon prays, will receive the life-giving message of his sacred record. For all who receive the record, especially the Lamanite "remnant," this epic device tempers the Lord's great deliverance of the fathers with the ultimate self-destruction of their descendants; it concentrates attention on the reasons for success and failure and points the way to avoid the fate of this people. One can have the perspective of Alma: He always remembers the captivity and deliverance of his fathers, he rejoices in the present repentance of many of his brethren, and he looks forward to bringing some soul to repentance, with the hope that his redeemed brethren will enter the timeless state of the heavenly kingdom of God to "go no more out" (Alma 29:17: cf. 1-17).

#### 4. Supernatural Beings

As for Abrams' fourth characteristic, the hallmark of the Book of Mormon is the way supernatural beings are involved in events, from Lehi's initial vision of God's dealings with man in the duration of the earth's existence to Moroni's declaration that at the judgment bar God shall affirm the truth of his writings.

There is hardly a page of the Book of Mormon that does not contain some reference to divine intervention or revelation. In the initial pages we are told of Lehi's vision of God on his throne and see the angel protecting Nephi against the physical abuse of Laman and Lemuel; we learn of Alma the Elder's people fleeing their captors during the day while their guards were in a profound sleep caused by the Lord, and of Alma's son being confronted by an angel. Most noteworthy are the appearances of Jesus Christ.

Overarching all the interrelationships of heavenly powers and men are revelations given to Lehi, Nephi, Mormon, and others of the world from the beginning to the end thereof. One effect of this is to extend the epic scope of the Book of Mormon to include all mankind; another is to illustrate that past, present, and future are one eternal round with the Lord.

#### 5. Ceremonial Performance

As for the fifth characteristic, at first glance, the Book of Mormon is hardly a poem, let alone a ceremonial performance.

Yet the pattern of divine revelations as well as prayers and many other impassioned declarations or appeals is actually related to Hebraic poetry.

The ceremonial quality of the book is supported, too, by the numerous formal occasions in which people often are taught, such as Lehi's last injunctions to his sons, King Benjamin's address, and the parting testimonies of Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni. In one of those occasions, the incident of Mosiah's reading the records of the people of Zeniff to those gathered at Zarahemla, we see a parallel with the Book of Mormon as a whole: they (and thus the reader) learn about a people through their records. Mosiah's audience had mixed feelings about what they heard—they rejoiced over those Zeniffites who had been delivered out of bondage, and shed tears of sorrow over their brethren slain by the Lamanites; they were grateful for God's power in behalf of Alma and his people, and were pained for the plight of the sinful Lamanites. That same degree of deep feeling is possible to present-day descendants of Lehi who learn about the peoples of the Book of Mormon.

Paradoxically, then, the record brought forth "out of the dust" of centuries past becomes a living epic in appealing to descendants of the people treated in the record, in showing them their past, present, and future. It gives them their origins, presents the truth about the heroic Nephi (the people as well as the man and his subsequent representatives), shows God's dealings with their people over a millennium of time, and challenges them to "come forth out of obscurity" (2 Nephi 1:23).

As an active epic, the Book of Mormon story of a people has yet to be completed. For the Lamanite (and also for the Jew and the Gentile), the Book of Mormon is both history and prophecy. It says to the Lamanite of today: See who you are! Know that you are a part of an illustrious covenant people. Know that while you can see the end of your earlier history from the beginning, the final end has not been reached. The epic story is still alive in you. Know that like your fathers the Anti-Nephi-Lehies, you can repent, receive the gospel, and not only prosper in the land temporally, but, more importantly, be rewarded with life everlasting in the eternal promised land.

Looking at our day, Lehi prophesied that the plates of brass would come forth to his seed as well as to all nations and people, not "dimmed any more by time" (1 Nephi 5:19; cf. 5:18). Likewise, the Book of Mormon plates, as Alma instructed his son Helaman, were destined to "retain their



brightness” (Alma 37:4-5). And how do they retain their brightness? They come alive for the audience which receives them. They are a continuing epic of Lehi’s people. On an even larger scale, they give meaning to man’s general destiny.

**“That they may know the covenants of the Lord, that they are not cast off forever”**

“That they may know the covenants of the Lord, that they are not cast off forever” (title page). While the word “covenants” in the second purpose can refer both to the Abrahamic covenant and to individual covenants such as baptism, it first of all refers to the Lord’s promise to Lehi and his posterity down to the Lamanites today. As Lehi says, “We have obtained a land of promise, a land which is choice above all other lands; a land which the Lord God hath covenanted with me should be a land for the inheritance of my seed. Yea, the Lord hath covenanted this land unto me, and to my children forever, and also all those who should be led out of other countries by the hand of the Lord” (2 Nephi 1:5; see also 2 Nephi 10:7). Implicit in the covenant, as Nephi is told by an angel, is “that the Lord God will not suffer that the Gentiles will utterly destroy the mixture of thy seed, which are among thy brethren” (1 Nephi 13:30; see also 2 Nephi 9:53). Nephi further understands that when the fulness of the gospel is brought from the Gentiles to the remnant of Lehi’s family, then, he says, “shall the remnant of our seed know that they are of the house of Israel, and that they are the covenant people of the Lord; and then shall they know and come to the knowledge of their forefathers, and also to the knowledge of the gospel of their Redeemer, which was ministered unto their fathers by him; wherefore, they shall come to the knowledge of their Redeemer and the very points of his doctrine, that they may know how to come unto him and be saved” (1 Nephi 15:14).

Poetry is one of the literary elements that convey this covenant in a memorable and persuasive way to the hearts of latter-day Lamanites. Especially when Nephi and other prophets quote the voice of the Lord, prose turns to poetry of an impassioned, even exalted nature appropriate to convey divine meanings to the soul. As Robert Alter says in *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, “Since poetry is our best human model of intricately rich communication, not only solemn, weighty, and forceful but also densely woven with complex internal

connections, meanings, and implications, it makes sense that divine speech should be represented as poetry."<sup>7</sup>

In light of Nephi's comments on his "plain" style (e.g., 2 Nephi 25:7; 33:6), we may initially be surprised to find Nephi writing poetry. What he intends by the word "plain" is "easy to understand" (1 Nephi 14:23, 16:29)—indeed, "not to be misunderstood" (see 2 Nephi 25:7, 28). This is contrasted with the writings of Isaiah, which are hard to understand except with prophetic keys. But as Nephi loved the poetry of Isaiah, so he himself wrote poetically.

Let's look at this first of some twenty instances of the essential Book of Mormon promise and curse which goes directly to the heart of the covenantal relationship between God and man and which has immediate relevance for our day. Here, the poetry has the Hebraic characteristic of "a rhyme of thoughts, or a music of ideas"<sup>8</sup> or what might be called semantic parallelism. As we read this, notice also the shift from Nephi's prose to the Lord's poetry:

But, behold, Laman and Lemuel would not hearken unto my words; and being grieved because of the hardness of their hearts I cried unto the Lord for them. 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.

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.

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

And inasmuch as thou shalt keep my commandments,  
thou shalt be made a ruler and a teacher over thy  
brethren.

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<sup>7</sup> Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic, 1985), 141.

<sup>8</sup> Ruth Ap-Roberts, "Old Testament Poetry: The Translatable Structure," *Proceedings of the Modern Language Association* 92 (1977): 999.

For behold, in that day that they shall rebel against me,  
 I will curse them even with a sore curse,  
 and they shall have no power over thy seed  
 except they shall rebel against me also.  
 And if it so be that they shall rebel against me,  
 they shall be a scourge unto thy seed,  
 to stir them up in the ways of remembrance.  
 (1 Nephi 2:18-22)

We feel here a rhythm of cause-and-effect relationships (following the pattern “inasmuch as ye or they do this, ye or they shall receive that”); there is repetition with an ascending order of significance (the “land of promise” becomes the “land which I have prepared for you” and “land which is choice above all other lands”); and rebellion against Nephi is transformed into rebellion against God, with the real conflict being not between Nephites and Lamanites but rather a matter of keeping or not keeping the commandments.

For Lamanites in the latter days, this confirms in a memorable and elevated way that this covenant with Nephi comes from the Lord.

Those Lamanites are also part of the intended audience to whom Nephi declared poetically,

My soul delighteth in the covenants of the Lord  
 which he hath made to our fathers;  
 yea, my soul delighteth in his grace,  
 and in his justice,  
 and power,  
 and mercy  
 in the great and eternal plan of deliverance from death.  
 (2 Nephi 11:5)

Poetry is part of the fabric of Nephi’s final testimony directed to peoples living when the Book of Mormon would come forth. After testifying of his own redemption, he speaks first to “my people,” the remnants of Israel who are assured that through Christ they are not cast off forever.

I glory in plainness;  
 I glory in truth;  
 I glory in my Jesus,  
 for he hath redeemed my soul from hell.

I have charity for my people,  
and great faith in Christ that I shall meet many souls  
spotless at his judgment-seat.

I have charity for the Jew—  
I say Jew, because I mean them from whence I came.  
I also have charity for the Gentiles.

But behold, for none of these can I hope  
except they shall be reconciled unto Christ,  
and enter into the narrow gate,  
and walk in the strait path which leads to life,  
and continue in the path until the end of the day of  
probation.

And now, my beloved brethren,  
and also Jew,  
and all ye ends of the earth,  
hearken unto these words and believe in Christ;  
and if ye believe not in these words believe in Christ.  
And if ye shall believe in Christ ye will believe in these  
words,  
for they are the words of Christ,  
and he hath given them unto me;  
and they teach all men that they should do good.  
(2 Nephi 33:6-10)

This poetic close to his record is both Nephi's personal testimony and his solemn admonition to future generations. The resonating word in the first stanza is "glory" as the parallelism moves in a staircase or climactic manner. Personal redemption is followed by charity for others in the second stanza. In the third stanza, possible reconciliation with Christ intensifies in a dynamic way from "enter" to "walk" to "continue," with the length of the last line also suggesting continuity.

The fourth stanza presents the audience in a heightened manner: the earlier phrase "my people" becomes "my beloved brethren" and "the Gentiles" becomes "all ye ends of the earth." The echoing word here is "believe," with the simple admonition to "hearken unto these words and believe in Christ" moving to a more complex response to the relationship of "these words" and Christ.



As I trust you have felt, Book of Mormon poetry is intended to be heard as well as read (and this is true in any language in which the book appears). Particularly, in many parts of the Book of Mormon it is implied that the Lamanites will hear the message of the book, perhaps more so than read it. Moroni ends his witness to his brethren the Lamanites (including dissident Nephites) by anticipating the Lord as saying at the judgment bar, "Did I not declare my words unto you, which were written by this man, like as one crying from the dead, yea, even as one speaking out of the dust?" (Moroni 10:27). Might, then, the spoken word appeal significantly to a people attuned to poetry and the processes and rhythms of nature? to a people whose legends have come down through oral transmission and aural reception?

In respect to individual covenant-making which will restore Israel to the Lord, "Have faith, repent, and be baptized" is the message of most of the great discourses and parting declarations of the Book of Mormon (e.g., 2 Nephi 31, Alma 5, Alma 32, 3 Nephi 30, Moroni 7); it is the first major instruction of the resurrected Christ; and it is the climax of the Savior's directions to Moroni in the book of Ether. "Come unto me, O ye Gentiles, . . . Come unto me, O ye house of Israel. . . ." Moroni quotes Jesus as saying; "then shall ye know that the Father hath remembered the covenant which he made unto your fathers, O house of Israel. . . . Therefore, repent all ye ends of the earth, and come unto me, and believe in my gospel, and be baptized in my name" (Ether 4:13-15, 18). As is epitomized in these simple words, ultimately all of the Book of Mormon is centered in Jesus Christ and his gospel.

As literary elements, striking narratives in the Book of Mormon reinforce these principles and ordinances. The extensive account of Nephi and his brothers retrieving the brass plates gives point to the oft-quoted scriptural gem about faith that begins, "I will go and do the things which the Lord hath commanded . . ." (1 Nephi 3:7). We imaginatively share with the sons of Helaman their missionary experiences among the Lamanites and thus see faith in action. Faith is demonstrated in Alma and Amulek's dramatic release from prison, in the brother of Jared's experience in seeing the premortal Savior, and so forth. Likewise we are engaged extensively and memorably in the inner lives of those who repent, such as Alma the Younger who was visited by an angel and then "was three days and three nights in the most bitter pain and anguish of soul" (Alma 38:8);

Lamoni, the Lamanite king converted through the ministrations of Ammon, who had a movement through the hell of his soul into the joy of redemption similar to Alma's; and Zeezrom, the smooth-tongued lawyer who suffered a burning fever for his iniquities before being healed by Alma. Baptism is figuratively presented in the process of the Lehitites and Jaredites gaining redemption by going across or through water, and it is shown to us in the narrative of Alma at the waters of Mormon and the portrayal of Christ's disciples baptizing. The gift of the Holy Ghost is shown in scenes such as those of Nephi and Lehi in prison and of Jesus blessing the little children in which fire comes from heaven, surrounding holy persons.

Imagery, too, helps teach memorably and vividly the covenants of the Lord. Repeated references to literal or figurative images such as trees (especially the tree of life), water, dust, light, and fire confirm the purpose and power of covenants.

For example, faith in Jesus Christ the Creator, the Son of God, is shown in the contrast of light and dark and in reference to the four major elements of earth, air, fire, and water. These are brought together in the section of the Book of Mormon that prefigures the Second Coming of Christ. The chaos of things splitting apart and intense darkness—the opposite of creation—is associated with the death of the creator. Cities are sunk in the sea, Zarahemla is burned, and Moronihah is covered with earth. We are told:

It was the more righteous part of the people who were saved. . . . And they were spared and were not sunk and buried up in the earth; and they were not drowned in the depths of the sea; and they were not burned by fire, neither were they fallen upon and crushed to death; and they were not carried away in the whirlwind; neither were they overpowered by the vapor of smoke and of darkness. (3 Nephi 10:12-13)

Those elements that had been destructive before now bring great uplifting and salvation at the coming of "the Son of God, the Father of heaven and of earth, the Creator of all things from the beginning" (Helaman 14:12). Water is represented by baptism by immersion, air and fire by the Holy Ghost, and earth by people being instructed to build on the solidity of Christ's rock.



The Savior's coming to the Nephites out of darkness and great destruction is a miracle of light, establishing order where previously there had been chaos: After the earth "did cleave together again, that it stood" (3 Nephi 10:10), a Man descends out of heaven "clothed in a white robe" (3 Nephi 11:8) and declares, "I am the light and the life of the world" (3 Nephi 11:11). In a series of unforgettable instructions, the Savior teaches the gathered multitude to be "the light of this people" (3 Nephi 12:14), to realize that "the light of the body is the eye" (3 Nephi 13:22), that "I am the law, and the light" (3 Nephi 15:9), and that they should hold up their light "that it may shine unto the world" (3 Nephi 18:24). Then he causes the "light of his countenance" to shine upon his disciples, "and behold they were as white as the countenance and also the garments of Jesus" (3 Nephi 19:25).

Imagery also helps show latter-day Lamanites they are not cast off forever. Some of the most prominent images that do this are light and darkness, captivity and deliverance, wilderness or wandering, water or fruitfulness, and dust.

Let's look for a moment at the first, light and darkness: Helaman's sons Nephi and Lehi—whose names are particularly appropriate since they are representing the "fathers" to the Lamanites—are taken by Lamanites who initially are bloodthirsty but ignorant. These Lamanites are contrasted with the apostate Nephites who earlier had imprisoned Alma and Amulek. Feeling imperiled by the shaking earth and frightened by the voice which speaks to them three times, the Lamanites ask the crucial question: "What shall we do, that this cloud of darkness may be removed from overshadowing us?" (Helaman 5:40). The answer is, "Repent . . . until ye shall have faith in Christ" (Helaman 5:41). Doing so, they are brought into the light and each is encircled about by a pillar of fire (signifying the Holy Ghost). This powerfully presented event echoes the previous condition of the Lamanites being in spiritual darkness and anticipates the darkness and the thrice-repeated voice from heaven prior to the Savior's descent at Bountiful. As a pattern of conversion of latter-day Lamanites, this event images forth the prediction of Nephi that "the gospel of Jesus Christ shall be declared among them ["the remnant of our seed"]; wherefore, they shall be restored unto the knowledge of their fathers, and also to the knowledge of Jesus Christ, which was had among their fathers. And then shall they rejoice; for they shall know that it is a blessing unto them from the hand of God; and their

scales of darkness shall begin to fall from their eyes; and many generations shall not pass away among them, save they shall be a pure and a delightsome people" (2 Nephi 30:5-6).

A parallel transition might be seen in the temple where one learns about the origin and fall of man—necessary knowledge for us to appreciate fully our need for the rise of man through Christ, the Savior. In order to come into the light, the Lamanites need to know of the darkness into which their ancestors plunged.

As another example, dust is an image associated in the Book of Mormon with captivity, obscurity, destruction, and death. The wicked, Nephi prophesied, would be "brought low in the dust" (1 Nephi 22:23). The power of this metaphor is in the emergence of something precious out of nothingness. We discover that the Book of Mormon itself is prophesied to come "out of the dust" (Moroni 10:27), with other great blessings as well coming from the dust. Echoing Isaiah, Moroni cries: "Arise from the dust, O Jerusalem; yea, and put on thy beautiful garments" (Moroni 10:31). Laman and Lemuel are exhorted to "arise from the dust" (2 Nephi 1:14), to "awake from a deep sleep, yea, even from the sleep of hell" (2 Nephi 1:13). And after the Lamanites have been brought "down low in the dust, . . . yet the words of the righteous shall be written" (2 Nephi 26:15), and the Lord God shall speak concerning them "even as it were out of the ground; and their speech shall whisper out of the dust" (2 Nephi 26:16). In other words, latter-day Lamanites shall obtain renewal through repentance from a voice considered dead; life shall come out of death, words of eternal life from the voice out of the dust.

In its overall structure, the Book of Mormon begins and ends with concern for the Lamanites receiving the gospel. Reiterating the main points from the title page, Nephi says that through the Book of Mormon the Lamanites shall know they are of Israel and through it "they shall be restored unto the knowledge of their fathers, and also to the knowledge of Jesus Christ" (2 Nephi 30:5; see 30:1-6). Then toward the end, Mormon says much the same thing: "Know ye that ye are of the house of Israel. . . . Know ye that ye must come to the knowledge of your fathers, and repent of all your sins and iniquities, and believe in Jesus Christ" (Mormon 7:2, 5). At the physical center of the book is the narrative of the conversion of the Lamanites. This central part begins with the decree of the king of the Lamanites that Ammon and his brethren should be

free to preach the word of God throughout all the land, and ends with gratitude by these great missionaries for the thousands of Lamanite souls "brought to behold the marvelous light of God" (Alma 26:3). The narrative high point of the book is the ministry of the resurrected Savior. While discoursing to both the Lamanites and Nephites before him, Jesus as well speaks to their descendants, saying that the Book of Mormon "shall come forth of the Father, from [the Gentiles] unto you" (3 Nephi 21:3). He confirms the prophecies of Isaiah that in the last days the children of Lehi will be gathered both physically and spiritually. "Then is the fulfilling," he says, "of the covenant which the Father hath made unto his people, O house of Israel" (3 Nephi 20:12).

### "Convince that JESUS is the Christ" (Messiah)

To the Jew, the Book of Mormon testifies that "*Jesus* is the very Christ," the Messiah; to the Gentile, that "Jesus is the *Christ*, the Eternal God" (2 Nephi 26:12). A literary element New Testament writers used in appealing to the Jew was typology, comparisons or similitudes drawn from Old Testament persons or events which pointed to Christ or his gospel. (See "Jesus Christ, Types of" in the Topical Guide of the 1981 LDS edition of the Bible.) We might think of a type being like the printed impression left on a sheet of paper by a solid piece of metal or wood with a raised character on it; the solid character is like the antitype.

The Savior called attention to Old Testament typology by, for example, referring to manna as a similitude of him, saying, "I am the living bread which came down from heaven" (John 6:51). Nevertheless, most Jews were not able to see how the Mosaic law and rites prefigured Jesus Christ. As Paul said to the Corinthians, "When Moses is read, the veil is upon their heart. Nevertheless when it shall turn to the Lord, the veil shall be taken away" (2 Corinthians 3:15-16).

While the veil is penetrated to some extent in the New Testament, the Book of Mormon makes the veil transparent through clarifying typological interpretations.<sup>9</sup> First, the double

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<sup>9</sup> As George S. Tate, "The Typology of the Exodus Pattern in the Book of Mormon," in Neal E. Lambert, ed., *Literature of Belief: Sacred Scripture and Religious Experience* (Provo: Religious Studies Center, 1981), 245-62, has shown so well, Book of Mormon "typology is more conscious because the narrators are understood to possess the Christological



and triple meanings and typologies of Isaiah are oriented toward Christ in the Book of Mormon, making Isaiah a premier and convincing witness to the Jews that Jesus is the Messiah. A voice out of Israel's past, Isaiah establishes the grand connection with the House of Israel in the Old World, the remnant of Israel in the New World, and modern-day Israel. Moreover, Isaiah will be clearly understood at the time his prophecies are fulfilled (see 2 Nephi 25:7-8). That time, the Savior says, is when the Book of Mormon comes forth (3 Nephi 21) and the fulness of the gospel shall be preached to the Jews.

And they shall believe in me, that I am Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and shall pray unto the Father in my name.

Then shall their watchmen lift up their voice, and with the voice together shall they sing; for they shall see eye to eye.

Then will the Father gather them together again, and give unto them Jerusalem for the land of their inheritance. (3 Nephi 20:30-33)

All God-given events or God-directed persons in the Book of Mormon are types of Jesus Christ or his gospel. This is Nephi's point in saying, "Behold, my soul delighteth in proving unto my people the truth of the coming of Christ; for, for this end hath the law of Moses been given; and all things which have been given of God from the beginning of the world, unto man, are the typifying of [Christ]" (2 Nephi 11:4). Nephi's brother Jacob puts it this way: "And for this intent we keep the law of Moses, it pointing our souls to him [Christ]; and for this cause it is sanctified unto us for righteousness, even as it was accounted unto Abraham in the wilderness to be obedient unto the commands of God in offering up his son Isaac, which is a similitude of God and his Only Begotten Son" (Jacob 4:5). Again, Moses' lifting up a brass serpent to heal the people was a type of Christ's being lifted up on the cross. "And behold a type was raised up in the wilderness," Alma taught the Zoramites,

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key to the fulfillment of the types from Nephi's vision forward, a fulfillment underscored by the patterning of 3 Nephi around the Exodus." Focusing on the Exodus, he finds it "reverberates through the book, not only as theme but as pattern; and the overall design of the book generalizes the patterning of community in history while at the same time concentrating the Exodus in individual conversion" (ibid., 257).

“that whosoever would look upon it might live. And many did look and live” (Alma 33:19). Regarding the ordinances of the Melchizedek priesthood, Alma taught that they “were given after this manner, that thereby the people might look forward on the Son of God, it being a type of his order, or it being his order, and this that they might look forward to him for a remission of their sins, that they might enter into the rest of the Lord” (Alma 13:16; cf. 13:2-3). Abinadi recalls for King Noah’s court that all performances and ordinances in the Mosaic law “were types of things to come” (Mosiah 13:31), and insists, “If ye teach the law of Moses, also teach that it is a shadow of those things which are to come” (Mosiah 16:14). Amulek taught that “this is the whole meaning of the law, every whit pointing to that great and last sacrifice” (Alma 34:14). And Mormon says that the Anti-Nephi-Lehies “did look forward to the coming of Christ, considering that the law of Moses was a type of his coming. . . . Now they did not suppose that salvation came by the law of Moses; but the law of Moses did serve to strengthen their faith in Christ” (Alma 25:15-16).

To a Jew who reads it with an open mind and spirit, the Book of Mormon suggests manifold connections with the Old Testament. Regular reference to the deliverance of Lehi and his family from Jerusalem evokes the deliverance of Israel from Egypt. One is put in remembrance of Noah by Lehi and of Joseph the Patriarch by Joseph the son of Lehi as well as by Nephi—who is resisted by older brothers who do not want him to be a ruler over them, is bound and threatened with death, fulfills his father’s mission, and helps preserve the lives of those who earlier tried to take his life. Desiring to “be strong like unto Moses” (1 Nephi 4:2), he several times likens his situation to Moses (see 1 Nephi 4:3; 17:23-33); his brothers dare not touch him because of the power of God within him (see 1 Nephi 17:52); and like Moses he guides his people towards the promised land (see 1 Nephi 18:22).

A person attuned to typology can see how all the Book of Mormon prophets are types of Christ. Stilling the storm like Christ, Nephi was also directly like him in being an obedient son, a forgiving brother, a skillful carpenter, and a pilot. Mosiah is like Moses and Lehi, both of whom typify Christ’s leadership, in leading his people into the wilderness (see Omni 1:12). His son Benjamin also typifies Christ in shadowing the heavenly king (see Mosiah 2:19). Abinadi typifies Christ indirectly and directly: “His face shone with exceeding luster,

even as Moses' did while in the mount of Sinai" (Mosiah 13:5, which in turn reminds us of the luster of Christ at the Transfiguration and in Lehi's vision—1 Nephi 1:9); Abinadi is cast into prison for three days (Mosiah 17:5-6); his persecutors shed innocent blood (Mosiah 17:15, 19); and at death, Abinadi cries, "O God, receive my soul" (Mosiah 17:19). The three-day trance and conversion of Alma the Younger is a type of Christ's death, burial, and resurrection. Ammon is a type of Christ in saving many Lamanites who were "in darkness, yea, even in the darkest abyss, but behold, how many of them are brought to behold the marvelous light of God" (Alma 26:3); and like Moses, he leads his people through the wilderness to a promised land, giving the glory to Christ.

Type and antitype converge when the resurrected Savior says: "Behold, I am Jesus Christ, whom the prophets testified shall come into the world" (3 Nephi 11:10). "I have come to fulfill the law" (3 Nephi 15:5). "Behold, I am he of whom Moses spake, saying: A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your brethren, like unto me" (3 Nephi 20:23).

### Convince "that Jesus is the CHRIST"

For the Gentiles, a purpose of the Book of Mormon is to convince "that Jesus is the CHRIST" (title page). The Book of Mormon would come forth, Moroni declares prophetically, "in a day when it shall be said that miracles are done away" (Mormon 8:26). For Gentiles who profess a belief in Jesus but deny his power (see Mormon 8:28), the Book of Mormon convincingly testifies of a "God of miracles" (Mormon 9:11). In addition to a spiritual witness, various elements of design confirm Christ's divinity and power.

The book itself is a miracle, coming, Moroni says, "even as if one should speak from the dead" (Mormon 8:26). Its most prominent parts affirm the miraculous: the repeated exodus theme, including the escape by day of Alma and his people from their taskmasters (Mosiah 24:19-21); the freeing of prophets from prison; angelic visitations to Nephi, Alma, Amulek, and others; and, the most miraculous event of all, the personal visit of the resurrected Christ to the people.

As artistically designed for our time, the Book of Mormon does more than warn us about disbelief in miracles, it shows us, in ways that appeal to our imagination and memory, how to deal with that disbelief. Particularly, the intense dramatic dialogues



between Jacob and Sherem and Alma and Korihor present vivid responses to agnosticism. With this in mind, we might look at the first encounter. Through it, we can identify with Jacob in knowing a way to counter skeptical challenges to faith.

Sherem tries to subvert the three central tenets of Jacob's life and teachings. At the beginning of his book, Jacob had accepted Nephi's charge to engrave on the plates "preaching which was sacred, or revelation which was great, or prophesying . . . of Christ and his kingdom, which should come" (Jacob 1:4, 6). Now Sherem disputes Jacob's authority as a prophet who could know by revelation concerning the future. Jacob's recounting of the event shows both the source of his knowledge as well as an effective coping with Sherem.

But behold, the Lord God poured in his Spirit into my soul, insomuch that I did confound him in all his words. And I said unto him:

Deniest thou the Christ who shall come?

And he said:

If there should be a Christ, I would not deny him; but I know that there is no Christ, neither has been, nor ever will be.

And I said unto him:

Believest thou the scriptures?

And he said,

Yea.

And I said unto him:

Then ye do not understand them; for they truly testify of Christ. Behold, I say unto you that none of the prophets have written, nor prophesied, save they have spoken concerning this Christ. And this is not all—it has been made manifest unto me, for I have heard and seen; and it also has been made manifest unto me by the power of the Holy Ghost; wherefore, I know if there should be no atonement made all mankind must be lost. (Jacob 7:8-12)

Jacob strikes right at the heart of Sherem's position, challenging him to defend his denial of Christ. Sherem's response is one of intellectual pride, saying he knows there will never be a Christ. In opposing this, Jacob not only exposes the limitations of Sherem's understanding of the scriptures but also

affirms his own knowledge which has come through divine means. Then, exercising the gambit of a bold challenger, Sherem in sarcastic scornfulness asks Jacob to produce a sign:

Show me a sign by this power of the Holy Ghost, in the which ye know so much. (Jacob 7:13)

Here the arrogant Sherem takes one step too far in this conflict regarding knowing and knowledge. Jacob's response defines the issue and leaves the outcome to God:

*What am I* that I should tempt God to show unto thee a sign in the thing which thou knowest to be true? Yet thou wilt deny it, because thou art of the devil. Nevertheless, not my will be done; but *if God shall smite thee*, let that be a sign unto thee that he has power, both in heaven and in earth; and also, *that Christ shall come*. And thy will, O Lord, be done, and not mine. (Jacob 7:14; italics added)

The humble preacher ("what am I . . .") accepts revelation ("if God shall smite thee") and prophecy ("that Christ shall come"). In response to Jacob's words, Sherem is struck down—a miracle in itself to one who had denied miracles. Some days after this he reverses himself and assumes, at his death, the position Jacob had taken: He speaks plainly to the multitude (as would a humble preacher, not using much flattery and power of language), he confesses the Christ (showing a belief in prophecy), and he acknowledges the means of acquiring spiritual knowledge, the revelatory power of the Holy Ghost.

Finally, the Book of Mormon is a miracle in its power of the numinous, in its meeting of God and man. The reaching up of man is exemplified by Mormon's identification with Alma in a desire to "speak with the trump of God, with a voice to shake the earth" (Alma 29:1). This identification is more apparent in the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon. At first we recognize Mormon's commentary to his latter-day audiences, marked by phrases such as "and thus we see." Mormon's voice merges with Alma's cry of the heart, not recognizable as Alma's until his later references to his "brethren, who have been up to the land of Nephi" (Alma 29:14). With an intense concern for style and tone, that is, for his manner of communication and desire to

reach his audience, Mormon through Alma laments that "I am a man, and do sin in my wish. . . . I do not glory of myself, but I glory in that which the Lord hath commanded me" (Alma 29:3, 9). Especially on the part of the last writer, Moroni, there is a feeling of inadequacy in written expression. In a prayer he laments, "Lord, the Gentiles will mock at these things, because of our weakness in writing. . . . Thou hast also made our words powerful and great, even that we cannot write them; wherefore, when we write we behold our weakness, and stumble because of the placing of our words" (Ether 12:23, 25). Moroni's closing words to a future audience, however, are the opposite of what one might consider weak. In cadences of ascending power he boldly exhorts his audience:

Come unto Christ, and be perfected in him, and deny yourselves of all ungodliness; and if ye shall deny yourselves of all ungodliness and love God with all your might, mind and strength, then is his grace sufficient for you, that by his grace ye may be perfect in Christ; and if by the grace of God ye are perfect in Christ, ye can in nowise deny the power of God.

And again, if ye by the grace of God are perfect in Christ, and deny not his power, then are ye sanctified in Christ by the grace of God, through the shedding of the blood of Christ, which is in the covenant of the Father unto the remission of your sins, that ye become holy, without spot. (Moroni 10:32-33)

As we look at the detail from Michelangelo's painting of the creation of Adam, we are reminded that, reaching out to man again and again in the Book of Mormon, Jesus pleads: "Behold, mine arm of mercy is extended towards you, and whosoever will come, him will I receive" (3 Nephi 9:14).

While the mortal Book of Mormon prophets may have come short of being angels, I'm grateful for the near-angelic voices in the book they wrote, for the power of its poetic expressions, compelling narratives, epical rhythms, dramatic dialogues, typologies, intricate structures, and the like. These literary elements conjoin with the influence of the Spirit to give in the most stirring and memorable way possible a testament of identity and purpose to modern-day Lamanites and testimony to Jews and Gentiles that Jesus is the Christ.