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**Title** The Book of Mormon as Literature

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## The Book of Mormon as Literature

Abstract: What constitutes great literature? What is it about the literature of the Book of Mormon that has such a profound effect upon its readers? Although perhaps not beautifully written, the Book of Mormon's message or theme justifies its classification as great literature and accounts for its profound effect on the lives of millions.

Persons in and out of the Church may differ in their opinions of the Book of Mormon as a religious production; but whatever the nature of these opinions, we must agree that the Book of Mormon is literature. We can read it and appraise it—indeed, we can subject it to all the searching tests of literary criticism. It is estimated that nearly one million five hundred thousand copies have been put in circulation since the book was first published in March 1830. [Ed. note: As of December 1994, 72,860,936 copies were in circulation.] Now that the Nephite scripture has been before the public for a little over one hundred years, it would seem possible to give a candid and honest appraisal of the volume as literature. This we shall attempt to do and then proceed to point out the various types of literature found within its pages.

That the Book of Mormon has had a profound effect on hundreds of thousands of persons within the past century, few will deny. Henry A. Wallace, then Secretary of Agriculture, was probably right when he made a statement, widely quoted in Mormon circles and published in the *New York Times* on November 5,

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*This originally appeared as chapter 7 on pages 77–82 of Our Book of Mormon.*

1937, to the effect that of all the American religious books of the nineteenth century, the Book of Mormon was probably the most powerful. "It reached," so he said, "perhaps only one per cent of the people of the United States, but it affected this one per cent so powerfully and lastingly that all the people of the United States have been affected, especially by its contribution to opening up one of our great frontiers." What is there about the literature of the Book of Mormon that has produced such profound effects upon its readers?

### **Qualities of Great Literature**

All of us agree that great literature should have a great theme. A petty, trivial, or commonplace theme, no matter how adequately treated, ill adapts itself to the requirements of great literature because it is too narrow and limited in its outlook on life. Its content is too easily exhausted; it does not give constantly the exhilaration of new discovery with each repeated examination.

Then, too, we may agree that, in addition to having a significant theme, a given piece of literature, to be called great, must be expressed beautifully. Its diction and imagery should be well-nigh faultless.

Great literature has the faculty of bringing into activity man's whole being. The greater the scope of any literature—that is, the greater the number, variety, color, and complexity of the impulses it arouses in man—the better its quality.

We are perhaps safe in saying that the authors of the world's best literature have had such varied and wide experiences, have had so many avenues of approach, and have known human nature so well that we can never quite get away from them. Each age reads their works, relives them, and seems never to tire of them.

### **A Great Theme**

How does the Book of Mormon fulfill the first requirement of great literature, that it should have a great theme? The Nephite record deals with the ancient peoples which dwelt upon this continent. These people had followed prophets and believed in Jesus Christ as the Redeemer of the world. The Savior, after his death and resurrection, appeared to many of them, and they were per-

mitted not only to see him but to touch him and make sure that he was a glorious, exalted personage. The book reveals that the American aborigines are principally descendants of Hebrew colonies who were divinely led to this hemisphere about 100 B.C. Even non-Mormons will grant that the theme of the book is a great one, whether or not they agree as to its authenticity. Any book that professes to tell us the origin of the native inhabitants of this continent and to reveal that the Savior taught the gospel to their ancestors has a great theme, regardless of the manner in which it is treated.

### **Beauty of Expression**

How does the Book of Mormon fulfill the second requirement of great literature? Is it beautifully written? Is its diction nearly faultless? Most Mormon people who are well acquainted with the Nephite record would have quite mixed feelings if these questions were put to them. Before we attempt to answer the questions here, let us consider a few important matters in relation to the writing of the Book of Mormon and its translation. First of all, it would seem that few if any of the original Book of Mormon writers had great literary qualifications. We must recognize that almost no Book of Mormon writings reach the high literary levels found in the Old Testament—in the Joseph narratives, the books of Ruth, Isaiah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Job, and the Psalms, for example. The writers of the Book of Mormon seem to have been direct, simple, unsophisticated men with a fervent and sincere desire to tell the truth—religious truth—as they saw it. Seldom or never do they rise to the heights or grandeur that one finds in Isaiah; they never equal the philosophic concepts and literary perfection of Job. Occasionally one glimpses passages of considerable literary merit such as the psalm in 2 Nephi 4:28–34. Parts of Alma, 3 Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni may also be read for aesthetic enjoyment. A good example of the simple but fervent religious prose of the Book of Mormon is to be found in the book of Enos, which may be read in just a few minutes. Notice, however, the English of the following scripture, quoted in other connections elsewhere in this book:

Behold, I say unto you that because I said unto you that I had spent my days in your service, I do not desire to boast, for I have only been in the service of God.

And behold, I tell you these things that ye may learn wisdom; that ye may learn that when ye are in the service of your fellow beings ye are only in the service of your God.

Behold, ye have called me your king; and if I, whom ye call your king, do labor to serve you, then ought not ye to labor to serve one another? (Mosiah 2:16-18)

The homely English of this scripture could be much improved, particularly the first sentence. Nevertheless, the sentiments expressed are lovely and sublime. One likes to believe that King Benjamin, the author, was in effect the Wilford Woodruff of his time, a leader, a hard worker with his hands, a very spiritual man, but not an outstanding writer or orator.

Consider the following selection from the writings of Nephi, son of Lehi, who, for very good and sufficient reasons was the favorite Book of Mormon character of our former president, Heber J. Grant:

I, Nephi, having been born of goodly parents, therefore I was taught somewhat in all the learning of my father; and having seen many afflictions in the course of my days, nevertheless, having been highly favored of the Lord in all my days; yea, having had a great knowledge of the goodness and the mysteries of God, therefore I make a record of my proceedings in my days.

Yea, I make a record in the language of my father, which consists of the learning of the Jews and the language of the Egyptians. (1 Nephi 1:1-2)

This passage in its English dress, and doubtless in the original, is too involved. The last sentence, as pointed out in chapter 3, "The Language and Script of the Book of Mormon,"<sup>1</sup> is

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<sup>1</sup> Sidney B. Sperry, *Our Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1950), 28-38.

ambiguous and hard to understand. Nephi writes in another chapter:

For it sufficeth me to say that we are a descendant  
of Joseph. (1 Nephi 6:2)<sup>2</sup>

This is a very poor English sentence, parallels of which can be found many times over in the Book of Mormon. I believe that this sentence betrays a too literal adherence to the Nephite (Hebrew) original. This observation brings us to another matter which should be discussed in connection with the literature of the Book of Mormon.

### **Translation Literature**

The Book of Mormon is a translation literature. It must be kept in mind that a translation seldom does complete justice to the original. The patterns of any two languages differ from each other, oftentimes very widely. A peculiar idiom of one tongue may have no counterpart in another. Consequently, a translator is often hard put to carry over the spirit of a given passage into another language, because no adequate vehicle exists with which to do it. How, for example, could a translator render adequately the Gospel of John 10 into the Eskimo language? In this lovely excerpt of scripture Jesus portrays himself as the good shepherd. Eskimos of the Arctic region have had little or no experience with sheep. It would be vain to expect them to catch the spirit of Jesus' words if the translator kept the figure of sheep.

In connection with the English of the Book of Mormon we have indicated some of the natural human deficiencies of the translator. The Prophet Joseph Smith had little or no formal training in English. He was no scholar as were the translators who gave us the King James Version of the Bible. These men were literary experts; when they caught the spirit of the original scriptures they usually carried it over into clear, perspicuous, lovely English. Who can forget the melody and beauty of their translation? Seldom would examples of the poor English we have already

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<sup>2</sup> In our current version this verse reads: "For it sufficeth me to say that we are descendants of Joseph."

pointed to in the Book of Mormon have crept into the volume had Joseph Smith been an English scholar. Moreover, the prophet was a novice at translation. It takes experience and training to become a polished translator. But the Lord had to make the best use that he could of the young prophet. By means of the Urim and Thummim, which he provided, Joseph was enabled to catch the spirit of the original writers of the Book of Mormon; but his translation was limited in effectiveness and beauty by his own lack of training. Like most inexperienced translators he had a tendency to be too literal in his renditions of the original. Many of the mistakes found in the English of the Book of Mormon are due to this fact.

The abundant use of the expressions *and / and it came to pass*, so noticeable and distasteful to cultured readers of the Nephite record, is due simply to the fact that the prophet lacked the skill of the King James translators in handling the Hebrew original. These scholars knew how to avoid monotony in their renditions; Joseph Smith, on the other hand, did not. In the circumstances we should expect anything but a polished and sophisticated translation of the Book of Mormon. Moreover, the great amount of abridgment in the Nephite record tends to detract from any literary perfection it might otherwise have had.

We must conclude, then, that the diction of the Book of Mormon does not achieve the elegance of highly artistic English. It falls far short of the literary perfection found in many of the books of the Bible. Why has the Book of Mormon had such profound effects upon its readers? We are impelled to repeat the question propounded above: Why has the Book of Mormon had such profound effects upon its readers? I believe that the answer lies in the unusual historical and religious truths revealed by the volume, and in the further fact that the original writers of the book and its translator were possessed of unusually profound religious fervor and convictions. The message of the record, with all its native simplicity, honesty, and religious fervor, is carried with great power to the hearts of sincere seekers after truth. This effect is not dependent upon literary elegance.

In the light of what has been said, our appraisal of this book as literature may be stated as follows: Though the Book of Mormon has little sustained literary beauty, it is a great literature because of

the unusual religious and historical truths which it sets forth with profound spiritual fervor.