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Sidney B. Sperry

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**Title** Types of Literature in the Book of Mormon: Epistles, Psalms, Lamentations

**Author(s)** Sidney B. Sperry

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**Abstract** The Book of Mormon contains nine epistles—two pastoral, one prophetic, and six dealing with war. The “Psalm of Nephi” is the only psalm in the Book of Mormon, called such because it is a song of praise, betraying deep religious feeling. A good example of lamentation literature occurs in Mormon 6.

## **Types of Literature in the Book of Mormon**

### **Epistles, Psalms, Lamentations**

Abstract: The Book of Mormon contains nine epistles—two pastoral, one prophetic, and six war epistles. The “Psalm of Nephi” is the only psalm in the Book of Mormon, called such because it is a song of praise, betraying deep religious feeling. A good example of lamentation literature occurs in Mormon 6.

Following our discussion of the American Gospel in 3 Nephi, it seems appropriate to consider the epistles or letters of the Book of Mormon. There are nine epistles in the Nephite record; others are referred to, but their text is not given. The nine may be classified as pastoral, prophetic, and war epistles. All of these are found in four books: Alma, 3 Nephi, Ether, and Moroni.

### **Epistles**

The two examples of pastoral epistles are found in Moroni 8:2–30 and in Moroni 9. It will be remembered that in the New Testament three epistles of Paul are denominated “Pastorals.” They are 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus. These owe their name “Pastoral” to the general nature of their contents, which unites them and yet separates them from the other New Testament epistles. They all deal, more or less, with the duties of the “shepherd”

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*This originally appeared as chapter 9 on pages 102–112 of Our Book of Mormon.*

or presiding officer in a given branch or center of the Christian church.

The two pastorals in question are so named because of the fact that Mormon writes them to his son Moroni, who was engaged in the ministry, giving advice, counsel, and personal experience in much the same way that Paul writes to Timothy and Titus.

What was the situation that brought forth the first letter of Mormon to his son? It appears that Moroni had been recently called to the ministry. In fact, the superscription of Moroni 8 reads:

An epistle of my father Mormon, written to me, Moroni; and it was written unto me soon after my calling to the ministry.

We may presume that by the "ministry" is meant missionary labor. In the course of his missionary work he seems to have encountered persons in a certain branch of the Church who were contending that little children should be baptized. These people must have aroused much concern and unrest in the young missionary's mind. As a result he wrote his father Mormon about the situation and doubtless asked his advice. The creeping of the false doctrine of child baptism into the Church roused Mormon to write the letter, as the following words show:

And now, my son, I speak unto you concerning that which grieveth me exceedingly; for it grieveth me that there should disputations rise among you.

For, if I have learned the truth, there have been disputations among you concerning the baptism of your little children.

And now, my son, I desire that ye should labor diligently, that this gross error should be removed from among you; for, for this intent I have written this epistle.

For immediately after I had learned these things of you I inquired of the Lord concerning the matter. And the word of the Lord came to me by the power of the Holy Ghost, saying:

Listen to the words of Christ, your Redeemer, your Lord and your God. Behold, I came into the world not to call the righteous but sinners to repentance; the whole need no physician, but they that are sick; wherefore, little children are whole, for they are not capable of committing sin; wherefore the curse of Adam is taken from them in me, that it hath no power over them; and the law of circumcision is done away in me. (Moroni 8:4–8).

The reader will notice the great concern of Mormon over the fact that heresies were creeping into the Nephite Church. He, as a great prophet and leader, wanted to head them off. Moreover, the Lord assisted him by vouchsafing a special revelation on the subject (Moroni 8:8). The remainder of the letter through Moroni 8:26 is a masterly and spiritual presentation of the case against child baptism. Moroni 8:27–29 throw considerable light on Mormon's personal situation. Apparently he was at a considerable distance from his son Moroni and acting in a military capacity for his people:

Behold, my son, I will write unto you again if I go not out soon against the Lamanites. Behold, the pride of this nation, or the people of the Nephites, hath proven their destruction except they should repent. (Moroni 8:28)

Mormon asks his son to pray for the Nephites that repentance may come to them; he plainly indicates his great concern for the future of the nation. The true greatness of Mormon as a leader and a patriot is shown in this letter. "No nation," he seems to say between the lines, "can endure and become great except through the personal righteousness of its members." He ends his letter by saying:

Farewell, my son, until I shall write unto you, or shall meet you again. Amen. (Moroni 8:30)

The second letter of Mormon (Moroni 9) to Moroni must have been written a considerable time after the first, for it had been necessary for him to go out to battle against the Lamanites

(cf. Moroni 8:27). The fact that Mormon had been engaged in a battle, the effects of which were still fresh on his mind, causes him to write a letter much different from the first. This letter is not doctrinal; it deals largely with the cruelty, bestiality, and sadism of a hardhearted and unrepentant nation of Nephites. Mormon says of them:

O the depravity of my people! They are without order and without mercy. Behold, I am but a man, and I have but the strength of a man, and I cannot any longer enforce my commands.

And they have become strong in their perversion; and they are alike brutal, sparing none, neither old nor young; and they delight in everything save that which is good; and the suffering of our women and our children upon all the face of this land doth exceed everything; yea, tongue cannot tell, neither can it be written. (Moroni 9:18-19)

This letter of Mormon is heavy with his description of the wickedness of the Nephite people; nevertheless, he does not forget his ministry nor that of his son. He makes the following noble statements, which are an index to his character:

And now, my beloved son, notwithstanding their hardness, let us labor diligently; for if we should cease to labor, we should be brought under condemnation; for we have a labor to perform whilst in this tabernacle of clay, that we may conquer the enemy of all righteousness, and rest our souls in the kingdom of God.

My son, be faithful in Christ; and may not the things which I have written grieve thee, to weigh thee down unto death; but may Christ lift thee up, and may his sufferings and death, and the showing his body unto our fathers, and his mercy and long suffering, and the hope of his glory and of eternal life, rest in your mind forever. (Moroni 9:6, 25)

Yes, this letter is truly pastoral despite the abominations of which Mormon writes.

When were these epistles written? An exact answer to this question cannot be given. The contents of the letters seem to indicate a time late in Nephite history when the nation was ripe for destruction. Thus Mormon in the first letter, while commenting on the Nephites, says:

And after rejecting so great a knowledge, my son, they must perish soon, unto the fulfilling of the prophecies which were spoken by the prophets, as well as the words of our Savior himself. (Moroni 8:29)

Moreover, the letters must have been written sometime after Mormon had reconsidered his decision not to lead the wicked Nephites into battle (Mormon 5:1; cf. 3:16), for in the first letter to his son the great leader mentions, as we have seen, the possibility of going out against the Lamanites to battle (Moroni 8:27). The decision to lead the Nephites once more in battle seems to have been made shortly before A.D. 380 (Mormon 5:1-6). In the second letter to his son, Mormon writes:

I trust that I may see thee soon; for I have sacred records that I would deliver up unto thee. (Moroni 9:24)

We know that by A.D. 385 Moroni already had in his possession the sacred records mentioned by his father (Mormon 6:6). All things considered, it seems quite probable that Mormon's letters to Moroni were written sometime between A.D. 380 and A.D. 385.

Let us turn now to what we call the prophetic type of epistle. Actually there is only one example of it, that found in Ether 5. There may be those who object to calling this chapter an epistle, but it truly is a letter, since it contains Moroni's instructions to the future translator of the Book of Mormon. We call it a prophetic epistle because it was penned about fourteen hundred years before the advent of Joseph Smith, the prophet for whom it was intended. The great period of time which elapsed between the penning and the reception of the letter makes it one of the most unusual epistles in existence. Imagine receiving a letter directed to oneself fourteen hundred years after it was written!

The epistle is short, containing only six verses. The instructions in the letter to the future translator are two in number: first, he is told not to translate the plates which are sealed; and second, he is given the privilege of showing the plates unto "those who shall assist to bring forth this work." Moroni then declares that they would in time be shown to three witnesses by the power of God and "in the mouth of three witnesses shall these things be established" (Ether 5:4). The rest of the letter is general. Moroni points out that the "testimony of the three, and this work" (Ether 5:4) shall stand as a testimony against the world. If the people of the world repent and come unto the Father in the name of Jesus, they shall be received into God's kingdom. Moroni ends the letter by sharply affirming his authority to say these things.

The remaining epistles, six in number, are all war epistles. We shall not treat these in detail; it will suffice to classify them and consider the general nature of their contents. The first two are epistles dealing with the exchange of prisoners. These are found in Alma 54:5-14 and 54:16-24, respectively. A renegade Lamanite leader by the name of Ammoron asks one Moroni, a Nephite general, to exchange prisoners. Moroni writes the first recorded epistle of the Book of Mormon in answer to Ammoron's proposal. It is an exceedingly sharply worded reply in which he agrees to the Lamanite request on condition that the enemy deliver up a man and his family in exchange for each warrior in possession of the Nephites.

The second epistle contains Ammoron's reply; insolent though it is, he does agree to the Nephite proposals respecting the exchange. An interesting statement in Ammoron's letter deserves our attention. He says:

I am Ammoron, and a descendant of Zoram, whom  
your fathers pressed and brought out of Jerusalem.  
(Alma 54:23)

Had Ammoron's letter not been originally written because of the exchange proposal of Moroni, we might well have classed it as a revenge epistle, for it bristles with vindictive emotions.

The longest epistle in the Book of Mormon is found in Alma 56:2-58:41. It was written by Helaman, a Nephite leader and general, to the Nephite general, Moroni, mentioned in connection with



the epistles on exchange of prisoners. It is a faith-promoting letter of heroic mold, concerning certain phases of the war between the Nephites and Lamanites during the years 66–62 B.C. The epistle should be classified as a war story concerning two thousand young warriors known affectionately as the “sons of Helaman.” These young men were sons of Lamanites (converted by Ammon, a great Nephite missionary, and his brethren) who had taken a solemn oath never to bear weapons of war again. There arose a time, however, when the pressure of war was so great against the Nephites that the Lamanites who had taken the oath were about to take up arms again to aid in the cause of their friends. They were dissuaded from doing so when it was shown that their sons, who had grown up without taking the oath, could help their Nephite brethren just as well. Two thousand and sixty was the number of these young Lamanites who took up arms under Helaman’s direction (Alma 57:19; cf. Alma 53:18). They called themselves Nephites (see Alma 53:16), and Helaman reports that their faith in God was such that after several great battles none of them was slain, though many were wounded (Alma 56:56; 57:25; 58:40). What was astonishing was that though they were spared, many others of their Nephite brethren were slain:

And it came to pass that there were two hundred, out of my two thousand and sixty, who had fainted because of the loss of blood; nevertheless, according to the goodness of God, and to our great astonishment, and also the joy of our whole army, there was not one soul of them who did perish; yea, and neither was there one soul among them who had not received many wounds.

And now, their preservation was astonishing to our whole army, yea, that they should be spared while there was a thousand of our brethren who were slain. And we do justly ascribe it to the miraculous power of God, because of their exceeding faith in that which they had been taught to believe—that there was a just God, and whosoever did not doubt, that they should be preserved by his marvelous power. (Alma 57:25–26)

The story told in this epistle is probably the best example of its kind in the Book of Mormon. Though told in the midst of war, it is distinctly religious in tone, breathing great trust and confidence in God.

Alma 60 is an epistle of censure written by Moroni, the Nephite general, to Pahoran, chief judge and governor of the land. The letter complains of apparent neglect on the part of the government heads who, by their failure to support the Nephite armies in the field, cause the death of thousands. Moroni threatens reprisals unless immediate help is forthcoming to Helaman and himself. He ends his epistle as follows:

Behold, I am Moroni, your chief captain. I seek not for power, but to pull it down. I seek not for honor of the world, but for the glory of my God, and the freedom and welfare of my country. And thus I close mine epistle. (Alma 60:36)

This verse is worthy of being quoted, particularly at the present time when the world needs men and leaders imbued with Moroni's spirit.

Moroni's epistle prompts Pahoran to write a noble and patriotic reply, conciliatory and lovely in spirit (Alma 61:2-21). Pahoran points out that he has great troubles of his own; large numbers of Nephite dissenters have attempted to wrest the judgment seat from him and have prevented the sending of supplies to the Nephite armies in the field. Pahoran and the freemen supporting him are at their wits' end to prevent the overthrow of the government. Moroni is requested to send relief to Pahoran in order to put down an unjust rebellion. The spirit of Pahoran is manifested in his closing sentences:

See that ye strengthen Lehi and Teancum [other Nephite generals] in the Lord; tell them to fear not, for God will deliver them, yea, and also all those who stand fast in that liberty wherewith God hath made them free. And now I close mine epistle to my beloved brother, Moroni. (Alma 61:21)

The last of the war epistles may be denominated an ultimatum. This epistle, found in 3 Nephi 3:2-10, was written by Giddianhi, a

robber chieftain, to Lachoneus, the Nephite governor, who ruled about A.D. 16. It demanded possession of Nephite lands, threatened the people, and spoke of avenging fancied wrongs done to the robbers. Suffice it to say that Lachoneus did not answer the letter, but prepared his people for battle and eventually beat the robber bands.

## **Psalms**

Let us turn now to another type of literature, namely, the psalm. There can be little doubt that the psalm is a special type of literature; in many respects it stands alone, without parallel. Most psalms are characterized by a depth of personal religion which places them in a class of their own. Many ancient peoples other than the Israelites—the Babylonians and Egyptians, for instance—had a body of psalm literature. Many of the psalms of these people have great beauty, and their form has similarities to those of the Hebrew psalms.

The Book of Mormon, unlike the Old Testament in this respect, has few psalms. As a matter of fact I can report only one psalm in the entire volume. This is found in 2 Nephi 4:16–35. We justify the classification of this passage of scripture as a psalm, because it is essentially a song of praise and betrays deep religious feeling. Formally, we may call it “The Psalm of Nephi.” In 2 Nephi 4:15–16 Nephi’s yearning to praise God is easily seen:

For my soul delighteth in the scriptures, and my heart pondereth them, and writeth them for the learning and the profit of my children.

Behold, my soul delighteth in the things of the Lord.

Because of considerations of space we shall not print all of the psalm here. Captions are placed over the parts chosen for purposes of illustration:

### **Rejoice, O My Heart**

Awake, my soul! No longer droop in sin.

Rejoice, O my heart, and give place no more

for the enemy of my soul.

Do not anger again because of mine enemies.

Do not slacken my strength because of  
mine afflictions.

Rejoice, O my heart, and cry unto the Lord,  
and say:

O Lord, I will praise thee forever;

Yea, my soul will rejoice in thee,

My God, and the rock of my salvation.

(2 Nephi 4:28–30)

### O Lord, Redeem My Soul

O Lord, wilt thou redeem my soul?

Wilt thou deliver me out of the  
hands of mine enemies?

Wilt thou make me that I may shake  
at the appearance of sin?

May the gates of hell be shut  
continually before me, because  
that my heart is broken and my  
spirit is contrite!

O Lord, wilt thou not shut the gates  
of thy righteousness before me, that I  
may walk in the path of the low  
valley, that I may be strict in the  
plain road!

O Lord, wilt thou encircle me around  
in the robe of thy righteousness!

O Lord, wilt thou make a way for mine  
escape before mine enemies!

Wilt thou make my path straight  
Before me!

Wilt thou not place a stumbling block  
in my way—but that thou wouldst  
clear my way before me, and hedge  
not up my way, but the ways of  
mine enemy.

O Lord, I have trusted in thee, and

I will trust in thee forever.  
 I will not put my trust in the arm  
 of flesh; for I know that cursed  
 is he that putteth his trust in  
 the arm of flesh.  
 Yea, cursed is he that putteth his  
 trust in man  
 or maketh flesh his arm.  
 (2 Nephi 4:31-34)

This is a true psalm in both form and idea. Its rhythm is comparable to the noble cadence of David's poems. It not only praises God, but lays bare to us the very depths of Nephi's soul. A study of this psalm reveals how the scriptures delighted Nephi. The influence upon him of the books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, and the Psalms is very apparent.

A good example of a type of literature which we may call the lamentation occurs in Mormon 6:17-22.

This lamentation was uttered by Mormon, the great commander-in-chief of the Nephites, after the final destruction of his people in battle. It is characterized by intense grief over the slain of his people. A very poignant religious spirit is manifested throughout the lament:

And my soul was rent with anguish, because of the  
 slain of my people, and I cried:

#### Mormon's Lamentation

O ye fair ones, how could ye  
 have departed from the  
 ways of the Lord!  
 O ye fair ones, how could ye  
 have rejected that Jesus,  
 who stood with open  
 arms to receive you!  
 Behold, if ye had not done this,  
 ye would not have fallen.  
 But behold, ye are fallen,  
 and I mourn your loss.

O ye fair sons and daughters,  
ye fathers and mothers,  
ye husbands and wives,  
ye fair ones, how is it  
that ye could have fallen!  
But behold, ye are gone,  
and my sorrows cannot  
bring your return.

And the day soon cometh that your mortal must put on immortality, and these bodies which are now moldering in corruption must soon become incorruptible bodies; and then ye must stand before the judgment seat of Christ, to be judged according to your works; and if it so be that ye are righteous, then are ye blessed with your fathers who have gone before you.

O that ye had repented before  
this great destruction had  
come upon you.  
But behold, ye are gone, and  
the Father, yea, the Eternal  
Father of heaven, knoweth  
your state; and he doeth  
with you according to his  
justice and mercy.  
(Mormon 6:17-22)

The reader should observe the interesting parallelism which the poetic parts of the lamentation exhibit.