Types of Literature in the Book of Mormon: Historical Narrative, Memoir, Prophetic Discourse, Oratory

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Historical Narrative

Of the literary forms in the Book of Mormon, historical narrative is the most common. It is probable that a little over fifty percent of the text would be classified under this heading. The Nephite historians did not write history in the scientific, documented form that we do today. They wrote as intelligent, religious, and sincere laymen might write, telling the truth as they saw it. Their writings often lack literary embellishment, as we have already seen, and they make few attempts at historical interpretation in the comprehensive and thoroughgoing manner common among first-rate historians of the present time. Nevertheless, we must not forget that they stress most emphatically the fact that

This originally appeared as chapter 10 on pages 113–24 of Our Book of Mormon.
what they have written is true and should be taken seriously. Observe the final words of Nephi, the first writer in the Book of Mormon.

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.

And now, my beloved brethren, all those who are of the house of Israel, and all ye ends of the earth, I speak unto you as the voice of one crying from the dust: Farewell until that great day shall come.

And you that will not partake of the goodness of God, and respect the words of the Jews, and also my words, and the words which shall proceed forth out of the mouth of the Lamb of God, behold, I bid you an everlasting farewell, for these words shall condemn you at the last day. (2 Nephi 33:10, 13–14)

In the same tone are some of the words of Moroni, the last writer in the Nephite record:

And I exhort you to remember these things; for the time speedily cometh that ye shall know that I lie not, for ye shall see me at the bar of God; and the Lord God will say unto you: 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?

I declare these things unto the fulfilling of the prophecies. And behold, they shall proceed forth out of the mouth of the everlasting God; and his word shall hiss forth from generation to generation. (Moroni 10:27–28)

Jacob, the brother of Nephi, declared, "I have written according to the best of my knowledge" (Jacob 7:26).
The historical interpretation found in the Book of Mormon reminds one somewhat of the type found in Chronicles. The chronicler definitely attempts to show that blessings follow those who keep the law of the Lord, and that punishment befalls the sinner. In the Book of Mormon the historians constantly emphasize and attempt to drive home the idea that if the people keep the commandments of the Lord they will prosper in the land; otherwise they will be cut off from his presence. Second Nephi 1 is almost entirely devoted to this doctrine, epitomized beautifully:

And he [the Lord] hath said that: Inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments ye shall prosper in the land; but inasmuch as ye will not keep my commandments ye shall be cut off from my presence. (2 Nephi 1:20)

The observant student will find the same philosophy of history in succeeding books (see Enos 1:10; Jarom 1:9; Omni 1:6; Alma 9:14; 37:13; 38:1; 45:6-8; 50:20; Helaman 10:4-5; 4 Nephi 1:15-18, 23; Mormon 3:2-3; Ether 2:8-12). Indeed, this doctrine seems to have determined their interpretation of history.


We shall reproduce here only one example of this type of literature. It is not the most interesting or, perhaps, the best written, but it may be called typical. Moreover, the words which we have italicized indicate that the philosophy underlying the writing of it is in accordance with what has been said. The passage in question is taken from the small book of Jarom.

And now, behold, two hundred years had passed away, and the people of Nephi had waxed strong in the land. They observed to keep the law of Moses and the sabbath day holy unto the Lord. And they profaned not; neither did they blaspheme. And the laws of the land were exceedingly strict.

And they were scattered upon much of the face of the land, and the Lamanites also. And they were
exceedingly more numerous than were they of the Nephites; and they loved murder and would drink the blood of beasts.

And it came to pass that they came many times against us, the Nephites, to battle. But our kings and our leaders were mighty men in the faith of the Lord; and they taught the people the ways of the Lord; wherefore, we withstood the Lamanites and swept them away out of our lands, and began to fortify our cities, or whatsoever place of our inheritance.

And we multiplied exceedingly, and spread upon the face of the land, and became exceedingly rich in gold, and in silver, and in precious things, and in fine workmanship of wood, in buildings, and in machinery, and also in iron and copper, and brass and steel, making all manner of tools of every kind to till the ground, and weapons of war—yea, the sharp pointed arrow, and the quiver, and the dart, and the javelin, and all preparations for war.

And thus being prepared to meet the Lamanites, they did not prosper against us. But the word of the Lord was verified, which he spoke unto our fathers, saying that: Inasmuch as ye will keep my commandments ye shall prosper in the land.

And it came to pass that the prophets of the Lord did threaten the people of Nephi, according to the word of God, that if they did not keep the commandments, but should fall into transgression, they should be destroyed from off the face of the land.

Wherefore, the prophets, and the priests, and the teachers, did labor diligently, exhorting with all long-suffering the people to diligence; teaching the law of Moses, and the intent for which it was given; persuading them to look forward unto the Messiah, and believe in him to come as though he already was. And after this manner did they teach them.

And it came to pass that by so doing they kept them from being destroyed upon the face of the land;
for they did prick their hearts with the word, continually stirring them up unto repentance.

And it came to pass that two hundred and thirty and eight years had passed away—after the manner of wars, and contentions, and dissensions, for the space of much of the time.

And I, Jarom, do not write more, for the plates are small. But behold, my brethren, ye can go to the other plates of Nephi; for behold, upon them the records of our wars are engraven, according to the writings of the kings, or those which they caused to be written. (Jarom 1:5–14)

Some very interesting historical narrative can also be found in Alma 17–20.

**Memoir**

One is tempted to show that autobiography is one of the literary forms in the Book of Mormon. Indeed, in the books of 1 and 2 Nephi, Enos, Mosiah, and Mormon are writings that many readers might classify as such. Much that Nephi writes is about himself, and often we can see, as it were, the very soul of the man. The books of Enos, Mosiah 9–10, and Mormon 1–7 contain much of the personal element and the self-revelation necessary to autobiography. Are these portions of the Book of Mormon to be classified as true autobiography?

Autobiography, letter, journal, diary, and memoir may be grouped together as literature of personal revelation. A quick inspection of the books we have cited rules them out as letters, journals, or diaries. Do they belong in either of the remaining classifications, autobiography or memoir?

Technically an autobiography is a connected account of the author’s life, with due stress on introspection, or on the importance of his life against a communal, national, or world background. The memoir—the term is often used as if interchangeable with autobiography—is to be properly distinguished from autobiography by the relative emphasis placed on character and on external events. The memoir as a rule gives some prominence to personalities and actions other than the writer’s own. In fact, cer-
tain memoirs are hardly more than a recital of historical occurrences that have come under the direct purview of their recorders.

It seems to us that Nephi’s writings in 1 and 2 Nephi are not autobiography in the true sense of the term. Memoir better describes these books. Let us call them “Nephi’s Memoirs.” Enos gives no connected account of his life, though much of what he writes is warmly personal. His writings are too limited in amount (27 verses) to be seriously regarded as autobiography. Memoir is a better description of the literary form. The same may be said of Zeniff’s writings in Mosiah 9–10. Mormon’s personal record in Mormon 1–7 falls also in the memoir classification.

Prophetic Discourse

Prophetic discourse is a form of literature common in the Book of Mormon. This type of literature is relatively simple and may be thought of as the equivalent of our modern sermon in which description, reflection, and warning are intermingled in a fervor of appeal. Good examples of this form of literature are found in Isaiah 1; Isaiah 2–4; Jeremiah 23–32; Ezekiel 33:30; 34, are others in the Bible. From the Book of Mormon we cite a few instances as follows: 1 Nephi 22; 2 Nephi 1, 29, 32; Jacob 6; Mosiah 12:1–8; Alma 10:17–23; 32:8–43; 33:2–23; 34:2–41; Helaman 7:13–29.

The example found in Mosiah follows:

Thus has the Lord commanded me saying—Abinadi, go and prophesy unto this my people, for they have hardened their hearts against my words; they have repented not of their evil doings; therefore, I will visit them in my anger, yea, in my fierce anger will I visit them in their iniquities and abominations.

Yea, wo be unto the generation! And the Lord said unto me: Stretch forth thy hand and prophesy, saying: Thus saith the Lord, it shall come to pass that this generation, because of their iniquities, shall be brought into bondage, and shall be smitten on the cheek; yea, and

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shall be driven by men, and shall be slain; and the vultures of the air, and the dogs, yea, and the wild beasts, shall devour their flesh.

And it shall come to pass that the life of king Noah shall be valued even as a garment in a hot furnace; for he shall know that I am the Lord.

And it shall come to pass that I will smite this my people with sore afflictions, yea, with famine and with pestilence; and I will cause that they shall howl all the day long.

Yea, and I will cause that they shall have burdens lashed upon their backs; and they shall be driven before like a dumb ass.

And it shall come to pass that I will send forth hail among them, and it shall smite them; and they shall also be smitten with the east wind; and insects shall pester their land also, and devour their grain.

And they shall be smitten with a great pestilence—and all this will I do because of their iniquities and abominations.

And it shall come to pass that except they repent I will utterly destroy them from off the face of the earth; yet they shall leave a record behind them, and I will preserve them for other nations which shall possess the land; yea, even this will I do that I may discover the abominations of this people to other nations. (Mosiah 12:1–8)

Abinadi is as vehement in his way as Isaiah is in the “great arraignment” in Isaiah 1. However, as literature, Abinadi’s words lack the majesty and grandeur that is Isaiah’s. Isaiah was apparently a very highly trained prophet-statesman. The reader will find it profitable to examine carefully some of the other prophetic discourses of the Book of Mormon and compare them with examples in the Bible.

Oratory

Oratory is one of the forms of spoken rhetoric or of the literature of address in the Book of Mormon. Only one good
instance of it can be found in the Nephite record. It is the address of King Benjamin found in Mosiah 2:9–3:27; 4:4–30. The Bible offers many more examples. The four orations of Moses in Deuteronomy (1:6–4:40; 5:1–11:30; 28; 29:2–31:8), the speeches in Job, Elijah on Mt. Carmel (1 Kings 18:20–40), and Amos 1–2 are good illustrations. The business of a speechmaker is to do something with his audience, to change the listeners or mold their opinions before they depart. Many techniques are used in doing this, and the true orator knows how to employ them skilfully. He may leave the audience better informed; he may cause an emotional change; or he may change a purely indifferent attitude to one of active interest. In any event, he must cause a change in the ideas and attitudes of his listeners, or he has failed as an orator.

It is highly improbable that Benjamin had received much instruction in the making of speeches or sermons. What ability he had in his youth had probably been improved through long experience as a teacher of his people and as their king. Most of his speeches were doubtless of a religious nature, if we may judge the spirit of the man in his last formal speech.

The situation which caused Benjamin to deliver the address is this: He had grown old and was desirous of conferring the kingdom upon Mosiah, his oldest son. Moreover, he wanted to deliver to his people one last warning against sin and unrighteousness. Therefore, he called Mosiah and instructed him to make a proclamation to the people bidding them gather on the morrow to hear his words.

For on the morrow, I shall proclaim unto this my people out of mine own mouth that thou art a king and a ruler over this people, whom the Lord our God hath given us.

And moreover, I shall give this people a name, that thereby they may be distinguished above all the people which the Lord God hath brought out of the land of Jerusalem. . . .

And I give unto them a name that never shall be blotted out, except it be through transgression. (Mosiah 1:10–12)
Mosiah did as his father had instructed, and bade the people of Zarahemla gather themselves to the temple to hear Benjamin’s address. So many people gathered that the king could not speak to them all within the confines of the temple walls. He therefore erected a tower from which to speak, but even this did not suffice. He then had his words written down and circulated among those who could not hear him.

The oration is remarkable in many respects. It is characterized by dignity, simplicity, sincerity, and a warm religious feeling. It seems also to have been delivered with force and persuasiveness. The combined powers of Benjamin’s religious authority and kingly office undoubtedly gave his words great prestige among the people. The oration seems to fall in three logical divisions: (1) Mosiah 2:9–41; (2) Mosiah 3; (3) Mosiah 4:4–30.

In the first part of the first division King Benjamin enjoins upon his people the necessity of rendering service to each other and to God. In fact, “service” is the watchword of this part of the oration. The king begins by skillfully pointing out how he labored without stint to serve his people and his God (Mosiah 2:9–18). The rulers of all nations, not to mention the servants of the people everywhere, would do well to read Benjamin’s words and take them to heart. They are part of the glory that belongs to the Book of Mormon. Let us reproduce at this point a few verses of what he said:

I say unto you that as I have been suffered to spend my days in your service, even up to this time, and have not sought gold nor silver nor any manner of riches of you;

Neither have I suffered that ye should be confined in dungeons, nor that ye should make slaves one of another, nor that ye should murder, or plunder, or steal, or commit adultery; nor even have I suffered that ye should commit any manner of wickedness, and have taught you that ye should keep the commandments of the Lord, in all things which he hath commanded you—

And even I, myself, have labored with mine own hands that I might serve you, and that ye should not be laden with taxes, and that there should nothing come
upon you which was grievous to be borne—and of all these things which I have spoken, ye yourselves are witnesses this day.

Yet, my brethren, I have not done these things that I might boast, neither do I tell these things that thereby I might accuse you; but I tell you these things that ye may know that I can answer a clear conscience before God this day.

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. (Mosiah 2:12-17)

Benjamin proceeds to remind the multitude that if he merits any thanks from them, how much more ought they to thank God, their heavenly king (Mosiah 2:19). Mosiah 2:19 is a transition. The king now points out that if his people would praise God and serve him with their whole soul they would still be unprofitable servants. Two or three verses deserve to be quoted because of the high view taken of God:

I say unto you, my brethren, that if you should render all the thanks and praise which your whole soul has power to possess, to that God who has created you, and has kept and preserved you, and has caused that ye should rejoice, and has granted that ye should live in peace one with another—

I say unto you that if ye should serve him who has created you from the beginning, and is preserving you from day to day, by lending you breath, that ye may live and move and do according to your own will, and even supporting you from one moment to another—I say, if ye should serve him with all your whole souls yet ye would be unprofitable servants.

And behold, all that he requires of you is to keep his commandments; and he has promised you that if ye would keep his commandments ye should prosper in
the land; and he never doth vary from that which he
hath said; therefore, if ye do keep his commandments
he doth bless you and prosper you. (Mosiah 2:20–22)

In the remainder of this division Benjamin reminds the people
of his age and approaching death. He proclaims to them the
ascent of his son Mosiah to the throne and bespeaks for him their
loyalty and support. He also warns his people in a most solemn
manner of the perils of transgressing the commandments of God.
The king wanted to make sure that the blood of no person should
come upon him for lack of proper instruction (Mosiah 2:27).

Benjamin wisely reserved for the second division of his ora­
tion a revelation of the highest importance. Its effects upon the
people were bound to be impressive. Sometime before the deliv­
er of his address an angel had appeared to Benjamin with tidings
of great joy that he told the king might be shared with the people.
The message of the heavenly visitor concerned the coming of the
Savior, his work in mortality, his death and resurrection, and the
consequent effects upon mankind. The angel also explained the
reasons for giving the law of Moses: the power of the atoning
blood of Christ in saving children who die in infancy, and the
necessity of men becoming meek, humble, patient and full of love
if they are to be saved. The divine messenger concluded by
pointing out that his words would stand as a bright testimony at
the judgment day, in which every man would be judged according
to his works, whether good or evil. The multitude fell to the earth
on hearing the angel’s words as they were delivered by King
Benjamin. The sacred record says:

And they had viewed themselves in their own carnal
state, even less than the dust of the earth. And they all
cried aloud with one voice, saying: O have mercy, and
apply the atoning blood of Christ that we may receive
forgiveness of our sins, and our hearts may be purified;
for we believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God. (Mosiah
4:2)

Benjamin must have been pleased with the interruption, for he
knew that the words he was delivering were having a profound
effect upon his audience. And the message of the angel was like a
letter from the Christ, assuring his people that he would come in
due time as the prophets had prophesied.

The third division of Benjamin’s oration consists of the words
that he uttered after the people of his audience had received the
angel’s words and a comforting and peaceful testimony from the
Spirit of the Lord. Benjamin takes advantage of the unusual
opportunity afforded him by the testimony which the people had
received to drive home to them the obligation of keeping the
Lord’s commandments. Salvation, he points out, comes only
through the Atonement of Christ. Then he says:

    Believe in God; believe that he is, and that he cre-
ated all things, both in heaven and in earth; believe that
he has all wisdom, and all power, both in heaven and in
earth; believe that man doth not comprehend all the
things which the Lord can comprehend.

    And again, believe that ye must repent of your sins
and forsake them, and humble yourselves before God;
and ask in sincerity of heart that he would forgive you;
and now, if you believe all these things see that ye do
them.

    And again I say unto you as I have said before, that
as ye have come to the knowledge of the glory of God,
or if ye have known of his goodness and have tasted of
his love, and have received a remission of your sins,
which causeth such exceeding great joy in your souls,
even so I would that ye should remember, and always
retain in remembrance, the greatness of God, and your
own nothingness, and his goodness and long-suffering
towards you, unworthy creatures, and humble your-
selves even in the depths of humility calling on the
name of the Lord daily, and standing steadfastly in the
faith of that which is to come, which was spoken by the
mouth of the angel.

    And behold, I say unto you that if ye do this ye
shall always rejoice, and be filled with the love of God,
and always retain a remission of your sins; and ye shall
grow in the knowledge of the glory of him that created
you, or in the knowledge of that which is just and true.
And ye will not have a mind to injure one another, but to live peaceably, and to render to every man according to that which is his due.

And ye will not suffer your children that they go hungry, or naked; neither will ye suffer that they transgress the laws of God, and fight and quarrel one with another, and serve the devil, who is the master of sin, or who is the evil spirit which hath been spoken of by our fathers, he being an enemy to all righteousness.

But ye will teach them to walk in the ways of truth and soberness; ye will teach them to love one another, and to serve one another. (Mosiah 4:9-15)

These are the words of a great religious soul, and we believe them worthy of a high place in the scriptures. Benjamin concludes his speech by emphasizing the need of succoring and administering to those in need. Some of his words, simple as they are, deserve to be framed and memorized. Despite our already lengthy quotations from him we cannot refrain from calling attention to these words:

And also, ye yourselves will succor those that stand in need of your succor; ye will administer of your substance unto him that standeth in need; and ye will not suffer that the beggar putteth up his petition to you in vain, and turn him out to perish.

Perhaps thou shalt say: The man has brought upon himself his misery; therefore I will stay my hand, and will not give unto him of my food, nor impart unto him of my substance that he may not suffer, for his punishments are just—

But I say unto you, O man, whosoever doeth this the same hath great cause to repent; and except he repenteth of that which he hath done he perisheth forever, and hath no interest in the kingdom of God.

For behold, are we not all beggars? Do we not all depend upon the same Being, even God, for all the substance which we have, for both food and raiment, and for gold, and for silver, and for all the riches which we have of every kind? (Mosiah 4:16-19)
Every just and righteous person must recognize that Benjamin was a great man and that his oration, judged by religious standards, was a noble achievement. Was the oration successful? Did it change the people in any way? Even the king was anxious to know, and he sent among them to find out. They universally cried out their belief in the words which he had spoken (see Mosiah 5:1–5). Not only did they believe, but they consented to enter into a covenant with Christ to keep his commandments and become his spiritual sons and daughters. Benjamin now told them that they should be called by the name of Christ (Mosiah 5:6–12). This was the name which the king had said, prior to his oration, that he would give his people (Mosiah 1:11–12).

It is my belief that King Benjamin's oration is one of the highlights of the Book of Mormon and deserves more careful study than it has heretofore had.