



1-31-1999

Unlocking the Sacred Text

Marilyn Arnold

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms>

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Arnold, Marilyn (1999) "Unlocking the Sacred Text," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*: Vol. 8 : No. 1 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol8/iss1/10>

This Feature Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.



NEAL A. MAXWELL INSTITUTE
FOR RELIGIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY • PROVO, UTAH

Title Unlocking the Sacred Text

Author(s) Marilyn Arnold

Reference *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8/1 (1999): 48-53, 79.

ISSN 1065-9366 (print), 2168-3158 (online)

Abstract Literary analysis provides useful tools in the study of sacred texts, including the Book of Mormon. For the author, three transforming events that enhanced her study of the Book of Mormon included reading the book in earnest as a complex and masterful literary text, the entrance of the Spirit into her study of the book, and a prayerful desire to experience the great change of heart described by King Benjamin and Alma. Nephi begins his record with sincerity and honesty and serves notice that he intends to prepare a true record. The opposition between Nephi and his brothers Laman and Lemuel illustrates well Lehi's teachings on the necessity of opposition in all things. More subtly, the reader notes a contrast between the characters and personalities of Nephi and Jacob. Jacob is portrayed as an empathetic and compassionate person who was tutored by exile and isolation.





UNLOCKING

THE

*Sacred
Text*

MARILYN ARNOLD

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN REES



UNLIKE THE SCIENTIST OF FAITH WHO STUDIES THE WORK OF THE CREATOR EVERY TIME HE OR SHE ENTERS THE LABORATORY OR THE FIELD, THE ENGLISH TEACHER STUDIES THE PRODUCT OF THE HUMAN MIND, RELENTLESSLY PURSUING MEANING AND DELIGHT IN THE WRITTEN WORD.

To the onlooker there may seem to be little connection between literary studies and religious faith; but to me, now, there is an almost inseparable bond. In fact, it was not until I began to read sacred texts with the skills I had acquired in studying nonsacred texts that the eyes of my understanding truly began to open. Unquestionably, my training in literary analysis has enhanced my reading of scripture and my testimony of its divine origin.

Of the many hundreds of texts I have read, none has touched me more profoundly than the Book of Mormon. Without question, it is the greatest book I have ever encountered. The near perfect blend of poetry and truth is, in my view, simply unequaled. I confess, however, that I have not always appreciated its greatness, and for too many years my reading was sporadic and merely dutiful. I knew that the Book of Mormon contained some splendid passages, but as a whole it had not grabbed me and shaken me into a realization of its unparalleled magnificence. Three things transformed the book for me, though it was not I that changed the book, but the book that changed me. The first transforming event was my decision to read the Book of Mormon in earnest, from cover to cover, investing the same concentrated energy that I would accord a complex and masterful literary text. The second transforming event grew out of the first: it was the decisive entrance of the Spirit into my study of the book, and hence into my life, with unprecedented intensity and constancy. The third transforming event also grew out of the first: it was the prayerful desire to experience the great change of heart described by King Benjamin and Alma, to be more than an “active Mormon,” to be spiritually born as a child of Christ.

This article originally appeared in Expressions of Faith: Testimonies of Latter-day Saint Scholars, ed. Susan Easton Black (Provo, Utah: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1996), 193–200.

These three events, in concert, permanently transformed my inner life. They implanted in my soul an indescribable love of the Book of Mormon, of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and of his church. At the time this change was occurring, my friends may have recognized the same lengthy frame and the same silly grin they had always known, but I knew I was not the person they had charitably tolerated all those years. It was as if I harbored a sweet secret that I was too shy to talk about. I now wanted desperately to live more purely, to correct my innumerable character flaws, to abandon my sins. What happened to me during that period of intense study, prayer, and self-assessment remains with me still.

Since that time, I have undertaken a yet more concentrated study of the Book of Mormon, and with each reading it almost magically expands to meet my increased ability to comprehend it. Truly, this is no ordinary book, and I am grateful that the practice of literary analysis, though anything but an exact science, has given me useful tools in the study of sacred texts. Then, too, the Book of Mormon has its parallels with good fiction, for both contain narratives that offer insight into human experience. And while fiction is not true in a literal sense, it can most surely be true in an absolute sense. But the Book of Mormon is much more than fiction, for it is factually true as well as philosophically and morally true. The Book of Mormon is more than history, too.

All readers, specialists or not, have much in common, and like most, I am drawn to great texts out of love. Consequently, emotion, positive or negative, to some extent shapes my reading and accompanies my objective responses to the written word. We should not be embarrassed by an emotional response to genuine greatness. The emotion that overwhelms me when I read an exceptional text like the Book of Mormon bears no resemblance to the cheap tears that are the stock in trade of tasteless popular

literature. Such tears are induced by shallow notions, stereotypical characters, and shopworn images rather than by truth and artistry. Countless years of studying written texts have, I hope, fixed in me some small ability to distinguish between the good and the bad, the true and the false, the genuine and the spurious, the original and the imitative. When I read a book, I no longer have to ask with Hamlet, “Is this an honest ghost?”

In my experience, the first few pages of a book are critical; if a book is deceitful, its opening pages will betray it. I challenge anyone to apply that test to the Book of Mormon. Can an honest reader of the following lines doubt that Nephi is who he says he is, and that he writes what he knows to be absolute truth?

I, Nephi, having been born of goodly parents, . . . 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. And I know that the record which I make is true; and I make it with mine own hand; and I make it according to my knowledge. (1 Nephi 1:1, 3)

Nephi’s forthrightness is apparent in every line. He opens by naming himself, paying homage to his parents and his God, and bearing testimony about his record. Thus, we learn immediately that the narrative voice belongs to someone who is candid, respectful, dutiful, and grateful, someone who is likely to cut a very straight course. No hedging, no circumventing, no embroidering the truth. In fact, the very structure of verse 3 projects Nephi’s sincerity through the use of three sturdy parallel clauses, all beginning with the words “And I” followed by a single syllable verb: “And I know,” “and I make,” “and I make.” That same sincerity is also conveyed through word repetition. The first sentence contains a subordinate clause that introduces the words “I make,” words that Nephi deliberately repeats in the two independent clauses that follow. Nephi’s prompt self-introduction takes on added significance, too, as we come to realize that throughout the Book of Mormon the Lord and his servants almost invariably announce who they are, while Satan and his servants rarely do. The honest have nothing to hide; the devious have everything to hide. By immediately announcing his identity and fealty, therefore, Nephi serves reliable notice that he is who he says he is and that he intends to prepare a true record.

Although I consider other factors, my preference in approaching a text is to appraise its value by examining the internal evidence the text itself presents. History, biography, critical theory, and literary fashion are all legitimate and interesting doors through which to enter and interpret a piece of literature. But to limit analysis to one or more of those approaches is, I think, to remain in the foyer rather than to enter the living quarters of the work. It is to assess, merely, and never possess. Whatever frustrations the Book of Mormon presents to the historian or the anthropologist, it lends itself particularly well to my brand of close textual reading. In fact, external information about the record’s creation and its cultural setting is so sparse that the words on the page are very nearly the reader’s only tangible resource. Except for concurrent biblical history and archaeological findings in Mesoamerica, we are largely ignorant of the world that engendered the Book of Mormon.

Coincidentally, because the Book of Mormon arrives with so few cultural trappings, the diligent, spiritually attuned seeker can study and appreciate it with no specialized academic preparation for the task, no extensive historical background, and no external biographical data. Even so, I regard it as a great personal blessing that my formal training is of the sort that adds significantly to my study of

**I SEE IN THIS WRENCHING POLARIZATION A STRIKING
PROOF OF LEHI’S POWERFUL DISCOURSE ON THE
NECESSITY OF OPPOSITION IN ALL THINGS.**

the Book of Mormon. Possibly I “see more” because I am trained to see more. Most certainly, the Spirit finds me a readier pupil than I might otherwise have been.

Perhaps I can illustrate briefly how my academic preparation translates into “seeing.” Obviously, even inexperienced readers of the Book of Mormon readily perceive the opposition between Nephi and his brothers Laman and Lemuel because the narrative openly and repeatedly alludes to it. But while many readers might overlook the conflict’s deeper significance, I see in this wrenching polarization a striking proof of Lehi’s powerful discourse on the necessity of opposition in all things. Furthermore, readers might not notice the aptness in the positioning of Lehi’s discourse; it is delivered in the patriarchal blessing pronounced upon Jacob, a younger son who has painfully

witnessed firsthand the opposition between Nephi and his older brothers. Indeed, Jacob's whole existence has been marked by opposition; I think Lehi wants him to understand that, despite its concomitant pain, opposition makes possible the exercise of agency and is therefore a vital aspect of the plan of salvation.

As if echoing itself, but in much subtler tones, the text also reveals a contrast (though not a conflict) between Nephi and Jacob, thereby creating a kind of benign subtext on the theme of opposition. Although Jacob is gifted in language and solid in his testimony, to me he seems unusually tender, even a bit fragile, in his emotional makeup. Clearly, Jacob is no Nephi, nor need he be, but in a written text, as in life, he can serve as a complementary foil to his physically and spiritually imposing brother. Just who is this Jacob? One of the consummate pleasures of studying literature is the discovery of character. Whereas in real life, the essential person, the inner self, is carefully hidden from public gaze, in literature the very soul of a character can be opened, exposing a multitude of buried thoughts and anxieties. Jacob is a case in point. We often rush past Jacob because his hour on the stage is short and because Nephi quite naturally overshadows his more reticent younger brother. But under scrutiny the text actually reveals more than a little about Jacob.

Although Nephi's narrative is many times the length of Jacob's, we seldom see Nephi's inner self, the individual behind the courageous and faithful son, the undaunted prophet and the mighty leader. As narrator, he selects what will be told, and he chooses not to include his own sermons to his people or much personal musing. A notable exception, of course, is the lovely "psalm" that comprises verses 16–35 of 2 Nephi 4. But even then, Nephi formalizes the expression and distances himself from self-revelation by employing the overtly personal, but rhetorically impersonal, frame of the psalm. Conversely, the textual imprints of Jacob's character, and their replication in the hidden chambers of our own souls, are readily described by the alert eye.

Any consideration of Jacob must take into account the matter of Nephi's influence. In literary studies, giants like Shakespeare can be seen as massive watersheds of influence, changing what successive writers do ever afterward. As southern fictionist Flannery O'Connor wryly observed, "The presence alone of Faulkner in our midst makes a great difference in what the writer can and cannot permit himself to do. Nobody wants his mule and wagon stalled on the same track the Dixie Limited is roaring down."¹ Nephi is just this sort of irrepressible human locomotive, and Jacob is sure to measure himself against Nephi and his

achievement. Jacob himself is dutiful and conscientious in the extreme, but to what extent is that aspect of his character attributable to the presence and the enduring expectations of Nephi? Furthermore, does Nephi's death leave Jacob feeling abandoned and inadequate to the task ahead? More pronounced still is the distinct strain of melancholy that stamps Jacob's character, but it probably derives from another source. Consider this: Jacob was born in the wilderness and transported as a youngster on a long and arduous sea voyage, a voyage filled with terrifying cosmic and family tumult and ending in a strange,



seemingly uninhabited land. And unlike his older brothers, who at least had roots and memory in civilized society, Jacob lived under the menace of bitter conflict and imminent annihilation most of his life.

The text does not make an issue of Jacob's suffering, but it provides enough indicators to offer a window into his character. For instance, Lehi shows his awareness of Jacob's situation and nature when he begins Jacob's patriarchal blessing with these words: "And now, Jacob, . . . Thou art my first-born in the days of my tribulation in the wilderness. And behold, in thy childhood thou hast suffered afflictions and much sorrow, because of the rudeness of

The sensitivity and compassion I see in Jacob seem almost to spring from the melancholy begotten by exile and isolation. In public, and prior to Nephi's death, Jacob tries to put a positive cast on his people's circumstances, but his statement nonetheless reveals a deep-seated sense of their exile: "let us . . . not hang down our heads, for we are not cast off; nevertheless, we have been driven out of the land of our inheritance; but we have been led to a better land, for the Lord has made the sea our path, and we are upon an isle of the sea" (2 Nephi 10:20). In private, speaking not to his people but to future generations, an older Jacob does not mask his feelings:

"The time passed away with us, and also our lives passed away like as it were unto us a dream, we being a lonesome and a solemn people, wanderers, cast out from Jerusalem, born in tribulation, in a wilderness, and hated of our brethren, which caused wars and contentions; wherefore, we did mourn out our days (Jacob 7:26)."

To skim that passage and miss its tone of heartbreak, its revelation of Jacob's character and his perception of his circumstances, is to miss a rich opportunity for human understanding. Without question, Jacob, like Nephi, paid dearly for his faith. The text also affirms that he was beloved of the Lord, for even when Nephi was alive, Jacob was visited by Christ and by angels. Moreover, Jacob was first among the Nephites to learn—from an angel—that the name of the Holy One of Israel would be *Christ* (see 2 Nephi 10:3). And anyone uninitiated to Jacob's rhetorical gifts need only study in detail the sermon fragment that Nephi elects to copy into his own chronicle.

My point is simply this: The Book of Mormon is an inspired text whose possibilities could not be exhausted in a lifetime of study, much less a lifetime of pulling isolated passages for Sunday lessons and talks. I am particularly blessed to be a student of literary texts, for my academic pursuits have enriched, even prompted, my study of scripture. More than that, the Spirit that sometimes illuminates sacred texts for me also seems to lend insight and discernment to my reading of nonsacred texts. In all, the felicitous merging of these two important strands of my study and my life has immeasurably increased my understanding and appreciation, not only of books, but of the very essence of study and life. □

TO SKIM THAT PASSAGE AND MISS ITS TONE OF
HEARTBREAK, ITS REVELATION OF JACOB'S
CHARACTER AND HIS PERCEPTION OF HIS
CIRCUMSTANCES, IS TO MISS A RICH OPPORTUNITY
FOR HUMAN UNDERSTANDING.

thy brethren" (2 Nephi 2:1). Earlier, at sea, when Laman's and Lemuel's brutality toward Nephi heaps agony on the heads of Lehi and Sariah, the record notes that "Jacob and Joseph also, being young, having need of much nourishment, were grieved because of the afflictions of their mother" (1 Nephi 18:19).

It appears from the text, too, that conflict and grief have engendered in Jacob an intense empathy toward the suffering of others. Jacob's compassion is particularly evident in an emotional sermon he delivers after Nephi's death, a sermon quite different in tone and content from the earlier one recorded by Nephi (see 2 Nephi 6–10). In the later sermon, although painfully reluctant to harrow the already injured feelings of the women and children in the congregation, Jacob chastises the Nephite men for marital infidelity. Their wives and children, and others too, he declares, have come to hear the word of God, but will instead "have daggers placed to pierce their souls and wound their delicate minds" (Jacob 2:9). Jacob reiterates his concern in verse 35 of chapter 2, where he speaks of the "sobblings" of the broken hearts of the Nephite women and children over their husbands' and fathers' iniquities. Indeed, he says, "many hearts died, pierced with deep wounds."



NEAL A. MAXWELL INSTITUTE
FOR RELIGIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY • PROVO, UTAH

Title Unlocking the Sacred Text

Author(s) Marilyn Arnold

Reference *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8/1 (1999): 48-53, 79.

ISSN 1065-9366 (print), 2168-3158 (online)

Abstract Literary analysis provides useful tools in the study of sacred texts, including the Book of Mormon. For the author, three transforming events that enhanced her study of the Book of Mormon included reading the book in earnest as a complex and masterful literary text, the entrance of the Spirit into her study of the book, and a prayerful desire to experience the great change of heart described by King Benjamin and Alma. Nephi begins his record with sincerity and honesty and serves notice that he intends to prepare a true record. The opposition between Nephi and his brothers Laman and Lemuel illustrates well Lehi's teachings on the necessity of opposition in all things. More subtly, the reader notes a contrast between the characters and personalities of Nephi and Jacob. Jacob is portrayed as an empathetic and compassionate person who was tutored by exile and isolation.





UNLOCKING

THE

*Sacred
Text*

MARILYN ARNOLD

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN REES



UNLIKE THE SCIENTIST OF FAITH WHO STUDIES THE WORK OF THE CREATOR EVERY TIME HE OR SHE ENTERS THE LABORATORY OR THE FIELD, THE ENGLISH TEACHER STUDIES THE PRODUCT OF THE HUMAN MIND, RELENTLESSLY PURSUING MEANING AND DELIGHT IN THE WRITTEN WORD.

To the onlooker there may seem to be little connection between literary studies and religious faith; but to me, now, there is an almost inseparable bond. In fact, it was not until I began to read sacred texts with the skills I had acquired in studying nonsacred texts that the eyes of my understanding truly began to open. Unquestionably, my training in literary analysis has enhanced my reading of scripture and my testimony of its divine origin.

Of the many hundreds of texts I have read, none has touched me more profoundly than the Book of Mormon. Without question, it is the greatest book I have ever encountered. The near perfect blend of poetry and truth is, in my view, simply unequaled. I confess, however, that I have not always appreciated its greatness, and for too many years my reading was sporadic and merely dutiful. I knew that the Book of Mormon contained some splendid passages, but as a whole it had not grabbed me and shaken me into a realization of its unparalleled magnificence. Three things transformed the book for me, though it was not I that changed the book, but the book that changed me. The first transforming event was my decision to read the Book of Mormon in earnest, from cover to cover, investing the same concentrated energy that I would accord a complex and masterful literary text. The second transforming event grew out of the first: it was the decisive entrance of the Spirit into my study of the book, and hence into my life, with unprecedented intensity and constancy. The third transforming event also grew out of the first: it was the prayerful desire to experience the great change of heart described by King Benjamin and Alma, to be more than an “active Mormon,” to be spiritually born as a child of Christ.

This article originally appeared in Expressions of Faith: Testimonies of Latter-day Saint Scholars, ed. Susan Easton Black (Provo, Utah: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1996), 193–200.

These three events, in concert, permanently transformed my inner life. They implanted in my soul an indescribable love of the Book of Mormon, of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and of his church. At the time this change was occurring, my friends may have recognized the same lengthy frame and the same silly grin they had always known, but I knew I was not the person they had charitably tolerated all those years. It was as if I harbored a sweet secret that I was too shy to talk about. I now wanted desperately to live more purely, to correct my innumerable character flaws, to abandon my sins. What happened to me during that period of intense study, prayer, and self-assessment remains with me still.

Since that time, I have undertaken a yet more concentrated study of the Book of Mormon, and with each reading it almost magically expands to meet my increased ability to comprehend it. Truly, this is no ordinary book, and I am grateful that the practice of literary analysis, though anything but an exact science, has given me useful tools in the study of sacred texts. Then, too, the Book of Mormon has its parallels with good fiction, for both contain narratives that offer insight into human experience. And while fiction is not true in a literal sense, it can most surely be true in an absolute sense. But the Book of Mormon is much more than fiction, for it is factually true as well as philosophically and morally true. The Book of Mormon is more than history, too.

All readers, specialists or not, have much in common, and like most, I am drawn to great texts out of love. Consequently, emotion, positive or negative, to some extent shapes my reading and accompanies my objective responses to the written word. We should not be embarrassed by an emotional response to genuine greatness. The emotion that overwhelms me when I read an exceptional text like the Book of Mormon bears no resemblance to the cheap tears that are the stock in trade of tasteless popular

literature. Such tears are induced by shallow notions, stereotypical characters, and shopworn images rather than by truth and artistry. Countless years of studying written texts have, I hope, fixed in me some small ability to distinguish between the good and the bad, the true and the false, the genuine and the spurious, the original and the imitative. When I read a book, I no longer have to ask with Hamlet, “Is this an honest ghost?”

In my experience, the first few pages of a book are critical; if a book is deceitful, its opening pages will betray it. I challenge anyone to apply that test to the Book of Mormon. Can an honest reader of the following lines doubt that Nephi is who he says he is, and that he writes what he knows to be absolute truth?

I, Nephi, having been born of goodly parents, . . . 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. And I know that the record which I make is true; and I make it with mine own hand; and I make it according to my knowledge.

(1 Nephi 1:1, 3)

Nephi’s forthrightness is apparent in every line. He opens by naming himself, paying homage to his parents and his God, and bearing testimony about his record. Thus, we learn immediately that the narrative voice belongs to someone who is candid, respectful, dutiful, and grateful, someone who is likely to cut a very straight course. No hedging, no circumventing, no embroidering the truth. In fact, the very structure of verse 3 projects Nephi’s sincerity through the use of three sturdy parallel clauses, all beginning with the words “And I” followed by a single syllable verb: “And I know,” “and I make,” “and I make.” That same sincerity is also conveyed through word repetition. The first sentence contains a subordinate clause that introduces the words “I make,” words that Nephi deliberately repeats in the two independent clauses that follow. Nephi’s prompt self-introduction takes on added significance, too, as we come to realize that throughout the Book of Mormon the Lord and his servants almost invariably announce who they are, while Satan and his servants rarely do. The honest have nothing to hide; the devious have everything to hide. By immediately announcing his identity and fealty, therefore, Nephi serves reliable notice that he is who he says he is and that he intends to prepare a true record.

Although I consider other factors, my preference in approaching a text is to appraise its value by examining the internal evidence the text itself presents. History, biography, critical theory, and literary fashion are all legitimate and interesting doors through which to enter and interpret a piece of literature. But to limit analysis to one or more of those approaches is, I think, to remain in the foyer rather than to enter the living quarters of the work. It is to assess, merely, and never possess. Whatever frustrations the Book of Mormon presents to the historian or the anthropologist, it lends itself particularly well to my brand of close textual reading. In fact, external information about the record’s creation and its cultural setting is so sparse that the words on the page are very nearly the reader’s only tangible resource. Except for concurrent biblical history and archaeological findings in Mesoamerica, we are largely ignorant of the world that engendered the Book of Mormon.

Coincidentally, because the Book of Mormon arrives with so few cultural trappings, the diligent, spiritually attuned seeker can study and appreciate it with no specialized academic preparation for the task, no extensive historical background, and no external biographical data. Even so, I regard it as a great personal blessing that my formal training is of the sort that adds significantly to my study of

**I SEE IN THIS WRENCHING POLARIZATION A STRIKING
PROOF OF LEHI’S POWERFUL DISCOURSE ON THE
NECESSITY OF OPPOSITION IN ALL THINGS.**

the Book of Mormon. Possibly I “see more” because I am trained to see more. Most certainly, the Spirit finds me a readier pupil than I might otherwise have been.

Perhaps I can illustrate briefly how my academic preparation translates into “seeing.” Obviously, even inexperienced readers of the Book of Mormon readily perceive the opposition between Nephi and his brothers Laman and Lemuel because the narrative openly and repeatedly alludes to it. But while many readers might overlook the conflict’s deeper significance, I see in this wrenching polarization a striking proof of Lehi’s powerful discourse on the necessity of opposition in all things. Furthermore, readers might not notice the aptness in the positioning of Lehi’s discourse; it is delivered in the patriarchal blessing pronounced upon Jacob, a younger son who has painfully

witnessed firsthand the opposition between Nephi and his older brothers. Indeed, Jacob's whole existence has been marked by opposition; I think Lehi wants him to understand that, despite its concomitant pain, opposition makes possible the exercise of agency and is therefore a vital aspect of the plan of salvation.

As if echoing itself, but in much subtler tones, the text also reveals a contrast (though not a conflict) between Nephi and Jacob, thereby creating a kind of benign subtext on the theme of opposition. Although Jacob is gifted in language and solid in his testimony, to me he seems unusually tender, even a bit fragile, in his emotional makeup. Clearly, Jacob is no Nephi, nor need he be, but in a written text, as in life, he can serve as a complementary foil to his physically and spiritually imposing brother. Just who is this Jacob? One of the consummate pleasures of studying literature is the discovery of character. Whereas in real life, the essential person, the inner self, is carefully hidden from public gaze, in literature the very soul of a character can be opened, exposing a multitude of buried thoughts and anxieties. Jacob is a case in point. We often rush past Jacob because his hour on the stage is short and because Nephi quite naturally overshadows his more reticent younger brother. But under scrutiny the text actually reveals more than a little about Jacob.

Although Nephi's narrative is many times the length of Jacob's, we seldom see Nephi's inner self, the individual behind the courageous and faithful son, the undaunted prophet and the mighty leader. As narrator, he selects what will be told, and he chooses not to include his own sermons to his people or much personal musing. A notable exception, of course, is the lovely "psalm" that comprises verses 16–35 of 2 Nephi 4. But even then, Nephi formalizes the expression and distances himself from self-revelation by employing the overtly personal, but rhetorically impersonal, frame of the psalm. Conversely, the textual imprints of Jacob's character, and their replication in the hidden chambers of our own souls, are readily described by the alert eye.

Any consideration of Jacob must take into account the matter of Nephi's influence. In literary studies, giants like Shakespeare can be seen as massive watersheds of influence, changing what successive writers do ever afterward. As southern fictionist Flannery O'Connor wryly observed, "The presence alone of Faulkner in our midst makes a great difference in what the writer can and cannot permit himself to do. Nobody wants his mule and wagon stalled on the same track the Dixie Limited is roaring down."¹ Nephi is just this sort of irrepressible human locomotive, and Jacob is sure to measure himself against Nephi and his

achievement. Jacob himself is dutiful and conscientious in the extreme, but to what extent is that aspect of his character attributable to the presence and the enduring expectations of Nephi? Furthermore, does Nephi's death leave Jacob feeling abandoned and inadequate to the task ahead? More pronounced still is the distinct strain of melancholy that stamps Jacob's character, but it probably derives from another source. Consider this: Jacob was born in the wilderness and transported as a youngster on a long and arduous sea voyage, a voyage filled with terrifying cosmic and family tumult and ending in a strange,



seemingly uninhabited land. And unlike his older brothers, who at least had roots and memory in civilized society, Jacob lived under the menace of bitter conflict and imminent annihilation most of his life.

The text does not make an issue of Jacob's suffering, but it provides enough indicators to offer a window into his character. For instance, Lehi shows his awareness of Jacob's situation and nature when he begins Jacob's patriarchal blessing with these words: "And now, Jacob, . . . Thou art my first-born in the days of my tribulation in the wilderness. And behold, in thy childhood thou hast suffered afflictions and much sorrow, because of the rudeness of

The sensitivity and compassion I see in Jacob seem almost to spring from the melancholy begotten by exile and isolation. In public, and prior to Nephi's death, Jacob tries to put a positive cast on his people's circumstances, but his statement nonetheless reveals a deep-seated sense of their exile: "let us . . . not hang down our heads, for we are not cast off; nevertheless, we have been driven out of the land of our inheritance; but we have been led to a better land, for the Lord has made the sea our path, and we are upon an isle of the sea" (2 Nephi 10:20). In private, speaking not to his people but to future generations, an older Jacob does not mask his feelings:

"The time passed away with us, and also our lives passed away like as it were unto us a dream, we being a lonesome and a solemn people, wanderers, cast out from Jerusalem, born in tribulation, in a wilderness, and hated of our brethren, which caused wars and contentions; wherefore, we did mourn out our days (Jacob 7:26)."

To skim that passage and miss its tone of heartbreak, its revelation of Jacob's character and his perception of his circumstances, is to miss a rich opportunity for human understanding. Without question, Jacob, like Nephi, paid dearly for his faith. The text also affirms that he was beloved of the Lord, for even when Nephi was alive, Jacob was visited by Christ and by angels. Moreover, Jacob was first among the Nephites to learn—from an angel—that the name of the Holy One of Israel would be *Christ* (see 2 Nephi 10:3). And anyone uninitiated to Jacob's rhetorical gifts need only study in detail the sermon fragment that Nephi elects to copy into his own chronicle.

My point is simply this: The Book of Mormon is an inspired text whose possibilities could not be exhausted in a lifetime of study, much less a lifetime of pulling isolated passages for Sunday lessons and talks. I am particularly blessed to be a student of literary texts, for my academic pursuits have enriched, even prompted, my study of scripture. More than that, the Spirit that sometimes illuminates sacred texts for me also seems to lend insight and discernment to my reading of nonsacred texts. In all, the felicitous merging of these two important strands of my study and my life has immeasurably increased my understanding and appreciation, not only of books, but of the very essence of study and life. □

TO SKIM THAT PASSAGE AND MISS ITS TONE OF
HEARTBREAK, ITS REVELATION OF JACOB'S
CHARACTER AND HIS PERCEPTION OF HIS
CIRCUMSTANCES, IS TO MISS A RICH OPPORTUNITY
FOR HUMAN UNDERSTANDING.

thy brethren" (2 Nephi 2:1). Earlier, at sea, when Laman's and Lemuel's brutality toward Nephi heaps agony on the heads of Lehi and Sariah, the record notes that "Jacob and Joseph also, being young, having need of much nourishment, were grieved because of the afflictions of their mother" (1 Nephi 18:19).

It appears from the text, too, that conflict and grief have engendered in Jacob an intense empathy toward the suffering of others. Jacob's compassion is particularly evident in an emotional sermon he delivers after Nephi's death, a sermon quite different in tone and content from the earlier one recorded by Nephi (see 2 Nephi 6–10). In the later sermon, although painfully reluctant to harrow the already injured feelings of the women and children in the congregation, Jacob chastises the Nephite men for marital infidelity. Their wives and children, and others too, he declares, have come to hear the word of God, but will instead "have daggers placed to pierce their souls and wound their delicate minds" (Jacob 2:9). Jacob reiterates his concern in verse 35 of chapter 2, where he speaks of the "sobblings" of the broken hearts of the Nephite women and children over their husbands' and fathers' iniquities. Indeed, he says, "many hearts died, pierced with deep wounds."

Unlocking the Sacred Text
Marilyn Arnold

1. Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969), 45.