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Beauty on the Mountains: Inspiration from the Book of Mormon for LDS Writers

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Abstract The Book of Mormon provides many good examples to Latter-day Saint writers of how to magnify their work. By following the patterns of the Book of Mormon, writers can understand what to emphasize and how to include the Spirit in their writing.

Beauty on the Mountains

INSPIRATION FROM THE BOOK OF MORMON FOR LDS WRITERS

BY CYNTHIA HALLEN

Even before I joined the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in 1973, I felt called to express something beautiful in words. To develop skills as a poet, I majored in creative writing at the University of Arizona, although my great-aunt Elizabeth urged me to pursue a more practical career, such as journalism. During my mission to Bolivia, a keen desire to inscribe beauty was rekindled when I read the July 1977 *Ensign*, a special issue on the arts. Recently, the Book of Mormon has provided me with specific, practical guidelines for magnifying my work as a writer in Zion. I would like to share some of those observations with fellow word-crafters in the kingdom.

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The Book of Mormon inspires us to keep a record of our meaningful dreams. The prophet Lehi wrote "many things which he saw in visions and in dreams" (1 Nephi 1:16). Because Lehi kept a record, we can read about his vision of the tree of eternal life (see 1 Nephi 8:10–20). His son Nephi saw the same vision, reporting that the beauty of the tree was "far beyond, yea, exceeding of all beauty" (1 Nephi 11:8). The tree was not just lovely; it was also pure, desirable, and wholesome, and the fairness of it "did exceed the whiteness of the driven snow" (1 Nephi 11:8). Keeping a record of our dreams can enhance our ability to pluck "excellent and comely" fruit from the "beautiful and glorious" branch of the Lord (2 Nephi 14:2; Isaiah 4:2). If we emulate the vision-keeping of Lehi and Nephi, our writing can be enriched by the images of inspired dreams.

The Book of Mormon urges us to know our family history. Lehi sent his sons back to Jerusalem to obtain records so that his posterity could preserve the language of their forebears, remember the

words of the prophets, and learn their genealogy (see 1 Nephi 3:19–20; 5:16). Scripture records, family histories, and personal journals are the fountains of literacy, linguistics, and literature. We can more fully find our own writing voice when we have listened to the voices of our progenitors. We can write with richer ethos when we are familiar with the lives of our predecessors, because we are more complete with them, and they with us (see Doctrine and Covenants 128:15, 18).

A family record can stand as the cornerstone of our verbal creations and publications. Adam and Eve used their "book of remembrance" as a textbook to teach their children to read and write (see Moses 6:5–6; 3 Nephi 24:16). As members of the church learn about the lives of their ancestors, the Lord pours out the Spirit of Elijah. Authors who call upon God for a "double portion" (2 Kings 2:9) of that spirit to do family history research may also ask the Lord for a double portion of the kind of spirit that attended Isaiah or William Shakespeare or Emily Dickinson or Neal A. Maxwell in their writing endeavors. As we cultivate our writing talent, we will be able to write by the spirit of inspiration in language that is "pure and undefiled" (Moses 6:6).

The Book of Mormon teaches the value of writing to please God. After Nephi read the account of his ancestors, he prepared to make his contribution to the record. His motive was not self-serving, secular, or sensational; his intent was to "write the things of God" and to persuade readers to come unto Christ (1 Nephi 6:3–4). Nephi deliberately excluded worthless things "which are pleasing unto the world" so that he had room on the plates to write priceless things "which are pleasing unto God" (1 Nephi 6:5–6). His brother Jacob later explained that "tender and chaste and delicate" feelings are pleasing to God (Jacob 2:7). As writers, we need not fear that respecting such sensitive feelings will result in repressed, sterile, and boring manuscripts. In Hebrew, tenderness implies vulnerability, youth, compassion, affection, and nourishment (*The Scriptures: CD-ROM Resource Edition 1.0*). Chastity implies clarity, cleanliness, fulfillment, reverence, and simplicity. Rather than fragility, delicate feelings imply openness, beauty, delight, playfulness, and refinement. Thoughtful writers can act as proxy authors of the "pleasing word of God" that heals the "wounded soul" (Jacob 2:8). We can produce texts that have the power to bind up broken hearts and troubled minds.

On the other hand, authors who write to please the world may increase the pain of "those who are already wounded, instead of consoling and healing their wounds" (Jacob 2:9). Texts based in snobbery, mockery, cynicism, deceit, or permissiveness may work as daggers that pierce the souls and wound the minds of readers who would rather feast upon words of strength (see Jacob 2:9; 3:2). Authors who brandish verbal violence and wanton words will experience "burning instead of beauty" (2 Nephi 13:24). If we court worldliness with words, we may fail to recognize the beauty of Christ's countenance when he turns to gaze upon us. Instead of seeing him "as he is," we may see "no beauty that we should desire him" (Moroni 7:48; Isaiah 53:2; Mosiah 14:2).

The Book of Mormon exhorts us to bring forth Zion. Authors who seek to establish Zion through uplifting, inspirational writing will be blessed with "the gift and the power of the Holy Ghost" (1 Nephi 13:37). Those who write under the inspiration of the Holy Ghost will be able to communicate in the tongue of angels, speaking the words of Christ (see 2 Nephi 31:14–15; 32:2–3). In the ancient Indo-European poetic tradition documented by Calvert Watkins, the "language of men" was ordinary human discourse, or the "tongues of men," whereas the "language of gods" was the discourse of poets and prophets, or the "tongue of angels" (1 Corinthians 13:1). Through the tongue of angels, authors are able to mediate the "opposition in all things" with extraordinary language (see 2 Nephi 2:11). Writers like Emily Dickinson are able to juxtapose joy and sorrow, knowing that there

> Must be a Wo –
> A loss or so –
> To bend the eye
> Best Beauty's way –
>
> But – once aslant
> It notes Delight
> As difficult
> As Stalactite

When writers are filled with the Spirit of the Lord God, their mission is to care for those "that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes,

View of the Teton Range of the Rocky Mountains, Grand Teton National Park. Photograph by Malina Nielson.

the oil of joy for mourning . . . that they may be called trees of righteousness" (Isaiah 61:3).

The Book of Mormon encourages us to publish peace. Satan is the "author of all sin" and the "father of contention" (Helaman 6:30; 3 Nephi 11:29). Christ is "the author and the finisher" of faith and salvation (Moroni 6:4; see Hebrews 5:9; 12:2). Since "God is not the author of confusion, but of peace" (1 Corinthians 14:33), we can follow his example by writing about the peace that salvation brings. Citing Isaiah, Book of Mormon prophets promise that those who publish peace will be beautiful upon the mountains (see 1 Nephi 13:37; Mosiah 12:21; 15:16–18; 3 Nephi 20:40). The publisher of peace is a sprinter and a marathoner, a *chasqui* running on the high plains, carrying words of Christ's victory from the battlefield to watchers on the towers of Mount Zion. The beautiful messenger is a mountaineer, like the late United Nations Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize after he died on a diplomatic mission to Africa in 1961. In addition to public service, Hammarskjöld kept a private journal of contemplations that were translated from Swedish into English by W. H. Auden and published posthumously as the bestseller *Markings*. In this book of "waymarks" (Jeremiah 31:21), Hammarskjöld wrote that beauty is "the wind" that refreshes the traveler, not the "stifling heat" in dark shafts where miners grub for gold. His life and writings show that peace is not the absence of conflict; it is the presence of moral courage. Peace is an amalgam of beauty, faith, patience, reverence, endurance, and sacrifice.

The Book of Mormon reminds us to sing the song of redeeming love. Like the tree of life and the waters of life in Nephi's vision, our arts and letters can be representations of the "love of God" (1 Nephi 11:21–25). If we remember with Johann Wondra that "art is therefore a possibility for love," our words can be clothed with charity regardless of topic, genre, or audience (see Moroni 7:47). The book of Alma contains an inventory of questions that writers can use to evaluate their works, for example:

> Can you imagine to yourselves that ye hear the voice of the Lord, saying unto you, in that day: Come unto me ye blessed, for behold, your works have been works of righteousness upon the face of the earth? . . . If ye have felt to sing the song of redeeming love, I would ask, can ye feel so now? . . . [The Lord God] saith: Come unto me and ye shall partake of the fruit of the tree of life; yea, ye shall eat and drink of the bread and the waters of life freely; yea, come unto me and bring forth works of righteousness. (Alma 5:16, 26, 34–35)

As authors, our works can be as beautiful as "the place of Mormon, the waters of Mormon, the forest of Mormon" to readers who are refugees from the wilderness of wickedness (Mosiah 18:30). The

power of divinely inspired words can liberate people from the pains of hell, enabling them to "sing redeeming love" (Alma 5:9; 26:13).

The Book of Mormon asks us to put on beautiful garments. Paraphrasing Isaiah, Moroni awakens us to possibilities of covenant beauty in our writing:

> I would exhort you that ye would come unto Christ, and lay hold upon every good gift, and touch not the evil gift, nor the unclean thing. And awake, and arise from the dust . . . and put on thy beautiful garments . . . that thou mayest no more be confounded, that the covenants of the Eternal Father which he hath made unto thee . . . may be fulfilled. (Moroni 10:30–31; compare Isaiah 52:1–2)

As we shake away the dust of unseemliness from our minds and loose the bands of captivity from our hearts, we can put on beautiful garments of thought and feeling (see 2 Nephi 8:24–25; 3 Nephi 20:36–37). We can "stand therefore, having [our language] girt about with truth, and having on the [rhetoric] of righteousness; and [our words] shod with preparation of the gospel of peace" (see Ephesians 6:14–15; D&C 27:16). We can clothe our creative works with meekness and humility "as with an ornament, and bind them on even as a bride" (1 Nephi 21:18; compare Isaiah 49:18). As we pry the bondage of pride from our hearts, Hammarskjöld says that we can realize our individuality, "becoming a bridge for others, a stone in the temple of righteousness." We can build a temple as the center stake of our aesthetic realms, lifting up titles of liberty to defend marriage, families, and children (see Alma 46:12, 19). All of our writings, whether they be fiction or nonfiction, comedy or tragedy, poetry or prose, should have at their underlying core the beautiful, irrefutable, crystalline fact of Christ's redemption.

The Book of Mormon invites us to restore plain and precious things. Writers in Zion have the opportunity to create beauty but also the responsibility to renew truths that have been lost through persecution, ignorance, obscurity, or neglect (see 1 Nephi 13; 2 Nephi 25). With the Lord's help, we can "write many things" that are "plain and precious" (1 Nephi 13:35). If we will avoid the clichés of self-pity, self-indulgence, self-assertion, sobbing sentimentality, and "sickly sexuality" that Arthur H. King warned about in modern culture, then we can produce innovative, intelligent, integrated works of art that "build the old waste places" and "raise up the foundations of many generations" (Isaiah 58:12). Faithful authorship must include the filling of gaps in our stewardship, as we see from the Savior's evaluation of the Nephite record in Bountiful. When the Lord asks, "How can it be that ye have not written this thing?" we can respond by making sure that essential experiences are "written according as he commanded" (see 3 Nephi 23:7–14).

Like Ether and Moroni, we can abridge and seal up some of our works for the benefit of future readers. Like Emily Dickinson and Dag Hammarskjöld, we can leave consecrated manuscripts in a drawer for loved ones to find and circulate after our death. Rather than aspiring for Pulitzer prizes and Nobel nominations, we will long to be known as "the repairer of the breach" and "the restorer of paths to dwell in" (Isaiah 58:12). We will yearn to hear the commendation "Well done, thou good and faithful [writer]; thou hast been faithful over a few [words], and I will make thee [author of] many [works]" (adapted from Matthew 25:21).

The Book of Mormon guides us to write in beauty. We can glorify the Lord with beautiful words as we walk the "strait and narrow path" and wend the "way of holiness" through life's mountains (1 Nephi 8:20; 2 Nephi 31:18–19; Isaiah 35:8). Navajo names for the path of harmony, or hózhó, include the Beauty Way and the Mountain Way. We need chanters to sing new songs for the Lord's way of writing: the Dream Way, the Remembrance Way, the Pleasing Way, the Zion Way, the Peaceful Way, the Loving Way, the Covenant Way, and the Plain Way. With the Book of Mormon as an inspirational guide, we can walk in beauty, talk in beauty, read in beauty, write in beauty, learn of beauty, and weave in beauty.