

# Book of Mormon Imagery

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They were many times buried in the depths of the sea, because of the mountain waves which broke upon them” (Ether 6:6).

“[Wicked King Noah] shalt be as a stalk, even as a dry stalk of the field, which is run over by the beasts and trodden under foot” (Mosiah 12:11).

Each of these Book of Mormon passages is given life by the pictures or images they awake in our minds. In Ether the power comes from referring directly to “mountain waves.” The memorable picture of King Noah is not so direct, being formed from a figure of speech: the ruler is like a “dry stalk” crushed under foot. Without their imagery, these verses would lose beauty and vitality.

Imagine if the statements had only been something like, “The Jaredites faced great difficulty in crossing the ocean,” or, “The life of King Noah shall become of little value.” Imagery helps make the Book of Mormon appeal to all our senses (our sight, hearing, touch, smell, taste, and even our spiritual sense). We should be grateful for this, because some of our deepest responses to truth are through our senses and emotions. But many of us are not as aware as we might be of how scripture affects us. By stepping back and looking at imagery in the Book of Mormon as a whole, we can discover patterns hidden beneath the surface of our usual reading that increase the book’s meaning and impact.

Let us begin by looking at a phrase and concept that we read over and over: “It must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things” (2 Nephi 2:11). Writers and speakers in the Book of Mormon use image-stimulating language to support and explain this teaching. Mental pictures raised within us thus deepen our understanding and anchor in our memories the principle that opposition can benefit the righteous. This spiritual truth is presented to us in vivid images, the most prominent of which are (1) fire, (2) light and darkness, (3) captivity and deliverance, (4) wilderness or wandering, (5) water or fruitfulness, and (6) dust.

With some of these images, the opposition is obvious, as in the contrast between light and darkness or between captivity and deliverance. But even the single images, like fire, are used to emphasize opposition. Fire accompanied Lehi’s call to be a prophet (remember how Moses received his call at the burning bush). And the righteous will be saved by fire. Yet the wicked will be destroyed by it (see 1 Nephi 22:17), so there are two opposing sides to the one symbol.

The same is true of the image of the wilderness. For some of Lehi’s family, departing into the wilderness proved to be a means to salvation, yet the rebellious sons disliked where they went. From their perspective, Lehi had led them out to “perish in the wilderness” (1 Nephi 2:11). Thus, as with essentially all of the Book of Mormon images, while there is a risk of loss or death associated with an image, such as fire or water, there are also great rewards that come from going through or over water, being enveloped in flames, coming out of dust, breaking the chains of bondage, wandering through the wilderness, and the like. This two-sidedness will become clearer as we look briefly at each major group of images.

## 1. Fire

Lehi's dream showed that the justice of God that divides the wicked from the righteous is like a flaming fire (see 1 Nephi 15:30). From that point on to the end of the Book of Mormon, fire is viewed in contradictory ways.

Fire played an unexpected role in the experience of the brothers Nephi and Lehi when the Lamanites imprisoned them (see Helaman 5:21-49). When they were about to be put to death, these prophets were encircled about by fire. Instead of destroying them, it freed them from prison. At the same time, their Lamanite captors, who had been imprisoned within walls of their hatred and error toward the Nephites, were set free when they repented and a pillar of protecting fire encircled them about. At that point, they all were "filled as if with fire" by the Holy Ghost (v. 45).

Again, the people who saw the resurrected Christ at Bountiful saw their children encircled by fire (see 3 Nephi 17:24). This stands in contrast to the terribly destructive fires from which they had recently escaped at the time of Christ's crucifixion. The same contrast is visible when Mormon said that the righteous are to be baptized "with fire and with the Holy Ghost" (Mormon 7:10), while the holiness of Jesus Christ "will kindle a flame of unquenchable fire" within the wicked (Mormon 9:5). Thus, while the source of the fire—God—is the same, punishing or glorifying depends on the spiritual condition of the recipient.

## 2. Light and Darkness

As Christ is called a fire, so he is a light in the wilderness (see 1 Nephi 17:13). In vision, Lehi saw the Son of God as glowing brighter than the sun (see 1 Nephi 1:9). He also saw Christ's apostles dressed in startlingly white garments (see 1 Nephi 1:10; 12:10; cf. 3 Nephi 19:25). Both physically and figuratively, light and whiteness are associated with truth, purity, and divine guidance, just as darkness is associated with unbelief and error (for example, see Alma 40:14). To move from darkness to light gives concrete meaning to the process of redemption. This is apparent in Lamoni's experience when he entered unconsciousness into a dark condition but arose from it enlightened—the "dark veil of unbelief was being cast away from his mind, and the light . . . of everlasting life was lit up in his soul" (Alma 19:6).

The most dramatic opposition of light and dark is connected with the appearance of Jesus Christ. Samuel the Lamanite had predicted that there would be great lights in heaven at the Savior's birth, but he prophesied that darkness would attend the Savior's death (see Helaman 14:3, 20). In the first part of Samuel's prophecy, light and order were associated with the Creator and creation (a new star). On the other hand, the chaos of things splitting apart as well as intense darkness—the opposites of creation—were associated with the creator's death.

The Savior's coming to the Nephites out of darkness and great destruction was to them a miracle of light. A "Man" descended out of heaven dressed in a white robe, and he declared, "I am the light and the life of the world" (3 Nephi 11:11). In a series of unforgettable instructions, the Savior taught those who stood before him at Bountiful to be "the light of this people," to realize that "the light of the body is the eye," and that "I am the law, and the light." They were also to hold up their light "that it may shine unto the world." Later he caused the "light of his countenance" to shine upon his disciples, "and behold they were as white as the countenance and also the garments of Jesus" (3 Nephi 12:14; 13:22; 15:9; 18:24; 19:25).

We are able to feel the power of this light imagery, and we can join with Moroni in expressing through language about light our gratitude for the Book of Mormon and the Lord's prophet who gave it to us:

**Blessed be he that shall bring this thing to light;  
for it shall be brought out of darkness unto light,**

according to the word of God;  
yea, it shall be brought out of the earth,  
and it shall shine forth out of darkness,  
and come unto the knowledge of the people  
and it shall be done by the power of God.  
(Mormon 8:16)

### **3. Captivity and Deliverance**

Joseph who saved his family in Egypt foretold that the Messiah would bring latter-day Lamanites “out of darkness unto light—yea, out of hidden darkness and out of captivity unto freedom” (2 Nephi 3:5). Here we see the contrast between darkness and light linked with captivity and deliverance. Both sets of images communicate to us a process, a movement, a rebirth through which humans become whole by coming either to a physical or to a spiritual promised land or condition.

Again and again, individuals or people in the Book of Mormon were delivered from being captives. Sometimes they were politically and physically in slavery; other times the captivity was of the mind and spirit, and the two may be connected. In the wilderness Nephi broke the cords his brothers used to tie him up. Later, on board the ship, he was freed by a miracle from the ropes binding him. The first case of physical deliverance was followed by Lehi’s vision of the tree of life, which promises spiritual deliverance; after the ship incident, the group was physically delivered and arrived at the land of promise.

Other individuals put into bondage, especially through being cast into prison, are Abinadi, Alma and Amulek, Ammon and his brethren, Nephi and Lehi, and the Three Nephites. What happened to them parallels the freeing of Moses and the Israelites by God’s intervention, just as God took direct action to save Lehi and his family (often linked together, as in 1 Nephi 4:2 and Alma 36:28-29), Limhi and his people, and Alma and his followers. In each case, bondage was associated with the powers of Satan and his prisons of death and hell, while deliverance came through the power of God.

Bondage is often considered in the Book of Mormon to be a necessary condition as preparation for conversion or salvation. After Aaron was freed (Alma 21:14-15), he and his brothers were tremendously successful—as though they somehow needed to go through the experience of physical captivity as a price to be paid in order to deliver others from spiritual bondage. Further, the bondage suffered by peoples such as Alma’s group was beyond what humans could do to solve it, requiring the power of God to be shown directly: “They were in bondage, and none could deliver them except it were the Lord their God” (Mosiah 24:21). Similarly, the most oppressive spiritual bondage has to be overcome miraculously by the power of God himself. This is the core of the testimony of Alma the Younger, and it is also the experience of the Lamanites whom Ammon and his brethren taught. Through their teaching, they were moved out of the imprisoning power of Satan and into the refuge of God’s love (see Alma 26:15).

### **4. Wilderness or Wandering**

When God frees people from bondage, leading them out into and then through the wilderness often seems to be the way he does it. The pattern of escape into a wilderness is found in the Book of Mormon in the stories of Moses, Lehi, Nephi, Mulek, Mosiah, Limhi, Alma, the Anti-Nephi-Lehies, Jared, and King Omer.

Responses to the wilderness were dramatically different. It seemed to be a spiritual as much as a physical testing ground. For righteous Nephi, the wilderness was a place for receiving revelation, but Laman and Lemuel feared perishing in it. Nephi's experience taught him faith, the rewards of obedience, and gratitude to God: "He hath led me through mine afflictions in the wilderness" (2 Nephi 4:20). For Laman and Lemuel and their posterity, on the contrary, it was where they became a "wild, and ferocious, and a blood-thirsty people, . . . dwelling in tents, and wandering about in the wilderness with a short skin girdle about their loins and their heads shaven" (Enos 1:20).

The essential difference is that the Lord intended his people to go through the wilderness (the command to Lehi) or else to civilize it (as in the case of Alma in the land of Helam), not simply to remain in it, as the priests of Noah did. Living in a tent is necessary for a time, but building a temple is preferred, for it symbolizes permanence. Even the most righteous saints may wander through the land for a while (see Jacob 7:26 and Alma 26:36), but a different sort of wandering ("losing one's way" is the root meaning of the word) is even more dangerous. This is having lost one's spiritual way. Many descendants of Laman and Lemuel (see Mormon 5:18) were lost in this sense. The way out is to have the word of Christ as guide, like a Liahona, to point "a straight course to eternal bliss" and to show that man's final destination is no spot in any earthly wilderness but the heavenly promised land (see Alma 37:44-45).

## **5. Water or Fruitfulness**

In accordance with the Book of Mormon's system of oppositions, it is appropriate that in his dream Lehi had to go through "a dark and dreary wilderness" to reach the tree of life "whose fruit was desirable to make one happy" (1 Nephi 8:4, 10). This tree is a rich, complex symbol. In different parts of the Book of Mormon, it is linked with water, vineyards, and olive trees. The people who listened to Alma at Zarahemla were invited to come to the tree of life and also to drink freely of "the waters of life." Approaching the tree is a holy matter, like taking the sacrament: "Come unto me," Alma quoted the Lord, "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." On the other hand, those who refuse will be like dead trees that are "hewn down and cast into the fire" (Alma 5:34-35).

The fertility of land and water can have their negative aspects, too. The fountain of living waters in Lehi's dream is opposed by the river of filthy waters. Being whole and safe from storm is communicated by Ammon's image of the converted Lamanites being a ripe field from which a harvest of sheaves has been safely gathered in. They would not be beaten down by the storm at the last day, but "they are in the hands of the Lord of the harvest" (Alma 26:5-7). On the other hand, the wicked, like that leader in wickedness King Noah, are like the dry stubble of the field after the harvest is done, which is run over by beasts and crushed under their feet (see Mosiah 12:11-12). Another opposite of the tree of life is the tree on which the rebel Zemnarihah was hanged (see 3 Nephi 4:28-29).

The key forces of water, fire, and earth are involved in the destruction of the Nephite and Lamanite cities recorded in 3 Nephi 8 and 9: cities were sunk beneath the sea, Zarahemla was burned, and Moronihah was covered with earth. Yet in 3 Nephi 11, uplift and even salvation are said to come through those same three elements: being baptized in water, being visited by fire and the Holy Ghost, and being built upon Christ's rock.

## **6. Dust**

The extreme opposite of water and fruitfulness is dust. This image is associated in the Book of Mormon with mortality, humiliation, captivity, obscurity, destruction, and death. The wicked, Nephi prophesied, would be "brought low in the dust," and the Jaredites, unless they repented, would be destroyed and their bones should become "as heaps of earth upon the face of the land" (1 Nephi 22:23; Ether 11:6).

Yet out of the dust come life and blessings. The Book of Mormon itself was prophesied to come “out of the dust.” Echoing Isaiah, Moroni cried: “Arise from the dust, O Jerusalem; yea, and put on thy beautiful garments” (Moroni 10:27, 31). Laman and Lemuel were exhorted to “arise from the dust,” that is to “awake from a deep sleep, yea, even from the sleep of hell” (2 Nephi 1:14, 13).

After the Nephites have been brought “down low in the dust, . . . yet the words of the righteous shall be written,” and the Lord God shall speak concerning them “even as it were out of the ground; and their speech shall whisper out of the dust” (2 Nephi 26:15-16). In other words, the latter-day Lamanites shall be awakened to repentance by a voice considered dead. Life shall come out of death, words of eternal life from the voice out of the dust.

Finally, at the very core, the book’s six major kinds of images appeal to our senses so that we more intensely feel the atoning power of Christ, which our minds cannot rationally grasp. The Lord acts as “a refiner’s fire,” “the light of Israel,” guide and deliverer of his children who wander in the wilderness, “the fountain of living waters,” and creator of humans from the dust of the earth, and the one who will retrieve us from dust again at the last day.