

# "Great Things the Lord Hath Done" - Epic Elements

When Moroni addresses the Book of Mormon to “a remnant of the house of Israel,” he says the book that comes forth to them will show this remnant “what great things the Lord hath done for their fathers.” Moroni implies that Lehi’s descendants who receive the Book of Mormon will not initially know their complete identity. To truly understand their identity, a people must know who they are, where they come from, and what their destiny is. The Book of Mormon answers those questions for Lehi’s descendants. Just as Jacob who became Israel pronounced upon his sons blessings that pertained to his descendants down through the centuries, so Lehi in his patriarchal blessings to his children prophetically foretells what will happen to his descendants. He sees the time when other nations would take away from them “the lands of their possessions” and his people would be “scattered and smitten” (2 Nephi 1:11). Challenging his oldest sons to “Awake! and arise from the dust” (2 Nephi 1:14), Lehi directs his words also to the descendants of Laman and Lemuel in the latter days. While he fears that “a cursing should come upon you for the space of many generations,” he hopes that “these things might not come upon you, but that ye might be a choice and a favored people of the Lord” (2 Nephi 1:18–19).

Reiterating his challenge and speaking much more to the descendants of Laman and Lemuel, Lehi implores: “Shake off the chains with which ye are bound, and come forth out of obscurity, and arise from the dust” (2 Nephi 1:23). From this perspective, Lehi’s words apply to Lamanites in our time. Lehi commands that Laman and Lemuel “rebel no more” against Nephi and states that “if ye will hearken unto the voice of Nephi ye shall not perish” (2 Nephi 1:24, 28). Modern-day Lamanites can hear the voice of Nephi in the Book of Mormon. They can “arise from the dust” in learning their true identity from the precious record taken from the plates of Nephi. In turn, the record itself is brought forth “out of the dust” (2 Nephi 1:23; Moroni 10:27).

The Book of Mormon is designed to bring the Lamanites to a true knowledge of their relationship to their fathers—and especially to Nephi, their spiritual father. In doing so, the book responds to the Lamanites’ false tradition, defined by Zeniff:

Believing that they were driven out of the land of Jerusalem because of the iniquities of their fathers, and that they were wronged in the wilderness by their brethren, and they were also wronged while crossing the sea; and again, that they were wronged while in the land of their first inheritance, after they had crossed the sea, and all this because that Nephi was more faithful in keeping the commandments of the Lord—therefore he was favored of the Lord, for the Lord heard his prayers and answered them, and he took the lead of their journey in the wilderness. And his brethren were wroth with him because they understood not the dealings of the Lord; they were also wroth with him upon the waters because they hardened their hearts against the Lord. And again, they were wroth with him when they had arrived in the promised land, because they said that he had taken the ruling of the people out of their hands; and they sought to kill him. And again, they were wroth with him because he departed into the wilderness as the Lord had commanded him, and took the records which were engraven on the plates of brass, for they said that he robbed them. And thus they have taught their children that they should hate them, and that they should murder them, and that they should rob and plunder them, and do all they could to destroy them; therefore they have an eternal hatred towards the children of Nephi. (Mosiah 10:12–17)

Just as the brass plates had been essential to the cultural and spiritual preservation of the Nephites, so the Book of Mormon finally is necessary to the spiritual preservation of Lehi’s living descendants. They are brought “out of

captivity” and “out of obscurity” by being given the Lord’s “covenants and his gospel” (1 Nephi 22:11–12) as promised in the title page of the Book of Mormon.

Although readers might not immediately recognize it as such, the Book of Mormon can be considered an epic, and analysis of the elements of this literary form could well assist latter-day Lamanites in a discovery of their origins and history. The great epic of the ancient people of Lehi can show modern Lamanites the possibilities for physical and spiritual fulfillment in the land of promise in which they have been placed. And it informs them of God’s relationship with them in times past, present, and future. Especially as we consider the Book of Mormon as a living epic “written to the Lamanites,” we can see how the book helps the children of Lehi realize that the “great things” the Lord has done for their fathers are continuing for them today.

The Book of Mormon meets two requirements of an epic; its broad sweep in time and its scope in space and import. Just as the Old Testament has been considered an epic in its character and range of concern, so the Book of Mormon has the breadth and inclusiveness that the British scholar E. M. W. Tillyard considers epic traits.<sup>1</sup> As many classical epics do, the story of father Lehi and his descendants arises out of a crisis: Mormon is abridging the entire history of the Nephite nation at the time when that civilization is being annihilated. And it contains the elements Leland Ryken in his literary introduction to the Bible finds characteristic of an epic: scope; nationalistic emphasis, with narrative motifs including warfare and rulership; a historical impulse, with allusions to key events in the life of a nation; a supernatural context in which the action occurs; and an epic structure of episodic plot with recurrent patterns or situations.<sup>2</sup>

### Defining the Epic

**The epic is a literary form that has been defined according to previous examples. Thus, the definition has changed over the years as more works have been considered epics. A generally accepted current definition is that given by M. H. Abrams in *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. In his definition, the epic is**

a long narrative poem on a serious subject, told in a formal and elevated style, and centered on a heroic or quasi-divine figure on whose actions depends the fate of a tribe, a nation, or (in the instance of John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*) the human race. . . . The literary epic is certainly the most ambitious of poetic enterprises, making immense demands on a poet’s knowledge, invention, and skill to sustain the scope, grandeur, and variety of a poem that tends to encompass the world of its day and a large portion of its learning.<sup>3</sup>

Most of this definition applies to the Book of Mormon, although it is primarily a work of prose, not poetry. Yet, as John McWilliams argues, “Durable and persuasive epics may appear in prose rather than verse,” for “the essence of *epos* is heroic narrative.”<sup>4</sup>

Abrams notes that literary epics commonly have the following features:

1. The hero is a figure of great national or even cosmic importance. In the *Iliad* he is the Greek warrior Achilles, who is the son of the sea-nymph Thetis; and Virgil’s Aeneas is the son of the goddess Aphrodite. In *Paradise Lost*, Adam and Eve are the progenitors of the entire human race, or if we regard Christ as the protagonist, He is both God and man. Blake’s primal figure is “the Universal Man” Albion, who incorporates, before his fall, humanity and God and the cosmos as well.

2. The setting is ample in scale, and may be worldwide, or even larger. Odysseus wanders over the Mediterranean basin (the whole of the world known at the time), and in Book XI he descends into the underworld (as does Virgil's Aeneas). The scope of *Paradise Lost* is the entire universe, for it takes place in heaven, on earth, in hell, and in the cosmic space between. . . .

3. The action involves superhuman deeds in battle, such as Achilles' feats in the Trojan War, or a long, arduous, and dangerous journey intrepidly accomplished, such as the wanderings of Odysseus on his way back to his homeland, despite the opposition of some of the gods. *Paradise Lost* includes the revolt in heaven by the rebel angels against God, the journey of Satan through chaos to discover the newly created world, and his desperately audacious attempt to outwit God by corrupting mankind, in which his success is ultimately frustrated by the sacrificial action of Christ.

4. In these great actions the gods and other supernatural beings take an interest or an active part—the Olympian gods in Homer, and Jehovah . . . and the angels in *Paradise Lost*. . . .

5. An epic poem is a ceremonial performance, and is narrated in a ceremonial style which is deliberately distanced from ordinary speech and proportioned to the grandeur and formality of the heroic subject and epic architecture. Hence Milton's grand style—his diction and elaborate and stylized syntax, which are often modeled on Latin poetry, his sonorous lists of names and wide-ranging allusions, and his imitation of Homer's epic similes and epithets.<sup>5</sup>

There are other generally accepted characteristics of an epic as well. Regarding the style in which an epic is written, McWilliams says, "The language should be as distinct as possible from ordinary speech, and to this end should avail itself of the inversion, compound epithets, and exalted diction of the sublime, as practiced preeminently by John Milton."<sup>6</sup> And whereas such epic poets as Homer invoke a Muse to aid them in their elevated narration, John Milton in *Paradise Lost* invokes the Holy Ghost:

Sing Heav'nly Muse, that on the secret top  
Of Oreb, or of Sinai, didst inspire  
That Shepherd, who first taught the chosen Seed,  
In the Beginning how the Heav'ns and Earth  
Rose out of Chaos (Book I, lines 6–10).

Likewise, Mormon is directed by the Holy Ghost. He writes "for a wise purpose; for thus it whispereth me, according to the workings of the Spirit of the Lord which is in me. And now, I do not know all things; but the Lord knoweth all things which are to come; wherefore, he worketh in me to do according to his will" (Words of Mormon 1:7).

Epics generally begin in the middle of the action, rather than at the beginning or end of the story or journey. Regarding the place in the action an epic starts, however, Gabriel Josipovici says that "epic does not so much tell a story as recount for the community the main features of its world, and it does not therefore much matter where you begin, since any opening will eventually allow you to articulate the whole."<sup>7</sup> As Abrams notes, *Paradise Lost*

opens with the fallen angels in hell, gathering their forces and determining on revenge. Not until Books V–VII does the angel Raphael relate to Adam the events in heaven which led to this situation; while in Books XI–XII, after the fall, Michael foretells to Adam future events up to Christ's second coming. Thus Milton's epic, although its action focuses on the temptation and fall of man, encompasses all time from the creation to the end of the world.<sup>8</sup>

## The Book of Mormon as an Epic

As we look at the Book of Mormon with the above features in mind, we find that the book is an epic in its own way.

### *Hero*

The Book of Mormon has a number of heroes of national or even cosmic importance, among them the prophet-warriors Nephi, Gideon, Ammon, Captain Moroni, Moronihah, and Mormon. Lehi himself, as Hugh Nibley has shown in *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, is a product of a Heroic Age.<sup>9</sup> By “Heroic Age,” Nibley means a “strange, tense, exciting and very brief moment of history when everything was ‘big with the future.’ . . . The population squeeze accelerated a world-wide activity in exploration and colonization that . . . reached its peak almost exactly in 600 B.C.”<sup>10</sup> The Book of Mormon contains many captivating individual deeds of valor, courage, and strength, such as Nephi’s lone quest for wild game, Alma’s hand-to-hand combat with Amlici, Ammon’s protecting the king’s flocks at the waters of Sebus, and Captain Moroni’s bearing valiantly his title of liberty at the head of freedom-loving forces. At times these heroes and their deeds appear superhuman—and, indeed, the editor and the writers themselves attribute all heroic successes to the power of God.

In a sense, all the heroic qualities of all the heroes in the Book of Mormon are contained within one hero: Nephi. He, in turn, is a representative of the ultimate hero: Christ. At the fountainhead of his nation and people, Nephi becomes more than an individual hero. He is a prophet-king after whom subsequent kings are titled and for whom the central Book of Mormon people is named. (A parallel is the way *Caesar* became a title for emperors who followed Julius Caesar. Another parallel is Aeneas, back to whom the Romans proudly trace their line.) Further, such leaders as Alma, Amulek, and Mormon claim to be pure descendants of Nephi and identify with him (Mosiah 17:2; Alma 10:2–3; Mormon 1:5).<sup>11</sup>

The original title with which Nephi’s record begins, “The First Book of Nephi; His Reign and Ministry,” implies that this is the story of a whole people, represented in Nephi. “I, Nephi,” the first words of the Book of Mormon, thus suggests not only “I, individual,” but also “I, king” and “I, people”—indeed, a whole race of people going down through time. As with Patriarch Jacob’s blessing to his beloved son Joseph, Lehi’s prophetic blessing to his son refers more to Nephi’s “seed” or posterity. For his part, Nephi sees the history of his people down through time, including their destruction as a people (1 Nephi 11–15, 22). In vision he beholds multitudes of people in the land of promise and numberless cities. He sees wars and “great slaughters with the sword” (1 Nephi 12:2), culminating in a great destruction followed by the visit of Christ to the Nephites. After righteousness to the fourth generation, multitudes gather together to a battle in which Nephi’s seed are overpowered. Further, he sees the fate of the house of Israel down to the end-time.

Lehi’s dream of the tree of life prefigures the epic drama of the entire history of Nephi’s people. In the dream, concourses of people move through a mist of darkness, some to catch hold of an iron rod that leads them to a tree laden with precious fruit, others to be lost and drowned or to enter a “great and spacious building” (1 Nephi 8:26) from which they point fingers of scorn at those who partake of the fruit. In the interpretation given to Nephi while he is “caught away . . . into an exceeding high mountain” (1 Nephi 11:1), the tree represents the love of God, the iron rod is the word of God, and the spacious building is the pride of the world. The dream symbolically sets forth the fate of “numberless concourses of people” (1 Nephi 8:21) as they journey through life, face tests and temptations, and then suffer ignominious death, become haughty in their vanity and pride, or accept God’s love.

The last part of the First Book of Nephi and the central section of the Second Book of Nephi put the epic action on a cosmic level. Here the story of the Lehitites is linked with Isaiah's prophecies about the scattering and then gathering of the entire house of Israel. Ultimately, the "kingdom of the devil" will tremble and all who belong to it "must be brought low in the dust" (1 Nephi 22:23). Opposed to it will be the kingdom of the Holy One of Israel. Nephi records for his posterity the opposition between "liberty and eternal life" and "the captivity and power of the devil" (2 Nephi 2:27) in a revelation "from the beginning of the world to the ending thereof" (2 Nephi 27:7). Then in his parting testimony, Nephi looks into the past ("I have written [that which is] of great worth"), the present ("I pray continually for [my people]"), and the future—combining both past and present ("I speak unto you as the voice of one crying from the dust") (2 Nephi 33:3, 13). He completes this time cycle by saying that as the head or father of a people, he will meet them at the judgment day. Although the earth shall eventually pass away, his people will be saved by knowing their roots and acting on the prophetic counsel of their fathers. (In this regard, see also Alma 9:8–13.)

In the framework of the book, Mormon becomes in effect the last Nephi, a spokesman for his nation who comments on its main spiritual events and, with his son, concludes its record and preserves it in condensed form for future generations.<sup>12</sup> For his part, Moroni presents a dual epical overview. He closes out the history of the Nephites and surveys the entire history of the Jaredites, who were destroyed about the time the Nephite civilization began. In some parts of the Book of Mormon, "Nephite" is synonymous with "the people of God" (Alma 2:11). The representative of the original Nephi, whether Abinadi, Alma, or Aaron, contains within him some of that quality. He may be strong physically, but his greatest strength is moral. He has power of the sort Abinadi claims before King Noah and his priests: "Touch me not, for God shall smite you if ye lay your hands upon me" (Mosiah 13:3).

In each case, the Book of Mormon hero is an unlikely one. Nephi and Moroni are acutely aware of their weaknesses, King Mosiah's sons Ammon and Aaron are humbly willing to be servants in the missionary cause, and Captain Moroni is reluctant to shed blood unless greatly pressed to it. When the Book of Mormon hero shows great strength or resourcefulness, he invariably gives credit to the Lord. Often that strength is verbal, as in Alma's opposition to Korihor, or quietly courageous, as in Abinadi's return to testify to the people of King Noah despite the threat of death.

The truly central hero of the Book of Mormon is Jesus Christ. It is he who gives direction to the other heroes and whose redeeming power is affirmed throughout the book, culminating in his personal visit. He is the hero whom the others represent. As Ammon declares, "I know that I am nothing; as to my strength I am weak; therefore I will not boast of myself, but I will boast of my God, for in his strength I can do all things" (Alma 26:12). And, as will be developed later, each mortal hero is also a type of Christ. For instance, Nephi prefigures Christ, though not to the extent of commanding the elements himself, when he prays that the storm be stilled. Further, Nephi is like Christ in being an obedient son, a forgiving brother, a skillful carpenter, and a pilot. King Benjamin is a type of Christ as the heavenly King. And Alma comes to new life after being as if dead for three days and three nights, just as Christ rose from the dead after three days. (One of Joseph Campbell's ideas in *Hero with a Thousand Faces* is that all epic heroes have much in common with Christ. It seems that many epic heroes are at base mortal echoes of Christ. Certainly Milton's Adam and the hero Beowulf have been compared to Christ for various reasons, and when Christianity was introduced to the German tribes, they related to Christ primarily as an epic hero.)

*Setting*

Settings in the Book of Mormon are epic in nature. They are vast and involve large-scale migrations of whole populations across lands and seas. The setting of the main story is implicitly the known mideastern world, the Indian and Pacific oceans, and the promised land of America. The Jaredite story has a similarly vast setting and is a concentrated epic contained within the Nephite story as a second witness to the extremes of the Nephite experience. Both narratives contain the beginning of a vision and escape to a promised land, a rapid overview of the rise and fall of a civilization, and an end in total collapse and destruction.

Each story also has a spiritual setting: that of God's eternal purposes "prepared from the foundation of the world" and the ultimate destiny of mankind (Alma 42:26). These earthly and spiritual settings are both initially found in Lehi's dream, which tells of mortal members of his family making choices of everlasting import. They may partake of the fruit of the tree of life or choose to join the multitude in a great and spacious building. In another example of dual setting, throughout the book there are frequent reminders that Jerusalem of Judea has a counterpart in the heavenly Jerusalem, that "the kingdom of heaven is soon at hand" (Alma 5:50). At this cosmic level, particular human experience symbolizes man's general destiny.

### *Action*

As there are both physical and spiritual dimensions to the setting, so the action of the Book of Mormon takes place on both the human level and the divine. The human level is mainly a cycle of humbling leading to repentance leading to prosperity leading to pride leading to destruction. This pattern requires a generation or more to complete, guaranteeing that each individual has the opportunity to choose right or wrong. Thus, the action in the Book of Mormon is linear for the individual yet cyclical for the generations of the Nephites. On the divine level, ultimate blessings or punishments are promised, both to the individual and to the group.

On the human plane, for instance, in Alma 16 the Nephites win a physical victory over the desolating Lamanites who have made incursions into the land of the Nephites. But there is another battle as well—the battle of righteousness. First, the wicked people of Ammonihah, who had imprisoned Alma and Amulek and burned the wives and children of their followers, are destroyed at the hands of the Lamanites; second, Alma and Amulek go forth to preach the word throughout all the land and get "the victory over the devil" (Alma 16:21).

Both of these cycles, physical and spiritual, illustrate the repeated statement by the Lord: "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).<sup>13</sup> This blessing or curse provides an epic rhythm in the Book of Mormon because it applies to all people living in the promised land, whether in the past, present, or future. The firm connection between righteousness and existence as a nation is evident on a large scale with the Nephite civilization. In a relatively brief example, it is shown in the fate of the Jaredites, who "did not repent; therefore they have been destroyed" (Alma 37:26). The Jaredite and Nephite civilizations, because they refused to repent, both experience the annihilation of their earthly societies. Against that, however, is juxtaposed the continuation of a divine society: Ether and Moroni, whose records are the final two in the Book of Mormon, conclude with references to being "saved in the kingdom of God" (Ether 15:34) and having "rest in the paradise of God" (Moroni 10:34).

Northrop Frye in *Anatomy of Criticism* finds in the Bible two epic frameworks, "the epic of return and the epic of wrath." In the first, "the movement is first down and then up to a permanently redeemed world." The "epic of wrath" is the "cycle of human life without redemptive assistance," ending with "bondage, exile, continuing war, or destruction by fire (Sodom, Babylon) or water (the flood)."<sup>14</sup> In the Book of Mormon, the end of an epic of wrath,

or what Frye calls the “all too human” cycle, is the destruction of the unrepentant Nephites (and, in a parallel, of the wicked Jaredites). The conclusion of an epic of return, or what Frye calls the divine cycle, is found in Moroni’s last words, in which he says he will meet his readers at the bar of God. He speaks to them, he says, “out of the dust” (Moroni 10:27).

### *Supernatural Beings*

As with ancient poetic epics, a hallmark of the Book of Mormon is the way supernatural beings are involved in events, from Lehi’s initial vision of God’s dealings with man in the duration of the earth’s existence to Moroni’s declaration that at the judgment bar God will affirm the truth of his writings.

There is hardly a page of the Book of Mormon that does not contain some reference to divine intervention or revelation. In the opening pages we are told of Lehi’s vision of God on his throne and see the angel protecting Nephi against the physical abuse of Laman and Lemuel; we learn of Alma the Elder’s people fleeing their captors during the day while their guards were in a profound sleep caused by the Lord; and we read of Alma the Younger being confronted by a chastising angel. Most noteworthy are the appearances of Jesus Christ.

Supernatural powers in the Book of Mormon are not directed by whim, as might be found in a Greek epic. Rather, they function in accordance with people’s faith. For example, after Nephi incurs the wrath of his brothers when he breaks his steel bow, he is directed by means of a brass ball, the Liahona, to a mountain top where he slays wild beasts for food. After the rebellious brothers bind up Nephi and cause the Liahona (the ship’s navigation system) to fail, the ship is kept from going down only by their untying Nephi. (In an interesting turn on the Jonah story, the main company is at fault, and it is the loosing of a righteous man—not the casting away of an unrighteous one—that brings calm.) An agent of divine powers, the Liahona thus functions strictly according to the “faith and diligence” of the people (Alma 37:41).

Overarching all the interrelationships of heavenly powers and humankind are revelations given to Lehi, Nephi, Mormon, and others, showing conditions of the world from the beginning to the end. One effect of this is to extend the epic scope of the Book of Mormon to include all humankind; another is to illustrate that past, present, and future are one eternal round with the Lord.

### *Ceremonial Performance*

At first glance, the Book of Mormon is hardly a poem, let alone a ceremonial performance. But as will be demonstrated later, divine revelations, as well as prayers and many other impassioned declarations or appeals, are actually related to Hebraic poetry.

The ceremonial quality of the book is supported, too, by the numerous formal occasions on which people are taught, such as Lehi’s last injunctions to his sons, King Benjamin’s address, and the parting testimonies of Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni. In the incident of Mosiah’s reading the record of the people of Zeniff to those gathered at Zarahemla, we see a parallel with the Book of Mormon as a whole: they (and thus the reader) learn about a people through their records. Mosiah’s audience rejoice over those Zeniffites who have been delivered out of bondage and shed tears of sorrow over their brethren slain by the Lamanites; they are grateful for God’s power in behalf of Alma and his people, and are pained for the plight of the sinful Lamanites. In the same way, we may read the records of the peoples of Nephi and Jared and rejoice over their triumphs and sorrow over their ultimate destruction—and, if we are perceptive enough, apply the lessons of their records to our own lives and civilization.

## Middle of the Action

The literary convention called beginning *in medias res*, or “in the middle of things,” is a standard characteristic of an epic. As is typical of epics, many narratives in the Book of Mormon begin in the middle of the action, with the interest being on *why* something happens rather than on *what* happens. We know the ending of the Nephite story from the beginning. Lehi recounts to his children the Babylonian captivity, the coming of the Messiah, the travels of his people to the land of promise, the time when the Gentiles would receive the fulness of the gospel, and the final return of the remnants of the house of Israel to the Messiah (1 Nephi 10). Nephi’s revelation of the implications of Lehi’s vision of the tree of life gives in brief the whole of the Nephite experience, down to the final devastation in the fourth generation after the coming of Christ (1 Nephi 12).

Likewise, Mormon introduces his abridgment by confirming Nephi’s prophecies. Yet the real end is still to come: Mormon supposes that his son Moroni “will witness the entire destruction of my people” (Words of Mormon 1:2). Thus we read the rest of the Book of Mormon knowing all the while the outcome of the story but still wanting to know the final details. In the Words of Mormon near the beginning of his record, Mormon prepares us to focus on *why* the Nephites were destroyed. He then asks the larger question about the eventual eternal destiny of his people and prays that a remnant of them will receive the life-giving message of his sacred record.

So that we recognize the sweep of history throughout the Book of Mormon, we are told what will happen before we get the details of such major events as the annihilation of the Jaredites, the coming of Christ to the Nephites, the destruction of the wicked city Ammonihah, and the success of the sons of Mosiah. The last is a representative example of this foretelling: At the very beginning of the extensive account of their missionary journey, we learn that the sons of Mosiah “had been teaching the word of God for the space of fourteen years among the Lamanites, having had much success in bringing many to the knowledge of the truth” (Alma 17:4).

This pattern of anticipation is also illustrated in the story of the people of Zeniff, which is recounted in Mosiah 7 through 25. We begin the story with Zeniff’s grandson, Limhi, and his people in bondage to the Lamanites. Then in Limhi’s discourse to his people we learn what has led up to that bondage. He tells of Zeniff’s migration, refers to the trickery of the Lamanite king, and alludes to a slain prophet of the Lord (Abinadi). We thus learn the fate of the people and get something of an overview of their story, although we do not know exactly how it will end. Then Limhi has Ammon the explorer read the plates containing the record of Zeniff’s people from the time they left Zarahemla, and excerpts from the record of Zeniff and the story of the people of Alma are inserted into the text of the book of Mosiah. From that we learn the *why* and *how* of *what* we already knew. The story of the Zeniffites is completed when Ammon assists Limhi and his people in their escape from bondage back to Zarahemla and as the people of Alma are also led back to Zarahemla.

The same pattern occurs in the account of the Jaredites. At several points before the book of Ether we are informed that a great people has been completely destroyed, leaving behind twenty-four gold plates. We also learn as early as the book of Omni about Coriantumr, the last survivor of this people. We are kept in anticipation by Mormon’s promise that the account would be written “hereafter; for behold, it is expedient that all people should know the things which are written in this account” (Mosiah 28:19)—a promise fulfilled by Moroni with the book of Ether. Knowing all this, the reader, along with Limhi, is eager to know the contents of those twenty-four engraved gold plates: “Perhaps, they will give us a knowledge of a remnant of the people who have been destroyed, from whence these records came” (Mosiah 8:12). Again, the reader’s concern is with knowing *why* the people have been destroyed and what the lesson is in that destruction.



This “middle of the action” structure in the Book of Mormon is paralleled and reinforced by prophetic structure. Before going sequentially through the story of the sons of Mosiah, for example, the narrator gives us Alma’s report that they are alive and well, that they had “much success in bringing many to the knowledge of the truth,” and that they had suffered much in both body and mind (Alma 17:1–5). Soon after this report we are told that at the beginning of their dangerous missionary venture, the sons of Mosiah learned through the Spirit that they should be patient in afflictions and would be instruments in the Lord’s hands for the salvation of many souls (Alma 17:11). Thus the essential events are known ahead of time—both by the narrator’s foretelling and by prophecy.

The Book of Mormon epic provides, if you will, a “backward” story. Jaredite records seen by King Mosiah give “an account of the people who were destroyed, from the time that they were destroyed *back* to the building of the great tower, . . . yea, and even from that time back until the creation of Adam” (Mosiah 28:17). Whether or not the record progressed this way, the interest was from the foregone event (the destruction) *back* to its origins (the time they were scattered at the building of the great tower) and then back to the very beginning (the creation of Adam). The interest thus is different from that of a regular story: we care much more about knowing the whys than the whats.

The “middle of the action” structure also allows for an ironic dimension. For example, King Noah’s people tell him: “We are strong, we shall not come into bondage, or be taken captive by our enemies” (Mosiah 12:15). Yet at that point we already know wicked King Noah and his people were brought into bondage. Indeed, from our frame of reference as we read the Book of Mormon, we think of the people as still in bondage and wonder how they are going to get out of it.

Finally, this structure underlines the constant relation of past, present, and future in the Book of Mormon. In his parting testimony, Nephi speaks of great worth in that which he has written, prays continually for his people, and speaks to a future audience “as the voice of one crying from the dust” (2 Nephi 33:13). Alma, too, considers both past and future from his present: He always remembers the captivity and deliverance of his fathers, he rejoices in the present repentance of many of his brethren, and he looks forward to bringing some soul to repentance, with the hope that his redeemed brethren will enter the timeless state of the heavenly kingdom of God “to go no more out” (Alma 29:17).

In this respect, Isaiah is particularly important in providing prophetic texts that present the judgments of God upon Israel in the sweep of time. A voice out of Israel’s past, Isaiah establishes the grand connection with the house of Israel in the Old World, the remnant of Israel in the New World, and modern-day Israel—with many of his prophecies yet to be fulfilled.

### **A Living Epic**

**The record brought forth “out of the dust” (Moroni 10:27) of centuries past becomes a living epic in claiming to speak to descendants of the people treated in the record. It gives them their origins, presents the truth about the heroic Nephi (the people as well as the man and his subsequent representatives), shows God’s dealings with their ancestors over a millennium of time, and challenges them to come forth out of an obscurity caused by disobedience and by the repression of latter-day Gentiles.**

The Book of Mormon is an active epic. Its story of a people has yet to be completed; it is both history and prophecy. Told in plainness and high seriousness, it says to Lehi’s living descendants that they are a part of an illustrious covenant people. Like their fathers the Anti-Nephi-Lehies, they can repent, receive the gospel, and not only prosper in the land temporally, but, what is more important, be rewarded with life everlasting in the eternal promised land.

As Alma instructed his son Helaman, the Book of Mormon plates were destined to “retain their brightness” (Alma 37:4–5; see also 1 Nephi 5:18–19). And how do they retain their brightness? They come alive for the audience that receives them. They are a continuing epic of Lehi’s people. On an even larger scale, they give meaning to humankind’s general destiny.

## Notes

1. E. M. W. Tillyard, *The English Epic and Its Background* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1966).
2. Leland Ryken, *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1987), 127–29.
3. M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1993), 54–55.
4. John P. McWilliams Jr., *The American Epic: Transforming a Genre, 1770–1860* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 217, 6.
5. Abrams, *Glossary*, 52.
6. McWilliams, *American Epic*, 28.
7. Gabriel Josipovici, *The Book of God: A Response to the Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 61.
8. Abrams, *Glossary*, 55.
9. Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 33–55. In “Tenting, Toll, and Taxing,” *Western Political Quarterly* 19, no. 4 (1966): 599, Nibley says regarding an epic milieu: “It was not until early in the present century that H. M. Chadwick [in *The Heroic Age*] pointed out what should have been obvious to everyone, namely that epic literature, a large and important segment of the human record, is the product not of unrestrained poetic fancy but of real years of terror and gloom through which the entire race has been forced to pass from time to time. We now have good reason to believe . . . that the violence of the elements that forms the somber backdrop of the ‘Epic Milieu’ was more than a literary convention.” (This article was reprinted in Hugh Nibley, *The Ancient State: The Rulers and the Ruled* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and Farms, 1991].)
10. Nibley, *Approach*, 39–40.
11. This relationship of Nephi to his people is central to an epic. According to Cleanth Brooks, R. W. B. Lewis, and Robert Penn Warren in *American Literature: The Makers and the Making* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1973), 2:2190, an epic gives us “the story of a hero who typifies a people and whose career provides us with a sense of the history of a people enacted and of a civilization realized or transformed.”
12. E. Douglas Clark and Robert S. Clark in *Fathers and Sons in the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1991), 229–32, show a number of parallels between Mormon and Nephi, including preparation in the “learning of my people” or “learning of my father” (Mormon 1:2, 1 Nephi 1:1), being visited by the Lord, and being military leaders of their people.
13. See also Jarom 1:9; Omni 1:6; Mosiah 1:7; Alma 9:13; 36:30; 37:13; 3 Nephi 5:22.

14. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 317.