

# "Their Fathers" - Letters and Autobiography

The first purpose of the Book of Mormon, according to Moroni in the title page, is “to show unto the remnant of the House of Israel what great things the Lord hath done for their fathers.” The “great things” are primarily the miracles of the Lord in bringing Lehi and his family out of Jerusalem and to the promised land (2 Nephi 1:1; Alma 9:9; 3 Nephi 5:20). To Nephi and Lehi, the “fathers” are their ancestors, especially Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (1 Nephi 17:40). But Mormon and Moroni more likely intend “fathers” to refer primarily to Lehi and Nephi. Mormon speaks of “our fathers” whom the Lord brought “out of the land of Jerusalem” (3 Nephi 5:20). “Fathers” implicitly includes as well such other exemplars of faith as Ammon, Alma, and the twelve Nephite disciples. Moroni quotes Christ as saying “unto our fathers: If ye have faith ye can do all things which are expedient unto me” (Moroni 10:23; see also Moroni 7:33). Mormon speaking to Lamanites in the latter days says,

Know ye that ye must come to the knowledge of your fathers, and repent of all your sins and iniquities, and believe in Jesus Christ. . . . and if ye believe [the Book of Mormon] ye will know concerning your fathers, and also the marvelous works which were wrought by the power of God among them. (Mormon 7:5, 9)

Conversely, the fathers of the Lamanites, Laman and Lemuel, began false traditions, saying Nephi was a liar and a robber (Alma 20:13). For the converted Lamanites, the Nephite fathers become their fathers as they accept the gospel through the Nephites. Thus Samuel the Lamanite says that those Lamanites who “know of the wicked and abominable traditions of *their fathers*, and are led to believe the holy scriptures, . . . have been made free” (Helaman 15:7–8). The time shall come, he continues, “which hath been spoken of by *our fathers* [meaning the Nephite prophets whom Samuel adopted as his fathers] . . . concerning the restoration of our brethren, the Lamanites, again to the knowledge of the truth” (Helaman 15:11).

Acceptance of Nephi and Lehi as fathers to the Lamanites is exemplified in King Lamoni’s father. He has his people take upon themselves (and also gives to Lamoni’s brother) the name of Anti-Nephi-Lehi, which could be interpreted to mean “in imitation of Nephi and Lehi.” The prefix *anti-* means “against, facing, or opposite”—as is a reflection in a mirror. While it can have the negative meaning of a false imitation, *anti-* can also indicate a similarity or likeness. In this positive sense of being a reflection, *Anti* in *Anti-Nephi-Lehi* might well have signified the converted Lamanites’ desire to be like the prophet-fathers Nephi and Lehi. In what must have been a similar intent, Helaman named his sons Nephi and Lehi so they would remember their “first parents who came out of the land of Jerusalem” (Helaman 5:6).

We come to know those “first parents” and their descendants in a book that reveals various personalities through styles of writing and that has many striking family relationships.<sup>1</sup> Personal voices appear in the literary genres of autobiography and letters. Such accounts provide direct access into the thinking and feeling of various “fathers” as well as of persons with whom they came into conflict.

## Autobiography

**Parts of the Book of Mormon could well be called autobiographies in giving us moving and searching confessionals or cries of the soul. They individualize the processes of redemption.**

The first phrase of the book begins autobiographically, with “I, Nephi, having been born of goodly parents” (1 Nephi 1:1). Much of Nephi’s record can be approached from that angle. The formula “I, Nephi” introduces most phases of

Nephi's account of the Lehitess' journey into the wilderness, the return for the plates, the voyage across the waters, and the arrival in the promised land. While these narratives are firmly told from Nephi's personal perspective, his confessions of the soul are the most moving parts of his autobiographical expressions. "As I sat pondering in mine heart I was caught away in the Spirit of the Lord," he says, "yea, into an exceedingly high mountain, which I never had before seen" (1 Nephi 11:1), and then he relates his visionary experience of seeing God's dealing with mankind to the end of time. Moving lyrically into what has been analyzed earlier as the psalm of Nephi, he reveals his deepest weaknesses and strengths:

Nevertheless, notwithstanding the great goodness of the Lord, in showing me his great and marvelous works, my heart exclaimeth: O wretched man that I am! Yea, my heart sorroweth because of my flesh; my soul grieveth because of mine iniquities. I am encompassed about, because of the temptations and the sins which do so easily beset me. And when I desire to rejoice, my heart groaneth because of my sins; nevertheless, I know in whom I have trusted. My God hath been my support; he hath led me through mine afflictions in the wilderness; and he hath preserved me upon the waters of the great deep. (2 Nephi 4:17–20)

Nephi's nephew, Enos, tells of the central event of his life, his "wrestle . . . before God," in which, like the eighteenth-century Puritan divine Jonathan Edwards, he supplicates God for his soul. Edwards in his private writings speaks of his "inward struggles and conflicts, and self-reflections. I made seeking my salvation the main business of my life." After describing his increased sense of divine things, he says: "It was my continual strife day and night, and constant inquiry, how I should *be* more holy, and *live* more holily, and more becoming a child of God, and a disciple of Christ."<sup>2</sup>

For his part, Enos confesses his experience in a forest:

And my soul hungered; and I kneeled down before my Maker, and I cried unto him in mighty prayer and supplication for mine own soul; and all the day long did I cry unto him; yea, and when the night came I did still raise my voice high that it reached the heavens. And there came a voice unto me, saying: Enos, thy sins are forgiven thee, and thou shalt be blessed. (Enos 1:4–5)

The experience of Enos is reminiscent of Jacob's wrestle with an angel who blessed him and redeemed him from all evil (Genesis 32:24–29). As with the Old Testament account, Enos's experience is told simply. The word "and" is the main connective; modifiers are sparse ("*mighty prayer*"); and only the decisive points are emphasized.

The style here is similar to that of the biblical account of Abraham and Isaac as analyzed by Erich Auerbach in *Mimesis*. This style is first apparent in Auerbach's quotation of Genesis 22:1: "And it came to pass after these things, that God did tempt Abraham, and said to him, Abraham! and he said, Behold, here I am."<sup>3</sup> In both narratives, the syntactical connections are simple (*and* is the primary connective); there is "the externalization of only so much of the phenomena as is necessary for the purpose of the narrative";<sup>4</sup> modifiers are sparse ("*mighty prayer*" in Enos's account) or not to be found at all (in the passage from Genesis); and "the decisive points of the narrative alone are emphasized."<sup>5</sup>

The dialogue between Enos and the Lord continues in this sparse yet forceful way: "And I, Enos, knew that God could not lie; wherefore, my guilt was swept away. And I said: Lord, how is it done? And he said unto me: Because of thy faith in Christ, whom thou hast never before heard nor seen. And many years pass away before he shall manifest himself in the flesh; wherefore, go to, thy faith hath made thee whole" (Enos 1:6–8).

The transforming religious experience of Alma the Younger becomes more structured and more personal in his retelling of it to his sons. In the first instance, Mormon relates the story of Alma's being struck down, but he quotes the recovered Alma for the crucial recounting of his internal experience: After Alma receives his strength, he stands up and bids those around him to be of good comfort, "For, said he, I have repented of my sins, and have been redeemed of the Lord; behold I am born of the Spirit" (Mosiah 27:24). Alma continues to tell how his soul "was racked with eternal torment; but I am snatched, and my soul is pained no more" (Mosiah 27:29). To his son Helaman, Alma gives a more extensive and a remarkably chiasmic version of his experience. In what John Welch calls a "conscious creation of an imaginative and mature artist," Alma succeeds in placing the turning point of his life at the turning point of his narrative.<sup>6</sup> This turning point is an intense movement from torment to mercy:

And it came to pass that as I was thus racked with torment, while I was harrowed up by the memory of my many sins, behold, I remembered also to have heard my father prophesy unto the people concerning the coming of one Jesus Christ, a Son of God, to atone for the sins of the world. Now, as my mind caught hold upon this thought, I cried within my heart: O Jesus, thou Son of God, have mercy on me, who am in the gall of bitterness, and am encircled about by the everlasting chains of death. And now, behold, when I thought this, I could remember my pains no more; yea, I was harrowed up by the memory of my sins no more. And oh, what joy, and what marvelous light I did behold; yea, my soul was filled with joy as exceeding as was my pain! (Alma 36:17-20)

For his part, Mormon gives us a piecemeal autobiography and so does Moroni. In the first verse of the Words of Mormon, before beginning his record, Mormon says: "And now I, Mormon, being about to deliver up the record which I have been making into the hands of my son Moroni, behold I have witnessed almost all the destruction of my people, the Nephites." Moroni, in turn, first tells us about himself and then gives an account of his people: "I even remain alone to write the sad tale of the destruction of my people" (Mormon 8:3).<sup>7</sup>

A distinguishing characteristic of each of these expressions is the necessity to confess deepest feelings as well as weaknesses or sins and religious experiences. Nephi, Enos, Alma, Mormon, and Moroni are impelled by the need to lay bare their souls and witness to future audiences.

## Letters

**Letters in the Book of Mormon have a claim to be examined as literature because they engage our interest both for what they say and for the way in which they are expressed. We take special interest in the personalities that are revealed in a genre the great letter writer Horace Walpole thought "ought to be nothing but extempore conversation upon paper."<sup>8</sup> Harold Binkley agrees that the familiar letter "is what we may call oral; it is read as we read drama, always with the sound of the words in our ears, and the image of personal manner and gesture before our eyes."<sup>9</sup> According to Ronald Corthell, "Demetrius, the most influential classical theoretician of the genre, distinguished the letter from other literary kinds by its style and corresponding ability to reveal the character or soul of the writer."<sup>10</sup>**

The eight substantive, natural, and self-revelatory epistles or letters we find in the Book of Mormon are like conversations in revealing the souls of the writers.<sup>11</sup> These letters are from Captain Moroni to Ammoron (Alma 54:5-14), Ammoron to Moroni (Alma 54:16-24), Helaman to Moroni (Alma 56:2-58:41), Moroni to Pahoran (Alma 60:1-36), Pahoran to Moroni (Alma 61:2-21), Giddianhi to Lachoneus (3 Nephi 3:2-10), and Mormon to his son Moroni (Moroni 8:2-30, 9:1-26).<sup>12</sup> Those from Captain Moroni and Mormon notably reveal an intensity of feeling on the parts of these striking Book of Mormon personalities.

## Moroni-Ammoron Correspondence

The remarkable correspondence between Captain Moroni and the Lamanite warlord Ammoron comes after nine years of bloodshed in a war between the Lamanites and Nephites. This war was begun by Amalickiah, a cunningly brutal man of Nephite origin who installed himself as the king over the Lamanites by conspiring to kill the Lamanite ruler. Although he cursed God and swore to drink the blood of Moroni, Amalickiah was killed by Moroni's lieutenant, Teancum. Amalickiah was succeeded by his brother Ammoron, who continued the war.

In cosmic terms, these letters between Moroni and Ammoron have to do less with exchange of prisoners than with the irreconcilable conflict between the powers of God and Satan, with Moroni appearing as the Christian champion. As we read Moroni's letter, we remember Mormon's earlier encomium on Moroni as

a strong and a mighty man; he was a man of a perfect understanding; yea, a man that did not delight in bloodshed; a man whose soul did joy in the liberty and the freedom of his country, and his brethren from bondage and slavery; . . . and he was a man who was firm in the faith of Christ, and he had sworn with an oath to defend his people, his rights, and his country, and his religion, even to the loss of his blood. . . . If all men had been, and were, and ever would be, like unto Moroni, behold, the very powers of hell would have been shaken forever; yea, the devil would never have power over the hearts of the children of men. (Alma 48:11, 13, 17)

For his part, Ammoron, a Zoramite who has rejected his faith and turned into a Lamanite, epitomizes the apostate who repeatedly leads attacks on the Nephites.

Although at first Moroni rejoices at the request for an exchange, as he gets into his letter his pent-up anger flows forth. This is anger about years of conflict led by Ammoron's brother, the cunning and duplicitous Amalickiah; on a larger scale, it is a response to centuries of Lamanite-Nephite conflict. "Behold, I would tell you somewhat concerning the justice of God, and the sword of his almighty wrath, which doth hang over you except ye repent and withdraw your armies into your own lands," Moroni declares (Alma 54:6). In this cosmic context, God is on the side of the Nephites; the real battle is between God and Ammoron (both the man and the army.)

The issues Moroni outlines are these: The purposes of Ammoron and of Amalickiah before him are blatantly murderous. In spiritual terms, the Lamanites have fought against the people of the Lord, and unless they abandon their plans, they will incur the wrath of God to their destruction (in Book of Mormon terms, the ultimate curse—one that eventually comes to the Nephites). For their part, the Nephites vow to stand firm in their religion and with their God. Because the Nephites are outnumbered, Moroni needs to arm his women and children—and would do so, in his extremity, to fight against the Lamanites.

The first half of Moroni's letter builds on a formula repeated four times: "except ye repent and withdraw" (Alma 54:6, 7) or "except ye withdraw" (Alma 54:9, 10) your armies and your murderous intentions, God's wrath and death will come upon you.<sup>13</sup> Moroni breaks off this theme with his angry declaration, "But behold, it supposeth me that I talk to you concerning these things in vain; or it supposeth me that thou art a child of hell" (Alma 54:11). Then continuing with the repeated declaration, "Behold," Moroni affirms not what God will do but what he, Moroni, will do:

And behold, if you do not this, I will come against you with my armies; yea, even I will arm my women and my children, and I will come against you, and I will follow you even into your own land, which is the land of our first inheritance; yea, and it shall be blood for blood, yea, life for life; and I will give you battle even until you are destroyed from off the face of the earth. (Alma 54:12)

Moroni ends his letter with three short, blunt affirmations that suggest the firmness of his character: “Now I close my epistle. I am Moroni; I am a leader of the people of the Nephites” (Alma 54:14).

In his letter, Moroni uses rhetorical devices to convey his “sincerity and force of utterance.”<sup>14</sup> These devices, in classicist George Kennedy’s words, are intended to persuade or motivate—to “affect the thought, actions, or emotions of an audience.”<sup>15</sup> Moroni’s letter can be analyzed in reference to rhetorical terms defined by linguist Edward Corbett in *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student* and by Northrop Frye, Sheridan Baker, and George Perkins in *The Harper Handbook to Literature*.<sup>16</sup> *Anaphora*, or initial repetition, is found in “Behold, Ammoron, I have written unto you. . . . Behold, I would tell you . . . Yea, I would tell you . . . ; yea, I would tell you . . .” (Alma 54:5–7). This scheme, Corbett says, “is usually reserved for those passages where the author wants to produce a strong emotional effect.”<sup>17</sup> Moroni uses *apophasis* (also called *paraleipsis*, a technique of irony in which one mentions a matter while appearing to pass over it) when he says to Ammoron he would tell him “somewhat concerning the justice of God” and would tell him “concerning that awful hell that awaits to receive such murderers as thou and thy brother have been” if Ammoron “were capable of hearkening” to these things (Alma 54:6–7). Moroni uses *isocolons* (repeated phrases of similar length and corresponding structure) when he writes: “for we will retain our cities and our lands; yea, and we will maintain our religion and the cause of our God” (Alma 54:10); “yea, and it shall be blood for blood, yea, life for life” (Alma 54:12). The latter in its equation of blood with life also illustrates *synecdoche* (substitution of a part for a whole). Close to *synecdoche* is *metonymy* (substitution of a name of one thing for that of another associated with it), as found in “the sword of [God’s] almighty wrath” (Alma 54:6). A *parenthesis* (a verbal unit that interrupts the flow of the sentence) is found in the following: “I have written unto you somewhat concerning this war which ye have waged against my people, or rather which thy brother hath waged against them, and which ye are still determined to carry on after his death” (Alma 54:5). *Antithesis*, or the contrast of ideas in parallel phrases, is employed in “ye have sought to murder us, and we have only sought to defend ourselves” (Alma 54:13). There is an excellent example of *climax* (increasing weight or importance) in Alma 54:12 (quoted above), when Moroni enumerates the steps he will take toward his enemy’s destruction. Moroni ends his letter with an *appositive* (a phrase that explains or modifies a previous phrase with the same grammatical construction): “I am Moroni; I am a leader of the people of the Nephites” (Alma 54:14).

For his part, Ammoron reveals his character and motives: bloodthirsty and brazen, he desires to avenge the death of Amalickiah. In the larger context, he asserts that the Nephite fathers wronged the Lamanites—“they did rob them of their right to the government when it rightly belonged unto them” (Alma 54:17). Ammoron desires to correct this wrong—a critical matter for him is who is rightfully in charge. The Nephites (when righteous) lead humbly and with a desire for liberty (exemplified by Mosiah, Alma, and Moroni); the Lamanites traditionally seek to subjugate others. That is shown in Ammoron’s setting down exactly the condition he knows Moroni will not accept: an offer to end the war “if ye will lay down your arms, and *subject yourselves* to be governed by those to whom the government doth rightly belong” (Alma 54:18). Affirming a boldness equal to Moroni’s, Ammoron vows to “wage a war which shall be eternal, either to the subjecting the Nephites to our authority or to their eternal extinction” (Alma 54:20). Protection against these alternatives has been Moroni’s central concern for some time, especially as manifest when he rallied the people with the title of liberty. Ammoron will not consider the third alternative for the Lamanites, which, as we have seen earlier, is demonstrated by the people of Ammon—living in peace next to the Nephites and being neither conquerors nor slaves.

Ammoron’s arrogant scorn is manifest in his declaration that though he does not know God, “neither do ye” (compare his statement to those of Korihor and Sherem). He continues with derision, “And if it so be that there is a

devil and a hell, behold will he not send you there to dwell with my brother whom ye have murdered, whom ye have hinted that he hath gone to such a place?" (Alma 54:21, 22).

The aftermath of this exchange between Moroni and Ammoron has several ironies. Moroni is incensed at Ammoron's fraud and says, "Behold, I will not exchange prisoners with Ammoron save he will withdraw his purpose" (Alma 55:2). Knowing that this will not happen, however, Moroni plans a stratagem that has nothing to do with his apparent intent in the first letter. He responds to Ammoron's claim, "I am a bold Lamanite" (Alma 54:24), by getting a true Lamanite—fittingly named Laman and a descendant of Laman—to trick the Lamanites and free the prisoners in the city of Gid. (This Laman had been accused of murdering the king of the Lamanites, when the crime was actually Amalickiah's.) Rather than send a large army, Moroni sends only a small force with Laman. Arriving at the camp of the Lamanites, Laman claims that he has escaped from the Nephites. He then deceives the Lamanites by offering them wine as a symbol of conviviality—wine that has been strengthened in order to get them drunk. Moroni then makes good on his promise to Ammoron when, summoned by Laman, he and his men surround the sleeping Lamanites and arm the Nephite women and children who are prisoners in the city of Gid. They do not use their weapons, but their arms help persuade the Lamanites to surrender. In an ironic turnaround, once it is evident that the prisoners have power over the Lamanites, the captains of the Lamanites are the ones who take away their soldiers' weapons, throw them at the feet of the Nephites, and plead for mercy. "destroyed." Thus, though in his letter Moroni unleashes his anger in words, afterwards he shows mercy in deeds.

### Helaman to Moroni

**Helaman's letter to Moroni contrasts strikingly with the Moroni-Ammoron exchange. Written to "my dearly beloved brother, Moroni, as well in the Lord as in the tribulations of our warfare" (Alma 56:2), its tone is one of love, humility, gratitude, and faith. In it Helaman tells a remarkable story of 2,000 stripling Ammonites (later, 2,060) whose presence and valor change the course of the Lamanite-Nephite balance of power in the area by the west sea.**

Helaman's love is evident in his salutation and in his repeated references to his 2,000 "sons"—"for they are worthy to be called sons," he says (Alma 56:10). Helaman's humility is revealed through his downplaying his own role in affairs. Though he was active in persuading the older Ammonites not to break their covenant regarding taking up weapons of war, he attributes his position as leader to the young men: they "would that I should be their leader" (Alma 56:5). Helaman's gratitude and faith are shown in his recounting the astounding preservation of all of the Ammonites after a fierce battle: "And we do justly ascribe it to the miraculous power of God, because of their exceeding faith in that which they had been taught to believe—that there was a just God, and whosoever did not doubt, that they should be preserved by his marvelous power" (Alma 57:26). His faith and gratitude are further shown in such statements as, "And blessed is the name of our God; for behold, it is he that has delivered us; yea, that has done this great thing for us" (Alma 57:35) and "The Lord our God did visit us with assurances that he would deliver us; yea, insomuch that he did speak peace to our souls, and did grant unto us great faith, and did cause us that we should hope for our deliverance in him" (Alma 58:11). Helaman closes his letter with an invocation of God's protection: "And now, my beloved brother, Moroni, may the Lord our God, who has redeemed us and made us free, keep you continually in his presence" (Alma 58:41).

Helaman's letter is particularly interesting in its gripping narrative of remarkable stratagems that recover one city after another for the Nephites. This narrative epitomizes the repeated Book of Mormon motif of a small force dealing successfully with an innumerable one—provided there is righteous commitment to a cause. Helaman's solution is to use ingenuity and plan creative stratagems, yet acknowledge the deliverance of the Lord: "It is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do," as Nephi said (2 Nephi 25:23).

In this respect, Mormon's edited retelling of Helaman's extended narrative points to a purpose of the "war chapters" in the Book of Mormon. If these chapters are to provide military history, it is strange military history indeed. By contrast with the 5,500 words of Helaman's account, the largest battle in the first 570 years is covered in 65 words. (In Alma 62:38 a great battle is dismissed in one sentence.)

And in the fifty and seventh year [the Lamanites] did come down against the Nephites to battle, and they did commence the work of death; yea, insomuch that in the fifty and eighth year of the reign of the judges they succeeded in obtaining possession of the land of Zarahemla; yea, and also all the lands, even unto the land which was near the land Bountiful. (Helaman 4:5)

Rather, Helaman's narrative emphasizes the exercise of faith, direction by a great prophet-warrior, and help by the Lord in the face of superior numbers.<sup>18</sup>

### **Moroni to Pahoran**

**Contrasting sharply with Helaman's mild tone is Moroni's barely controlled anger in writing to the Nephite governor Pahoran. In expressing the need for reinforcements, Helaman had said in an earlier letter:**

Behold, we do not know but what ye are unsuccessful, and ye have drawn away the forces into that quarter of the land; if so, we do not desire to murmur. And if it is not so, behold, we fear that there is some faction in the government, that they do not send more men to our assistance. . . . But, behold, it mattereth not—we trust God will deliver us, notwithstanding the weakness of our armies. (Alma 58:35–37)

When he received no response to his first letter requesting additional help for Helaman and having a serious setback in his own area, Moroni sends a second letter—or rather, an epistle—to Pahoran and other government officials with a powerful appeal that mounts into a condemnation, accusation, and threat.

The tone of Moroni's epistle is described by Hugh Nibley: "The letter seethes with the resentment of the man at the front for the easy-living ways of the 'VIP's' back at the capital—the old misunderstandings between the 'office' and the 'field.'"<sup>19</sup> In his thorough analysis of the letter, Nibley goes on to say:

Moroni was bursting with pent-up emotions and the accumulated memories of reverses that could have been avoided and operations that could have ended the war had the necessary support been forthcoming from home. He knows, as Helaman suspects, that someone in high places is working against him, and for his noble and idealistic nature the thought that anyone should make capital of the miseries of others was simply maddening.<sup>20</sup>

Granted the bursting of pent-up emotions, the epistle nevertheless has a shape of development that makes it powerful and persuasive. (Moroni is incorrect in his surmise concerning Pahoran, yet he is right in his main suspicion, and the force of his challenge impels Pahoran to decisive action.) Though directing his epistle to Pahoran specifically, Moroni at first speaks generally "by the way of condemnation" to "those who have been chosen by this people to govern and manage the affairs of this war" (Alma 60:2, 1). He reminds them of their responsibility, tells how he and others have suffered afflictions, and then recounts the slaughter among the people—which, he asserts, might have been otherwise "if ye had rendered unto our armies sufficient strength and succor for them" (Alma 60:5).

The second phase of the epistle consists of Moroni's mounting accusations against the government leaders, prefaced by phrases such as "can you think" or "could ye suppose." "Can you think to sit upon your thrones in a state of thoughtless stupor," he asks disdainfully, "while your enemies are spreading the work of death around you? . . . Behold, could ye suppose that ye could sit upon your thrones, and because of the exceeding goodness of God ye could do nothing and he would deliver you?" (Alma 60:7, 11) Twice he declares, "if ye have supposed this ye have supposed in vain" (Alma 60:11, 12). (A comparison might be made here with George Washington's letters to the Second Continental Congress.)

In the third phase, Moroni develops a series of cause-and-consequence arguments in fearing that "the judgments of God will come upon this people": "Were it not for the wickedness which first commenced at our head, we could have withstood our enemies. . . . Yea, had it not been for the war which broke out among ourselves, . . . we should have dispersed our enemies" (Alma 60:14–16). Current military insufficiency, he says, is caused by recent civil strife instigated by those who sought to replace judges with a king.

Moroni then turns his criticism directly to the current rulers. With several rhetorical questions, Moroni ranges through possible reasons why the leaders have neglected him—and may even be traitors to their country. Have ye neglected us "because ye are in the heart of our country and ye are surrounded by security . . . ? Have ye forgotten the commands of the Lord your God? Yea, have ye forgotten the captivity of our fathers?" His last question brings an obvious and sharp response: "Do ye suppose that God will look upon you as guiltless while ye sit still and behold these things? Behold I say unto you, Nay" (Alma 60:19–20, 23).

Moroni's forceful "Nay" is a bridge to the final phase of his epistle. "God has said that the inward vessel shall be cleansed first," he reminds them, "and then shall the outer vessel be cleansed also" (Alma 60:23). Moroni warns them that unless his leaders repent and send the armies relief and supplies, he will lead part of his army to the capital and stir up insurrections among them in the cause of freedom. Contrasting with the stasis of the supposedly *sitting* rulers, Moroni will act forcefully if his conditions are not met. If they do not act quickly, he will.

Moroni closes with an appeal to the authority of God and a calm affirmation of his unselfish purpose. The Lord has given him a directive to go to battle against the governmental leaders if they do not repent, and because "God will not suffer that we should perish with hunger, . . . see that ye fulfil the word of God. Behold, I am Moroni, your chief captain. I seek not for power, but to pull it down." In a balanced amplification of this statement he concludes, "I seek not for honor of the world, but for the glory of my God, and the freedom and welfare of my country" (Alma 60:35–36).

### **Pahoran to Moroni**

If Moroni is bold, courageous, and strong-willed as the man of action, Pahoran is the hesitant, passive leader with an overreliance on words. When he is chosen to be chief judge, he is on the right side of the cause of freedom but exhibits neither diplomacy nor forceful leadership. When a faction desiring to overthrow the free government and establish a king tries to change the law, Pahoran, we are told, does not "hearken to those who had sent in their voices with their petitions concerning the altering of the law" (Alma 51:3). When the king-men still try to get their way, it is others—not Pahoran—who resist them. Moroni, especially, rises to the fore with his petition to Pahoran representing "the voice of the people" in asking to be granted the "power to compel those dissenters to defend their country or to put them to death" (Alma 51:15).

In responding to Moroni's second epistle, Pahoran reveals both his good heart and his relative passivity:

I say unto you, Moroni, that I do not joy in your great afflictions, yea, it grieves my soul. But behold, there are those who do joy in your afflictions, yea, insomuch that they have risen up in rebellion against me, and also those of my people who are freemen. . . . And now, in your epistle you have censured me, but it

mattereth not; I am not angry, but do rejoice in the greatness of your heart. I, Pahoran, do not seek for power, save only to retain my judgment-seat that I may preserve the rights and the liberty of my people. (Alma 61:2–3, 9)

Though he means well, Pahoran, in contrast to Moroni, does not do much. In the first part of his letter he emphasizes the actions of others: the king-men have “have led away the hearts of many people. . . . They have driven me out before them. . . . They have got possession of the land” (Alma 61:4, 5, 8). After affirming that he does not seek for power, Pahoran gives passive responses that reverse Moroni’s formula of “Except ye \_\_\_, I will \_\_\_.” Pahoran says what he would not do: “We would not shed the blood of the Lamanites if they would stay in their own land. We would not shed the blood of our brethren if they would not rise up in rebellion and take the sword against us. We would subject ourselves to the yoke of bondage if it were requisite with the justice of God” (Alma 61:10–12). Rather than going forth to rally the people, as Moroni would have done, he sends forth a proclamation; his first resistance to evil is with words (Alma 61:14); and his advice to Moroni regarding the hardened and faithful warriors Lehi and Teancum is to “tell them to fear not, for God will deliver them” (Alma 61:21)—again, an overreliance on words. Pahoran’s hesitancy to act is revealed especially in his saying to Moroni, “I do joy in receiving your epistle, for I was somewhat worried concerning what we should do, whether it should be just in us to go against our brethren. But ye have said, except they repent the Lord hath commanded you that ye should go against them” (Alma 61:19–20).

As revealed in their letters, the sharp outlines of the personalities of these two quite different leaders are striking. Contrasting features of these two Nephite leaders subsequently appear in the differences between their sons. Moroni’s son Moronihah is forceful, bold, and determined; Pahoran’s sons are contentious, indecisive, and weak. His son Pacumeni, who becomes the ruler, ends up being killed against the wall of Zarahemla; Moronihah liberates the city.

### Giddianhi to Lachoneus

**The context for this letter from the robber chieftain Giddianhi to the Nephites’ chief judge Lachoneus is a period of depredations by Gadianton robbers. These robbers, intent on gaining wealth and power by murder and by upsetting civil order, make forays out of their mountain hideouts to attack both Nephites and Lamanites and destroy their cities. Despite repeated efforts by the Nephites, “the Gadianton robbers did gain many advantages over them.” Nephi adds that “the sword of destruction did hang over” his people, “insomuch that they were about to be smitten down by it, and this because of their iniquity” (3 Nephi 2:18–19).**

Emboldened by successes of the robbers, Giddianhi threatens Lachoneus. Giddianhi’s letter drips with gall, revealing an insolent, bold, and rapacious person. He begins with feigned flattery that moves into sarcasm:

Lachoneus, *most noble* and chief governor of the land, behold, I . . . give unto you *exceedingly great praise* because of your firmness, and also the firmness of your people, in maintaining that which *ye suppose* to be your right and liberty; yea, ye do stand well, *as if* ye were supported by the hand of a god, in the defence of your liberty, and your property, and your country, *or that which ye do call so*.

And it *seemeth a pity unto me, most noble* Lachoneus, that ye should be so foolish and vain as to suppose that ye can stand against so many brave men who are at my command, who do now at this time stand in their arms, and do await with great anxiety for the word—Go down upon the Nephites and destroy them.

And I, knowing of their unconquerable spirit, having proved them in the field of battle, and knowing of their everlasting hatred towards you because of the many wrongs which ye have done unto them,

therefore if they should come down against you they would visit you with utter destruction.

Therefore I have written this epistle, sealing it with mine own hand, *feeling for your welfare*, because of your firmness in that which ye *believe* to be right, and your *noble spirit* in the field of battle. (3 Nephi 3:2–5)

Giddianhi impudently claims that the works of his secret society are good and that his robbers “dissented away from [the Nephites] because of [their] wickedness in retaining from them their rights of government” (3 Nephi 3:10). What he wants is nothing less than that the people of Lachoneus turn over their cities, lands, and possessions to the Gadianton band.

In his mail-fisted threats, Giddianhi reveals the claws that earlier were barely hidden: “If ye will not do this, I swear unto you with an oath, that on the morrow month I will command that my armies shall come down against you, and they shall not stay their hand and shall spare not, but shall slay you, and shall let fall the sword upon you even until ye shall become extinct” (3 Nephi 3:8).

Though there is no direct response by Lachoneus to Giddianhi that would reveal a contrast in personalities, we are given part of Lachoneus’s proclamation to his people. He calls on them to gather into one central location with their families and enough substance for seven years, and he says they must repent or they will “in nowise be delivered out of the hands of those Gadianton robbers” (3 Nephi 3:15). His plan is successful. Giddianhi is slain, and the robbers are eventually defeated.

### **Mormon to Moroni**

**Mormon’s two pastoral letters to Moroni are just before the end of the Book of Mormon. In them we hear extensively the voice of the man who has given shape to the Book of Mormon narrative from the book of Mosiah onward and whose commentaries have pointed the lessons he wanted his audience to receive. The two letters are separated in time: the first coming soon after Moroni is called to the ministry; and the second near the end of Mormon’s life, just before he delivers up the sacred records to Moroni.**

It is appropriate that these letters follow Mormon’s sermon on faith, hope, and charity because they put the essence of that sermon to the test. They also prepare for the last chapter in the Book of Mormon, Moroni’s departing testimony and exhortation regarding spiritual gifts, by showing the extremes of righteous living and degraded wickedness. Mormon’s closing prayer in Moroni 7 is for the true followers of Jesus Christ to be purified even as Christ is pure (Moroni 7:48). In his epistle in Moroni 8, though, he fears that the Spirit has abandoned the Nephites as they seek “to put down all power and authority which cometh from God” (Moroni 8:28). In his second epistle he portrays a “horrible scene” (Moroni 9:20) of a depraved people who are “without order and without mercy. . . . And they have become strong in their perversion; and they are alike brutal, sparing none, neither old nor young; and they delight in everything save that which is good” (Moroni 9:18–19).

Mormon’s first letter is like a Pauline epistle in giving counsel to help regulate the Church. Like Paul in 1 Corinthians and other epistles, Mormon begins with a salutation and thanksgiving: “My beloved son, Moroni, I rejoice exceedingly that your Lord Jesus Christ hath been mindful of you, and hath called you to his ministry, and to his holy work.” He continues in a personal, affectionate manner of the sort Michael Goulder finds in Paul.<sup>21</sup> “I am mindful of you always in my prayers,” Mormon says, paralleling his own caring to that of the Savior, “continually praying unto God the Father in the name of his Holy Child, Jesus, that he, through his infinite goodness and grace, will keep you through the endurance of faith on his name to the end” (Moroni 8:2–3).

The reference to Jesus the Child points to Mormon's main concern. In a systematic and well-structured argument, Mormon addresses the disputations that had come among the Nephites concerning the baptism of little children. He begins by quoting the words of Christ that came to him in a revelation: "Behold, I came into the world not to call the righteous but sinners to repentance; the whole need no physician, but they that are sick; wherefore, little children are whole, for they are not capable of committing sin; wherefore the curse of Adam is taken from them in me, that it hath no power over them" (Moroni 8:8). Mormon then develops the implications of this doctrine: Because little children need no repentance, they do not need baptism. Those who think children who have died without baptism are damned are themselves iniquitous and have "neither faith, hope, nor charity" (Moroni 8:14). Those who say little children need baptism deny the mercies of Christ. Indeed, "all little children are alive in Christ" (Moroni 8:22). Finally, repentance is for those who are condemned for breaking the law, which repentance is followed by baptism and remission of sins. In sum, according to Mark Thomas, "Mormon argues that to accept infant baptism is to deny one's own charity, the nature of God and the atonement."<sup>22</sup>

In harmony with his argument and his previously quoted sermon, Mormon's dominant characteristic revealed in this letter is love. He first affirms to his beloved Moroni that he always remembers him in his prayers. In the center of his argument he identifies with Christ as he testifies, "And I am filled with charity, which is everlasting love; wherefore, all children are alike unto me; wherefore, I love little children with a perfect love; and they are all alike and partakers of salvation" (Moroni 8:17).

The second letter reveals the full strength of Mormon's position. His people, he says, "have lost their love, one towards another; and they thirst after blood and revenge continually" (Moroni 9:5). Yet Mormon preserves his "perfect love" (Moroni 8:16) and remains uncontaminated by the evil around him. Bracketed by Mormon's tender love and concern for Moroni, this letter gives a brief but pointed glimpse into the depths of the depravity of the collapsing and doomed Nephite civilization. The brutality of the Lamanites is evidenced by their feeding the Nephite women prisoners "upon the flesh of their husbands, and the children upon the flesh of their fathers" (Moroni 9:8). The depravity as well as brutality of the Nephites is shown by the men of Moriantum depriving many of the Lamanite young women of "that which was most dear and precious above all things, which is chastity and virtue" and then torturing the women to death and afterwards devouring their flesh "like unto wild beasts, because of the hardness of their hearts; and they do it for a token of bravery" (Moroni 9:9-10). Though he cannot recommend his people to God "lest he should smite me" (Moroni 9:21), Mormon can and does recommend his son Moroni to God, saying, "and I trust in Christ that thou wilt be saved; and I pray unto God that he will spare thy life, to witness the return of his people unto him, or their utter destruction" (Moroni 9:22). Then, in a tender close, Mormon invokes the grace of God upon Moroni and admonishes him to "be faithful in Christ; and may not the things which I have written grieve thee, to weigh thee down unto death; but may Christ lift thee up, and may his sufferings and death, and the showing his body unto our fathers, and his mercy and long-suffering, and the hope of his glory and of eternal life, rest in your mind forever" (Moroni 9:25). The storm is over; all that is left is for Moroni to conclude the record with this same exhortation to his unseen audience to "come unto Christ, and be perfected in him, and deny yourselves of all ungodliness, . . . and love God with all your might, mind and strength, . . . that by his grace ye may be perfect in Christ" (Moroni 10:32).

The eight letters we have examined show remarkable diversity in style and tone—from Captain Moroni's honest and angry forthrightness to Mormon's gentle charity toward children and his cry of the heart regarding the wickedness of his people. The letters likewise reveal clearly such various personality traits as Pahoran's vacillation and Giddianhi's arrogance. In total, they form part of the rich fabric of presentation of memorable individuals and families in the Book of Mormon.

## Notes

1. For a discussion of the various styles of writing in the Book of Mormon, see Robert K. Thomas, "A Literary Critic Looks at the Book of Mormon," in *To the Glory of God*, ed. Charles D. Tate Jr. and Truman G. Madsen (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1972), 149–61. For extensive treatments of individual personalities and family relationships, see *The Book of Mormon: It Begins with a Family*, a compilation of essays first printed in the *Ensign* on Book of Mormon persons (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983); E. Douglas Clark and Robert S. Clark, *Fathers and Sons in the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1991); and John S. Tanner, "Jacob and His Descendants as Authors," in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1991), 52–66.
2. Jonathan Edwards, Personal Narrative, in *The Works of President Edwards* (1847; reprint, New York: Burt Franklin, 1968), 1:29, 33.
3. Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 8.
4. *Ibid.*, 11.
5. *Ibid.*
6. John W. Welch, "Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon," in *Chiasmus in Antiquity: Structures, Analyses, Exegesis*, ed. John W. Welch (Hildesheim, West Germany: Gerstenberg, 1981), 207. Welch also says, "It is difficult to imagine a more paradigmatic or a more effective use of chiasmus than this. Alma 36 is worthy in form to the best of any ancient chiastic writer."
7. Moroni's witness account is put in a larger context by Lisa Bolin Hawkins and Gordon C. Thomasson in "I Only Am Escaped Alone to Tell Thee: Survivor-Witnesses in the Book of Mormon" (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1984).
8. Horace Walpole, quoted by Henry B. Wheatley in "Letter Writers," in *The Cambridge History of English Literature*, ed. A. W. Ward and A. R. Waller (New York: Macmillan, 1933), 10:284.
9. Harold C. Binkley, "Essays and Letter Writing," *PMLA* 41 (June 1926): 346 [342–61].
10. Ronald J. Corthell, "'Friendships Sacraments': John Donne's Familiar Letters," *Studies in Philology* 78 (Fall 1981): 410 [409–25].
11. Norman Perrin in *The New Testament: An Introduction* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974), 96, says the Greek word *epistole* may be translated either as "epistle" or "letter" but then notes that "in the ancient world a 'letter' was a personal communication between individuals or groups" and was intended to be direct and personal, while an "epistle" was a "deliberate literary creation intended for wide dissemination." Given this distinction, most of these Book of Mormon pieces would more appropriately be called *letters*.
12. Sidney B. Sperry in *Our Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1947), 102–9, finds a ninth epistle in Ether 5—"Moroni's instructions to the future translator of the Book of Mormon" (106). He calls the first six of the eight we are considering "war epistles" and the letters from Mormon "pastoral epistles."

13. Hugh Nibley, in his analysis of the exchange between Moroni and Ammoron in *Teachings of the Book of Mormon; Semester 3 Transcripts (1988–90)* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, n.d.), 164, says what Moroni does here is “accepted procedure for generals. . . . In epic literature, whether it’s Homer or whether it’s the *Aeneid*, the heroes or leaders of the hosts always before the battle have to stand up and at least spiel off a whole book, sometimes two books, of imprecations against the enemy—tell him how often he has done wrong, how evil he is, and the terrible things you are going to do with him. Then he comes and replies.”

14. The phrase comes from an introduction to the letters of Keats by Harold Bloom and Lionel Trilling in *The Oxford Anthology of English Literature*, ed. Harold Bloom et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 2:764. They note that good letters “are those which are free from self-consciousness, which claim their right to be spontaneous and immediate, and even, if the mood dictates and the occasion allows, casual or willful. Yet some of the conventional standards of literary excellence do apply, of which substantiality of subject matter, cogency of observation and reasoning, and sincerity and force of utterance are salient.”

15. George A. Kennedy, *Classical Rhetoric and Its Christian and Secular Tradition from Ancient to Modern Times* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 4. Of course, rhetorical devices are found in various cultures down through time. As Kennedy says in *Classical Rhetoric*, “Traditional or natural rhetoric occurs in all societies,” and when conceptualized, many of the qualities are “not dissimilar to categories of Greek rhetoric” (6, 7).

16. Edward P. J. Corbett, *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Northrop Frye, Sheridan Baker, and George Perkins, *The Harper Handbook to Literature* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), 395.

17. Corbett, *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*, 438.

18. I treat this more fully in an essay called “Purpose of the War Chapters in the Book of Mormon,” in *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 29–32.

19. Nibley, *Since Cumorah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book 1967), 360.

20. *Ibid.*, 362.

21. Michael Goulder, “The Pauline Epistles,” in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 482.

22. Mark Thomas, “Listening to the Voice from the Dust: Moroni 8 as Rhetoric,” *Sunstone* 24, no. 10 (1979): 22–24.