

# THE BOOK OF MORMON AS LITERATURE

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In my time in the church I have never known anyone to treat of the *Book of Mormon* on its literary merits. Surely something worth-while can be said in this regard, and the following is an attempt to introduce this phase of its study and to stimulate others better able to elucidate its style and quality.

## WHAT DO ITS CRITICS SAY?

Not a few disparaging remarks have been uttered about the literary quality of the *Book of Mormon*. Perhaps the most famous is Mark Twain's comment in *Roughing It*, chapter 16: "such an insipid mess of inspiration. It is chloroform in print. . . . The book seems to be merely a prosy detail of imaginary history, with the Old Testament for a model, followed by a tedious plagiarism of the New Testament. . . . If he had left that ('and it came to pass') out, his Bible would have been a pamphlet." He noted that it spoke against polygamy and added: "There is nothing vicious in its teachings. Its code of morals is unobjectionable." In the next chapter he had the grace to admit: "I gave up the idea that I could settle the 'Mormon question' in two days. Still I have seen newspaper correspondents do it in one."

Even in a noteworthy scientific journal like the *American Anthropologist*, an article by P. B. Pierce once ran as follows: "In this publication, we have a work of the greatest anthropological, ethnological, and archaeological interest, struck off in one complete, full, perfect act, at the hands of an uneducated, uncultivated, country boor of equivocal reputation and low origin." He remarked that the typesetters had to punctuate it, and that 700 "whichs" in the original edition were later changed to as many "whos," going on to add: "If the prophet and his counselors had only known that the pronoun 'which' in King James' time was good English when referring to persons, but that it is not good English now, nor was it good English in 1829, they would have been spared the pains of the invention of the Urim and Thummim stone, by the operation of which their God has been made to masquerade as an idiot." He concluded that the book was a "monstrosity, born of deceit and bred in falsehood" and had molded "a most dangerous weapon against the moral world in this doctrine of continuing revelations." More recently Beardley, in his *Joseph Smith and His Mormon Em-*

*pire*, had this to say of Joseph Smith's troubles with the first printer of the *Book of Mormon*: "Joe had impressed upon Grandin and his forces that the book must be printed exactly as written. To alter a single comma would be to prevent the word of God, and dire consequences might result. After setting up the first day's copy and attempting to read proof on it, the force rebelled. The copy was full of anachronisms and errors of spelling, punctuation, and grammar. At last, after due consultation, a revelation was received permitting the proofreaders to correct spelling, punctuation, and grammar, but to make no alterations. So, page by page, the manuscript went to the compositors." He continued: "The *Book of Mormon* . . . is one of the most incomprehensible volumes that has ever attained the dignity of print. It is incomprehensible in thought and language." He further quoted a disparaging remark made by Burton, the famed translator of the Arabian Nights. He goes on: "The *Book of Mormon* is a product of an adolescent mind and a mind characterized by the symptoms of the most prevalent of mental diseases of adolescence—*dementia praecox*. By the time the book was completed, . . . the nature of his disease had been modified." He then adds that Dr. Woodbridge Riley (a Ph. D!) had diagnosed Smith as an epileptic of familial type.

Criticism of this kind might be multiplied, but at least those of the book's most famous as well as its most modern traducers have been sampled above. Nothing worse can be said of it. Now let us see if all this coincides with the truth.

## WHAT SORT OF BOOK IS IT?

What does the *Book of Mormon* claim to be? It is an abridgment many times repeated, a synopsis of a synopsis. It deals with the broad current of ancient American history rather than with its details. What historical narrative it contains is interlarded with sermons, admonitions, and prophecies. Let us imagine as its classic counterpart something as concise as Caesar's *Commentaries on the Gallic War*, with a spice of Ciceronian declamation or denunciation here and there, together with a few utterances of the Delphic Sibyl. Or we could throw into the narrative of the old Sinaitical Wanderings several passages of

Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the Gospels and have something like a Biblical analogy.

It is a book with a purpose, one that is never lost sight of, and it is definitely written for posterity as both a warning and a history. Lesser details, such as crowd into and lend interest to the books of Kings or Judges, are all either subordinated to its main theological theme or are excluded altogether. There is no rhetoric, or very little, and there are few or no "purple passages." This is partly because the men who wrote it were too busy and too unscholarly for such flights of the pen, partly because it is so compactly synopsisized, often by scribes in flight and in great danger of their lives, but mainly, one suspects, because of the material of the book itself. The authors of the *Book of Mormon* did not write on clay tablets intended to be treasured up in huge depositories in arid lands, like the libraries of Nineveh and Ur, nor on papyrus as in ancient Egypt, nor on rolls of parchment as did the scribes of glorious Israel. They painfully engraved their shorthand notes on thinly hammered golden plates, such gold plate as one sees today in the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago in the section devoted to American Antiquities. This material had the great advantage of lightness and therefore could be easily transported, was permanently decipherable and was able to withstand burial, flood, heat, or cold, and all the erosion of the centuries to a unique degree; however, the writing once engraved could not be erased. The book could readily be divided, or could be sealed in *toto* or in part only—as proved to be part of God's original intention for it. Within such limits, but limits well suited to the exigencies the book was to encounter, its style and the manner of its laborious and harried authors found a surprising degree of freedom and elasticity.

As it is primarily a theological work, a "Golden Bible," one naturally turns to the Hebrew Bible for comparisons. First let us say that the *Book of Mormon* is not poetical like the Psalms or the famous passages in Isaiah or Revelation. It cannot even be said to be very imaginative. Lehi's vision of the rod of iron for example, is an almost isolated instance of that sort. It disdains wise saws of the nature of the Proverbs. It has no time for romances like Ruth. Indeed, women play almost no part in it at all—a surprising oversight in an author de-

nounced as the most wholesale lover of recent centuries, a super (but always backwoods) Casanova! It has little concern with such ritual as fills Deuteronomy, Numbers, and Ezra. It does not dwell on scenes of kingly grandeur or wholesale blood and murder as do Judges, Kings, and Chronicles. There is sarcasm and invective in the Gospels and the Epistles, but none in the *Book of Mormon*. There is humor in the Proverbs but none in this record. It lacks the quaintness and the charm of the Elizabethan English of the King James Version of the Bible—but then all late versions of the Bible, such as the Authorized or Moffatt, also do. Often they are much clearer and more explicit for just that reason.

But it has much of the Mosaic thunder, much of the noble melodrama of Daniel, and great stretches reminiscent of Isaiah (who is extensively quoted) and of Jeremiah and their lesser brethren. It contains much of the personal, simple, quotable teaching of the Gospels and a great deal of theological exposition, suggesting Paul and the great apostles.

One cannot but think of how the writers of Judges or Kings would have elaborated the story of Laban's death given in First Nephi, or of the murder of Cezoram and his son by the Gadianton robbers as told in Helaman. What would the authors of Genesis or Exodus not have made of the arrival of Mulek or the finding of the remains of the Jaredite nations! What would John the Revelator have written of Mormon's last stand at Hill Cumorah! But the first Nephi and Alma, and perhaps Mormon, seem to have been the only narrators of any power in the whole list of *Book of Mormon* writers, and their style must have been greatly cramped by their medium and their need of brevity.

Occasionally there is a flash of skill or picturesqueness as in the description of the punishment on the hill Manti, where the murderer Nehor acknowledged his faulty teachings and suffered death. It is noteworthy that explorers have found stone seats on the top of the hill at Mandi in Ecuador, perhaps the seats of Nehor's judges! This descriptive skill is seen again in the first mention of Gadianton, Hitler's foul prototype, and might apply to the latter equally well: "there was one Gadianton who was exceeding expert in many words, and also in his craft, to carry on the secret work of murder and robbery." Another such flash is in Nephi's comment on the sorrow of his parents when he himself was being maltreated by his older brothers: "they were brought near even to be carried out of this time to meet their God." The despairing dignity and pathos of Moroni's last comments are touching:

"behold, I would write it also, if I had room upon the plates, but I have not: and ore I have none, nor I am alone; my father hath been slain in battle and all my kinfolks, and I have not friends nor whither to go; and how long the Lord will suffer that I may live, I know not . . . the whole face of this land is one continual round of murder and bloodshed, and no one knoweth the end of the war."

Its literary high lights are perhaps the sermons of Jacob, brother of the first Nephi, and the great address of King Benjamin to his people. Jacob's expositions of doctrine are quite Pauline in their profundity; perhaps they are even more intense and sympathetic, if noticeably less polished and rhetorical. There are almost none of the figures of speech of the trained writer or orator to be found in them. Yet it would be hard to find anywhere a more pointed and powerful, a simpler, or a better balanced sermon than is recorded in the second chapter of Jacob. It is difficult to select from these intense and moving chapters any particular passages worthy of special attention, although one might mention Mosiah 1:25 to 27, 31 to 33, 51 to 52, 61 to 66, 71 to 72, 76 to 78; 2: 6 to 7, 11 to 17, and Jacob 2: 1-7, 9 *et seq.*, 36-38, 50; 3: 6-11.

Quite obviously the *Book of Mormon* is not the work of one hand, that of Joseph Smith. There can be no doubt, for example, that Jacob and Mosiah were written by different pens. That is equally true of Alma and Ether, to multiply examples. In spite of the numerous redactions, their stylistic, and temperamental differences shine through the centuries separating them from us. Moreover, the *Book of Mormon* differs notably in its literary style from the early revelations in the *Doctrine and Covenants*, which are couched in Joseph's own style. This is a point that deserves to be stressed more in our polemics.

In many school books we find Addison's famous "Vision of Mirza" reprinted. Lehi's vision of the rod of iron (1 Nephi 2: 34-65) is somewhat analogous. Compare the two, and bear in mind that Addison was the most famous stylist of his day and is regarded as a literary model even now. Then remember that the vision of Lehi was written or "translated," whichever way you like to have it, by one whom Pierce called an "uneducated country boor"! Dwell on the pathos of the great preacher Jacob's last words (Jacob 5: 38, 39). No ordinary backwoods boy wrote those words. The lowest level of the book is reached in the first thirteen verses of Omni, perhaps. But the Bible has its dull moments, as has the Anglican Prayer Book and even the inimitable Shakespeare. The

deterioration of style in Omni and occasional other books speaks for multiple authorship, too, it should be noted.

Many a consecutive verse in First Nephi, Alma, and in other books begins with the monotonous repetition "And it came to pass." This happens in seven consecutive verses in Chapter 5 of the former, and in fifty-five of the 136 verses in that chapter. This is all very inartistic from a literary point of view, although it detracts nothing from the clarity of the narrative and may have derived from the fact that some single, easily written symbol in the ancient language was best translated thus into English. Think for a minute what elaborate means are used by good writers to get around this monotonous but simple usage. They are "moreover," "accordingly," "now," "then," and "such," and the words that follow must vary their order accordingly, to get away from the simple narrative style that can be used without variation after "it came to pass." Pragmatically speaking, much could be said for this phrase by practical narrators if not by stylists. At least it has the merits of clarity and simplicity.

However, that masterpiece of English, the King James translation of the Bible, offers some parallels. For example, look at the Beatitudes of Saint Matthew, in which nine consecutive verses begin with "Blessed." Although the versification in both the *Book of Mormon* and the Bible is merely a convenience for readers, it probably had no antecedent in the original text of the former, and certainly had none in the latter. The folly of using this as a critical weapon is well illustrated by such genealogies as that in the third chapter of Luke, where fifteen consecutive verses begin with "which," although the whole fifteen verses, together with the verse preceding them, are one unit—indeed are one sentence! One could multiply other Biblical analogies, *viz.*; the ten verses out of twenty-three in the eighth chapter of Zechariah that begin: "Thus saith the Lord or Hosts," and other such—but all that this implies is an ignorance of the convention by which Biblical verses were originally divided, and serves no useful purpose.

Strange idioms appear now and then in the story, as when Nephi, for example, says he "did moulten" iron. But Joseph wrote in a day when Americans were their own Winchells and coined words at their own convenience, and spelled them so, too. Compare these phrases with those cited below from Stonewall Jackson's biography. There are apparent anachronisms too, in the narrative *e. g.*, the last word in Jacob "Adieu," "shock" in 1 Nephi 5: 101, Hamlet (?) in 2 Nephi 1: 16, and "steel" in Jarom 1: 17. But this book, like the Bible, was

written in the idiom of the translator's day, and that was only 113 years ago. The "Hamlet" reference, moreover, can be paralleled at least as closely in an old Aztec prayer quoted by the explorer, Du Charnay!

Some of the books in this great compilation, such as First Nephi and Alma, are nearly half adventure. The story of the missionary, Mosiah, would be hard to surpass in Samuel or Daniel or Esther. One of the greatest military chronicles in all the troubled pages of the *Book of Mormon*, if not the very greatest in any historical record, is the account of Mormon's retreat with an army or horde which at its last stand amounted to 230,000 (the soldiers took along their wives and families). The retreat lasted eighteen years, and the line of march took these people from what was probably the Isthmus of Panama (Mormon 1: 59, 67) to upper New York State near the present city of Rochester. This maneuver far overshadows Xenophon's "Retreat of the Ten Thousand." Its only faint rivals are Brigham Young's trek in the last century with about 10,000 Saints of all ages from Missouri to Utah, through untracked deserts and tribes of hostile Indians, or the Chinese Red Army's retreat in 1934 which lasted 368 days, covered 6,000 miles (about twice the width of the American continent), and crossed eighteen mountain ranges and twenty-four rivers. Edgar Snow relates that this retreat was begun by 100,000 to 200,000 soldiers accompanied by thousands of men, women, and children and that about 20,000 survivors got to the journey's end in Shensi. Snow remarks that Hannibal's march over the Alps "looks like a holiday excursion" beside this retreat of Chu Teh, and that only Napoleon's retreat from Moscow stands comparison with it. What shall we say then of the quality of Mormon's leadership and the exodus he contrived?

I mention this particular exploit in the *Book of Mormon* narrative to emphasize the baldness of the narrator's account of it all. There is none of the journalese of the Associated Press in his chapters. He could be accused, indeed, of gross understatement. His phraseology is as curt as Caesar's well-known introductory words, *Omnia Gallia in tres partes divisa est* when he remarks "and they did also drive us forth out of the land of David. And we marched forth and came to the land of Joshua, which was in the borders west, by the sea-shore" (Mormon 1: 27). He gives his reason in chapter 2: 34: "I, Mormon, do not desire to harrow up the souls of men." This, truly, is not in the direct line from which "life" springs! But it emphasizes again that the historical part of this book is considered by its narra-

tors to be of very much less importance than its warning and instruction. There are many other instances of this brevity. I might mention one more, *viz.*: Alma 23: 17-20, before passing on.

Strange animals, cureloms and cumons, are mentioned by the first Nephi. Critics of the book have been quick to seize upon such "absurdities." We cannot say what animals were meant, perhaps animals since extinct, just as the Ona and Yahgan Indians of Tierra del Fuego are now nearly extinct, or the passenger pigeon or great auk have become extinct within recent times. However, we do feel as well able to explain what these animals were as any theological expositor who undertakes to clarify Biblical references to the "dragon" or to "leviathan."

Clarity is one thing in which the *Book of Mormon* does not fail. Even a writer like Paul may be beyond easy interpretation at times, but never Jacob, or Benjamin, or that Nephi who was one of the disciples. Clarity, after all, is the primary desideratum in all writings. If the Bible had been left as clear as this book, there had been no need for modern sectarian differences, perhaps no need for the main division of Christianity into Protestants and Catholics. There are advantages in burying a book throughout the Dark Ages, whose text God wants to preserve intact, especially if the land where it lies is to be colonized under the aegis of Conquistadores and Franciscan zealots of the type of Bishop Zumarraga, who burned the Mexican manuscript books. The best friends of the Bible must admit it often contradicts itself. That cannot be said of the *Book of Mormon*. At least it is self-consistent. Few deceivers manage to write so clear a story, and that is another strong point in its defense!

#### A WORD TO ITS CRITICS

It is no defense of the *Book of Mormon* to attack its critics, although that very thing can be done. Mark Twain was being intentionally funny when he commented on Joseph Smith's bad grammar. But he had his unintentionally funny moments, too, and they come fairly close together in his naive comments on art and architecture in *Innocents Abroad*. "Those who live in glass houses . . ." and Samuel Clemens was one!

Critics who adopt the Pierce line of argument prove too much, and their best answer is found by close or even casual perusal of the book they criticize so rabidly. Granting that its author was as poorly fitted for his task as they claim, his work is amazing and obviously outside his powers. Indeed, it surely shouldn't require such a battery of howitzers to obliterate the mud hut he built—or are they merely dummy guns?

If the grammatical critics should turn their philological lenses on some of Joseph Smith's famous contemporaries, they would uncover some curious English, by modern standards. A Philadelphia wholesaler wrote to Andrew Jackson: "A Considerable time has Elapsed since we have had the pleasure to hear from you and your acc't still unsettled—" The founder of Nashville, General James Robertson, wrote Jackson regarding an impending duel: Should Jackson lose "your Country besides—your Fannley" would suffer. He cited Aaron Burr's duel, saying: "I suppose if dueling could be Jestifiable it must have bin in his case and it is beleaved he has not had ease in mind since the fatal hour—" And to give a fair idea of the tenor a preacher's epistles could assume in 1825 here is an excerpt from one by Edward Patchell to the same recipient, sympathizing with General Jackson's defeat by Mr. Adams at an election: "Thy throan shall be in Heaven at the right hand of Jehovah linked in the arm of the Immortal Washing" (ton) whereas "The corrupt Adams and Clay" would sizzle in hell "unless they be born again." Since Clay had recently been burnt in effigy, the writer concluded—"proposed sending a Barrel of whiskey to Grantshill to treat the fellows." I have selected these typical excerpts from James' *Life of Andrew Jackson*. It would be easy to adduce parallels from the contemporary letters of the day. Joseph Smith stands comparison with the twice President of his United States rather well for an "uncultivated country boor of equivocal reputation and low origin." One could point, too, to that font of good English, the King James Version, for impossible constructions and errors in grammar—notably in Revelation!

To a medical man, of course, the dictum of a doctor of philosophy like Riley on Joseph Smith's *dementia praecox* and *familial epilepsy* is merely laughable. He overshot his mark in his effort to prove Joseph a degenerate. Schizophrenia (*dementia praecox*) is a progressive deterioration of the mind. Joseph flourished for twenty years after he had his first vision, in the full possession of his acknowledged abilities. Familial epilepsy, if he displayed any trace of it, acted rather oddly in attacking him and missing all his descendants. Why only he and his ancestors should have so suffered, but none be affected since, is too much of a puzzle for a mere physician to unravel. That must be left to the explanations of psychologists of the adjectival virulence of Riley, and to scurrilous journalists like Beardsley, who refused to debate his "history" on the public platform. Moreover, Riley should

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also have attempted to prove that both groups of the three and eight witnesses were also epileptiform or schizophrenic—but he forgot that important link in his argument, perhaps because he had exhausted all his ingenuity and imagination on Joseph, the Seer. It is a pity that Joseph could “mesmerize” them into thinking they saw and hefted the plates of the *Book of Mormon*—statements they confirmed throughout their later lives, even when some of them had left the church—but was totally unable to hypnotize the mob that shot him fifteen years later, when he should have been much more practiced in this type of deception!

### CONCLUSION

The higher or textual criticism of the *Book of Mormon* has an important role to play in our study and defense of it. It is easy to show that its literary style is admirably adapted to the role the book was intended for and to its material, script, and preservation. Multiplicity of authorship can be demonstrated, even despite the numerous redactions of the earlier text by its last editors. Some of its high lights are mentioned here, and set out in the light of their historical analogues to illustrate that the *Book of Mormon* does not suffer by comparison with the best literary productions. A few of the criticisms leveled against it are answered.

## Why and How Important Is the Church

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or misfortune befalls a friend. When we put forth our efforts to add to the happiness of others, we feel an expansiveness of our souls and a joy in our hearts that is not experienced in any other way. The church gives us the *best* opportunity to help others, and as a result of our mutual experiences we know that as we help others, help is given to us; thus helping each of us to make great strides forward in our efforts at kingdom building.

The church experience is the most important one in our lives. It offers us strength to endure, hope, faith; and that peace for which Christ was born and the love for

which he died will surely come to us from our participation in the organization created by him to convey to us these very promises.

Let us all realize the importance of this church—the Church of Jesus Christ—and in the responsibilities and opportunities that face us as individuals and as a group—his kingdom here on earth—may our lives reflect these God-given qualities.

## A Valley of Troubled Years

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So he wisely left it and went into war work. But looking ahead, he saw possible hardships and deprivations to come when the war is concluded. So he began to look for something that would not be affected by either war or peace. His statement was fine:

I want to educate my children—I plan to send them to Graceland. I want to provide for my own old age, to have some security. I believe that in time to come I must be ready to help others if hard conditions must be met. All that will require money, and I must start to make it now.

Something about this brother's home life is revealed in a statement made by his wife, who said, “There has never been a time during our married life when we were not studying something.” The study has included preparation for church work, personal improvement, and business advancement. Theirs is a Christian home—a home of builders.

Our highest duty is to remain serious, realistic, and devoted to our ideals in this time of confusion and uncertainty, preparing for a time to come that other people are trying to keep out of their thoughts.

L. L.

## Modern Samaritans

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also would be the gift of worthwhile experience, the encouraging nod of age to youth, and the stalwart resolution of right over wrong. Being a *modern samaritan* is an all-

time, all-embracing Christian program.

Remember: the Devil was a “sissy” because he didn't have courage to do the right.

## God's Hand

By C. J. Lant

In spite of the present-day difficulties and worries over the war; we can again see God's hand beginning to gather up the remnants of his lost and scattered people.

Bombs have flattened buildings and whole cities, and not one stone was left standing upon another. Whole nations have been wiped out, as far as the boundaries of their countries were concerned.

Whole congregations of churches have been forced to seek other surroundings, in order to earn a livelihood; whole branches have been shaken to their very foundations. Religious professing people had grown deaf.

Sweeter day by day, and clearer and more understandable grow the words of our song, “Onward to Zion.” Truly, God has again set his hand to build Zion. And when the clouds have passed away, and the debris is swept clear, the rebuilding will start on good solid foundations that have been laid by the children of Zion.

*Guide me, oh, thou great Jehovah. Tell me what thou would have me know and do. Thy will is my will. Thy way is the best way.*

## The Secret of Life Everlasting

To give one's life away to what one knows to be of highest worth, not only for oneself, but for all mankind, is the most mature experience open to man. It can help him face death and tragedy undismayed. It possesses the secret of life everlasting.—Gregory Vlastos.

I speak truth, not so much as I would, but as much as I dare; and I dare a little the more as I grow older.—Michael de Montaigne.