

## 5

THE LITERARY POWER OF THE  
BOOK OF MORMON*Charles Swift*

Although the Book of Mormon is composed of such literary elements as stories, poetry, symbolism, letters, archetypes, typology, and allegories, it is not just literature; it is sacred literature, and millions of people with open hearts have found the power behind the Prophet Joseph Smith's inspired words that "a man would get nearer to God by abiding by its precepts, than by any other book" (introduction to the Book of Mormon). For believers, there is no question that the Book of Mormon has the power to change the lives of those who are willing to let it. What believers may not so readily understand, however, is the powerful role that the book's literary features play in changing their lives. These literary elements are not decorative add-ons included by the prophets merely to make reading the book more interesting. Often the literary nature of the Book of Mormon conveys the doctrine and other life-changing precepts in ways that help us better abide by them and experience their power in our lives.

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## THE LITERARY POWER OF THE BOOK OF MORMON 73

## LITERATURE

When we say that the Book of Mormon is sacred literature, we are not equating this book of scripture with a novel, nor are we saying that it is in any sense a work of fiction or merely the product of human intellect and effort. To appreciate the Book of Mormon through a literary lens does not require us to see it as anything less than scripture. What one scholar wrote about the Gospel of John applies to all scripture: “One can call attention to the gospel’s literary features because the author used standard literary conventions in order to make his gospel interesting and lively. In no way does the use of literary criticism suggest that his gospel is ‘only’ a story; but it is no less than that.”<sup>1</sup>

Philosophers, scholars, and writers have debated for thousands of years about the meaning of the word *literature*. If we define *literature* so broadly to mean anything that is written, then a grocery list can be seen as poetry. However, if we define it too narrowly, then the field of literature will be so small that finding patterns and themes to help us understand what we read will be almost impossible. The description offered by Leland Ryken, a scholar of the Bible as literature, is useful in our discussion of some of the literary parts of the Book of Mormon: “A working definition of literature, is that it is an interpretive presentation of experience in an artistic form. This means that there are two criteria that must be insisted on if we are to distinguish between the literary and nonliterary parts of the Bible: (1) literature is experiential rather than abstract, and (2) literature is artistic, manifesting elements of artistic form.”<sup>2</sup> The literary parts of the Book of Mormon manifest a certain aesthetic care about the diction, and they help us to *experience* the people, action, ideas, and feelings in the book rather than merely read about them. As important as it is to read “Thou shalt not kill” (Exodus 20:13), we find additional power and insight when we read stories that involve that commandment, such as Nephi’s being commanded to take the life of Laban (see 1 Nephi 4).

The Book of Mormon has so many literary elements that it would be impossible to touch on even one of each kind in such a brief study. However, discussing just a few elements is helpful in understanding how the literature of the book can convey the doctrines and principles of the gospel.

## DIALOGUE

Writers often reveal characters and their natures through dialogue. Rather than having a narrator comment on a character's motivation or intentions, for example, a skillful author will often have the characters speak for themselves, thereby allowing us to see more fully into the characters. Instead of being told everything by the narrator, we have the satisfaction of gaining insights on our own. This masterful use of dialogue to reveal truths is often used in the Book of Mormon.

In discussing dialogue in the Bible, the biblical scholar and literary critic Robert Alter writes that "the very occurrence of extended dialogue should signal the need for special attentiveness as we read."<sup>3</sup> We certainly find this to be the case in the amazing encounter between the prophet Alma and the anti-Christ Korihor. Of course, their dialogue provides a direct account of much of what each of these men believes. While there is a narrative description of what Korihor believes (see Alma 30:17–18), we also learn through his dialogue what Korihor believes: "Behold, these things which ye call prophecies, which ye say are handed down by holy prophets, behold, they are foolish traditions of your fathers"; and "Ye cannot know of things which ye do not see" (Alma 30:14–15). In contrast, we know from Alma's own words, among many other things, that he knows "there is a God, and also that Christ shall come" (Alma 30:39).

What is not so obvious, however, are the characteristics that are revealed about these men by closely examining the dialogue. For example, we hear Korihor apparently splitting hairs when he says, "I do not deny the existence of a God, but I do not believe that there is a God" (Alma 30:48). This is a significant distinction to make, though, because people in that society were not punished for their beliefs but only for the crimes they committed (see vv. 11–12). In addition, Alma has just told him that if he does "deny again, behold God shall smite" him and take away his ability to speak (Alma 30:47). Korihor wants to make clear that while he does not believe there is a God (a belief, for which one cannot be punished), he is not denying the existence of God (an act that could lead to his being smitten by God). What principle can be learned from this insight that is revealed by looking more closely at dialogue? There is a difference between an honest person who seeks

## THE LITERARY POWER OF THE BOOK OF MORMON 75

the truth but may have some doubts, and the kind of person Korihor is—a man who merely plays with words and who is not interested in finding truth as much as he is in covering it up. His motives are not sincere; his methods are not honorable.

For his part of the dialogue, Alma speaks of his personal testimony, the testimony of people in the community, the testimony of the holy prophets, and even the testimony of the natural world (see Alma 30:29, 44). In contrast to Korihor, Alma is a man who is rooted in testimony. This is a man who indeed knows things he may not be able to see. Among the many principles we learn from Alma's dialogue is that one of the best approaches to take in such discussions is to rely on testimony.

Many other examples of dialogue appear in the Book of Mormon. For example, we read of dialogues between Nephi and the Spirit of the Lord (see 1 Nephi 11), between Nephi and an angel (see 1 Nephi 11), between Jacob and Sherem (see Jacob 7), between Ammon and King Limhi (see Mosiah 8), between Amulek and Zeezrom (see Alma 11), and between Ammon and King Lamoni (see Alma 17–18). Each dialogue reveals principles of the gospel as well as character traits of the men who participate in the discussions.

Sometimes, however, the absence of dialogue teaches us. For example, in the first chapter in the Book of Mormon that offers an account of the Savior's physical appearance to the Nephites (3 Nephi 11), we have no account of any dialogue—of any conversation between two or more people. We hear the voice of Heavenly Father introducing the Son, and we hear the Son teach the people, but there is no dialogue. We never read in this chapter of the Lord speaking to anyone and that person, in turn, speaking to Him. This chapter is not an account of a sermon; it is not like the chapters in the New Testament, for example, that provide us with the Sermon on the Mount. It makes sense that people are not going to interrupt the Savior as He delivers a sermon. In this Third Nephi chapter, though, there are many times in which it would make sense that there would be some dialogue. Everyone present comes forth and touches the Lord, feeling the wound in His side and the prints of the nails in His hands and feet (see 3 Nephi 11:15). This is an experience that must have taken hours, yet we

have no record of anyone saying anything to Him in dialogue during this time. Also, there is no account of dialogue when He calls Nephi and others to Him and gives them power to baptize.

We do hear the voice of the people: “Hosanna! Blessed be the name of the Most High God!” (3 Nephi 11:17). But, of course, this is not a dialogue but a beautiful, spontaneous expression of worshipful joy from the Nephites. They are not entering into a conversation with the Lord; they are praising Him.

From a historical perspective, the reason we have no recorded dialogue from this experience may be that no one said anything to Him in any form of discussion. It is difficult to imagine that in all that time, no one asked a question or entered into a simple conversation with Him, but it is not impossible. However, that approach is looking at the chapter through a historical lens. If we study it through a literary lens, we may see that the absence of dialogue helps to create a beautiful and powerful image of the Lord as one who blesses and teaches but is not our equal. The focus of the chapter is on the Savior and on His words and actions, not on anything or anyone else. I believe we can learn from this the importance of coming to the Lord not as His equal but as disciples who hunger to be taught and blessed by Him. We do not enter into negotiations with the Savior; we follow Him.

If we look at 3 Nephi as a whole, we read very little dialogue with the Savior in the entire book. When we compare the account of the Lord’s visit to the Nephites with those accounts in the Gospels of His mortal interactions with others, it is amazing how little dialogue there is. Could it be that the people who surrounded Him during His mortal ministry had more to say to Him than those in His Nephite ministry? Perhaps. But, once again, if we look at the text through a literary lens, we can see that there is a difference between how the people of Palestine treated the mortal Jesus of the Gospels and how the Nephites treated the resurrected, glorified Christ of 3 Nephi. And it is not just a difference between a people who had evil among them and a people who were more righteous in general. Righteous people can have dialogues with the Savior, but those in 3 Nephi rarely do. As we look at the text, we see that these Nephites worship Him, adore Him, quietly listen to His teachings, and follow Him. From a literary perspective, the

## THE LITERARY POWER OF THE BOOK OF MORMON 77

3 Nephi account portrays the Savior in ways that help readers *experience* Him as an elevated, superior Being whom we are to worship.

## METAPHOR

While many metaphors in the Book of Mormon communicate essential doctrinal truths, it may be most helpful to select one and study it in some depth. In Alma's sermon to the members of the Church in Zarahemla, we find this example: "I say unto you, ye will know at that day that ye cannot be saved; for there can no man be saved except his garments are washed white; yea, his garments must be purified until they are cleansed from all stain, through the blood of him of whom it has been spoken by our fathers, who should come to redeem his people from their sins" (Alma 5:21). Alma is using the image of a person possessing a white garment that has been stained and cleansing it in blood. In fact, the garments are actually "washed white" from being soaked in the blood. This metaphor is more than just a poetic way in which to portray the Atonement, but a powerful way to convey one of the most important truths about the Atonement. No one can wash any garment in blood and have it become clean. More emphatically, no one can wash a white garment in blood and have it turn out white. It is simply impossible—it would take a miracle for such a phenomenon to occur. And this is an essential doctrine that is communicated by means of this metaphor: the Atonement accomplishes the impossible; it is a miracle beyond human comprehension.

Alma could have taught the members of the Church accurately without metaphorical language that if they repent they would be forgiven through the Atonement of Christ. And, though that teaching would have been true, it also would have been missing the significant aspect of how the Atonement is miraculous. Alma's metaphor sends a special message to all those who are struggling to repent and who doubt that the Atonement can reach them in their need. They may feel that it's impossible for them to be forgiven for what they did. What is the message they can receive from Alma's metaphor? To the human mind, it is impossible for justice to be satisfied by what someone else does. But the Lord's Atonement does the impossible. "It would take a

miracle for me to be forgiven,” we may cry out in anguish. And a miracle is exactly what we can receive.

### SIMILE

After the dramatic, catastrophic destruction among the Nephites and Lamanites because of the Crucifixion, the Savior speaks to the remaining people, giving an account of what happened and why it happened. Then there is silence for many hours. The silence is finally broken by the voice of the Savior once more, and this time the Lord uses a literary device—a simile—as he speaks to His people: “How oft have I gathered you as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings” (3 Nephi 10:4). He states the simile four different times, perhaps leading the casual reader to infer that His message is the same each time and that He is repeating it for emphasis. However, upon closer examination, we see that while the simile is the same, it is used in three different contexts.

1. “O ye people of these great cities which have fallen, who are descendants of Jacob, yea, who are of the house of Israel, how oft have I gathered you as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and have nourished you” (3 Nephi 10:4). He speaks in the past tense, indicating that there were previous times when He gathered His people.

2. “And again, how oft would I have gathered you as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, yea, O ye people of the house of Israel, who have fallen; yea, O ye people of the house of Israel, ye that dwell at Jerusalem, as ye that have fallen; yea, how oft would I have gathered you as a hen gathereth her chickens, and ye would not” (3 Nephi 10:5). Now He speaks not in the past tense but conditionally, referring to the times He would have gathered His people if they had been willing to follow Him.

3. “O ye house of Israel whom I have spared, how oft will I gather you as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, if ye will repent and return unto me with full purpose of heart” (3 Nephi 10:6). In this third iteration, He speaks in the future tense, indicating that He will gather them in the future if they will repent and return to Him.

Once again, this literary element helps to convey a doctrine that would not otherwise have been communicated with more direct

## THE LITERARY POWER OF THE BOOK OF MORMON 79

language. He could have spoken of the gathering by saying something like, “How often I would bring you all together if you would just repent and follow me.” However, by using the simile of the hen gathering her chicks under her wings, He is also using the image of *kaphar*. This is the “basic word for atonement” with “the same basic meaning in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Arabic.” That meaning includes the act of bending, arching over, or covering.<sup>4</sup> The simile of a hen gathering her chickens under her wings refers not only to the gathering of the house of Israel but also to the great work of His Atonement, which is fully efficacious to those who repent and return to Him “with full purpose of heart.” Just as the hen’s wings embrace her chickens and protect them, the Lord embraces and protects us through His Atonement.

## ALLEGORY

Much has been written about Zenos’s allegory of the olive tree in the fifth chapter of Jacob. If we think of an allegory as an extended metaphor in which elements correspond to a meaning outside of the actual narrative,<sup>5</sup> we can see other “allegories” in the Book of Mormon. The detailed story of the Jaredites crossing the ocean in their unique barges, though an account of an actual, historical event, can also be read in such a way that we see gospel principles and basic truths of the kind of life disciples lead. A modern example of this idea that actual events can have symbolic meaning happened years ago. When President Boyd K. Packer was in a sacrament meeting in Peru, a little native boy came inside off the streets. President Packer held his arms out to him, and the little boy ran to him. After the boy sat on his lap for a period of time, President Packer set him on the chair previously occupied by Elder A. Theodore Tuttle, president of the South America West Area, an act that was “something symbolic.” Later, when President Packer shared this experience, President Spencer W. Kimball told him the experience had “far greater meaning than [he had] yet come to know” and that he had held a nation on his lap.<sup>6</sup> We will certainly miss much meaning in life if we assume that only fictitious works can have symbolic significance.

As we study the Jaredite record of their historical journey, it is important to realize that journeys across oceans in literature are often



symbolic of mortality, with the ocean representing the many great unknowns in life and with the final destination of the oceanic voyage representing where we wish to be when mortality has come to a close. The Jaredites begin their journey by placing stones that have been blessed by the Lord's touch in their ships so that they might have light: "And thus the Lord caused stones to shine in darkness, to give light unto men, women, and children, that they might not cross the great waters in darkness" (Ether 6:3). As a historical record, this chapter mentions stones because that is what was used for light. As an allegory, however, this chapter presents a significant image of light coming from Christ through stones. Of course, the Lord could have provided light for the travelers by many other methods, but He used the stones the brother of Jared brought to Him. These stones may serve to remind those in the barges, and us as well, that all light comes from the Savior, that He is the rock of our salvation (see Psalm 89:26; 2 Nephi 4:30), and that He is the rock upon which we should build the foundation for our lives (see Helaman 5:12). The Church, after all, is built upon the rock of revelation (see Matthew 16:18).

Notice the careful language used in this verse to explain the purpose of these stones. The essence of the message could have been conveyed more simply and less emphatically: the Lord caused stones to shine so everyone would have light for the voyage. Why say that these stones will shine "in darkness" when that is obvious? Perhaps the writer includes the phrase to remind us of what darkness symbolizes: "misfortune, spiritual need," or "ignorance," as well as "chaos, mystery, [and] the unknown."<sup>8</sup> In religious terms, darkness is "a silencing of prophetic revelation" and "the state of the human mind unilluminated by God's revelation."<sup>9</sup> The stones give light not just to people but specifically to "men, women, and children," as if to emphasize that this light from Christ is much like the Light of Christ given to each individual person (see Moroni 7:18–19; D&C 88:7). Because of the Light of Christ, no man, woman, or child faces having to cross the "great waters" of mortality in darkness.

The Jaredites make extensive preparations, making certain that they will have the food they need as well as the food their animals will need, and then they commend "themselves unto the Lord their God" (Ether

## THE LITERARY POWER OF THE BOOK OF MORMON 81

6:4). Once again, we have a historical account of something the people actually did. But it also serves in the allegory to teach us that while we are to fully prepare ourselves in this life, we are not to ignore the Lord and His hand in our affairs. In fact, even after our preparations, we are to rely on Him.

One of the most interesting elements in this allegorical account is the wind. It becomes a character in the narrative; it is caused by the Lord, and it is a “furious wind” whose “fierceness” brings about “great and terrible tempests” (vv. 5–6). Even though at times the wind appears to be no friend to the travelers, from a broader perspective it ends up being one of their greatest allies, for it “did never cease to blow towards the promised land” (v. 8). Just as the wind seems to cause problems for the Jaredites in certain moments but actually helps them arrive at the promised land, the trials and challenges in this mortal life that often cause us to despair can help us get to our promised land (if we have open minds and hearts so we can see our trials for what they truly are).

For the Jaredites, the ocean both blesses their lives as the means by which they travel to the promised land and makes their lives more difficult as it “buries” them under the water. The ocean threatens them with “mountain waves” and “great and terrible tempests,” yet when they are “buried in the deep,” no water “could hurt them” because of the tightness of their vessels. At these difficult times, the Jaredites remember on whom they rely: “When they were encompassed about by many waters they did cry unto the Lord, and he did bring them forth again upon the top of the waters” (v. 7). Once again, the imagery teaches us principles that can help us grow closer to the Lord as we abide by them.

Despite the difficulty of their journey, the voyagers remain steadfast in their faith and also grateful to the Lord: “And they did sing praises unto the Lord; yea, the brother of Jared did sing praises unto the Lord, and he did thank and praise the Lord all the day long; and when the night came, they did not cease to praise the Lord” (v. 9). This spirit of gratitude to the Lord at all times, and especially during challenging times, is central to a happy, fulfilling life. “Gratitude is a sign of maturity,” President Gordon B. Hinckley writes. “It is an indication of sincere humility. It is a hallmark of civility. And most of all, it is a divine principle. I doubt there is anything in which we more offend the

Almighty than in our tendency to forget His mercies and to be ungrateful for that which He has given us.”<sup>10</sup>

After a treacherous journey of almost a year, the Jaredites arrive in the promised land, bow themselves in humility, and “shed tears of joy before the Lord, because of the multitude of his tender mercies over them” (v. 12). Like all those who endure to the end, they are protected throughout their journey from all things that mean them harm. Just as “no monster of the sea could break them, neither whale that could mar them” (v. 10), nothing can break disciples of Christ who remain true to their covenants. It is true that these disciples will not live lives free of mortal trials—there will be sickness, death, and heartache—but such trials will not have the power to break or mar them if they are faithful to the Lord. The Jaredites had “light continually, whether it was above the water or under the water” (v. 10). We too can have the comfort and guidance of the Light of Christ and the Holy Spirit in our lives, both in times of happiness and in times of sorrow.

### TRAGEDY

If we look at the entire Book of Mormon through a literary lens, it is worthwhile to ask what kind of book it is. As we ask ourselves that question, we may be quick to conclude that if it is anything, it is not a tragedy. The individual heroes of the book—Lehi, Sariah, Nephi, King Benjamin, Alma, Moroni, Mormon, and many more—do not have tragic flaws, characteristic of heroes in a tragedy, which bring them down and ultimately destroy them. However, if we take the large view, we see that there is a tragic hero in the book: the Nephite civilization. The Nephite civilization is, in essence, a heroic character in the book, and it is a hero with a tragic flaw: pride. Traditionally, the tragic heroes in literature have had to fight their hubris and have lost. So it is with the Nephites. They constantly struggle against their pride—against their desires to follow their own vain ways and rebel against God—and as a people they ultimately lose this struggle.

The climax of this tragedy is found in the record of Mormon. In Mormon we have an account of the fall of the now-wicked Nephites and of their righteous general, Mormon, who leads them with love but without faith (see Mormon 3:12). We read Mormon’s tragic

## THE LITERARY POWER OF THE BOOK OF MORMON 83

lamentation: “O ye fair ones, how could ye have departed from the ways of the Lord! O ye fair ones, how could ye have rejected that Jesus, who stood with open arms to receive you! Behold, if ye had not done this, ye would not have fallen. But behold, ye are fallen, and I mourn your loss. O ye fair sons and daughters, ye fathers and mothers, ye husbands and wives, ye fair ones, how is it that ye could have fallen! But behold, ye are gone, and my sorrows cannot bring your return” (Mormon 6:17–20). We experience Mormon’s pain as we read these words. The power of the doctrine of obedience, and the tragedy of disobedience to God, strikes our hearts through this lamentation and through the story of the fall of this great hero, the Nephite civilization. We see the same tragedy as we read of the Jaredite civilization in Ether. The message is not just taught by the text but also experienced through the literature: obedience to God ensures joy in this life and the life to come.

While the Book of Mormon has tragic elements, its overall message is not one of tragedy but of hope. As scripture, the book delivers a great message of hope—*the* great message of hope that we need to come unto Christ and be saved. In the last chapter of the Book of Mormon, we do not find a lamentation over a fallen people. Instead we find a promise to those who receive the book and read, ponder, and pray that they will know the truth (see Moroni 10:3–5). The Book of Mormon does not focus on the fall of the Nephite civilization so much as it concentrates on the faith and hope the reader can nurture through reading the book and by living what it teaches.

## CONCLUSION

Though the Book of Mormon can be seen as literature, it stands apart from works of literature because it is holy scripture, the word of God. The book is not bound by the constraints of other literary works that are primarily the product of human efforts, even if some of the principles in those works are inspired. The literary qualities of the book not only help us love reading it but also convey this message of hope and faith in Christ in a memorable way.

## NOTES

1. Marianne Meye Thompson, "John," in *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Leland Ryken and Tremper Longman III (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1993), 409.
2. Leland Ryken, *The Literature of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1974), 13–14.
3. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 182.
4. Hugh Nibley, *Approaching Zion*, ed. Don E. Norton (Salt Lake City and Provo: Deseret Book, FARMS, 1989), 558. On the following page, Nibley offers this relevant description: "It was the custom for one fleeing for his life in the desert to seek protection in the tent of a great sheik, crying out, 'Ana dakhiluka,' meaning 'I am thy suppliant,' whereupon the Lord would place the hem of his robe over the guest's shoulder and declare him under his protection. . . . This puts him under the Lord's protection from all enemies."
5. William Harmon and Hugh Holman, *A Handbook to Literature*, 10th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2006), 12.
6. Boyd K. Packer, "Children," *Ensign*, May 2002, 7, 9.
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8. Wilfred L. Guerin, Earle G. Labor, Lee Morgan, Jeanne C. Reesman, and John R. Willingham, eds., *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 161.
9. Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, eds., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 192.
10. Gordon B. Hinckley, *Standing for Something: Ten Neglected Virtues That Will Heal Our Hearts and Homes* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2000), 106.