



Type: Book Chapter

Big Lessons from Little Books

Author(s): Claudia L. Bushman

Source: *Big Lessons from Little Books: 2 Nephi 4 – Words of Mormon*

Editor(s): Roberts A. Rees and Eugene England

Published: Salt Lake City; Signature Books, 2008

Page(s): vii-xxii

Abstract: As I study the Book of Mormon, I am always discovering new and unexpected treasures. I can never open the book without seeing something I did not notice before. Reading the text straight through is the best way for me. It discloses more of those gems than I would find reading it thematically. The varied texture reveals itself most clearly when I follow the story from one chapter to the next.



Big Lessons from Little Books

Claudia L. Bushman

As I study the Book of Mormon, I am always discovering new and unexpected treasures. I can never open the book without seeing something I did not notice before. Reading the text straight through is the best way for me. It discloses more of those gems than I would find reading it thematically. The varied texture reveals itself most clearly when I follow the story from one chapter to the next.

I begin, not with the earnest writing of Nephi in the second of his books, but with the words of Jacob, his brother, who wrote the longest of the famously short books in the Book of Mormon; then I follow with a discussion of Enos, Jarom, Omni, and the Words of Mormon—short books every one. Some of the record keepers did not have much to say. After discussing these short books, I go back to Nephi's record. As I read the entire Book of Mormon, I find myself less interested in the doctrines and major characters than in discovering the minor writers, the less emphasized relationships, the little-recognized beautiful words, the new details.

The years pass quickly in the little books. Fifty-five years after settlement, Jacob, who was born in a Near Eastern wilderness, takes up his charge to add new entries to the small plates of Nephi. Nephi has been told that he should hand down the records to his descendants, from generation to generation; but at this point in the narrative his line has died

out, or at least disappeared, and the records have moved to Jacob's lineage. Just twenty-six pages later, the space occupied by five short books, we have traversed more than four hundred years.

In Jacob's first chapter, the great Nephi, much beloved of his people, has grown old and has died. He is succeeded by an unnamed king who is hard of heart, greedy for riches, lustful for wives and concubines, and full of pride. Quickly comes the fall from righteousness! So soon comes the break between the administrative and the religious leaders! The split allows Jacob to assume a superior tone. He carries no responsibility for running the state, so he can be critical of the administration. In a lengthy sermon, he calls for repentance.

Also at this time, a reversal in behavior has rendered the Lamanites the moral superiors of the traditionally good Nephites. The Nephites are practicing plural marriage and concubinage, while the Lamanites are loyal to their "fair wives." Jacob also includes the great defense of monogamy, as practiced by the Lamanites, against the polygamy of the Nephites. This juxtaposition is all the more interesting because of the fact that there is no mention of Abraham's polygamy earlier in the narrative, possibly because it would undermine Jacob's argument against concubinage. The omission shows the complexity of the scriptural message. It would seem that Jacob understands Abraham to be not only a good example but also a bad one, thereby selectively ennobled. Jacob may reason that Abraham, like everyone else, had feet of clay.

If I were Jacob and writing a short book, I would make it a narrative history of my time. But he gives us very little history, providing instead three static literary pieces: his sermon

about the love of riches and the importance of monogamous marital fidelity; his recounting of Zenos's parable of the olive tree, which sounds as if it were copied from another source; and the miraculous conversion of Sherem. There is little else in Jacob's book. His last entry is "after some years." More of an anthologist than an historian, he seems to lack the incentive to keep a detailed record.

What to write is a problem for these intermediate historians. They are also challenged by the difficulty of engraving messages on the plates. This is how Jacob accounts for the brevity of his record—by complaining about how hard it is to inscribe it on metal plates. Why, then, did he include the extensive parable of the olive tree? Nephi, seemingly a technical whiz, provided Jacob with the plates, already made, and all Jacob had to do was write something on them. Nephi himself seemed to have managed well enough with the engraving. Jacob could have written a great deal in the space he took to complain about the trouble of engraving. Could this have been an excuse for his disinclination to write?

The little books are full of similar remarks about engraving and the limitation of space. Why were the scribes not able to work out solutions to these difficulties? Surely the community, for whom the records are said to have been important, must have been sorely disappointed to find that instead of substantive entries the scribes complained about lack of space! One is reminded of the nurse in *Romeo and Juliet*, who multiplies words to say she is too breathless to deliver Romeo's news. As Juliet says in exasperation, "How art thou out of breath when thou hast breath / To say to me that thou art out of breath? / The excuse that thou dost make in

this delay / Is longer than the tale thou dost excuse." I wish these scribes had forced themselves to say more. Could this be a problem of limited literacy? I am continually struck by their choices to record some items to the neglect of others. We have Jacob's literary writings but little about his personal life. I wonder if Jacob had intended to write more and was diverted.

Even so, who would not be moved by his coda?

Our lives passed away, like as it were unto us a dream, we being a lonesome and a solemn people, wanderers cast out from Jerusalem; born in tribulation, in a wilderness, and hated of our brethren, . . . wherefore, we did mourn out our days.

We need someone to set those mournful cadences to music to give us a song to sing on bad days.

Jacob's son Enos lived to old age; when he finished his record, it had been 179 years since his father had left the Old World. But Enos managed to write only three pages. Is that enough? He tells us he had a powerful conversion experience when out hunting "beasts in the forest," including a "wrestle" before God. He says he witnessed wars between the Lamanites and the Nephites and that he had preached and declared the word of Christ "all [his] days." Although his record is brief, he says some interesting things. He desires that his record should be preserved. He summons heaven for a guarantee that his record will survive. Thereafter, he is able to rest. His curtain speech is more positive than his father's, looking to the afterlife:

I rejoice in the day when my mortal shall put on immortality,

and shall stand before [my Redeemer]; then shall I see his face with pleasure, and he will say unto me, Come unto me ye blessed, there is a place prepared for you in the mansions of my Father.

But he only wrote three pages! He hoped his record would be preserved for the benefit of future generations, and he had nothing more to say? Should he not have written in more detail?

His son Jarom writes even less. Jarom specifically states that he will not write of his prophesying and revelations because he is writing on the small plates, kept to benefit the Lamanites, and his predecessors have said all that needed to be said. He is not alone in enjoying prophetic gifts. Many, he tells us, have had revelations. Where are these records? He notes the skill of his people in working in tools and metals but still wrote less than two pages. Why not use those skills to make more plates?

He does give some religious history. He tells us the old story about the difficulties the prophets, priests, and teachers have in working with prosperous people. The leaders labor diligently, they threaten destruction, they exhort with long-suffering, they teach the Law of Moses, they prophesy of the Messiah, and they have some success. To keep the people from destruction, they “prick their hearts with the word, continually stirring them up unto repentance,” but this section of the Book of Mormon has no resolution.

Jarom’s son Omni, continuing the record, writes a couple of paragraphs. He confesses himself to be a man of war and “a wicked man” who has not kept the statutes and commandments. His son Amaron reports on the destruction of

the wicked Nephites, a divine act to preserve the righteous. Chemish, Amaron's brother, writes a single verse about the succession of the record. Chemish's son, Abinadom, in two verses, writes of the continuing wars and his own active sword. He knows of no revelation worthy of adding to the scriptures. These men write little; writing is difficult. The record-keeping tradition is petering out.

Amaleki, a slightly more energetic scribe, speaks of Mosiah's flight into the wilderness. Led by the word of God, Mosiah and his followers have left the land of Nephi and stumble on the land of Zarahemla, where the inhabitants greet them warmly. Mosiah teaches these foreign people his language, writes their history in it, and becomes their king. The childless Amaleki is succeeded in record keeping by Mosiah's son Benjamin. As the records leave his blood line, Amaleki signs off with a powerful gospel sermon, one familiar to us because it encapsulates many teachings we hold today. His closing witness is a nugget—a jeweled toad's eye. After saying he believes in the signs and that there is nothing good “save it comes from the Lord; and that which is evil, cometh from the Devil,” he writes this:

And now, my beloved brethren, I would that ye should come unto Christ, which is the Holy One of Israel, and partake of his salvation, and the power of his redemption. Yea, come unto him, and offer your whole souls as an offering unto him, and continue in fasting and praying, and endure to the end; and as the Lord liveth, ye will be saved.

This is the kind of universal, all-encompassing scripture we could cross-stitch on a sampler or print on a small card to

carry in our wallets. It gathers together aspects of the gospel that require no further explanation or commentary. I am always looking for scriptures like this—the kind that burst upon you with their completeness. Sometime I will collect all my favorites for my own missal or prayer book.

The scene shifts, the years pass. In the Words of Mormon, we find the book's editor at his task of abridging the plates of Nephi. Mormon likes these little plates and includes them without shortening them. All of the plates have come to him through lines of rulers and prophets for six hundred or so years since Amaleki closed the book of Omni.

King Benjamin comes off very well in the Words of Mormon. Why not? He has seized power, killed off his enemies, and controls history. He has established peace by driving the Lamanites from his lands. He has closed the mouths of false prophets and punished other bad people. Then he, as a holy man, reigns over the people in righteousness. Did everyone agree with his administration? I wonder. Don't we wish we knew! The dissenting voices, if any existed, have been excised from the record. Benjamin has both legal and literary control. Of the two, control of the record is more important in the long run, although legal control certainly has its advantages.

We now shift back to the wasteland of 2 Nephi with its endless transcriptions of Isaiah preceding the Book of Mormon's little books. I welcomed a reason to re-examine this material, which otherwise takes over fifty pages to cover twenty-five years, but I am sorry to say that the beauties of Isaiah elude me.

What we have here is material from the Hebrew Bible

framed by the mature Nephi, who has separated from his older brothers and their families. Nephi has spent his life trying to bring his family to repentance, and now, aged and worn, he tries to convey to their benighted and primitive minds a knowledge of the great civilization he once knew. That place was dense and rich but corrupt. Even his brother Jacob was born too late to know the old culture; no children born in the culturally barren, primitive “promised land” can appreciate it. Nephi will quote the baroque Isaiah and then, in contrast, speak plainly himself about how Israel will be saved.

He chronicles his painful separation from his brothers, including their attempts to kill him. He moves his family deeper into the wilderness to become nomads like the early Hebrews. His family names their land and themselves after him. On the journey, our great lost artifacts are carried: not the ark of the covenant, but the plates of brass and the compass ball. Using the sword of Laban as a pattern, Nephi constructs other swords. He works in the abundant woods and metals he finds to build a temple like Solomon's, only simpler. The people work and labor; they multiply and prosper.

Jacob is called on to speak a few words about Jewish history. “Wherefore I will read you the words of Isaiah. And they are the words which my brother has desired me that I should speak unto you.” We receive little information about the new land where they have moved to put distance between themselves and the Lamanites, or about how they have adapted to their new surroundings, starting over from scratch, before launching into the words of Isaiah in all their inexplicable splendor. Jacob's sermon, his revelation, and his

quotation of Isaiah are all written by Nephi, who notes that there is much more to write than he includes.

Having departed from his brothers, Nephi is able to transform the Lamanites into a forbidden people, the *other*: “and cursed shall be the seed of him that mixeth with their seed.” The Lamanites are said to be an “idle people, full of mischief and subtlety,” who hunt in the wilderness for “beasts of prey.” Here comes the cursing. The Lamanites acquire “a skin of blackness,” while the Nephites are said to be “white, and exceeding fair and delightsome.” The curse divides the good from the bad, making the difference between them immediately visible.

It is a world of dramatic contrasts on all counts. The difference in skin color is one of many signs of the distance between the Nephites and Lamanites: good and evil in constant contrast. We have hunters versus shepherds. We have the promise of salvation, on one hand, and the threat of destruction on the other. We are told of marauders versus defenders of home and liberty. In making these contrasts, the bad weighs more heavily than the good; that is, the bad people are more bad than the good are good. Nephi writes this way, but outdoing Nephi is Isaiah, king of a divisive style of rhetoric. The choices, for Isaiah, are either exaltation or damnation and no in-betweens.

Reading the constant reiteration of Isaiah’s demands is wearying, tempting more than one intrepid reader to try to escape from the onslaught rather than to read and repent! I always wonder whether this hard sell and repetitive denunciation is the way to persuade people toward a better life. Should these writers not have tried a more positive ap-

proach? This is no doubt the “chloroform in print” spoken of by Mark Twain. This is the boundary at which so many earnest Book of Mormon readers arrive and can get no further. This is—to me—evidence of the truth of the Book of Mormon because no modern compilers would consciously put in the endless Isaiah material. Even if we did, we would at least try to put the chapters in better order.

We have to wonder why Nephi did not simply refer to the plates of brass, from which he must have quoted this material, instead of laboriously transcribing it all over again? The writers complain that they cannot write but a hundredth part of what occurred. Why then do we have the interminable Isaiah, verse after verse, page after page, chapter after chapter? And why is Isaiah written in the archaic, complicated language of the King James Bible? Perhaps Joseph Smith, while translating, came to these places and resorted to his Bible for the language.

In any case, Isaiah has a violent imagination; he is relentless in conjuring various images of doom. He is wonderful in small doses, but a lot of Isaiah goes a little way. His rhetorical questions and exclamations are exhausting. His little stories are scarcely begun before they are abandoned for some other set of images, unsettling the reader. I do not appreciate him, although in these judgments I realize I am identifying myself as a person coming from a barren modern culture.

Despite my general weariness, I did discover many choice bits. For instance, Jacob’s world of contrasts: “O, my beloved brethren, remember the awfulness in transgressing against that holy God, and also the awfulness of yielding to the enticings of that cunning one. Remember, to be carnally mind-

ed, is death, and to be spiritually minded, is life eternal.”

Isaiah himself mostly gives us a long catalogue of ever-more imaginative ways to blast sinners, but his passages concerning the birth of a Messiah come as a welcome relief. I am glad to see that the Messiah will judge the poor with righteousness and reprove with equity the meek of the earth; such a nice message that Isaiah says it twice. Those of us who enjoy singing Handel's *Messiah* recognize many familiar verses. The librettist made good choices, winnowing the wheat from less pleasing chaff. Some of the best and most useful passages have been mined out of context, but I still found that some of them were new to me and that I liked them a great deal. One verse that speaks to me has the Lord telling Ahaz about the birth of a child. He says, “Butter and honey shall he eat, that he may know to refuse the evil and to choose the good.” I thought this was a charming picture and savored it until Bob Rees, citing a biblical commentary, noted that it should be translated “curds and honey”: “Curds (a kind of yogurt) and honey meant a return to the simple diet of those who lived off the land. The Assyrian invasion would devastate the countryside and make farming impossible. ... Thus when this boy is twelve or thirteen ... he would be eating curds and honey instead of agricultural products—due to the devastation of Israel by Assyria.”¹ I should have known better than to impute a positive meaning to Isaiah's metaphor! Here is another I like: “Therefore with joy shall ye draw water out of the wells of salvation.” And again in the same chapter, “Cry out and shout, thou inhabitant of Zion; for great is the Holy One of Israel in the midst of thee.” I like this whole chapter, in fact, which I think would make a good cantata. But soon

enough, we're back to wrath, pangs and sorrows, and the punishment of the arrogant and the haughty.

Isaiah does give us some images that are lacking elsewhere in the Book of Mormon. I am rather fond of the picture of the desolated Babylon: "But wild beasts of the desert shall lie there; and their houses shall be full of doleful creatures, and owls shall dwell there, and satyrs shall dance there. And the wild beasts of the islands shall cry in their desolate houses, and dragons in their pleasant palaces." This architecturally elegant place inhabited by strange creatures could be the setting for a science fiction story or the design for a tapestry. I have made a mental note that I must think of how to compose a sermon around this text.

The message of the Messiah and redemption can be found in the biblical Isaiah, but the message is clearer in Nephi. In Chapter XI, Nephi admits that Isaiah spoke many things that were hard for his people to understand because they were written in the "manner of the Jews." Because the Jews were engaged in "works of darkness," Nephi has not taught his people these things. But Isaiah, he says, is clear to those who "are filled with the spirit of prophecy." Nephi likes the style because Nephi too is from Jerusalem and saw these things; but unlike Isaiah, Nephi's prophecies, according to his own self-assessment, are plain.

The Jews had been warned of their imminent destruction, and Nephi knows further that in the future Christ will appear on earth and will be rejected and crucified. At that time, Jerusalem will be destroyed again, and woe to those who fight against God and his church! Then the Jews will be scattered among the nations and scourged until they accept

Christ and cease to look for another messiah. Finally, they will be restored from their lost and fallen state.

This is wonderful stuff, but the next idea is more thrilling to me. We are told that “these things which I write, shall be kept and preserved, and handed down unto my seed, from generation to generation, that the promise may be fulfilled unto Joseph, that his seed should never perish as long as the earth should stand.” This is a powerful message about the importance of maintaining and preserving written records. Nations will be judged according to them. Here the scribe testifies to the value of his work. However difficult to carry the history on, how important that it be done!

Nephi includes wonderful testimonies, such as this familiar passage: “We talk of Christ, we rejoice in Christ, we preach of Christ, we prophesy of Christ, and we write according to our prophecies, that our children may know to what source they may look for a remission of their sins.” Then Nephi continues to scold the poor “stiffnecked people.” They must not deny Christ, the Holy One of Israel, and must bow before him and worship him with all their “might, mind, and strength”—with their whole soul. If they do so, Nephi promises, “Ye shall in nowise be cast out.” He assures them that “the Lord God worketh not in darkness. He doeth not anything, save it be for the benefit of the world; for he loveth the world.” Among the multi-varied images of destruction, Nephi speaks with reassurance and universality, not of divided peoples, particularly not of race, color, or skin, but of good and evil, regardless of status.

I wish we could hear Nephi speak. He says he is not “mighty in writing, like unto speaking,” that the power of

the Holy Ghost would carry his speech into the hearts of men. But was there ever anyone who wrote more mightily than he? He notes that his society does not particularly value the written word. Those with hardened hearts “cast many things away which are written, and esteem them as things of nought.” But he, Nephi, “esteem[s]” what he has written to be “of great worth, and especially unto [his] people.” He prays continually for them: “And mine eyes water my pillow by night, because of them,” a dramatic admission for the virile leader to make. (Even as I am affected by this humble speech, I note with interest that he has a pillow!) He prays, “The things which I have written in weakness, will be made strong unto them: for it persuadeth them to do good; it maketh known unto them of their fathers; and it speaketh of Jesus, and persuadeth men to believe in him, and to endure to the end, which is life eternal.”

Single-minded, weary, sad, he has done his best. He values his own message, while others do not. In the end, he is less than triumphant. Who accomplished more? Who could feel better about his life? He has carried the message along and could say of himself, “He that endureth to the end, the same shall be saved.” He who writes a complete record will also be known in the future:

Wherefore, ye must press forward with a steadfastness in Christ, having a perfect brightness of hope, and a love of God and of all men. Wherefore, if ye shall press forward, feasting upon the word of Christ, and endure to the end, behold, thus saith the Father: Ye shall have eternal life.

It is clear, in reading through this section of the Book of

Mormon, that technology and tradition are the mothers of literature. Nephi can write long, extensive, repetitious entries full of cautions and punishments because he was allowed to by the combination of literary intention and technology. His immediate successors lacked the ability or the will to create an equal record. Bred in the wilderness, they lacked the vision of the value of history and did a cursory job of carrying on. We can imagine Chemish and Abinadom, knowing they must enter a few verses and dreading it, finally committing token entries to the plates. Their sketchy verses demonstrate, even more than Nephi's extensive record, the importance of keeping full records. We want to know more. What else happened? How much has been lost forever! How our trials and accomplishments disappear if no one writes about them! How soon everything we know is erased from the earth if we do not keep a record.

I wonder if it is legitimate to have favorite scriptures or to savor specific passages? Is it heretical to say that some sections of our sacred books are less than thrilling? How dull the battles are! How soon we are inured to mayhem and bloodshed. I cannot say what ought to be in the Book of Mormon. For one, my standards change from year to year; and additionally, it is not my place to judge. There are some things I hope were written about before the record was edited. I hope they included more colorful passages, maybe even some illustrations, maps, and descriptions of everyday life, which would have brought the lives of these strange people closer to us. I would have liked to read the social columns of their newspapers, their personals, a fashion commentary, a housekeeping manual.

I find I am against abridgements of original documents by editors who smooth over interesting wording and details. I wish that none of the plates had been abridged. Shortening the record leads to generalities and cuts out the interesting details we want to know. Abridgement tends to turn rich and complex stories into simple, truncated ones, leaving the reader hungry for the full narrative. I would rather have a few chapters of minutia than a long overview of military shifts from prosperity to bondage. How great it is whenever the vaults are opened and new material comes to light! How much better if we had our own urims and thummins and could restore the complete holy library, if we could read more about our forefathers and foremothers. Nephi tells us that by God's command the books are there: "For I command all men, both in the east, and in the west, and in the north, and in the south, and in the islands of the sea, that they shall write the words which I speak unto them; for out of the books which shall be written, I will judge the world, every man according to their works, according to that which is written." Meanwhile, of course, the lesson is that we should all write our own personal records for the benefit of future generations.

note

1. Kenneth Barker, ed., *New International Version Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Bible Publishers, 1985), 1,333.