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## The Book of Mormon—Literary Aspects of the Nephite Record

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# Lesson Department

## Theology and Testimony

(First Week in December)

Select Readings: Second Nephi, chapters 1 to 4 inclusive. Make notes, first of the prophecies mentioned, and next of the doctrines taught.

### THE BOOK OF MORMON—LITERARY ASPECTS OF THE NEPHITE RECORD

It is sometimes urged that the *Book of Mormon* has no literary merits at all. This is said because in its superficial aspects that volume does not conform to the standards which we have acquired in writing.

The book, we are told, abounds in errors of grammar, it uses too many words to tell its story, and its structure is not what it might be. All this we must concede, if we are to be honest with ourselves.

But what of it? Scott and Cooper and Dickens are by no means impeccable in their grammar and rhetoric, and much that they say could be left out with no loss to the effectiveness of their stories. Are we then to throw these authors into the discard, quit reading such books as *Ivanhoe*, the *Last of the Mohicans*, and *David Copperfield*? Not at all. Because these writers have qualities that are far higher than mere grammatical and rhetorical correctness. They all tell capital stories, they all have interesting situations, they all have vivid characterization, and at least one of them has rare humor and pathos. Stevenson and Walter Pater have perfect style, but as story tellers they are not in the same class as Scott, Cooper, and Dickens.

It is much the same with the *Book of Mormon*. Although the work may be deficient in some of the minor qualities of style, that is no sign that it has no literary values

whatever. For the fact is that the Nephite record has some very striking and beautiful expressions, and it abounds in a variety of characters that stand out in the mind.

Perhaps it will not be amiss here to inquire how it came about that the literary style of the *Book of Mormon* is what it is, especially since its literary defects have been made the basis for attacks on its divine origin. Is the language of the Nephite record the Lord's or Joseph Smith's?

If, on the one hand, the language is the Lord's how is it that he does not speak in the most perfect English, as one would naturally expect that he would? The fact that the style of the book is imperfect, on this assumption, would go to throw doubt on its divine origin—in the estimation of adverse critics. And then, on the other hand, if the language of the work is the Prophet's, how can we reconcile that fact with its claim to being an inspired product? Here, then, is our problem.

The only solution of the problem is to admit that the language is the Prophet's, although the thoughts, the material, of the book was revealed.

It is a safe assumption that the Lord does not do for man what man can do for himself. That would be to dwarf man's powers, to stay his development. Joseph Smith did not know, and could not know, anything

about the Lehites and the Jaredites. So God revealed it to him. Likewise the Prophet knew nothing of the language they used. Hence the Lord prepared the urim and thummim for the purpose of enabling him to understand that ancient tongue. He did know English, however—the English that was spoken in his neighborhood, the English that one in his circumstances could have got without training.

Here is a passage from the *Doctrine and Covenants* which shows indirectly how the translation of the *Book of Mormon* was accomplished:

Oliver Cowdery wanted to translate. He asked the Prophet for the privilege. His request was granted. But when he tried, he failed to get the required results. Then came the explanation in a revelation to him through Joseph.

"Behold, you have not understood; you have supposed that I would give it unto you, when you took no thought save it was to ask me. You must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore, you shall feel that it is right. But if it be not right, you shall have no such feelings, but you shall have a stupor of thought that shall cause you to forget the thing which is wrong; therefore you cannot write that which is sacred save it be given you from me. Now, if you had known this you could have translated."

And here are some conclusions that we must inevitably draw from these statements:

First, that the way described in the passage was most likely the way in which the Prophet translated. Secondly, the translator having got the thought on the plates, he set it down in such language as he had at his

command, endeavoring to express it exactly as it was on the plates. Thirdly, after it had been set down, the translator was to decide whether it was absolutely correct or not by the way he felt; if it was right, his bosom "burned within him," and if it was wrong he had a "stupor of thought." Fourthly, the whole process was carried on under the divine influence and power, because it was "sacred."

Incidentally it may be remarked here, as growing out of the statement made above, that the circumstances connected with the appearance of the *Book of Mormon* and the effort put forth in the translation of it, was a primary means of educating Joseph Smith in the work he was to do in the world.†

First, his long wait for the plates taught him patience, obedience, and knowledge of the ways of the Lord. Secondly, the effort he expended on the translation of it trained, disciplined his mind in the same ways the mind is always trained and disciplined. Thirdly, the time he spent on the translation, coupled with the effort he put forth, gave him a knowledge of the principles of salvation that, it would seem, nothing else could have given. For it is well known that to translate a work of any kind, especially if it be a work containing thought, forces one to think clearly. And in the case of the Prophet the mind was, in a way, checked up in its thinking.

So far as matters of style are concerned, three things may be said of the *Book of Mormon*. One has already been suggested—isolated expressions of truth in a rather forceful way. A second is the theme. Is this high or low? And the third is clearness, as compared with the Bible. Vigor, clearness, and a high theme are literary qual-

ities that are not to be overlooked in writing.

Let us take up each of these in turn.

Some of the rather striking things in the *Book of Mormon*—purple patches, in fact—may be given here. Not all that can be found there by any means, but enough to give an idea as to whether, in point of phrasing alone, the Nephite record is as contemptible as is sometimes represented.

1. "Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy.

2. "I would exhort you that ye would come unto Christ, and lay hold upon every good gift, and touch not the evil gift, nor the unclean thing. *What is the evil gift?*

3. "The Lord giveth no commandment unto the children of men, save he shall prepare a way for them that they may accomplish the thing which he commandeth of them.

4. "O, that I were an angel and could have the wish of my heart, that I might go forth and speak with the trump of God, with a voice to shake the earth, and cry repentance unto every people. *Alas!*

5. "Ye have called me your king; and if I, whom ye call your king, do labor to serve you, then ought ye not to labor to serve one another? And also if I, whom ye call your king have spent his days in your service and in the service of God without meriting any thanks from you, O how you ought to thank your Heavenly Father.

6. "I will tell you of the wrestle which I had before God, before I received a remission of my sins. Behold, I went to hunt beasts in the forest; and the words of my father, which I had often heard my father speak concerning eternal life and the joy of the saints, sunk deep into my

heart. And my soul hungered. And I kneeled down before my Maker, and cried unto him in mighty prayer and supplication. And all the day did I cry unto him, 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, and thou shalt be blessed.' And I knew that God could not lie; wherefore my guilt was swept away.

7. "If it were possible that you could have just men to be your kings, \* \* \* then it would be expedient that ye should have kings to rule over you. \* \* \* But because all men are not just, it is not expedient that ye should have a king or kings to rule over you. For behold, how much iniquity doth one king cause to be committed, and what destruction. \* \* \* Ye cannot dethrone an iniquitous king, save it be through much contention and the shedding of much blood. For he hath his friends in iniquity, and he keepeth his guards about him. He tearth up the laws of those who have reigned in righteousness before him, and enacteth laws after the manner of his own wickedness. Thus an unrighteous king doth pervert the ways of all righteousness. It is expedient that such abominations should come to an end.

"Therefore, choose you by the voice of this people, judges, that ye may be judged according to the laws which have been given by your fathers. It is not common that the voice of the people desireth anything contrary to that which is right, but it is common for the lesser part of the people to desire that which is not right. Therefore, this shall ye observe and make it your law—to do your business by the voice of the people. And if the time comes that the voice of the people doth choose

iniquity, then is the time that God will visit you with destruction."

These passages are well worth attention from more than one angle. They are not inappropriately worded. They are crystal clear on their face. The thought in all of them points to the universal in human life—to truths, that is, which hold good under all conditions of life. And at least one of them, the first, suggests an answer to an age-old question as to the purpose of life. Observe the use of the word "joy" instead of "happiness."

Every book has a general atmosphere, by reason of which it is good or bad or merely neutral in its effects. If a book is wholesome, it is largely because it has a good atmosphere. And atmosphere is created and sustained by means of ideas and characters chiefly.

What is the atmosphere of the *Book of Mormon*?

That atmosphere is well put by one of the early converts to "Mormonism"—George Cannon, father of the late president George Q. Cannon. He said, "No wicked man could write such a book as this; and no good man would write it, unless it were true and he were commanded of God to do so."

Every book, if it can be called a book at all, has a theme also. A theme is a general thought, or purpose, running through it like a thread; it is the thought for which the work was produced. Whether the book is a work of fiction, an historical narrative, or the development of a subject through explanation or argument, it must nevertheless have a theme by which the details are tied together. And the work is valuable, other things remaining the same, according as its theme is high or low, universal or local in its appeal.

The theme of the *Book of Mormon* is expressed in what may be called the preface to that volume, written by Moroni. It is "the convincing of the Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the Christ, the eternal God, manifesting himself unto all nations."

If there can be a higher theme than that, one would be hard put to find it. First, it clears up an ambiguity of the *New Testament* as to the divinity of Christ. And then, secondly, it shows the universality of idea of God's interest in mankind.

As for the characters in the *Book of Mormon*, the topic is too large for treatment in this place. So this aspect of the subject is left to a question, and may be dealt with at the discretion of the teacher.

### Questions

1. How important is the form in which an idea or a book is cast as compared with the idea or the theme? Explain with reference to the *Book of Mormon*.

2. Read or quote some of the statements of the Record, to show (a) their good phrasing, (b) their truth, and (c) their universality.

3. What is meant by a theme? Give the themes of works like *Silas Marner*, by George Eliot, or *Influencing Human Behavior*, by Overstreet. Why is the theme of the *Book of Mormon* a high one?

4. Take some one of the characters in the Nephite Record and, after reading all that the Record says about them, work up an essay or a short speech in which you give (a) a brief account of what the characters did, (b) what they said and thought, and (c) what they were in their qualities. Be sure, however, not to make anything up, but to have authority in the text for everything you say.

5. How do you account for the errors in grammar and composition in the *Book of Mormon*? What bearing does the answer to this question have on the claims to divine origin for the work?

## Work and Business

(Second Week in December)

*Watchword*: "And into whatsoever house ye enter, first say, Peace be unto this house."—Luke 10:5.

*Text*: "Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not; for of such is the kingdom of God."—Mark 10:14.

### TEACHER'S TOPIC FOR DECEMBER

From this text we may draw three lessons. The first is our duty to our children in directing them to Jesus; the second, in keeping ourselves active and interested in, and devoted to the Church; the third, that in order to enter the kingdom of God one must have childlike faith, humility and love.

Interpreting the meaning of our Savior into modern language, we would translate the text into words something like this: "Encourage and teach your children to come to me; persuade them by a righteous example and influence to love me; do not hinder them, nor cause them to turn from me by your own thoughtlessness and indifference; because children are naturally full of faith and sweetness and friendliness and love."

Children, in their early years, live in a world apart from ours. They are very near to heaven and things spiritual. Before they are very old, however, they begin to feel their own personality, and the possibilities of self. In developing this new found individuality they are certain to become self-willed and intractable. These early human tendencies checked and directed in a proper manner will avert improper thoughts and the forming of little habits which may lead into dis-

obedience and sin. While they are young it is a simple matter to instil into their eager, searching minds, the lovely truths of our Gospel. They can be readily brought to understand that cleanness is more attractive than foulness; that honesty is more gratifying than dishonor; that harmony with parents and with Jesus is more delightful than the unhappiness which discord and opposition bring. There is small danger of children disregarding the admonition of their parents if they have been taught to love, honor and obey them. Children need love and sympathy. They should always have the deep consciousness of the love their parents have for them.

Without lowering our standards or retracting from our position of integrity, we would do well to try to understand the modern viewpoint. While still holding fast to our ideals, we should acquire a sympathy for the struggles of youth. Afraid of life and ignorant of its problems, they assume a bravado which they do not feel. Assailed on every hand by doubts, skepticism, and iniquity, unless they are held securely in the bonds of love, they are bound to wander. Youth resents regulations and restrictions unless back of these is the love that will make them appreciate and understand the reason for guidance. It is impossible to