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Last Words

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Steve Walker

Among the Latter-day Saints, the Book of Mormon may be the most owned yet least read book. Even those of us who try to give it an earnest reading often fall asleep, confirming the joke that if you took all the snoring Mormons reading 2 Nephi and laid them end to end, they would be more comfortable. Yet we are nevertheless convinced that this book can get us “nearer to God” than “any other book.”¹ That is just the theological leading edge of amazing claims for the book that reach from transcendent spiritual dimensions to the earthiest kind of pragmatic implication: BYU scholar Hugh Nibley famously said that “what brings me back to earth is the good old Book of Mormon, the book that really tells you what goes on in the world.”²

Why such disparity between what the book means to us and how little we read it? Why do we find it to be a physical sedative as much as a spiritual stimulant? My suspicion is that our schizoid response results from the way we read it. That inkling was deepened when I asked my BYU classes about their interactions with the Book of Mormon. In my informal survey, every student treated it either as ancient history or a theological handbook. These, in my opinion, are the two worst imaginable ways to read this good book. It is not a history book, at least not in our twenty-first-century

manner of tracking national chronology. Secular matters do not matter much to the Book of Mormon, with its almost exclusive focus on spiritual issues. To pay attention to geography or metallurgy to the neglect of the book's overriding moral concerns mostly misses its point.

Reading the Book of Mormon like a Sunday school manual is more myopic. The Book of Mormon might be more accurately described as a collection of personal narratives—in other words, a collection of *stories*, along with poetry and highly stylized prophecies. What God has given us in the Book of Mormon is literature. That is why our usual approaches miss the best parts: they do not address the book's central concerns. Read as history, it will inevitably seem less historical than, say, the *New York Times*; and read as a catechism, it is less clear (and much less dogmatic) than a book like *Mormon Doctrine*.

Those unhelpful theological and historical approaches work worse because we're so used to them, because we have too many times been there, done that. The Book of Mormon is so much a part of our culture, we make the assumption that we already know what we need to know about it. Most of us know before we are old enough to read who Lehi and Laman and even some of the more minor characters like Korihor are. We know to the point of pain who Nephi is. He was "born of goodly parents." We know that. We know he was "exceeding young" but "large of stature." Most excruciatingly, we know, as reiteratively as we know the latest television commercials, that Nephi is ready at the drop of a hat to "go and do the things which the Lord hath commanded."

Because we know the story line, we fail to notice what ac-

tually happens in the story. Nephi proclaims in his pulpit voice that he will go and do as God commands; and after that heroic statement, what follows next? Not Nephi going and doing but Nephi and his brothers at a crap shoot, casting lots to see which one of them will have to go back to Jerusalem and talk Laban out of the historical records on the brass plates. It is Nephi's oldest brother, Laman, rather than Nephi, who draws the short straw, so Laman goes and tries to accomplish what God commanded and is unceremoniously hounded out of Jerusalem for his trouble.

If you think, as I do, that God is in charge here, the episode is very interesting. God decides not to select the volunteer—not the big talker—but his reluctant brother. You know the feeling when the Primary kid is waving his arm off, but experience with the arm waver has taught you to call on the quiet kid at the back who tries to avoid your eye. There is illumination here, insight here into real life: Much as we all appreciate the verbal enthusiasm of the volunteer, volunteers are sometimes better at volunteering than at going and doing.

So Laman goes and does. Where is Nephi? He is back at the tent, tall-talking about what he would have done if he had been selected. When Laman fails, Nephi finally goes, but he botches the operation, killing Laban when all God had told him to do was to get the plates.

We too-familiar readers do not notice what it is that Nephi has gone and done, let alone the ramifications of his goings and doings. We are so used to thinking of the Book of Mormon as a Sunday School manual telling us what to do, or as a history book telling us who has gone and done, that

far from reading it with the surprise it invites, we fail to engage it as we would the most mediocre novel. Even on those rare occasions when our eyes remain open, we read these passages to reassure ourselves, to reinforce what we already think we know. Far from expanding our horizons and illuminating our souls, we use it to lull ourselves into an intellectual and spiritual stupor. We use it as a security blanket to warm our souls while we slumber when it should be an alarm clock to wake us up.

We might remain more alert if we paid more attention. It would make it a better book for us, a livelier book, the kind that keeps us reading till two o'clock in the morning, if we approached it as eagerly as the latest Harry Potter story. I am aware that the Book of Mormon has not been universally admired for its literary style. Mark Twain pondered the quality of its rhetoric and quipped that if Joseph Smith “had left ‘and it came to pass’ out,” it “would have been only a pamphlet.”³ Twain’s reference to “chloroform in print” is a clever line. However, there are parts of the book Twain missed in his quest for one-liners.

Looked at from a literary perspective, for its impact in our personal lives, I find the final section of the Book of Mormon to be particularly engaging. Like any good climax, it tends to be the most intense part of the book. It is arguably the most significant section. This culmination of a thousand-year chronicle puts the whole volume into overview mode—the summary at the end of a book that encapsulates what has mattered most. T. S. Eliot observed that “what we call the beginning is often the end / And to make an end is to make a beginning. / The end is where we start

from.”⁴ Endings reorient us, as when Sam from *Lord of the Rings*, returns to the shire with all those world-altering adventures involving the ring: “Well, I’m back.”⁵

The small books that wrap up the Book of Mormon—Fourth Nephi, Mormon, Ether, and especially Moroni—give us the conclusion to the whole matter. Their endings are emphatic because they take up the theme of endings in a series of deathbed statements, famous last words. That’s dramatic because of the “last, the best of all the game” effect, because of our expectation that the final thing said distills overall implications, as in Sydney Carton’s last words in *A Tale of Two Cities*: “It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done.”⁶ The final Book of Mormon words put me in mind of the last words of Rabelais, for instance, who said: “I am going to seek a great perhaps”; and of Lord Nelson’s “Thank God, I have done my duty”; and Goethe’s “More light.”⁷ I especially like Pancho Villa’s expression that final statements matter: “Don’t let it end like this. Tell them I said something.”⁸

There is weightiness to the last words in the Book of Mormon as it assumes a deathbed whisper, “low out of the dust” as “one that hath a familiar spirit, ... out of the ground.” The book’s mood here is solemn, and that “whisper out of the dust” haunts us. It is because we are witnessing the death throes of entire peoples and sense the cosmic proportions in that apocalyptic end of all things. Unlike the apocalypses we’re used to, the kind of arcane theoretical symbolizings we get in Ezekiel or Revelation, this apocalypse invades actual experience. Mormon gives his last words, Moroni makes a penultimate statement, then his absolute

final words, and we hear not so much the echo of a distantly anticipated millennial ending as the immediate death of specific individuals.

“O ... what a falling-off was there.” The depth of this New World tragedy is as breathtaking in sweep as it is abrupt. As late as 4 Nephi, we see that goodness prevails so fully that the people “had all things common among them, therefore there were not rich and poor, bond and free, but they were all made free, and partakers of the Heavenly gift.” This totality of righteousness is stressed by the proliferation of words that characterize the inclusiveness of their Enoch-like society: “The people were *all* converted unto the Lord, upon *all* the face of the land. ... and *every* man did deal justly one with another. ... And it came to pass that there was *no* contention among *all* the people, in *all* the land; ... there were *no* envyings, *nor* strifes, *nor* tumults, *nor* whoredoms, *nor* lying, *nor* murders, *nor* no manner of lasciviousness; and surely there could not be a happier people among *all* the people which had been created by the hand of God.” This was a people so much more at peace than our own relatively peaceful society that it appears to be profoundly happier, far safer.

A breathing-space later, only a page away in 4 Nephi, we learn that they “began to be divided into classes.” By Mormon’s time, there has been a polar shift of such magnitude, the totality has become completely reversed: “*Every* heart was hardened. ... And there *never* had been so great wickedness among *all* the children of Lehi, nor even among *all* the house of Israel, according to the words of the Lord, as was among this people.” The accelerated decline makes us feel

like we are experiencing the cataclysmic fall of Troy. Homer's lament for Odysseus seems a fit epitaph for Mormon: "But not by will nor valor could he save them, / for their own recklessness destroyed them all."¹⁰

The scariest thing about this fall is that it feels so inevitable. Moroni interrupts the Nephite annals to give us the fate of the people who preceded them because in Ether the storyline follows such a similar arc: "For they were given up unto the hardness of their hearts, and the blindness of their minds, that they might be destroyed." Overcome with violence, "drunken with anger, even as a man which is drunken with wine," the Jaredites slice the lives out of each other until only two soldiers remain; then "after he had smitten off the head of Shiz ... Coriantumr fell to the earth, and became as if he had no life."

Through this closing scenario, stunned at the finality of it, we are staring over the shoulder of Moroni as he stares over the shoulder of the eyewitness, Ether, stupefied by the utter senselessness of this total destruction. "Why does Moroni, vigorously pruning the record to make room for only what there is space for, insert his own long abridgement of the record of the Jaredites?" Nibley once asked.¹¹ It is because what happened to the Jaredites happens to the Nephites; more presciently, we sense its potential for ourselves.

That is what disturbs us about these grisly scenes. We know that complete deterioration of civilization, and even utter annihilation, are possibilities for even the seemingly invincible United States. Nibley thought the scenes were "painfully familiar," writing that "the generations that understand the Book of Mormon" are necessarily in "much the

same situation ... and people in such a predicament are to be pitied.”¹² This strong sense of *deja vu* raises in our minds the specter of direct parallels.

History repeats itself with a vengeance in 4 Nephi, which reads like a twenty-first-century news report: “The wicked part of the people began again to build up the secret oaths and combinations.” They “began to be proud in their hearts, because of their exceeding riches, and become vain.” “Gold and silver did they lay up in store in abundance, and did traffic in all manner of traffic.” This compelling and relevant litany of vices forces us to take seriously Moroni’s farewell and to consider how our society mirrors his: “I soon go to rest in the paradise of God, until my spirit and body shall again reunite, and I am brought forth triumphant through the air, to meet you before the pleasing bar of the great Jehovah, the Eternal Judge of both quick and dead.” Reading the Book of Mormon for its relevance to our day, as a word to the wise, moves us amid such awesome finalities that we are forced to think about Moroni’s injunction to “ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true.”

The elegiac quality of Moroni’s final section speaks directly to us, and I find myself wondering what I would do in Moroni’s sandals. What would I say if I had twelve gold pages to say it on? What would I utter as the cumulative wisdom of so many lifetimes? The failure and regret expressed in these final pages are stark enough to exclude consideration of any hope of survival. In eulogizing his disappearing culture, Moroni turns my thoughts to the current situation in the world, the proliferation of weapons and unresolved political, ethnic, and religious conflicts.

Even if it were not for this mental comparison to our time, I find the end of the story to be profoundly moving and ineffably sad in its own right. The last words sound as gloomy as *Taps* echoing over a darkened battlefield. Observing that the Nephites have fallen to the point that they are “without civilization,” Moroni bewails “the depravity of my people! They are without order and without mercy.” These tales of sorrow and death are relentless. In a few short pages, Mormon dies; the Jaredite nation passes away; the Nephite people perish; Moroni himself wanders in elegiac isolation for twenty years, then dies in that final book. Read as literature, these dismal endings come to feel like our own.

Of all the sad characters in the book, none is as sad as Moroni, who must conceal himself from every living being. “I, even I remaineth alone to write the sad tale of the destruction of my people,” he writes, “and whither I go it mattereth not. . . . for I am alone: my father hath been slain in battle, and all my kinsfolks, and I have not friends nor whither to go; and how long that the Lord will suffer that I may live, I know not.” It is hard to imagine a more dismal existence than for this man, deprived of companionship and haunted by the view of 230,000 people, including his father and presumably his own wife and children, slain by enemies, his daily thoughts revolving around the certainty that he will die utterly alone.

Sad as that is, there is even more sadness here than the sadness of the loss of Mormon and Moroni, more than nostalgia for the entire peoples of Ether and Nephi, more than the tragic descent into ultimate degradation of a culture once blessed by divinity. There can be felt in these pages the

sadness of loss itself, the grief of the inevitable passing of all things mortal, however sweet:

One by one the petals drop.
There's nothing that can make them stop.
You cannot beg a rose to stay.
Why does it have to be that way?
The butterflies I used to chase
Have gone off to some other place.
I don't know where. I only know
I wish they didn't have to go.
And all the shiny afternoons
So full of birds and big balloons
And ice cream melting in the sun
Are done. I do not want them done.¹³

Things come to an end. Not only do books end, but so also individual lives and entire epochs. And always the loss is personal. Maybe the reason Moroni wanders for so long is to give us a sense of what a final ending feels like. Moroni wrote the book on loneliness. He reminds us that we, too, live with the inevitability of loss: the loss of family, loss of youthful athleticism and physical health, loss of professional competence and accomplishment, loss of dreams and ideals: "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."

For me, the striking thing is that taking this at face value, unconcerned with its relation to historical events and doctrines and allowing myself to react based on personal experi-

ence, it feels real. Moroni expresses it precisely: “I speak unto you as if ye were present.” In that context, his thumbs-down to popular culture causes me to take personal note: “I know that ye do walk in the pride of your hearts; and there are none, save a few only, which do not lift themselves up in the pride of their hearts”; “For behold, ye do love money, and your substances, and your fine apparel”; “Why do ye adorn yourselves with that which hath no life, and yet suffer the hungry, and the needy, and the naked, and the sick, and the afflicted to pass by you, and notice them not?” Heck of a question, Moroni, heck of a question. The moral of the story comes through loud and painfully clear: “Give thanks unto God that he hath made manifest unto you our imperfections, that ye may learn to be more wise than that which we have been.” Just maybe the cataclysms that erase nations and encroach on our own soil are not inevitable. Just maybe we are given reason here for hope.

This is itself an amazing dimension of the Book of Mormon, given its apocalyptic perspective, stark deathbed scenes, dark focus on the gloomy end of all things: the hope that shines through it. I am sometimes given to gloominess and to the pervasive pessimism of my own time, so I harbor a deep respect for hope. If ever hope were earned, it is this optimism pervading the Book of Mormon narrative, even in the face of the end of all things. Nibley again nails it, saying that the foretold desolation “will only take effect when everything is pretty far gone. . . . That leaves room for optimism.”¹⁴ Seeing what he has seen, that Moroni is able to still promote the idea of being “holy without spot” inclines me to think it may be possible.

That bottom-line hope, stunning amid the otherwise grim finalities, dramatizes the literary reach of the book. We might worry and weep and bemoan our woe, but it is also important to allow the book to force a smile from time to time, to relax a little with this narrative because if read literally, *it* smiles. There is optimism, and there is acknowledgment of the absurdity of many of life's predicaments, irony, and even humor, at least to my ear.

For instance, I smile reading about the Jaredites corraling "swarms of bees" in their boats; again in contemplating Moroni's declaration to write "a few more things" before he gives us some twenty pages of the most densely packed philosophy in all scripture. I also like the irony of God's instructions to Jared's brother on the importance of ventilating the boats: "Behold, thou shalt make a hole in the top thereof, and also in the bottom thereof; and when thou shalt suffer for air, thou shalt unstop the hole thereof, and receive air. And if it be so that the water come in upon thee, behold"—and I'll interrupt here to mention that they would have beheld with particularly rapt attention as the ocean rushed in on them—"ye shall stop the hole thereof, that ye may not perish in the flood." In other words, Mahonri, if the plug lets in the water, consider the possibility that you may have opened the wrong end.

Just as certainly as the drama and the tragedy, the humor here is not for laughter's sake so much as for inviting us personally into the situation, helping us feel more fully how desperate desert-dwelling people would have felt being asked to navigate boats. These were definitely not sailors. In fact, these folks had never so much as seen an ocean before. Now

they are forty fathoms deep in a hostile environment, wondering about their next breath. I commend the irony in the book as much as other literary dimensions because together they show the multifaceted dimensions of human feelings, because they help us relate our own lives to them, “to liken all scriptures unto us.”

In whatever way we read it, this is a good book—when we actually *read* it. From darkness to light, from laughter to tears—any approach beyond our usual obsessions with history and theology. I admire what Robert Nichols has written about the disservice he feels we do to Book of Mormon’s characters by neglecting to read the text closely, by not “contrasting revealing passages within the text proper and comparing them with similar events in life and other literature. . . . Such questions as these form the spine of literary appreciation. Yet perhaps due to didactic desires, they are questions put too infrequently to the Book of Mormon, and as a result, on many an LDS rack the Book of Mormon characters have been grievously blood-let. A sad fate: for lifeblood must surge or the individual will die. A sad state: for the dramatic personae of [the Book of Mormon] are alive and well and living in the desert.”¹⁵

Seen more closely, the Book of Mormon characters do not fill prescribed roles and therefore seem real in a way that transcends history; they are alive in the text every time we open the book. I am convinced that if we would only read scripture the way we do other literature, assuming from the outset that it will be interesting and meaningful, we will thereby relate to it in a manner that matters. We will find that the Book of Mormon is a heck of a book. It may be dull

as history, dry as a lesson manual, but as a narrative that in its human concerns relates immediately to us, it's an amazing document.

I admit that there is good news and bad news about the Book of Mormon from a literary perspective. The bad news is that it is not as good as the Bible—not as vivid, not as succinct, not as psychologically engaging. The good news is that second place is not so bad, and in a crucial way the Book of Mormon taps into spiritual dimensions that, for me, my readings of the Bhagavad Ghita, the Koran, the Tao, and even Isaiah or the Gospel of Luke do not match.

When I was six, showing off my newfound reading abilities to Uncle Clyde, I picked up the Book of Mormon because it was nearest at hand and began to read aloud to impress him. Hardly aware of what I was doing, and reading only for effect, I was surprised at how moved I was by the unprepossessing words: "I, Nephi, having been born of goodly parents, therefore I was taught somewhat. . . ." Not half a dozen verses into that quiet prose, I found myself in tears. Chagrined at failing to impress my Navy-tough uncle, nonplused at my reaction to words on a page, I asked my mother what had come over me. She said then, and I believe her still: "It's the Spirit, Steve. God is in that book."

However much God is in the book, we bother Him very little there. We need reminding as much as Nephi's brothers that the Spirit had "spoken unto you in a still small voice, but ye were past feeling, that ye could not feel his words." Read with open emotions, the book clears our spiritual eustachian tubes; we experience it more deeply and internalize its message if we read it literarily. It seems to me we are much

more likely to tap into its spirituality if we read for the joy of it rather than out of duty, for illumination rather than confirmation, personally rather than corporately, literally rather than theologically, and most importantly awake rather than asleep.

There is room enough in this wide book for every reader to find a personal best approach. For some this will mean reading the Book of Mormon while relaxing in the bathtub or meditating over it in a grove of fall foliage on a favorite mountain. In whatever way and in whatever locale, we should nevertheless read it. Eyes wide open. Awake.

notes

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