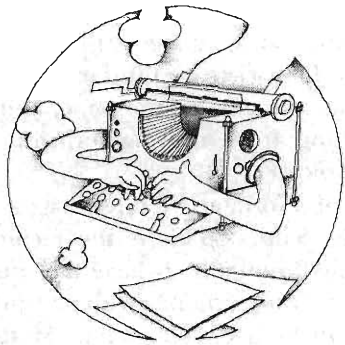

BEOWULF AND NEPHI: A LITERARY VIEW OF THE BOOK OF MORMON

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I

In all the wide world, past and present, there is no greater body of literature than that which we call English. And in all the annals of English literature, spanning thirteen centuries of impressive expression, no single matter has had greater impact on the creative genius than the life of Jesus Christ and the Biblical account of events surrounding that Life.

That matter, in Old English times, inspired the seventh-century *Hymn* by Caedmon, the first known English poet; it carried his school in the eighth century through Old Testament paraphrases to *Christ and Satan,* and triumphed in the ninth century with Cynewulf's *Dream of the Rood.* That matter suffused the Arthurian legendry of early Middle English, prodded the poet of *Piers Plowman* to social protest in the fourteenth century, and impelled the Wakefield Master to dramatic innovation in the fifteenth. That matter motivated such diverse figures as Bunyan and Milton during the English Renaissance, Addison and Blake during the Augustan and Romantic Ages and Melville and Eliot during modern times and on New World shores. Thirteen centuries, thousands of stylists, trillions of words in billions of lines of verse and prose — all influenced by a single written source, the Bible, itself little larger than a good-sized novel.

More than a millennium separates Caedmon and the coming forth of the Book of Mormon; more than a century separates us from the same event. Now one century assuredly is not ten, and the literary weight of a hundred years should not be expected to overbalance a thousand. But given a century of men and women still actuated in mind and heart and spirit by the Christ story and things Christian, and given a century of literary art still fundamentally influenced by the same materials, one might expect the Book of Mormon to have attained in its century-season a modicum of the role as source, analogue, and inspiration in the arts that the Vulgate and English Bible achieved in a millennium-season. After all, viewed as an addendum to Scripture, the latter-day narrative adds, at the very least, a provocative time-and-space dimension to Christian thought. Even viewed as an apocryphal tour de force, the work adds giant chunks of episodic adventure to Christian lore. Though one might expect a modicum, the expectation is unrewarded. Notwithstanding a century of world-engrossing interest in America and things

American, literature and literary scholarship rather ignore the existence of the Book of Mormon.[1]

It is tempting, of course, to redress the Book's limited literary impress by recourse to history, sociology, psychology, and demonology. It is tempting to say that a hundred and forty years in the literary marketplace is too limited a test for such a grand design — but entire literary movements, like the pre-Raphaelites, have come and gone in the same period. It is tempting to say that, with such a small membership, the Saints' religio-literary taste cannot achieve prominence in society — but in the past small groups, like the Lollards, have wrought a hearing in the larger community. It is tempting to say that the Saints' traditional emphases in agriculture, business, law and the like dissuade meaningful activity in the arts — but art and scholarship have ever been solitary ventures. And it is tempting to say that Satan never sleeps — but Richard Rolle documented the same plaint six hundred years ago.[2] It is tempting to say all these things, and all of them have been said — fruitlessly. Far sounder, for writer and commentator, to grapple with the text itself: to evaluate the Book's literary difficulties and learn to live with them, to assess the Book's literary strengths and proclaim them.

II

In any comprehensive literary examination of the Book of Mormon an immediate, pervasive, and lasting dilemma is the fact that the work offers itself as a translation, yet the source is not known to be extant. For the lay reader, this lacuna is incidental, as irrelevant as the inability to read Latin vis-a-vis the comprehension and appreciation of Sir Thomas More's englished *Utopia*. But for the scholar, this difficulty is a serious one: it denies him the very materials with which to evaluate the translated text. Because he cannot analyze the source of the text, the scholar faces the axiomatic question of, simply, the accuracy of the translation.

Worse, though thickest fogs shroud the scholar who tries to view no more than the mechanical accuracy of the Book of Mormon, virtual vapor-darkness itself obscures any investigation of the translation's stylistic probity. Accuracy, naturally, stands as a foremost requirement in any straightforward report of content. But, in a greater measure, stylistics, which approximates the linguistic overtones of the original document, engenders maximum total validity in the reproduction. In the pursuit of style the translator, in every line, weighs such decisions as discourse level, contextual intent, denotation and connotation, economy and prolixity, simplicity and complexity, each decision affecting the ultimate faithfulness of the translation. What is the relative mixture of literal and connotative translation in the Book of Mormon,

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[1]Somehow, the silence of a standard reference like the *Literary History of the United States*, ed. Robert E. Spiller *et al.* (New York, 1959), is preferable to Lyman P. Powell's chapter in vol. 3 of the old *Cambridge History of American Literature* (New York, 1921), wherein the Book of Mormon is said to describe "the hegira of an adventurous folk moving by successive stages from the East to the Salt Lake Valley."

[2]Implied in his fable, *The Bee and the Stork*, in Fernand Mossé, *A Handbook of Middle English* (Baltimore, 1952), pp. 231–32.

if any? When Lehi, convoluting a half-dozen pronouns in fair prolixity, is reported to exclaim, ". . . because thou art merciful, thou wilt not suffer those who come unto thee that they shall perish!" (I Nephi 1:14) how literally is it to be understood that "after this manner was the language of [Lehi]" (I Nephi 1:15)? The scholar cannot judge — unless he has a source.

Lacking Book of Mormon source material, the literary scholar would desire the primary transcript of the translation, or at least a portion of that transcript, for it could provide information on the translator's method from passage to passage, his apparent certainties and uncertainties, his well-pondered decisions and purposeful revisions, if any. Moreover, the transcript could help identify the role of the scribe from passage to passage, his relative importance in the translation, his relative influence in the decision-making process, his role in revisions of form or content, if any. Precisely how much of school teacher Oliver Cowdery was on those foolscap sheets that finally went to Grandin the printer? As Chaucer's *Wordes unto Adam* affirms, scribes can affect a text. Did the scribe of the Book of Mormon have any effect on the ultimate text? The primary transcript might suggest an answer — but no transcript survives.

The absence of an extant source and the lack of a translator's working transcript are, for the scholar, serious deficiencies in any complete examination of the work. And if these deficiencies have not proved so oppressive as to preclude other useful literary approaches to medieval literature, then, clearly, they need not prohibit similar approaches to early nineteeenth-century American literature. For, after all, the Book of Mormon does qualify as literature, on several fronts, not the least of which is the fact that it simply is there. Granted, the original text may have been Reformed Egyptian, but if exotic-language originals disqualify translations, then Pepys' coded *Diary* must surely leave the canon. Granted, the subject matter may be largely history, philosophy, and tract, but if that triumvirate must stand adumbrated by creative writing, then Alfred's *Orosius,* Browne's *Religio Medici,* and Paine's *Common Sense* must all go by the boards. Granted, the presentation may be largely abridgement, or abridgement of abridgement, but if précis is prohibited, then adieu to all the Old English glosses, many Middle English romances, most Renaissance theater records, and not a few Modern English journals.

And so, while, in an important sense, the substance of textual analysis is denied the Book of Mormon scholar, the opportunity for significant and provocative literary appreciation looms undiminished. Through character analysis, for instance — to name but one gateway — the literary analyst can appraise the text and attempt to advance fresh and penetrating views of the work as literature, as I now purpose to demonstrate in a close reading of I and II Nephi.

III

The analysis of character is a central feature of all studies in the humanities. In real life, as students of the humanities already know, human beings are complex. Identification of human traits, consideration of human

attitudes, examination of human communication, investigation of human interaction, comprehension of human motivations — these, and more, are the pursuits of the humanities. And they offer a legacy of understanding which can heighten one's esthetic enjoyment of the arts and can gird men and women to discern, and deal with, the social pragmatics of both this life and, one would presume, the life to come.

A clear route to unfolding the complexities of character in literature is a close reading of the text itself, contrasting revealing passages within the text proper and comparing them with similar events in life and other literature. Precisely what did the man say? When did he say it? Where did he say it? How did he say it? Why did he say it? Have others ever said the same thing? In the same way? In the same circumstances? For the same reasons? 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 L.D.S. rack the Book of Mormon characters have been grievously blood-let. A sad fate: for life-blood must surge or the individual will die. A sad state: for the dramatis personae of I Nephi are alive and well and living in the desert.

Lehi, assuredly, is a prophet with a problem. He may be without honor in his own land, and elsewhere a Cassandra, but he is most certainly a patriarch with a domestic communications gap. Lehi simply does not speak the language of his older children or his wife. Nor does he ever learn.

There is that speaketh like the piercing of a sword: but the tongue of the wise is health. (Proverbs 12:18)

Lehi tends to expound his deeply-felt emotions with the rhetorician's flourish of metaphor, as in his Rod of Iron dream-vision, and with apostrophe, as in his exclamation, "Great and marvelous are thy works, O Lord God Almighty!" Metaphor and apostrophe are two devices he plies so unsuccessfully on his intransigent sons, Laman ("O that thou mightest be like unto this river, continually running into the fountain of all righteousness") and Lemuel ("O that thou mightest be like unto this valley, firm, and steadfast, and immoveable in keeping the commandments of the Lord"). Significantly, these two young men later protest, "Behold, we cannot understand the words which our father hath spoken. . . ." And it is their younger brother, not their father, who is brought to assume the role of interpreter and peace-maker in the disputation.

Children's children are the crown of old men; and the glory of children are their fathers. (Proverbs 17:6).

Lehi not only fails to engage effective language to counsel his older children, but in argumentative persuasion he is often, at critical times, simply unconvincing. He has obviously failed to convince Laman and Lemuel of the validity of his religious experience, for they complain that his actions depriving them of their accustomed society and anticipated inheritance are due to "the foolish imaginations of his heart." Perhaps as a result, Lehi abandons persuasion in dealing with these unyielding sons, instead "exhorting them to all diligence," preaching to them "with all the feeling of a

tender parent, that they would hearken to his words. . . ." Obtuse in persuasion and frustrated in exhortation, Lehi resorts to raw authority to exert his will, speaking to his disaffected offspring "until their frames did shake before him . . . confound[ing] them, that they durst not utter against him; wherefore they did do as he commanded them."

Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it. (Proverbs 22:6)

Lehi, caught in times of crisis in a credibility gap of illogicality, communicates little better with his wife. Sariah, thinking their sons slain because of her husband's dreaming, complains bitterly, sarcastically "telling him that he was a visionary man." Lehi's response altogether begs the question: "I know that I am a visionary man; [for, if not, I] had tarried at Jerusalem and had perished with my brethren." Jerusalem, however, had not yet fallen. So Lehi was, in essence, saying no more than "I know I am a visionary because I know I've had a vision" — a circuitous argument.

Ye have broken the hearts of your tender wives, and lost the confidence of your children, because of your bad examples before them. (Jacob 2:35)

Futhermore, Sariah has complained of leaving their home ("the land of our inheritance") to wander about in a desert ("we perish in the wilderness"). In formulating a reply Lehi equivocates with his wife's concepts "inheritance" and "wilderness," insisting that he and his wife are *not* in a wilderness, for he has "obtained a land of promise." Yet shortly, with curious irony, Lehi assures his wife that their sons will be delivered, brought down again to them "in the wilderness." "After this manner of language," says Nephi, "did my father Lehi comfort my mother Sariah. . . ." Really? Nephi's subsequent remark may be more accurate, in that, when the sons had returned, Sariah "was comforted."

Consider what I say; and the Lord give thee understanding in all things. (II Timothy 2:7)

Lehi is a very human character. He is, of course, as Hugh Nibley has demonstrated, a product of a Heroic Age.[3] But his human traits make him readily identifiable with the domestically beleaguered patriarch in the life and letters of any age. He is today's well-to-do former businessman who turns, in early retirement and semi-retrenchment, to the religious avocation, an enigma to his wife and older children, who knew him during the pressure years as a hard-driving merchant.

By contrast, Nephi, equally a product of the same Heroic Age, is perhaps most clearly approached as a Book of Mormon figure, not through modern parallels, but through comprehension of his conduct as hero in the epic tradition, a tradition which, in Old English remnants, preserves Continental motifs dating into the pre-Christian era.

In that tradition, the hero displays certain typical physical propensities. Beowulf, a prime example, can wear thirty sets of armor; Nephi, even though "exceeding young, nevertheless [is] large in stature," so large as to elicit com-

[3] *An Approach to the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City, 1957).

ment twice in an abridgment. Beowulf is termed mankind's most powerful man, in his day; Nephi has "received much strength" and musters power to burst the bonds which bind his hands and feet, eluding destruction at the teeth of wild beasts. Beowulf possessess greater swimming endurance than any rival; Nephi, too, excels in the manly skills, such as hunting with the steel bow. Beowulf and Nephi both display undoubted personal courage, Beowulf in his combat with Grendel's Dam and Nephi in his daring impersonation of Laban. Both men are well-born, as genealogical references imply. And both are quintessentially men of action, humorlessly dedicated to the pursuit of a righteous cause.

As a further facet of this tradition, the hero, imbued with an unshakeable sense of purpose, delivers a *beot,* or boast, affirming his prowess and confirming his resolution as the fateful enterprise looms near. Beowulf, preparing to meet the fearsome Grendel, proclaims:

> I myself give no humbler tally in martial vigor than Grendel himself. Therefore, I will not kill him with sword, though I easily may. For, though he be renowned for battle, he knows not of such warfare as to strike against me, hewing my shield. But, if he dare seek hand-to-hand combat, tonight we two shall meet. And afterward the all-wise God, the holy Lord, will adjudge the glorious deed as He thinks proper, on whatever hand.

In a similar fashion Nephi, charged by Lehi to seek the Brass Plates of Laban, boldly announces:

> I will go and do the things which the Lord hath commanded, for I know that the Lord giveth no commandments unto the children of men, save he shall prepare a way for them that they may accomplish the thing which he commandeth them.

Subsequently, Nephi, after some indecision, takes command of the band of brothers, strongly reminiscent of the Old English *dright,* or warrior band. Ever the intrepid individual, Nephi causes the band to "hide themselves without the walls," while he reconnoiters the city himself, a solitary emprise like the aged Beowulf's solo attack on the Dragon to shield his companions, though they too have a clear commitment. That commitment, in the Anglo-Saxon tradition, may be one of noble purpose — to support their captain in destroying the monster — but more frequently it is only the promise of gold, mercenary payment made by the *dright's* leader, their ring-giver. Nephi's band, ostensibly, undertakes their raid for a lofty cause — securing "the records which were engraven upon the plates of brass" — but before ever trying for the plates, they "gather together [their] gold, and [their] silver, and [their] precious things." Ancient battle poems show that neither gold nor lofty cause could keep a *dright's* courage at the sticking point: The warriors needed to be harangued into perseverance, reminded of their obligations to the ring-giver and their ultimate rewards. In such a vein Nephi, facing his band's defection, harangues, "As the Lord liveth, and as we live, we will not go down unto our father in the wilderness, until we have accomplished the thing which the Lord hath commanded us." He reminds

them of their debt to the Lord, the waiting treasure, the coming destruction of the city, and the wisdom of their cause. Emboldened by the harangue, though not without certain further backslidings, Nephi's *dright* see their mission through.

Nephi is well cast for the heroic mantle — he's built of the appropriate materials in the correct proportions, he has developed enviable capacities in the proper skills, and he does things when they need to be done. However, he is far more complex than most of his counterparts in the epics. As early as the Plates of Laban Affair, for instance, Nephi reveals himself to be a logician of the first water. A typical young champion like Wiglaf may try to spur Beowulf's *dright* by reminding them of their debts and shouting, "Let us press on." But when the young Nephi makes the same exhortation, "Let us go up again unto Jerusalem," he supplies a triad of illustrations to *prove* that the *dright* should advance and to demonstrate that they will achieve victory *unharmed.* And with rhetorical insight, he thrice calls for action, utilizing the power of incremental repetition, and "they did follow [him] up until [they] came without the walls of Jerusalem." It is this same logician's demeanor (which later safeguards Nephi from his mutinous brothers) with which he "said many things unto [his] brethren, insomuch that they were confounded, and could not contend against [him]; neither durst they lay their hands upon [him], nor touch [him] with their fingers, even for the space of many days."

Such a bent of mind, such a capacity for confounding and converting opposition through logic and reason and appeal to emotion, strongly differentiates Nephi as a personality from Lehi his father: Nephi is a persuader of the foremost magnitude. In the entrapment of Zoram, for example, Nephi displays discrimination of action and reflection, mastery at merging the physical man with the philosophical man, sagacity in selecting the deed or symbol of the deed. Seizing Zoram and holding him, "that he should not flee," Nephi, who reemphasizes his physical advantage, could have dispatched the servant as easily as he had the master. Instead, Nephi "spake with him . . . [saying] that if he would hearken unto our words, we would spare his life," adding the surety of an oath and the mystery of a riddle. Nephi, like Marlowe's Tamburlaine, grasps the fine distinction between the word and the sword.[4] And Zoram surrenders, even as Theridamas to Tamburlaine — "Won with thy words, and conquered with thy looks." It is undoubtedly this same persuasive acumen which softens "the heart of Ishmael, and also his household," bringing Ishmael's daughters into the wilderness as the brothers' wives. For in the young Nephi persuasion is "the fulness of [his] intent." And it remained ever thus, as witnessed in the old Nephi, who, looking back on his life's work a half-century later, concludes that "it persuadeth [men] to do good" (II Nephi 33:4).

Indeed, it is Nephi's search for a more persuasive personality which seems to mark a progression in his character as he ages. As a green youth,

[4]For the view of Tamburlaine I am indebted to my good friend Prof. Thomas Burton of Weber State.

wearing brotherly concern almost like a badge, Nephi *says*, "Being grieved because of the hardness of their hearts, I cried unto the Lord for them." As a maturing young man, he *sorrows* in frustration: "My soul is rent with anguish because of you, and my heart is pained." And as an old man he *grieves* for his people, the badge turned suit of hair: "For I pray continually for them by day, and mine eyes water my pillow by night, because of them; and I cry unto my God in faith . . . ." At the end of his days, he mourns that he is not "mighty in writing, like unto speaking," for the speech, with the Spirit, can carry his message "unto the hearts of the children of men."

Nephi's disclaimer rebuts its own author and closes his work on the note of light irony which often marks a writer's deathbed retractions.[5] His impatience with the weak esteem accorded the written word (II Nephi 33:2) is the sort one would expect from a man, like Nephi, who remains, at heart, closer to the active life than to the contemplative. Yet in his farewell he writes with rhetorical strength, capturing in the written word the moving quality of incremental repetition that had marked the spoken words of his long-ago harangue outside the walls of Jerusalem. In some measure, consciously yet unconsciously, he *has* bridged his imagined chasm between writing and speech:

> *I glory in* plainness;
> *I glory in* truth;
> *I glory in* my Jesus,
> For he hath redeemed my soul from hell.
> *I have charity for* my people
> And great faith in Christ
> That I shall meet many souls
> Spotless at his judgment-seat.
> *I have charity for* the Jew;
> I say Jew, because I mean them from whence I came.
> *I also have charity for* the Gentiles. —
> But behold,
> For none of these can I hope,
> Except they shall be reconciled unto Christ,
> *And enter into* the narrow gate,
> *And walk in* the straight path, which leads to life,
> *And continue in* the path
> Until the end of the day of probation.[6]

The Book of Mormon is, as I have suggested, part of a great literary tradition, yet a part, for all its uniqueness, which has still not achieved primacy, neither in its own right nor in its influence on the arts. It is, without question, a work whose singular origins thwart many of the traditional approaches to literature. Yet it is, as I have tried to demonstrate, a work laden with promise for the literary analyst. Indeed, after navigating through more than a century of generally inconclusive encounters, the Book of Mormon remains a challenging critical prize, undoubtedly the major prize of nineteenth-century Americana, perhaps the chief prize of the literature we call English.

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[5]Chaucer, for instance, in his *Retractions* apologizes for his "ignorance" and says he "most willingly would have written better if [he] had had the skill."

[6]II Nephi 33:6–9. Italics and arrangement mine, both for illustrative purposes.