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Abstract: A man of God to the end, Mormon the general knows that salvation cannot come by the sword but only through repentance and faith in Christ: “Know ye that ye must come unto repentance, or ye cannot be saved. . . . Know ye that ye must lay down your weapons of war, and delight no more in the shedding of blood, and take them not again, save it be that God shall command you. Know ye that ye must come to the knowledge of your fathers, and repent of all your sins and iniquities, and believe in Jesus Christ”. Mormon ends his mortal ministry with his stirring testimony of Jesus and leaves his life’s work, his abridgment of the large plates of Nephi, the Book of Mormon, in the hands of his son, Moroni.



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Mormon and Moroni: Father and Son

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Gary Layne Hatch

The prophet Mormon must be one of the greatest geniuses in the history of the human race. Scholar, soldier, prophet, poet—Mormon distinguished himself in a number of ways and under difficult circumstances. He was a serious scholar and careful observer, and he possessed the ability to report his observations and experiences in a concise, straightforward, objective manner. We learn from Mormon's abridgment of his own record that Ammaron, the keeper of the plates, sought him out when he was just 10 years old, because he had noticed Mormon was "a sober child, and . . . quick to observe" (Mormon 1:2). Ammaron told Mormon to remember the location of the plates so he could find them 14 years later and then record on them what he had observed about the Nephite people during those 14 years, a task difficult enough for an adult, even more so for a 10-year-old boy. Yet Mormon records his ability to perform this difficult cognitive task with the simple phrase: "And I, Mormon . . . remembered the things which Ammaron commanded me" (v 5). Because of the travels of his family, Mormon had abundant opportunity to observe the Nephite people. He reports the over-building and overpopulation of the land, the extreme wickedness of the people, and the vicious wars among the Nephites and Lamanites, all in the same spare, confident style that he uses in his abridgment of the large plates of Nephi. Indeed, he reports what must have been one of the sublime moments of his life in the following terse sentence: "And I, being fifteen years of age and being somewhat of a sober mind, therefore I

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was visited of the Lord, and tasted and knew of the goodness of Jesus” (v 15).

Soberness and seriousness of mind characterize Mormon as one of the unique Book of Mormon figures. These characteristics were innate in part, and in part brought on by the “continual scene of wickedness and abominations” he had witnessed since he had been “sufficient to behold the ways of man” (Mormon 2:18).

Mormon gives no indication that he felt overwhelmed by the literary miracle he was performing in gathering and sorting out the many records of the Nephites and writing on and abridging the large plates. Many Book of Mormon authors remark that they could write only a small part of the events they witnessed. Yet, according to the testimony of Brigham Young, the Book of Mormon plates were themselves a small part of a library of plates—as many as many wagon loads (*Journal of Discourses* 19:38). Mormon had to sift through 1,000 years of history, religion, and culture to provide the abridgment that became the Book of Mormon. It might be roughly equivalent to taking all the holdings of a local library and condensing them into a 500-page book, maintaining a coherent narrative, relating the parts to one another and to the book as a whole, and commenting on the meaning and significance of many episodes and ideas.

The manner in which Mormon abridges the plates is also remarkable. He carefully selects events that will illustrate different aspects of the mercy and love of God and the need for people to come to Christ. Mormon directs the readers’ attention to and comments on events with his confident “thus we see,” and “now behold” phrases, but, at the same time, is able to describe the events he records in a detached voice so that readers often forget that they are reading an abridgment. He incorporates the dialogue and voices of different writers in a seamless, organic, literary whole. If Joseph Smith’s achievement in translating the book was remarkable, then Mormon’s abridging the plates into a unified whole must be equally remarkable, a work certifying him as one of the great literary scholars. And he was a man of God, without whose help even one as talented as he could not have completed the task. The Book of Mormon truly is Mormon’s book.

Somehow Mormon was able to combine a literary life with a life of action. Like his ancestor Nephi, Mormon was large for his age and a skilled soldier. At the age of fifteen, perhaps not long after being

visited by the Lord, Mormon takes command of the Nephite army and leads them into battle. A man of courage, Mormon criticizes those who flee before the Lamanites and refuse to fight (Mormon 2:3), finally winning a decisive battle against Aaron, the king of the Lamanites. Mormon must have been an inspiring leader. Even though he recognizes that the Lord is not with them and despite the crushing defeats they have sustained in the second onslaught of the Lamanites, Mormon speaks to his people “with great energy, that they would stand boldly before the Lamanites and fight for their wives, and their children, and their houses, and their homes.” In this manner, he inspires his men “somewhat to vigor, insomuch that they did not flee from before the Lamanites, but did stand with boldness against them” (Mormon 2:23–24).

Frustrated with the cowardice and wickedness of his people, and with his world tumbling down around him, Mormon looked for inspiration to another young general, who lived over 400 years earlier and was able to inspire his people to victory through righteousness. Captain Moroni, chief captain of the Nephite armies, is a man Mormon greatly admired. He devotes a large part of his abridgment to the wars fought by Captain Moroni and may even have named his son after this courageous captain. The description of Captain Moroni in the book of Alma gives some insight into Mormon’s personality. He admires Moroni for his skill as a general but even more for his faith in God:

And Moroni was a strong and a mighty man; he was a man of a perfect understanding; yea, a man that did not delight in bloodshed; a man whose soul did joy in the liberty and the freedom of his country, and his brethren from bondage and slavery;

Yea, a man whose heart did swell with thanksgiving to his God for the many privileges and blessings which he bestowed upon his people; a man who did labor exceedingly for the welfare and safety of his people.

Yea, and he was a man who was firm in the faith of Christ, and he had sworn with an oath to defend his people, his rights, and his country, and his religion, even to the loss of his blood. . . .

Yea, verily, verily I say unto you, if all men had been, and were, and ever would be, like unto Moroni, behold, the very powers of hell would have been shaken forever; yea, the devil would never have power over the hearts of the children of men. (Alma 48:11–13, 17)

One could easily substitute Mormon’s name for Captain Moroni’s in the above passage, for Mormon was above all else a man

of God, one who also threatened to shake the very foundations of hell. He recognizes that the troubles faced by the Nephites result from their great wickedness, from their secret combinations to commit murder, and from their thievery and adultery. His heart rejoices when he witnesses the sorrow and lamentations of the Nephites because of his confidence in the mercy and patience of the Lord; however, his rejoicing turns to sorrow when he realizes that their sorrow is not Godly sorrow or sorrow for their sins, but “the sorrowing of the damned, because the Lord would not always suffer them to take happiness in sin” (Mormon 2:13). Like Nephi, Mormon feels great sorrow for the wickedness of his people and expresses it in his characteristically concise manner: “And wo is me because of their wickedness; for my heart has been filled with sorrow because of their wickedness, all my days; nevertheless, I know that I shall be lifted up at the last day” (v 19).

When Mormon is not abridging the plates or leading armies into battle, he is preaching the word of the Lord. After reaching an uneasy peace with the Lamanites and in the midst of preparations for the inevitable third onslaught, Mormon hears the voice of the Lord which commands him to preach repentance and build up the Church. Mormon shows himself a greater prophet than a general, heeding the Lord’s words and preaching to the people that if they will repent they will be spared (Mormon 3:2). When the Lamanites return a third and fourth time, Mormon is ready for them and wins two stunning victories. But when the people turn to even greater wickedness, entering into devilish oaths and covenants, swearing “by all that had been forbidden them by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,” the Lord reveals to Mormon that the Nephites are ripe for destruction (vv 10–15).¹ Mormon steps down as the Nephite commander, leaving the people to their own wickedness and destruction. Once again, Mormon becomes the sober, observant scholar, “an idle witness to manifest unto the world the things which [he] saw and heard, according to the manifestations of the Spirit which had testified of things to come” (v 16). But his great love for his people is demonstrated by the fact

¹ This passage clarifies the meaning of the Lord’s prohibition against “swearing” in his sermon to the Nephites and in the Sermon on the Mount (3 Nephi 12:33–37; Matt 5:33–37). In these discourses the Lord is warning against entering into the oaths typical of secret combinations. For additional instances of these oaths, see Hel 1:11 and Ether 8:14.

that, despite their wickedness, he agrees to lead them into battle a final time, a hopeless cause, a battle which brings the destruction of the Nephite people.

A man of God to the end, Mormon the general knows that salvation cannot come by the sword but only through repentance and faith in Christ: "Know ye that ye must come unto repentance, or ye cannot be saved. . . . Know ye that ye must lay down your weapons of war, and delight no more in the shedding of blood, and take them not again, save it be that God shall command you. Know ye that ye must come to the knowledge of your fathers, and repent of all your sins and iniquities, and believe in Jesus Christ" (Mormon 7:3–5). Mormon ends his mortal ministry with his stirring testimony of Jesus and leaves his life's work, his abridgment of the large plates of Nephi, the Book of Mormon, in the hands of his son, Moroni.

Like his father, Moroni distinguished himself in battle. He was selected to lead a group of 10,000 men into battle. Along with his father, he was one of the 24 to survive the terrible destruction of more than 230,000 warriors at Cumorah. As 23 of those 24 are hunted down and killed by the Lamanites, Moroni finds himself alone, surrounded by death, destruction, and wickedness, and faced with the difficult task of completing his father's work.

Moroni feels the weight of this task keenly. In addition to describing the events following Cumorah and adding his own testimony to his father's, Moroni abridged and translated the record of the Jaredites (Mosiah 28:19) as a fitting parallel to the destruction of the Nephites. Moroni expected his personal contribution to the record to be small.² He writes: "Behold I, Moroni, do finish the record of my father, Mormon. Behold, I have but few things to write, which things I have been commanded, by my father" (Mormon 8:1).

Instead of the concise, objective style of the sober and observant Mormon, Moroni gives us glimpses into his own fears, sorrows, and misgivings. As he begins to relate the events following the great battle at Cumorah, he describes his sorrow and loneliness and resignation:

² What we have of Moroni's writings in the current Book of Mormon is small compared to Mormon's; however, the late Professor H. Donl Peterson argues in his article herein that Moroni also wrote all that is in the sealed portion of the gold plates, making his production larger than Mormon's.

And now it came to pass that after the great and tremendous battle at Cumorah, behold, the Nephites who had escaped into the country southward were hunted by the Lamanites, until they were all destroyed.

And my father also was killed by them, and I even remain alone to write the sad tale of the destruction of my people. But behold, they are gone, and I fulfil the commandment of my father. And whether they will slay me, I know not.

Therefore I will write and hide up the records in the earth; and whither I go it mattereth not.

Behold, my father hath made this record, and he hath written the intent thereof. And behold, I would write it also if I had room upon the plates, but I have not; and ore I have none, for I am alone. My father hath been slain in battle, and all my kinsfolk, and I have not friends nor whither to go; and how long the Lord will suffer that I may live I know not. (Mormon 8:2–5)

In his writing, Moroni also lacks the confident, concise, and detached style of Mormon. In addressing the future readers of this record, Moroni expresses his concern that others will condemn the record because of its imperfections and faults (Mormon 8:12, 17), a theme that he also states at the end of his father's record. After giving his testimony of Christ, he writes:

Condemn me not because of mine imperfection, neither my father, because of his imperfection, neither them who have written before him; but rather give thanks unto God that he hath made manifest unto you our imperfections, that ye may learn to be more wise than we have been.

And now, behold, we have written this record according to our knowledge, in the characters which are called among us the reformed Egyptian, being handed down and altered by us, according to our manner of speech.

And if our plates had been sufficiently large we should have written in Hebrew; but the Hebrew hath been altered by us also; and if we could have written in Hebrew, behold, ye would have had no imperfection in our record. (Mormon 9:31–33)

Moroni seems to have two kinds of imperfections in mind: first, the human frailty of himself and his people; second, his own shortcomings as a writer, difficulties that bother him while he is completing his translation and abridgment of the record of the Jaredites. We learn that Moroni is not merely talking about the general difficulty of writing on plates in reformed Egyptian but also of his particular struggles as a writer. In describing the faith of the prophet Ether, Moroni digresses from his abridgment to discuss the power of faith. Although he directs his ideas about faith to the reader, Moroni must have received them in a conversation with the Lord because, in

verse 23, he breaks back into this conversation in order to record his personal struggles with the Lord about his weakness in writing:

And I said unto him: Lord, the Gentiles will mock at these things, because of our weakness in writing; for Lord thou hast made us mighty in word by faith, but thou hast not made us mighty in writing; for thou hast made all this people that they could speak much, because of the Holy Ghost which thou hast given them;

And thou hast made us that we could write but little, because of the awkwardness of our hands. Behold, thou hast not made us mighty in writing like unto the brother of Jared, for thou madest him that the things which he wrote were mighty even as thou art, unto the overpowering of man to read them.

Thou hast also made our words powerful and great, even that we cannot write them; wherefore, when we write we behold our weakness, and stumble because of the placing of our words; and I fear lest the Gentiles shall mock at our words. (Ether 12:23–25)

The weakness that troubles Moroni is his inability to express in writing what he feels inside, what he can express in speech through the power of the Spirit. He is obviously moved by the literary power and skill of the brother of Jared. His own writing pales by comparison, and he feels below the task of translating and abridging the work of this great writer and prophet. We can understand Moroni's feelings of inadequacy. A comparable task for us might be to paraphrase and abridge all 38 of Shakespeare's plays, preserving some of the continuity and brilliance of the originals. We, too, would worry that others would mock at our words.

Yet the Lord promises Moroni that his weakness in writing will become his great strength:

Fools mock, but they shall mourn; and my grace is sufficient for the meek, that they shall take no advantage of your weakness;

And if men come unto me I will show unto them their weakness. I give unto men weakness that they may be humble; and my grace is sufficient for all men that humble themselves before me; for if they humble themselves before me, and have faith in me, then will I make weak things become strong unto them. (Ether 12:26–27)

After finishing the abridgment of the record of the Jaredites and completing the writings of his father, Moroni expected that he would be finished with the book and could hide it in the earth:

Now I, Moroni, after having made an end of abridging the account of the people of Jared, I had supposed not to have written more, but I have not as yet perished. . . .

Wherefore, I write a few more things, contrary to that which I had supposed; for I had supposed not to have written any more; but I write a few more things, that perhaps they may be of worth unto my brethren. (Moroni 1:1, 4)

Moroni adds brief descriptions of procedural matters in the Church and selections from the writings of his father. H. Donl Petersen maintains that some church organization still existed in Moroni's early life and that he probably presided over a congregation. Mormon and Moroni discuss problems of church governance in their epistles, and Moroni probably would have had first-hand experience with these procedures (10). In chapter 2, Moroni also fulfills a promise made by Mormon that he would give evidence that the Lord gave the Nephite Twelve Disciples the power to give the Holy Ghost (3 Nephi 18:37). In chapter 10, Moroni adds a few of his own words, and I believe that it is in this chapter that the Lord fulfills his promise to Moroni that He will make his weaknesses into strengths. The entire chapter is moving; Moroni records his powerful testimony with confidence and grace. But a few particular passages demonstrate that the Lord has made Moroni as strong a writer as he was a speaker.

It is always difficult to discuss the literary qualities of a work in translation. It is difficult to know what to attribute to the writer and what to the translator or what may have been added or lost in the process of translation. Despite these difficulties, my sense as a critic tells me that here are some examples of powerful writing. Consider the following passage on faith, hope, and charity:

Wherefore, there must be faith;
and if there must be faith there must also be hope;
and if there must be hope there must also be charity.
And except ye have charity ye can in nowise be saved
in the kingdom of God;
neither can ye be saved in the kingdom of God if ye have not faith;
neither can ye if ye have no hope.
And if ye have no hope ye must needs be in despair;
and despair cometh because of iniquity. (Moroni 10:20–22)

I have adjusted the line endings to emphasize the balance and parallelism in these lines. Note how Moroni begins coordinate sentences

in the same manner to emphasize the relationships among these sentences. He also ends each balanced sentence or phrase with words he desires to emphasize: faith, hope, charity, God, not faith, no hope, despair, iniquity. These words form a mirror reflection around the word *God*, the foundations of the gospel—faith, hope, and charity—opposed by Satan’s inversion of this trinity—lack of faith, despair, and iniquity.

In other passages, Moroni uses short, emphatic phrases to punctuate his writing. In the following passage, Moroni refers to the possibility of the power of God disappearing from the earth because of wickedness: “And wo be unto the children of men if this be the case; for there shall be none that doeth good among you, no not one” (Moroni 10:25-28). The final phrase of this sentence, “no not one,” is a redundancy; the idea that no one would be righteous if the power of God is taken away is expressed in the previous phrase. This final phrase is added for emphasis. Moroni uses a similar emphatic phrase in the next verse: “And wo unto them who shall do these things away and die, for they die in their sins, and they cannot be saved in the kingdom of God; and I speak it according to the words of Christ; and I lie not (v 26).

In the next passage, Moroni mingles his voice with the voices of Isaiah and Nephi and uses direct reported speech to give immediacy to the scene he creates of the Lord interrogating the reader about Moroni’s testimony:

And I exhort you to remember these things; for the time speedily cometh that ye shall know that I lie not, for ye shall see me at the bar of God; and the Lord God will say unto you: Did I not declare my words unto you, which were written by this man, like as one crying from the dead, yea, even as one speaking out of the dust?

I declare these things unto the fulfilling of the prophecies. And behold, they shall proceed forth out of the mouth of the everlasting God; and his word shall hiss forth from generation to generation. (Moroni 10:27–28)

Instead of merely stating that the Lord will hold us accountable for how we receive Moroni’s testimony, he gives the scene presence by placing the question directly in the Lord’s mouth, using the very words He might use. Moroni gives authority and elegance to these words by adopting some of the same phrases used by Isaiah and Nephi: “speaking out of the dust” and “his word shall hiss forth” (see Isa 5:26; 29:1–4; 2 Nephi 29:2–3; 33:13).

But I find the final passages particularly elegant and equal to any writing found in the scriptures:

And again 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.

And awake, and arise from the dust, O Jerusalem; yea, and put on thy beautiful garments, O daughter of Zion; and strengthen thy stakes and enlarge thy borders forever, that thou mayest no more be confounded, that the covenants of the Eternal Father which he hath made unto thee, O house of Israel, may be fulfilled.

Yea, come unto Christ, and be perfected in him, and deny yourselves of all ungodliness; and if ye shall deny yourselves of all ungodliness, and love God with all your might, mind and strength, then is his grace sufficient for you, that by his grace ye may be perfect in Christ; and if by the grace of God ye are perfect in Christ, ye can in nowise deny the power of God.

And again, if ye by the grace of God are perfect in Christ, and deny not his power, then are ye sanctified in Christ by the grace of God, through the shedding of the blood of Christ, which is in the covenant of the Father unto the remission of your sins, that ye become holy, without spot.

And now I bid unto all, farewell. 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. Amen. (Moroni 10:30–34)

The first two passages echo Isaiah 52:1–2. They are a hymn of rejoicing as well as an exhortation to Israel to return unto their God. These passages provide a poetic introduction to Moroni's more straightforward exhortation for Israel to "come unto Christ, and be perfected in him" (Moroni 10:32–33). Verses 32 and 33 are a complex interlacing of the words *Christ*, *grace*, and *perfection*. Note the number of times that these words are repeated in some form. These verses are punctuated with the climactic and emphatic phrase, "without spot."

In the final verse of the Book of Mormon, Moroni creates the image of himself flying through the air triumphantly to meet face to face with the reader at the judgment bar of God, an image prophesied by John and since recreated in gold-leaf statuary on the tops of many of our temples:

And I saw another angel fly in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach unto them that dwell on the earth, and to every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people,

Saying with a loud voice, Fear God, and give glory to him; for the hour of his judgment is come: and worship him that made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and the fountains of waters. (Rev 14:6–7)

Moroni truly sealed his father's testimony, adding a fitting capstone to his father's book, finally giving the same force to his own writing which he no doubt conveyed in his preaching.

Unlike Captain Moroni, neither Mormon nor Moroni could bring salvation to the Nephites, who were beyond any desire for repentance. But these last two Nephite prophets had a greater mission to fulfil than bringing the word to their contemporaries. The fragmented, violent, and evil world they found themselves in prevented them from leading normal, peaceful lives, but it also prepared them for the service of God. Mormon prepared this second witness of Jesus Christ, and Moroni delivered it to the Prophet Joseph Smith, bringing salvation to millions, truly shaking the very powers of hell forever, preparing the way for a time when "the devil would never have power over the hearts of the children of men."

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