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Side Lights on the Book of Mormon, III: Form and Structure

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Abstract: On the basis of its involved structure, the author argues that the Book of Mormon is a translation of an ancient document and not a modern composition.

Side Lights on the Book of Mormon

By John Henry Evans

III

FORM AND STRUCTURE

IF the *Book of Mormon* is a modern composition—that is, if it was written by Solomon Spaulding or Sidney Rigdon or the unaided Joseph Smith—then its literary form and structure and details generally would bear the stamp of modernity.

But if, on the contrary, the Nephite Record is an ancient composition—that is, if Joseph Smith's account of its origin is true, that he translated it by divine power from gold plates given him by an angel—in this event the work would bear evidences of antiquity in form and structure and some of its details.

It is the purpose of the present article to examine, very briefly and inadequately, to be sure, some of the outstanding literary features of the book, with a view to ascertaining which of these corresponds with the facts in the case.

To begin with, let us see just how the case stands as to the real authorship of the *Book of Mormon*.

As everyone knows, the first theory, the theory of Joseph Smith's neighbors about the time the work appeared, was that Joseph Smith himself wrote it. Of course, they discounted the idea that he was divinely inspired to do so. What puzzled them, though, and piqued them as well, was that one of their own number, and one, too, whom they did not at all look up to, should have written a book. Nevertheless, there was nothing else to do than to believe that he had actually written it, because everything in the situation pointed that way. A year later Alexander Campbell, a Chris-

tian minister, accepted this idea as a fact.

And then came the Howe-Hulburt theory that Joseph Smith did not after all write the *Book of Mormon*, but that somebody else with more literary ability wrote it. And they looked about for that somebody. The result was the Spaulding-Rigdon theory.

According to this explanation Solomon Spaulding, who was a minister, wrote a manuscript about the first settlement of America by Romans. This manuscript he gave to a printer in Pittsburg to look over. By some means not yet clear Sidney Rigdon, also a minister, got hold of the manuscript, rewrote it, and then somehow turned it over to the Palmyra youth, who published it under the title *The Book of Mormon*.

Nowadays, however, no one with a knowledge of the facts in the case accepts this theory of the origin of the work. It is believed only by those who are satisfied with a catch phrase, which for some reason they do not care to examine. The theory fairly bristles with difficulties—the connection between the printer and Rigdon, for instance, the connection between Rigdon and the Prophet, and the lack of similarities between the Spaulding manuscript, which was discovered about fifty years afterwards, and the *Book of Mormon*.

And so today there is almost no one to dispute the idea that Joseph Smith, somehow, is the one responsible for the Nephite Record. The only question is, Did he compose it with or without divine aid? In other words, is it an original com-

position by him or is it a translation of an ancient book? John Fiske, an American historian, accepts the theory that Joseph Smith is the author of the work and thinks no special talent was necessary to write it.

IN literary structure the *Book of Mormon* is complex rather than simple.

If the work were simple in form, it would carry but one thread of action throughout. That is to say, it would begin with the little colony that left Jerusalem six hundred years before Christ and follow their fortunes as they developed into a nation and then lost their national identity in the darkness that came on about four hundred years after Christ. In this event the narrative would be simple in its literary structure.

But the book does not do that. On the contrary, the narrative is full of digressions, interrupted by comments, explanations, and expositions of doctrine.

The story begins with the departure of Lehi's family and a few others from Palestine. Thence it carries the action forward across the sea to the Land of Promise, till they divide into the Nephites and the Lamanites. This, with some further action, covers the first one hundred and thirty-two pages of the current edition of the Record—from about 600 B. C. to about 200 B. C. This would be a period of about four hundred years. As a matter of fact, however, the greater portion of this is not narrative at all, but discussion and quotation.

If the entire period of Nephite history were written on this scale (less than four hundred years in one hundred thirty-two pages) and if we omit the quotations, then we

should have a book of only about two hundred seventy-five pages.

The rest of the book is even more complex. But here the complications are in the narrative mainly, although in this part, too, there are long quotations and expositions of doctrine. During the whole period, of course, the two threads involving the two peoples are maintained. And then, after the lapse of about four hundred years, we learn for the first time that there have been people living on the continent almost from the time the Lehites arrived here, namely, the Mulekites, who also were Jews from Palestine. There are detours here, too, from the main narrative in the form of accounts of a missionary expedition and a new colony planted in the old home of the Nephites. Meanwhile, foreign wars and internal rebellion distract attention from the principal line of action. To cap the climax, we have at the end of the volume, by way of an after-thought, it would appear, a thirty-two-page abridgment of the record of a still different people, who occupied the continent before the coming of the Nephite-Mulekite nation; also some isolated documents giving the religious forms used among the Nephites in the days after Christ.

Not including the quotations, which are rather numerous here, too, the account of the events occurring in this period is given seven-tenths of a page per year. If the entire period of Nephite history were written on this scale, we should have a volume of almost exactly two hundred pages more than we have in our current edition of the *Book of Mormon*, or seven hundred twenty-five pages.

This involved structure is certainly not modern. It is far from what anyone would write even in the

first years of the nineteenth century. On the contrary, it is the kind of thing we might expect of a translation made after the fashion that Joseph Smith says the *Book of Mormon* was done. In a word, the structure is that of a translation of an ancient document, not of an original composition.

If the *Book of Mormon* were of modern origin, it is probable that its form and structure would be more modern in appearance than it is. That is, greater use would doubtless be made of the forms in which books were cast, even in the early nineteenth century—chapters, section headings, and the rest.

There is a story to the effect that the typesetter at the printer's in Palmyra offered to make such alterations in the form as would bring it into greater conformity with modern usage. But the Prophet, although grateful for the suggestion, would not allow any changes. If he had composed the work, it is likely that he would have welcomed any suggestion that might make the book more modern in appearance. But as it was, he acted on the assumption that the book was not his, that he was only its translator, that he had been inspired in his work of doing it into English, and that, therefore, it should appear as much like the original in form as possible.

SO much for the larger literary aspect of the Nephite Record. There is, however, another aspect in the same line of thought which deserves attention, although not so obvious to the casual reader until it is pointed out. It is the spirit of unity in the work, the manner in which the details are selected so as to create a single effect.

In all literary composition particulars crowd upon the mind in the

most confusing variety. Unless there is a selective principle in the mind, all these particulars look alike in importance. Especially is this the case with the untrained writer of books. As soon, however, as some general principle of selection makes its appearance, the details all fall into their place, on the basis of their importance and relevancy.

When the material to be shaped into an article or a book is concrete—that is, when it involves persons, things, and happenings, as in fiction and history—the task is difficult enough. But when, as in the *Book of Mormon*, ideas are the main thing and these ideas are brought out by means largely of persons and events, the difficulties are greatly increased. When, therefore, Professor Fiske tells us that the only ability needed in the composition of the Nephite Record is an acquaintance with the language of the *Bible*, he is surely not thinking of the intellectual strength and fiber necessary to whip a vast number of details into shape so as to create in the reader a single impression of theme and spirit.

The purpose of the *Book of Mormon* is not to give a picture of the political or the social or the artistic life of its peoples. If that were the case, we should have a very different set of details from those now in the book. The purpose of the *Book of Mormon*, on the contrary, is to give a picture of the moral and spiritual life of those peoples in relation to the will of God.

This is perfectly clear from what Nephi, the first writer in the book and the real founder of the Nephite nation, says on the subject in the very beginning.

“It mattereth not to me,” he says (First Nephi, chapter 6, verses 3 to 6, inclusive) “that I am particular to give a full account of all the

things of my father, for they cannot be written upon these plates, for I desire the room that I may write of the things of God. The fulness of mine intent is that I may persuade men to come unto the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob, and be saved.

Wherefore, the things which are pleasing unto the world I do not write, but the things which are pleasing unto God and unto those who are not of the world. And I give commandment unto my seed that they shall not occupy these plates with things which are not of worth unto the children of men."

These words were said, of course, to those historians who were to set an account on the "smaller plates." But they were heeded also by Mormon, who made an abridgment of the "larger plates" of Nephi in what we now call the *Book of Mormon*. So that this record may be said to be a working out of this fundamental idea. In other words, the principle of selection adopted by the writers of the first one hundred thirty-two pages of the book and by Mormon and Moroni, was this thought expressed by Nephi on the very threshold of his literary undertaking.

THERE is a singular thing about the *Book of Mormon*: A very great deal of the material centers in its personalities. Almost it might be said that the work is a series of character sketches on the religious side. No book better carries out Carlyle's theory—that history is the biography of its great men. Eliminate Nephi, Lehi, Benjamin, the two Mosiahs, the two Almas, Ammon, the two Moronis, the Nephis of a later period, Samuel the Lamanite, Mormon—and where are we in the *Book of Mormon*? Even the

"bad" men in the work—Korihor, Nehor, Amalickiah, and the rest—are but foils to accentuate the good qualities of the book's chief characters. What its main personalities think, what they say, what they do, their relation to God and their fellows, their influence on others, how events affect them—this is what the writers of the *Book of Mormon* are concerned with chiefly.

This biographical feature of the Nephite Record has been noted by a critic of Joseph Smith and used to the Prophet's disadvantage in connection with the *Book of Mormon*.

Nephi and Joseph Smith, the critic says, are one and the same person. And he bases this assertion on some similarities between the two. Joseph and Nephi are both very young; they are "large of stature;" their fathers are both visionary; and they are themselves given to "seeing things."

And this is true as far as it goes. But there the resemblance ends, and the differences begin. It is true, too, that both Nephi and Joseph use the pronoun "I" a great deal in their writings. But there is no likeness whatever between the things that happen to Nephi and the things that happen to Joseph Smith.

And this is remarkable. For, in spite of everything, authors unconsciously insinuate themselves, their thoughts, and their doings into their original compositions. Sometimes these are hard to discover, so effectively have they been disguised—harder in the case of skilled writers than in inexperienced. But they are there just the same. There is none of this, however, in the *Book of Mormon*.

Aside from the resemblances pointed out between Joseph Smith and Nephi and a few others—the

reference to secret societies, for example, and to infant baptism—it is astonishing that so few similarities between the two periods and persons can be found in the *Book of Mor-*

mon. And these, as a matter of fact, are easily accounted for, without resorting to the theory that Joseph Smith wrote the Nephite Record out of his own head.

Happenings

By Annie Wells Cannon

ADVERSITY may be a blessing in disguise, for have not the sorrows of the recent depression made "the whole world kin?"

SIGNORA ANTOINETTA GRANDI was the most beautiful and popular of the women who accompanied foreign delegates to Washington this past winter. Though a quiet Italian mother, she understood all the arts of feminine bewitchery. For a ten-day stay in America she brought eight trunks filled with lovely apparel. Though her jewels and shimmering gowns offset her loveliness, they were less brilliant than her wit.

MR.S. WILLIAM C. HAMMER, general manager of the Philadelphia Grand Opera Company, is at present the only woman to hold such a position. In operatic history, there have been only three women general operatic directors—the others are Mary Garden of the Chicago Grand Opera Company, and Signorina Anita Colombo of La Scala Opera, Milan, Italy.

A GOLDEN voice indeed has Rosa Ponselle of the Metropolitan Opera, New York. Besides her salary she receives \$3,000 an appearance in concert, and \$5,000 apiece for her broadcasts.

MISS LYLE SPARKS, president of the Decorators Club of New York, was appointed chairman of President Hoover's committee on

Home Furnishings and Decorations. Miss Sparks is considered one of the best authorities on interior decoration in the United States.

ANNIE JUMP CANNON, noted astronomer, in a recent editorial makes a plea to women to let the new discoveries affect the superstitions and ignorant belief in horoscopes and astrology handed down from the Middle Ages. Miss Cannon is one of the most distinguished scientists in the world. No less than four honorary degrees have been given her for her contribution to astronomy. She was made Doctor of Science of Oxford University and is the only woman to receive an honorary degree from that institution. She is a member of the Harvard University faculty and curator of the astronomical photographs at Harvard Observatory.

MISS DOROTHEA BRAND, associate editor of the *Bookman*, is much sought after in New York literary circles to lead discussions on short stories and kindred subjects. Besides being an editor and writer of books, Miss Brand spent many years coaching novelists and writers how to make their work salable.

THE Governor of Rome has proclaimed a begetting contest for the encouragement of motherhood. The major prize is an apartment dwelling, rent free for thirty years, after which time the couple become