More Than Meets the Eye: Concentration of the Book of Mormon

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Steven C. Walker

Mark Twain, pondering the question of concentration of the Book of Mormon, opined, "If [Joseph Smith] had left that ['and it came to pass'] out, his Bible would have been only a pamphlet."[1] Twain is not the only critic to have declared the Book of Mormon wordy. Even among those of us who are convinced of the divinity of its source and the primacy of its message, there is a tendency to find "the most perfect book ever written" prolix.

Recently it occurred to me that my Book of Mormon always lies by the Bible at my bedside or stands side by side with the Bible on my bookshelf. Could it be that part of the Book of Mormon's prolixity problem is proximity with the King James Version of the Bible? Could it be that the traditional appraisal of Book of Mormon style as wordy results from comparison against a standard which would make the most concentrated modern book look bloated? If we are judging Book of Mormon style by the King James Version of the Bible, we might do well to recognize what we are suggesting by choosing as standard the most concentrated volume in the English language. We might do well, if we are dismissing it as lightly as many have been, to consider more carefully the concentration of the Book of Mormon.

Comparison of Bible originals with Book of Mormon Isaiah passages and the 3 Nephi Sermon on the Mount points up exactly what the circumstances of translation would lead us to expect—overwhelming similarities: the Book of Mormon makes fittingly few alterations in Bible language. However much consolation such close parallels may give to those cynical of the book's origins, it must be conceded that at least the Book of Mormon knows a good thing when it sees it. Consistency with the peerless King James Version, whatever its implications for originality, is high stylistic tribute.

And the variations from the Bible are not only tastefully few, but less damning to the Book of Mormon than they at first appear. Take, for example, the Book of Mormon Beatitudes—3 Nephi 12:3–11, which parallels Matthew 5:3–11. Though the *ands* and *alls* and *yea* and *again* of the Nephi version are clearly superfluous, at least a third of the eighteen percent additional words used by Nephi enrich the passage; they are no more redundant than the "and thirst" in "hunger and thirst after righteousness."

"Blessed are the poor in spirit *who come unto me,* for theirs is the kingdom of heaven,"[2] while using more words than the original, makes it clear that the Sermon was directed to those who had come unto the Savior in the waters of baptism. And verse 6—"Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled:—is made specific with the addition of "with the Holy Ghost." Verse 10's alteration of "righteousness' sake" to "my name's sake" serves a similar focusing function, distinguishing between suffering for any good cause and enduring persecution specifically for devotion to Christ.

Another point of direct comparison with the King James Version, the Isaiah passages, 1 Nephi 20, which corresponds to Isaiah 48, is typical. The first verse perhaps unfortunately expands "Hear ye" to the alliterative "Hearken and hear," but the other extension in that verse clarifies "out of the waters of Judah" with the added "or out of the waters of baptism" to make profound sense of Isaiah's nebulousness. Similarly, the second verse is thirty includes rhetorical excrescences—"yea"; "nevertheless"—the increased wordage, inserting the missing negative, clarifies the cryptic Isaiah version.

Occasionally the Book of Mormon even goes the Bible brevity one better, as in the removal of excess words from verses 19, 20, and 21, or the excision of the superfluous "and they came to pass" phrase from verse 3, or the cutting of "that" from verse 8 of Isaiah 48—a particularly astute deletion since it illuminates the 1 Nephi 20 passage while concentrating its rhetoric.

Much Book of Mormon expansion of Bible passages, then, adds up not to wasted words but to multiplied meaning. The addition to verse 22—"And notwithstanding he hath done all this, and greater also"—long as it is, serves the solid rhetorical function of enhancing the impact of that climactic "there is no peace, saith the Lord, unto the wicked." Sometimes Book of Mormon rhetoric even manages that kind of heightened vividness without expansion, as when Nephi replaces "them that are in darkness" with "them that sit in darkness" (1 Nephi 21:9).

And occasionally the Book of Mormon beats the Bible at its own good game of succinctness. Perhaps the best example in Isaiah 48 / 1 Nephi 20 is verse 10. Isaiah puts it:

> "Behold, I have refined thee, but not with silver; I have chosen thee in the furnace of affliction."

Nephi pares that down to

> "For, behold, I have refined thee, I have chosen thee in the furnace of affliction."

The Book of Mormon at its rare best can not only clarify but can condense the eminently concentrated King James Version.

The Book of Mormon holds up surprisingly well under direct comparison with parallel Bible passages, but a more compelling claim to concentration may be the concision of its dominant forms. Book of Mormon literary genres are invariably compact. Its central genre, history, a literary type that tends toward dircursiveness, manages in the Book of Mormon a fierceness of focus that would intimidate Will Durant. Book of Mormon history is as selective as Bible history, so exclusively intent upon God's dealings with man that vast vistas of time and complicated epochs of action sweep by in dizzyingly few words, with precious little attention to such extraneous matters as geography. Despite the "and it came to pass" handicap, the Book of Mormon manages to cram over thee thousand years' worth of complex migrations and wars and political upheavals and cultural evolutions and intimately detailed religious chronicles of several peoples into its 552 pages.

The density of that selective history is further concentrated by the even tighter literary forms sprinkled through it richly as raisins in good rice pudding. Nephite prophets from Jacob to Moroni are fond of proverbial statements of the Hebrew *hokmah* type which distill centuries of folk wisdom and fathoms of theological profundity. Cast in blunt distich form, these aphorisms are notable for how much they manage to condense into such short space: "Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy" (2 Nephi 2:25); "Fools mock, but they shall mourn" (Ether 12:26); "Wickedness never was happiness" (Alma 41:10).

Even more striking than the proverb as evidence of the conciseness of Book of Mormon forms is the remarkable rhetorical mileage distilled from the question. Book of Mormon writers, like the best Bible writers, take frequent advantage of the suggestive power of questions; their best questions radiate significance from a simple center with the inexorable outreaching of ripples from a stone cast into a lake: Jacob wonders wistfully, "For why will ye die?" (Jacob 6:6). Mosiah presses our consciences with "Are we not all beggars? Do we not all depend upon the same Being, even God, for all the substance which we have?" (Mosiah 4:19). Alma searches our souls in his asking: "If ye have experienced a change of heart, and if ye have felt to sing the song of redeeming love, I would ask, can ye feel so now?" (Alma 5:26).

Perhaps the most unappreciated aspect of Book of Mormon concentration is its humor. That lack of appreciation probably testifies to the effectiveness of the humor, since its essence is understatement, a laconic refusal to push the punch line. I suspect that the tongue-in-cheek British laugh more than we Americans in reading the Book of Mormon. The high seriousness of its context can easily distract those used to more explicit humor from the smile on the face of the writer of such a statement as

"Whomsoever of the Amalickiahites that would not enter into a covenant to support the cause of freedom . . . he caused to be put to death; and there were but few who denied the covenant of freedom" (Alma 46:35), or "Neither were there Lamanites, nor any manner of -ites" (4 Nephi 17), or "For if their wine would poison a Lamanite it would also poison a Nephite" (Alma 55:32).

One of the most engaging moments in the Book of Mormon for me comes in the studied anticlimax after Ammon has smitten the enemies of the Lamanite king's shepherds, in true heroic fashion, slicing off all arms raised against him. When King Lamoni inquires about this superservant—"Where is this man that has such great power?"—Ammon's fellow servants take great delight in taking the wind out of everyone's overawed sails with: "Behold, he is feeding thy horses" (Alma 18:8–9).

Understated humor, ramifying question, rich aphorism, and selective history formally attest the concentration of the Book of Mormon. Even its more oratorical literary features tend toward concentration. The parallelism of such a passage as the Psalms of Nephi (2 Nephi 4:16–35) manages marvelous density through the repetitions of its Hebraic thought rhyme. Similarly, the chiasmus which John W. Welch has discovered undergirding Book of Mormon rhetorical structure is a concentric form; ontological density is inevitably intensified by the centripetal force of such balances elements as the structure of Alma 36:

My son give ear to my words (v 1)
Keep the commandments and ye shall prosper in the land (v 1)
Captivity of our fathers—bondage (v 2)
He surely did deliver them (v 2)
Trust in God (v 3)
Support in trials, troubles and afflictions (v 3)
I known this not of myself but of God (v 4)
Born of God (v 5)
Limbs paralyzed (v 10)

The Agony of conversion
destroyed (v 11)
racked with eternal torment (v 12)
harrowed up to the greatest degree (v 12)
racked with all my sins (v 12)
tormented with the pains of hell (v 13)
inexpressible horror (v 14)
banished and extinct (v 15)
pains of a damned soul (v 16)

Called upon Jesus Christ (v 18)

The Joy of Conversion
no more pain (v 19)
oh what joy (v 20)
what marvelous light (v 20)
soul filled with joy as exceeding as was my pain (v 20)
exquisite (v 21)
nothing as sweet as was my joy (v 21)
singing and praising God (v 22)
long to be with God (v 22)

Use of limbs returns (v 23)
Born of God (v 26)
Therefore my knowledge is of God (v 26)
Supported under trials and troubles and afflictions (v 27)
Trust in him (v 27)
He will deliver me (v 27)
Egypt—captivity (v 28–29)
Keep the commandments and ye shall prosper in the land (v 30)
This according to his word (v 30)[3]

We ought not, then, to be misled by the *and it came to pass*'s, and the *O*'s and *yea*'s and *for behold*'s. The essence of Book of Mormon style is concentration. The working vocabulary of 1 Nephi, according to E. Craig Bramwell's 1960 Brigham Young University thesis, "Hebrew Idioms in the Small Plates of Nephi," has only twenty-three percent more words than comparable Old Testament sections—2696 root words, a mere tithe of Shakespeare's written vocabulary. Perhaps the most impressive aspect of that compact vocabulary is its sparing use of adjectives; most literary stylists feel that where modifiers are concerned, less is more. The inimitably concentrated Genesis 1, for instance, boasts but sixteen simple adjectives in its nearly nine hundred words. The slightly longer first chapter of 1 Nephi has, impressively enough, only sixteen adjectives.

The first chapter of Genesis, representing as it does the Bible at its best, makes for interesting stylistic comparison with 1 Nephi 1, which I take to be typical of Book of Mormon style. *And it came to pass*'s, while something short of Twain's estimate of two-thirds of the total words, do comprise fully five percent of Nephi's first chapter. Yet in Genesis, where there is virtually no feeling of redundancy, there is much more repetition. Thus I suspect it is not rhetorical formulas which make the Book of Mormon less dynamic

rhetorically; there are as many *and the morning*'s and *and God saw that it was good*'s in Genesis 1 as there are *and it came to pass*'s in 1 Nephi 1—and more *and God said*'s. What becomes in the Book of Mormon a mannerism as annoying as our modern *y'know* is in its essential impulse rhetorically sound: Cornercutting formulas, like blunt *and* transitions, however monotonous they may sound to a modern ear, are attempts at terseness.

That is not to say that the Book of Mormon is total literary concentration. In 1 Nephi 1, such idle repetitions as "being thus overcome with the Spirit" in verse 8 after "being overcome with the Spirit" in verse 7, or "as he prayed unto the Lord" in verse 6 following immediately upon "as he went forth prayed unto the Lord" in verse 5, are difficult to forgive, let alone defend. And *yea* becomes so consistently an announcement of unnecessary repetition or superfluous explication that it doesn't take a sensitive reader long to learn to skip those arid *yea* passages as religiously as he avoids pedantic footnotes.

But even this weakness is relative: We ought not to let the fact that much more is said in Genesis 1 than 1 Nephi 1 obscure the fact that a great deal is said in 1 Nephi 1. Nephi may not get the world created in those 934 words, but he manages masterfully to establish persona, place, purpose, even spirit. His first chapter, radiating out in its careful chiasmic structure from the visionary center of verse 9, reminds me of such artful beginnings as Dickens's opening to *A Tale of Two Cities:* "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." As Hugh Nibley has shown us in *Lehi in the Desert*, from its formal introductory Egyptian colophon to its climactic statement of thesis, succinctness marks 1 Nephi 1 to be the abridgment Nephi informs us that it is:[4]

> I, Nephi, having been born of goodly parents, therefore I was taught somewhat in all the learning of my father; and having seen many afflictions in the course of my days, nevertheless, having been highly favored of the Lord in all my days; yea, having had a great knowledge of the goodness and the mysteries of God, therefore I make a record of my proceedings in my days

falls something short of the concentration of "In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth." I'd prefer the Nephi statement in half the words:

> I, Nephi, born of goodly parents, and having been highly favored of the Lord, make a record of my days.

But then I'm an English teacher, and what's worse, a Bible-reading English teacher. In the concentration contest, the Book of Mormon clearly comes in second to the King James Version; but in this race, that's admirably high place.

The Book of Mormon is impressively concentrated. Our choosing as standard against which to measure it the most superlatively understated volume in the English language attests that concentration. Concentration could well be the weakest area of Book of Mormon style. Even here, at its worst, the Book of Mormon invites favorable comparison with the King James Version of the Bible.

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1. Mark Twain, *Roughing It,* ed. Franklin R. Rogers and Paul Bander (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1972), p. 125.

2. Italics added.

3. John W. Welch, "Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon," *Brigham Young University Studies* 10 (Autumn, 1969): 83.

4. Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert & The World of the Jaredites* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Bookcraft, 1952), pp. 13–20.