

Enos, Jarom, Omni A Window On Their Souls

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Introduction

While most of the Book of Mormon is given to us in the carefully edited phrases of Mormon's abridgement, in that translation taken from the small plates we have the opportunity for a first person association with the authors. Even there, Nephi's careful editing of First Nephi gives us perhaps more of a plastic character than the real Nephi we encounter in 2 Nephi 4:17-35. With out question the dominant personality of this record is Nephi. Yet, the personalities of other contributors may be less ambiguously drawn.

From Jacob's first "Behold, my beloved brethren" (2 Nephi 6:2), we know that we are reading words spoken by a tender spirit. Neal Maxwell calls Jacob the "great poet prophet," and all readers are moved by his sensitivity and empathy for the challenges of women. Jacob is a teacher. Robert Matthews calls him "the outstanding doctrinal teacher of the Book of Mormon." He makes clear his discomfort with confrontation; yet, because he is "weighed down with . . . desire and anxiety for the welfare" of his people, he must speak boldly and testify "concerning the wickedness of [their] hearts." No reader would confuse Nephi and Jacob. The contribution of each to this historical record is clear and consistent with their plainly identifiable personalities.

The last three books of the small plates record occupy little more than seven pages in our current Book of Mormon publication. On those seven pages we meet seven writers. Their words are few; for some, very few. Yet, it's remarkable how much these few words reveal about their authors. What they say, and what they don't say, draws them so clearly that Robert Thomas can say that "I feel I might recognize them on the street."

Dr. Robert K. Thomas, who passed away on October 3, 1998, was an exceptional English teacher and a sensitive and insightful teacher of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. A devotional address given at BYU during his years as BYU academic vice-president serves as both inspiration and source for most of this study. This address has been republished by FARMS under the title, "A Literary Critic Looks at the Book of Mormon."

The Affectionate and Impetuous Enos

The Book of Enos is one of the most loved of Book of Mormon writings. The story is simple and is told with great humility. Yet, the story is powerful, graphic, and spontaneous in its detail. It has been the inspiration for numerous great discourses in the history of this restored gospel. Perhaps none greater than the 1961 devotional address of Elder Spencer W. Kimball to the BYU student body. Enos's message concerns the power of prayer, the blessing of faith, the necessity of perseverance, and the reality of God's love for man exemplified in his forgiveness of sin. But, how much does the Book of Enos tell us about the man, Enos?

Dr. Robert K. Thomas looking closely at the way Enos uses words, makes this observation:

The headlong impetuosity of Enos is suggested by his rather imprecise, fragmentary opening sentence. As an English teacher this always makes me shiver a little as I read it. "Behold, it came to pass that I, Enos, knowing my father that he was a just man--for he taught me in his language, and also in the nurture and admonition of the Lord--and blessed be the name of my God for it."

The vitality of this man fairly crackles on the page. Note especially his use of verbs and verb forms; "wrestled, sunk, hungered, kneeled, cried, raised, poured out, struggling, swept." Enos simply cannot wait for logic to catch up with him. His words roll forth in an irresistible flood.

Enos's description of the Lamanites tells us almost as much about Enos as it does about the Lamanites:

. . . they were led by their evil nature that they became wild, and ferocious, and a blood-thirsty people, full of idolatry and filthiness; feeding upon beasts of prey; dwelling in tents, and wandering about in the wilderness with a short skin girdle about their loins and their heads shaven; and their skill was in the bow, and in the cimeter, and the ax. And many of them did eat nothing save it was raw meat; and they were continually seeking to destroy us (Enos 1:20)

Dr. Thomas points out that in this description Enos "pours attitudes on top of environment [evil, wild, ferocious -- dwelling in tents, in the wilderness], adds physical description [short skin girdle, heads shaven], then skills, shifts to diet and back to attitudes again." While Enos is graphic and colorful, he is far from precise and specific. Dr. Thomas continues:

His sentences all have a spoken quality, and their lengths seem determined only by a need for breath. Listen as you read the following description of his own people: "And there was nothing save it was exceeding harshness, preaching and prophesying of wars, and contentions, and destructions, and continually reminding them of death, and the duration of eternity, and the judgments and the power of God, and all these things--stirring them up continually to keep them in the fear of the Lord." Just one magnificent sentence--about a deep breath long!

This man wrings meaning from every moment. His concluding words are beautifully in character: "And I rejoice in the day when my mortal shall put on immortality, and shall stand before him; then shall I see his face with pleasure." It has been suggested that in all Western literature there is a singular lack of friendship toward God. Reverence, awe, wonder, transport, even ecstasy we know; but all these have overtures of the supernal. Enos, in the company of the English poet George Herbert, might well make an affectionate call on the Lord.

The Succinct Precision of Jarom

The significance of this kind of close critical look at these Nephite authors begins to come in focus as we look with Dr. Thomas at the contribution of Jarom:

From Enos to his son Jarom is the shortest of genealogical steps but a gigantic shift in style. Except for the expected, conventional beginning, note the difference: "Now behold, I, Jarom, write a few words according to the commandment of my father, Enos, that our genealogy may be kept." You are suddenly aware that nothing in the whole Book of Enos came to bear on a problem with such crispness. The succeeding verses develop the reasons for the length of his account and the special problems of his day in coherent, beautifully modulated sentences. His diction too is precise. In discussing his people he lets us see their total strength in saying that "They profaned not, neither did they blaspheme." This is not merely synonymous parallelism, that standard device of Hebraic poetry; this is an incremental repetition in which additional meanings are added within a parallel framework.

Too many readers of the Book of Mormon have failed to appreciate its quality by setting their own limited understanding as the gauge of excellence. Profane (literally "before the temple") suggests general irreverence, most commonly heard in light-minded reference to holy things. As serious as this is, it does not connote the deliberate defiance which is suggested by blasphemy. Thoughtless people may profane; the intentionally wicked blaspheme.

Note how carefully the general denunciations of Enos are focused in Jarom. In verse 20 Enos describes the Lamanites as being of "such evil nature they became wild and ferocious, a bloodthirsty people, full of idolatry and filthiness." Jarom's accusation is precise: "They loved murder. . ." Perhaps more clearly than we have understood before we here see the hopelessness of the Lamanite attitude, with its calculated wickedness.

These are not plastic figures. They are real men with discernable personalities. Enos is seen as warm, caring, and affectionate. But his son, Jarom, while admirably fulfilling his role as record keeper, almost seems to write as an efficient and well trained reporter. His words are well chosen, almost with a lawyer's skill, a skill seemingly foreign to his father. Dr. Thomas provides a further example:

In verse 11 he comments that it was possible to teach the law of Moses but the people had to be persuaded to look forward to the Messiah. Once more this is just the right distinction. The law of

Moses was not only a fact of holy writ, it was a fact of experience. It could be rationally apprehended. The concept of a Messiah on the other hand was in the realm of things yet to come; it required emotional reinforcement, which is just the connotation sounded by "persuaded."

While similar language mastery is exhibited by many contributors to the Book of Mormon record, there is nothing in the writings of these last seven small plate's authors which comes close to the precision of language demonstrated here by Jarom.

Omni, the Self-centered Soldier

In the first twelve verses of Omni we move rapidly through the record keeping contribution of four writers and begin the work of a fifth. Just as with Enos and Jarom, each gives himself away even in the few words of his record.

With Omni we are at once "struck by a focus on the first person." There are ten "I"s in just three verses. Dr. Thomas observes:

Omni is a soldier, dutifully carrying out the command of his father but not a bit averse to identifying himself as a wicked man. We soon see what really interests him. He not only lets us know of his valor in battle but describes his times solely in terms of war and peace. "We had many seasons of peace, and we had many seasons of serious war and bloodshed."

That reference to "serious war" gives him away. It suggests the concern of a man for whom war is neither inconsequential nor detestable. It is simply a vocation. Omni is forthright, not very reflective, and his sentences march briskly but to no great end.

Amaron, A Mixed Chip off of Two Blocks

Then we come to Amaron, Omni's son. Amaron is careful and organized, more like his grandfather than he is like his father,

and in a few verses manages to turn our attention from personalities to issues. Yet Amaron lacks Jarom's linguistic sensitivity. His sentences, unlike Omni's, are neatly balanced, but it is a mechanical neatness. Here is a style which tries to synthesize the no-nonsense approach of his father with the carefully controlled cadence of his grandfather.

Chemish: Poor Chemish!

What can we say of Chemish? I once sat at the feet of Dr. Thomas as he spoke of Chemish. (Literally, I was at his feet. We were in a small fireside in a home. There weren't enough chairs and I sat on the floor. As Brother Thomas sat at the front of the room and my feet stretched out from my position in front of the others, our feet almost touched). He spoke of Chemish as the most pitiable person in the Book of Mormon. Chemish, given the opportunity to write scripture, writing in a record that he surely knew, or should have known, was prophesied "to come forth in the latter-days," all he could say was:

Now I Chemish, write what few things I write, in the same book with my brother; for behold, I saw the last which he wrote, that he wrote it in the day that he delivered them unto me. And after this manner we keep the records, for it is according to the commandments of our fathers. And I make an end.

Poor Chemish! Dr. Thomas suggests that he may not have expected to have a turn writing in this record. The record had been passed from father to son. In his generation the record was the responsibility of his brother. Apparently his brother didn't have a son and the records were now to be passed to Chemish's son, Abinadom, the nearest male in the next generation. Chemish was present for this significant event. I can imagine his surprise, even shock, as Amaron wrote those last words into his contribution to the record: "I did deliver the plates unto my brother Chemish." Have you ever at a wedding reception had a microphone suddenly thrust in your face and been told to say a few words to the bride and groom? For me, this usually has the same effect on my mind as the delete button has on my computer files. All rational thought is suddenly gone! Chemish's words almost have the character of my fumbled congratulations. Dr. Thomas observes that Chemish,

overwhelmed by the responsibility that is suddenly his, . . . can only belabor the obvious: "They all write in the same book, and they all write with their own hands." You can just see the half-hopeful, half-relieved smile with which he turns the records over to his son.

But, Dr. Thomas sees a very significant and powerful message in these few words of Chemish:

I know of no more revealing verse in all scripture. How clearly Chemish is given to us. Not in what is said about him, but in what he says about himself through his style. Just one verse, but in it is the whole history of inadequacy. The ghosts of my own failures clamor for recognition from my subconscious whenever I hear the name Chemish. I am related to him by all the blundered opportunity, the embarrassed incompetence that has threaded itself through my own life.

What To Do with Abinadom?

What do we do with Abinadom? The excuse of surprise won't work. He appears to have had the time. Yet, Abinadom's contribution of two verses is scarcely more than that of his father, and Dr. Thomas sees some insecurity in that little he has written. He comments, "I suspect he has looked back to see what others have written. There are echoes of Omni and Jarom, but nothing else."

The Loquacious Amaleki

Finally, we come to someone who has something to say. Dr. Thomas comments:

The final nineteen, rather long verses are the breezy contribution of Amaleki. He just loves to write. He mixes exhortation and history in about equal amounts and stops only when he has used up all the space that remained on the plates.

Amaleki has a great deal to say and he seems very aware that space on the plates is running out. Like a child in a hurry he dumps detail on top of detail:

they had had many wars and serious contentions, and had fallen by the sword from time to time; and their language had become corrupted; and they had brought no records with them; and they denied the being of their Creator; and Mosiah, nor the people of Mosiah, could understand them.

Fortunately, Amaleki did not run out of space before he completed at least that which he gave us. This is the only history we have for probably over two hundred years. Unfortunately, there is one detail which he left out. For all his spilling forth with specifics of his history he failed to give us a date. Omni, the almost pompous military man, tells us twice the dating of his record. He was a military man, would we expect less? His son, Amaron, also gives us a date; but, this is the last date we get in the Book of Mormon referencing the time of Lehi until the first verse of 3 Nephi. All other dating from Amaleki to the birth of Christ must count backwards from the time of that birth.

Conclusion

I can do no better than end with the concluding remarks of Robert K. Thomas's critical (meaning serious, analytical, discriminating, cultured, refined) examination of the small plates contribution to the Book of Mormon.

Joseph Smith's translation of the small plates concludes here. Not only have we encountered typically Hebraic figures, but they have been presented with undeniable skill. Styles which should have been distinctive have been consistently so. Yet there is an overall tone which bespeaks a single translator.

We have only to check the markedly different versions of the Bible in English to recognize how much a translator can provide in achieving that integration of nuance and emphasis that turns words into life. . .

In one of the few comments which we have from the Lord concerning sacred translation, he suggests the person who is entrusted with his gift must study out in his mind the material under consideration and then ask him whether or not it is correct. If it is, the Lord will cause the translator's bosom to burn with the knowledge that what he is writing has divine sanction. How the Prophet Joseph's bosom must have burned as he was translating the Book of Mormon! We shall never learn to appreciate this book fully until we too prepare a temple for the flame.