Recurrence in Book of Mormon Narratives

Richard Dilworth Rust


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He commenced, and again related the very same things which he had done at his first visit. . . . By this time, so deep were the impressions made on my mind, that sleep had fled from my eyes, and I lay overwhelmed in astonishment at what I had both seen and heard. But what was my surprise when again I beheld the same messenger at my bedside, and heard him rehearse or repeat over again to me the same things as before. (Joseph Smith—History 1:45–46)
Repetition is used both in life and in scripture to do such things as teach, emphasize, and confirm. It can help wake up and reach people at a deep level. When we knock at a door, we usually do it three times. A blacksmith strikes his hammer in rhythms of three. A typical cheer is repeated three times, with the last cheer being the most emphatic. We try something three times, with the third try often producing the desired result. Or three may be a limit; there is often a finality about the third time. Jesus gives three ascending injunctions to the Nephite people gathered at the temple in Bountiful: “Ask, and it shall be given unto you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you” (3 Nephi 14:7). In an intensified manner, his auditors are to speak, then move, then use vigorous action. On the first level, they are given what they ask for; on the second, they do the finding; on the third and most effectual, they both receive (the door is opened to them) and act (implicitly, they then go through the doorway). It is not until the third time that Samuel tells about hearing a voice that Eli finally perceives it is the Lord’s (1 Samuel 3:8). It is on the third time that the Nephites at the temple in Bountiful finally understand the heavenly voice (3 Nephi 11:5). There are “three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one. And there are three that bear witness in earth, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one” (1 John 5:7–8). “Wherefore, by the words of three, God hath said, I will establish my word” (2 Nephi 11:3).

The skillful use of repetition and contrast in the Book of Mormon as a principle of reinforcement and witness can be appreciated by close examination of various narrative threads woven by Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni. Repetition appears purposefully within narratives, and it seems that every important action, event, or character is repeated in the Book of Mormon. For instance, two wealthy men (Lehi, Amulek) lose their riches as they pursue prophetic callings. Kings Benjamin and Limhi each assemble their people in order to speak to them. Two sons of kings (Ammon and his brother Aaron) speak with kings (Lamoni and his father). Alma₂ and Lamoni fall into trances in which they appear to be dead. Two detailed accounts are given of prophets threatened within a prison (Alma₂ and Amulek, Nephi and Lehi). Two Lamanite leaders (who also are brothers) are killed by a spear
within their tents. And prophets (Abinadi, Alma₂, Samuel) are cast out of cities and then return at the Lord’s bidding. Further, prophet-leaders (Lehi, Zeniff, Mosiah) gather people to read records to them. Antichrists (notably Sherem, Korihor, and Nehor) lead people to follow their iniquities. A man named Ammon living in the time of King Mosiah is captured and taken before King Limhi—and ends up helping Limhi’s people escape from captivity; Mosiah’s son Ammon is captured and taken before the Lamanite king Lamoni and helps save Lamoni’s people both spiritually and physically. And three prophets, Alma₂, Nephi₂ (the son of Helaman), and Samuel the Lamanite, depart out of the land and are “never heard of more,” with it being the implication that Alma, at least, is translated and does not taste death (Alma 45:19).

Repetitions in the Book of Mormon emphasize the law of witnesses at work within the book. This law is found in Nephi’s testimony that he joined Isaiah and his brother Jacob in seeing the Redeemer: “Wherefore, by the words of three, God hath said, I will establish my word. Nevertheless, God sendeth more witnesses, and he proveth all his words” (2 Nephi 11:3). Again, Nephi quotes the Lord as saying, “Know ye not that the testimony of two nations is a witness unto you that I am God, that I remember one nation like unto another?” (2 Nephi 29:8). Near the end of the book, Moroni reaffirms the law of witnesses when he says, “And in the mouth of three witnesses shall these things be established; and the testimony of three, and this work, in the which shall be shown forth the power of God and also his word, of which the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost bear record—and all this shall stand as a testimony against the world at the last day” (Ether 5:4).

Further, the repetitions underscore the relevance of one character or action to people living in a different time. Many persons and actions typify or foreshadow later persons and actions. For example, at one point when his life is threatened, Nephi commands his brothers that they not touch him, for, he says, “I am filled with the power of God, even unto the consuming of my flesh; and whoso shall lay his hands upon me shall wither even as a dried reed” (1 Nephi 17:48). Standing before a hostile king and his court, the prophet Abinadi similarly says, “Touch me not, for
God shall smite you if ye lay your hands upon me, for I have not delivered the message which the Lord sent me to deliver” (Mosiah 13:3). Abinadi’s face shines “with exceeding luster, even as Moses’ did while in the mount of Sinai, while speaking with the Lord” (Mosiah 13:5). This heavenly transfiguration is repeated in the shining faces of the brothers Nephi and Lehi held in prison (Helaman 5:36) and climaxed in the description of the resurrected Jesus: “and the light of his countenance did shine upon them” (3 Nephi 19:25).\textsuperscript{1}

This repetition links narratives together in what Robert Alter in \textit{The Art of Biblical Narrative} calls “a kind of rhythm of thematic significance.”\textsuperscript{2} Alter’s point about actions in the Bible is directly relevant to the Book of Mormon parallels I have mentioned. He says, “Recurrence, parallels, analogy are the hallmarks of reported action in the biblical tale. . . . The two most distinctively biblical uses of repeated action are when we are given two versions of the same event and when the same event, with minor variations, occurs at different junctures of the narrative, usually involving different characters or sets of characters.”\textsuperscript{3}

Alter calls the recurrence of the same event a “type-scene” and considers it “a central organizing convention of biblical narrative.”\textsuperscript{4} Some examples Alter notes are an annunciation to a barren woman (Rebekah, Sarah, Hannah), the encounter with the future betrothed at a well (Abraham’s servant and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel, Moses and Jethro’s daughter), and a life-threatening

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\textsuperscript{3} Ibid., 180–81.

\textsuperscript{4} Ibid., 181.
trial in the wilderness (Ishmael, Isaac). Parallel episodes with their variations or contrasts reinforce and define each other and develop a larger pattern. They bring a narrative intensity as well as a sense of divine direction of events.

Alter notes that type-scenes contrast with each other as well. In the Book of Mormon, we see parallels and a crucial contrast in two scenes in which a very righteous person and a very wicked person put on disguises. Nephi disguises himself as the Jewish ruler Laban in order to obtain scriptures—which ultimately are for the good of a whole people (1 Nephi 4:19–38). The conspirator Kishkumen disguises himself and murders the chief judge for his own power and gain (Helaman 1:9–12). When we read the account of Kishkumen in context of the book as a whole, we may well reflect back on Nephi being directed by God in killing Laban and then taking on a disguise so as to spiritually save a nation (see 1 Nephi 4:13), whereas the kind of secret combination of robbers and murderers of which Kishkumen is a part eventually causes the destruction of the Nephites (Ether 8:21).

While it might be argued that some repetition and contrast in the Book of Mormon is accidental, there are evidences that the narrators such as Mormon and Moroni purposefully included parallel materials to instruct and convince. Both indicate they speak as though “from the dead” to a latter-day audience (Mormon 9:30–36), and Mormon affirms, “I . . . do write the things which have been commanded me of the Lord” (3 Nephi 26:12). These things—narrations of events, sermons, letters, and the like—were written, among other purposes, “to show unto the remnant of the House of Israel what great things the Lord hath done for their fathers” (Title Page). Mormon frequently calls on his audience to recognize the didactic point of his narrations with expressions such as “and thus we see.” And as though time has collapsed, Moroni forthrightly declares, “I speak unto you as if ye were present, . . . and I know your doing” (Mormon 8:35; here and elsewhere the emphasis is mine.)

A clear example of a purposeful contrast of persons is that between Benjamin and Noah, a good king and a wicked one.6

5 Ibid., 47–62, 181.
6 Susan Tabor analyzes this comparison in her essay, “Mormon’s Literary Technique” (in Mormon Letters Annual, 1983), finding that the
These narratives are presented in significant detail and appear close to each other. King Benjamin is a model of the righteous king. He calls his people together to bless them, affirms that he has labored with his own hands that he might serve them and that they should not be laden with taxes, and humbly confesses his dependence on God (Mosiah 2:14–19; 4:19). King Noah, described soon thereafter, “did cause his people to commit sin, and do that which was abominable in the sight of the Lord” (Mosiah 11:2); he laid a tax of one fifth part of all his people possessed to support a luxurious lifestyle for himself and his wives and concubines and also his priests and their wives and concubines; and rather than consider himself a beggar before God, “he placed his heart upon his riches, and he spent his time in riotous living” (Mosiah 11:14). At the time he proposes the institution of judges in place of a king, Benjamin’s son Mosiah pointedly tells his people that if they could always have kings like Benjamin “then it would be expedient that ye should always have kings to rule over you,” but one wicked king can cause much iniquity and great destruction. “Yea, remember king Noah,” Mosiah says, “his wickedness and his abominations, and also the wickedness and abominations of his people. Behold what great destruction did come upon them” (Mosiah 29:13, 18).

Repetition in Nephi’s Quest

Repetition makes up the hero’s task given Nephi and his brothers—to retrieve from Laban the scriptural records which would preserve for Lehi and his family “the language of our fathers,” the law, and the words of the prophets “since the world began” (1 Nephi 3:19–20). This quest follows what Leland Ryken in How to Read the Bible as Literature calls “the story-

“structure of the book of Mosiah, and to some extent the first half of Alma, is parallelism, contrasting and reinforcing” (118). In “Mosiah: The Complex Symbolism and the Symbolic Complex of Kingship in the Book of Mormon,” Journal of Book of Mormon Studies 2/1 (Spring 1993): 21–38, Gordon C. Thomasson also makes the point that the Book of Mosiah is a study in contrasts between good and bad kings.
telling principle of threefold repetition: a given event happens three times, with a crucial change introduced the third time."  

In the first of the three visits to Laban, and apparently without a plan, Laman futilely asks Laban to relinquish the records. Next, the brothers follow Nephi’s plan to offer their gold, silver, and other precious things for the plates of brass, only to have Laban take all this wealth from them and then try to have them pursued and killed. The third time, Nephi goes alone with no plan: “I was led by the Spirit, not knowing beforehand the things which I should do” (1 Nephi 4:6). Then the Lord’s plan goes into effect. This marks the “crucial change” Ryken speaks about.

Each of these efforts is put into motion by an intensified pledge. At the initial request to get the plates, Nephi says to his father, “I will go and do the things which the Lord hath commanded” (1 Nephi 3:7). Following Laman’s failure, Nephi increases his initial commitment and applies it to all the brothers: “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” (1 Nephi 3:15). After the next plan fails and the older brothers are reproved by an angel for beating their younger brothers, Nephi calls for them all to “be faithful in keeping the commandments of the Lord” and alludes to the great miracle of the Israelites crossing through the Red Sea in affirming the power of God. The emphasis has moved from “I will go and do,” to we will not leave until “we have accomplished,” to the Lord is “mightier than Laban and his fifty” and the Lord is able to deliver us, even as our fathers, and to destroy Laban, even as the Egyptians” (1 Nephi 4:1–3).

Finding Laban drunk in the street, Nephi is three times “constrained by the spirit” to kill him. The first is a simple injunction: Kill Laban. The second is the impression that the Lord had delivered Laban into Nephi’s hands. Nephi thinks of three reasons why he could be justified in taking Laban’s life: (1) Laban sought to take away Nephi’s own life. (2) Laban would not hearken unto the commands of the Lord. (3) He had taken away property belonging to Nephi’s family. The third constraint of the

7 Leland Ryken, How to Read the Bible as Literature (Grand Rapids, MI: Academie Books, 1984), 14.
spirit adds the crucial, convincing element: "The Lord slayeth the wicked to bring forth his righteous purposes. It is better that one man should perish than that a nation should dwindle and perish in unbelief" (1 Nephi 4:13).

Nephi then slays Laban, dresses in his clothes and armor, and, with the help of Laban’s servant Zoram, gets the brass plates and takes them outside the city wall. There, in calling to his frightened brothers, Nephi reveals his identity to Zoram—whom Nephi holds to keep from fleeing. Nephi then makes three levels of appeal to Zoram. These are introduced by a similar formulaic phrase, moving from sparing Zoram’s life, to allowing him freedom, to having a place with Lehi’s family:

And it came to pass that I spake with him, that if he would hearken unto my words, as the Lord liveth, and as I live, even so that if he would hearken unto our words, we would spare his life.

And I spake unto him, even with an oath, that he need not fear; that he should be a free man like unto us if he would go down in the wilderness with us.

And I also spake unto him, saying: Surely the Lord hath commanded us to do this thing; and shall we not be diligent in keeping the commandments of the Lord? Therefore, if thou wilt go down into the wilderness to my father thou shalt have place with us. (1 Nephi 4:32–34)

A three-part pattern is found as well in Sariah’s lament to Lehi, with the pattern emphasized by the rhythmical “Behold . . . , and . . . , and”: “Behold thou hast led us forth from the land of our inheritance, and my sons are no more, and we perish in the wilderness” (1 Nephi 5:2). This feared decline is counterbalanced by Sariah’s three-part intensified praise uttered at the return of her sons. In this, she echoes Nephi’s initial commitment: “I also know of a surety that the Lord hath protected my sons, and delivered them out of the hands of Laban, and given them power whereby they could accomplish the thing which the Lord hath commanded them” (1 Nephi 5:8). For their part, Lehi and Nephi rejoice that they had (1) kept the commandments, (2) obtained the records which the Lord had commanded, and (3) now could pre-
serve the commandments of the Lord unto their children (1 Nephi 5:20–21).

Repetition of the Word Power as a Narrative Focus

The missionary endeavor of the sons of Mosiah, found in a single chapter in the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon (Alma 17 through 20 in the current edition),8 is one of the most interesting stories in the Book of Mormon. By looking at this narrative as a single story, one discovers that its center is the kingdom of God in contrast with the kingdom of man, the power of God in contrast with that of man. It shows the ideal power of the missionary. Mormon’s headnote underlines this theme: The sons of Mosiah reject their “rights to the kingdom” (an earthly kingdom with its accompanying power) “for the word of God” and go up to the land of Nephi “to preach to the Lamanites.” There they experience “sufferings and deliverance.” This acceptance of God’s power and denial of earthly glory is emphasized in the first paragraph of the 1830 edition. The sons of Mosiah, we are told, “taught with power and authority, even as with the power and authority of God, . . . having refused the kingdom which their father was desirous to confer upon them” (cf. Alma 17:3, 6). From this point on, the word power becomes a repeated drum beat throughout the narrative.

Leaving behind a presumably comfortable life in Zarahemla, the sons of Mosiah depart into the wilderness to go among “a wild and a hardened and a ferocious people” (Alma 17:14). In their journey, the second son, Ammon, is their leader but still is their servant (he was “the chief among them, or rather he did administer unto them”; Alma 17:18). On arrival in Lamoni’s court, Ammon, the king’s son, declares his willingness to leave royalty behind him and “to dwell among this people for a time; yea, and perhaps until the day I die” (Alma 17:23). Given the potential of earthly reward (taking one of Lamoni’s daughters to wife), Ammon opts instead to “be thy servant.”

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The story that follows gains dramatic intensity by a greater movement into dialogue and monologue, with the emphatic word being *power*. At the waters of Sebus, the king’s servants express their fear of being slain for allowing the flocks to be scattered by robbers. Ammon’s interior response is to say, “I will shew forth my *power* unto these my fellow servants, or the *power* which is in me, in restoring these flocks unto the king, that I may win the hearts of these my fellow-servants, that I may lead them to believe in my words” (Alma 17:29). Ammon then serves the servants by being their champion, casting stones at the bullies with his sling; “yea, with mighty *power* he did sling stones amongst them; and thus he slew a certain number of them insomuch that they began to be astonished at his *power*” (Alma 17:36). Later reporting to the king, the other servants say they “do not believe that a man has such great *power*” (Alma 18:3). The king wants to know, “Where is this man that has such great *power*?” (Alma 18:8). The response is, “Behold, he is feeding thy horses” (Alma 18:9). This faithfulness elicits even more amazement in King Lamoni, who is now sure Ammon is the Great Spirit. When Ammon comes in, the king’s servants call him “Rabbanah,” which is interpreted as “*powerful* or great king” (Alma 18:13). In this scene of dramatic irony, we know that Ammon has turned down the opportunity to be king in order to be a missionary servant to Lamoni and his people. He, however, never reveals this to Lamoni. Indeed, he maintains the respectful stance of a servant: “What wilt thou that I should do for thee, O king?” (Alma 18:14).

The conversation that ensues revolves around the *power* question. Lamoni asks:

Tell me by what *power* ye slew and smote off the arms of my brethren that scattered my flocks. . . . If it were needed, I would guard thee with my armies; but I know that thou art more *powerful* than all they.

Ammon being “wise, yet harmless,” says unto Lamoni:

Wilt thou hearken unto my words, if I tell thee by what *power* I do these things?
Lamoni agrees to this missionary opening, and following a question-and-answer exchange in which Ammon teaches Lamoni about God, Lamoni then says:

I believe all these things which thou hast spoken.
Art thou sent from God?

Ammon responds:

I am a man; and man in the beginning was created after the image of God, and I am called by his Holy Spirit to teach these things unto this people, that they may be brought to a knowledge of that which is just and true; and a portion of that Spirit dwelleth in me, which giveth me knowledge, and also power according to my faith and desires which are in God. (Alma 18:20–22, 33–35)

Ammon expounds the history of God’s dealings with man, at which the now-believing Lamoni falls into a deathlike trance. Lamoni’s trance was what Ammon desired, for he knew that King Lamoni was under the power of God; he knew that the dark veil of unbelief was being cast away from his mind.

King Lamoni rises on the third day, bears his testimony, then swoons away again, as does the queen, and then Ammon, and then the attending servants. Abish, secretly converted earlier, sees what she thinks is an opportunity, “by making known unto the people what had happened among them, that by beholding this scene, it would cause them to believe in the power of God, therefore she ran forth from house to house, making it known unto the people” (Alma 19:17).

The action that most miraculously shows forth the power of God is the death of the man who tried to kill the unconscious Ammon—an event that causes a lot of contention among the people as to “the cause of this great power.” Abish then lifts up the queen who in turn takes Lamoni by the hand and he arises. They “declare unto the people the self-same thing—that their hearts had been changed; that they had no more desire to do evil” (Alma 19:24, 33).

Ammon’s journey with Lamoni to the land of Middoni to deliver his three brothers from prison brings to a climactic focus
the question of power and control (Alma 20). Here, the king over all the land commands Lamoni to slay Ammon, then tries to kill Ammon himself. However, he is withstood and put in peril of his life, offering Ammon at that point “whatsoever thou wilt ask, even to the half of the kingdom” (Alma 20:23). For the third time refusing earthly glory or power, Ammon asks only for freedom for his brothers and for Lamoni. This refusal of earthly power opens the way for Ammon to counter a cause of anger held by the Lamanites for centuries, their belief that Nephi had robbed them, that Laman and Lemuel’s younger brother had taken over in both land and leadership. Ammon teaches Lamoni, among other things, “concerning the rebellions of Laman and Lemuel, and the sons of Ishmael [Lamoni is a descendant of Ishmael], yea, all their rebellions did he relate unto them” (Alma 18:38). Then before the king over all the land, he responds to the Lamanite view that the Nephites are sons of a liar and a robber (Nephi; cf. Alma 20:13). By foregoing earthly power, Ammon shows forth God’s power and thus opens up the most significant missionary harvest in the Book of Mormon. The editor’s (Mormon’s) heavily repeated use of the word translated as power drives home that point.

Overall Narrative Patterns

The larger narratives of the Book of Mormon have many similarities and thus reflect on each other. This repetition serves to emphasize and define the book’s major themes or concerns. The quest theme is introduced with the commission to Lehi to escape Jerusalem, obtain the scriptural record found on the brass plates, and eventually take his family to the promised land. This pattern of escape, obtaining spiritual truth, and going to a safe or sanctified land continues in the stories of Nephi, Alma1, and Limhi—all of which sustain the Exodus theme of Israel’s escape from captivity in Egypt. The story of the Jaredite migration—occurring earlier but recounted later as an epitome of the Nephite experience—repeats the Lehite journey to the promised land. On an analogical level, as Alma2 explains to his son Helaman, just as the “fathers”

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were directed by the heaven-sent compass to reach the promised land, so “shall the words of Christ, if we follow their course, carry us beyond this vale of sorrow into a far better land of promise” (Alma 37:45). In this respect, the whole Book of Mormon is a Liahona and guide for escaping from Babylon to the promised land.

Connected to travel to the promised land (metaphorically, Christ’s kingdom) is the pattern of peoples who repent and are converted to Christ or who allow themselves to be led by Satan down to destruction. The book has an intensifying rhythm of persons choosing good (e.g., the people of King Benjamin and the Lamanites taught by Ammon and his brothers) or pridefully turning from it (e.g., Laman and Lemuel, Sherem, Korihor, and the Zoramites). Frequently, the people move through a humility-prosperity-pride-collapse cycle. The preservation at Christ’s coming of the “more righteous part of the people” (3 Nephi 10:12) and the calamitous destruction of many cities confirms the oft-repeated Book of Mormon motto: those who keep the Lord’s commandments shall prosper in the land of promise, but those who will not shall be swept off (cf. 2 Nephi 1:9; 4:4, Alma 9:13; 50:20; and Ether 2:10). The reality of the second half of the promise is confirmed vividly by Mormon and Moroni, who recount the descent of the Nephites into total destruction.

The nature, rise, and effect of secret combinations is a third significant type of narrative which is reinforced and confirmed by repetition. We anticipate the problem of Gadiantonism in Jacob’s speaking of the Devil’s stirring up secret combinations, Nephi’s prophecies of secret combinations among the Gentiles, and Alma’s testimony that the Jaredites were destroyed because of their secret works (2 Nephi 9:9; 26:22; Alma 37:30). Then the character of secret combinations is presented dramatically and frighteningly in the detailed accounts of Kishkumen and Gadianton and their band (Helaman 2-3, 6-8, 11) and of Akish’s machinations (Ether 8). One account confirms the other. Together they help reinforce Moroni’s warning:

And they have caused the destruction of this people of whom I am now speaking [the Jaredites], and also the destruction of the people of Nephi. And whatsoever nation shall uphold such secret combinations, to get
power and gain, until they shall spread over the nation, behold, they shall be destroyed. (Ether 8:21–22)

Countervailing that dismal picture are prophetic challenges to a future audience. “I speak unto you, ye remnant of the house of Israel,” Mormon says. “Know ye that ye must come unto repentance, or ye cannot be saved” (Mormon 7:1, 3). Moroni counsels, “Be wise in the days of your probation” (Mormon 9:28).

In sum, as “Another Testament of Jesus Christ,” the Book of Mormon depends on recurrence for its witness. It is as though the first occurrence of anything is not sufficient to confirm truth or value. Repetition brings understanding, conviction, and commitment. Just as information was repeated for Joseph Smith by Moroni, readers have repeated for them “the same things as before” (Joseph Smith–History 1:46) so they cannot misunderstand but rather remember clearly. The rhythm of repetition is also like the poetry of the Book of Mormon which I have discussed elsewhere,10 building ideas in intensified ways. Some repetition in the book may be attributed to conventional forms. An example of this might be the three choices, often found in fairy tale and legend, which appear in Lehi’s vision in which some people go to the tree of life, multitudes feel their way towards the great and spacious building, and many are drowned or lost [1 Nephi 8:30–32)]. Most dramatically, repetition in the book purposes to bring an epiphany—a startling awareness of the divine. In a way, readers of the Book of Mormon are put in a position similar to that of the Nephites to whom the resurrected Savior spoke. At first they heard a voice but did not understand it. Again, they heard without understanding. Finally, “they did hear the voice, and did open their ears to hear it. . . . And behold, the third time they did understand the voice which they heard” (3 Nephi 11:5–6).