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Title Types of Literature in the Book of Mormon:
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Narrative, Prophetic Dialogue

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Patriarchal Blessings

In Genesis 48:13–22; 49:1–27 are to be found accounts of Jacob's blessings upon his sons (including Ephraim and Manasseh, his adopted sons; see Genesis 48:5) before his death. These blessings have a prophetic element in them, and I believe them to be inspired. Among the Mormon people they would be called patriarchal blessings, and will, for our purposes here, be listed as a special type of literature. A patriarchal blessing is a blessing bestowed upon a person by an inspired man holding the patriarchal office, its purpose being to give comfort, direction,

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incentive, counsel, and guidance in the life of the recipient. Occasionally the patriarch, under the influence of the Holy Ghost, may for a special purpose indicate future events or give special warnings to an individual. The lineage of a person of the house of Israel may also be indicated.

The Book of Mormon records a number of patriarchal blessings, but they are confined mostly to 2 Nephi 1–4 and were pronounced by Lehi upon the heads of his children and grandchildren. Lehi knew that because of his age he would soon pass away. Like Jacob of old he wished to leave a blessing for his children; and like Isaac, the son of Abraham, he would have desired to leave his first blessing upon his oldest son (in this case, sons; see Genesis 27:1–41). However, his oldest sons, Laman and Lemuel, had been a sore trial to him. Therefore, in blessing these two and their next oldest brother, Sam, he said:

And now my son, Laman, and also Lemuel and Sam, and also my sons who are the sons of Ishmael, behold, if ye will hearken unto the voice of Nephi ye shall not perish. And if ye will hearken unto him I leave unto you a blessing, yea, even my first blessing.

But if ye will not hearken unto him I take away my first blessing, yea, even my blessing, and it shall rest upon him. (2 Nephi 1:28–29)

It will be observed that because of Nephi's faithfulness his father stood ready to give the first blessing to him. Sam later received a special blessing similar to that given to Nephi (2 Nephi 4:11).

Zoram, the servant of Laban, was next to be blessed:

And now, Zoram, I speak unto you: Behold, thou art the servant of Laban; nevertheless, thou hast been brought out of the land of Jerusalem, and I know that thou art a true friend unto my son, Nephi, forever.

Wherefore, because thou hast been faithful thy seed shall be blessed with his seed, that they dwell in prosperity long upon the face of this land; and nothing, save it shall be iniquity among them, shall harm or

disturb their prosperity upon the face of this land forever.

Wherefore, if ye shall keep the commandments of the Lord, the Lord hath consecrated this land for the security of thy seed with the seed of my son. (2 Nephi 1:30-32)

Lehi then proceeded to bless Jacob and Joseph, his youngest sons. These blessings, too long to reproduce here (see 2 Nephi 2-3), are filled with many important doctrinal and historical details. Lehi's last words to Joseph were:

And now, blessed art thou, Joseph. Behold, thou art little; wherefore hearken unto the words of thy brother, Nephi, and it shall be done unto thee even according to the words which I have spoken. Remember the words of thy dying father. Amen. (2 Nephi 3:25)

Throughout these blessings it is interesting to read the prophetic elements that are given in the form of prediction. In this respect they remind one of Genesis 49.

Lehi could not pass away without giving a blessing of a kind to the sons and daughters of Laman and Lemuel, his recreant elder sons. The merciful and loving heart of a father is thus manifested. Here is the blessing:

Behold, my sons, and my daughters, who are the sons and the daughters of my first-born, I would that ye should give ear unto my words.

For the Lord God hath said that: Inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments ye shall prosper in the land; and inasmuch as ye will not keep my commandments ye shall be cut off from my presence.

But behold, my sons and my daughters, I cannot go down to my grave save I should leave a blessing upon you; for behold, I know that if ye are brought up in the way ye should go ye will not depart from it.

Wherefore, if ye are cursed, behold, I leave my blessing upon you, that the cursing may be taken from you and be answered upon the heads of your parents.

Wherefore, because of my blessing the Lord God will not suffer that ye shall perish; wherefore, he will be merciful unto you and unto your seed forever. (2 Nephi 4:3-7)

Symbolic Prophecy

The next type of literature that we shall consider is symbolic prophecy. A fine example of it is found in 1 Nephi 8:4-28—a dream or vision which Lehi relates to his family and associates in the wilderness after leaving Jerusalem. Stripped to its essentials, his dream deals with a tree, a river, and a rod of iron. Led by a man in a white robe, Lehi traversed a dark and dreary waste. After praying, he found a tree in a large and spacious field whose fruit was able to make one happy. The fruit was exceedingly white and sweet, and it filled his soul with great joy. Wishing his family to partake of it also, Lehi looked around for them and discovered a river near the tree. At the head thereof he beheld his wife, Sariah, and two sons, Sam and Nephi, who seemed undecided where to go. They came readily when Lehi beckoned to them, and partook of the fruit. Finally, Lehi beheld Laman and Lemuel, his oldest sons, but they refused to come and eat of the fruit. Then Lehi noticed a rod of iron extending along the river bank and leading to the tree where he stood. Beside the iron rod was a straight and narrow path leading to the tree. The path also led by a fountain unto a field, large and spacious “as if it had been a world” (1 Nephi 8:19-20).

Numberless concourses of people were attempting to press forward and gain the path leading to the tree. Mists of darkness arose, and many were lost. Others pressed forward, caught hold of the iron rod and were led to the tree, where they partook of its fruit. Then they cast their eyes around as if ashamed. Lehi was thereby led to notice on the other side of the river a large building high above the earth. In it were numerous finely dressed people mocking and pointing their fingers towards those who were eating the fruit of the tree. Many of the partakers, who became ashamed, fell away into forbidden paths and were lost.

At this point Nephi drops the direct quotation of his father's words and tells the rest of the dream in his own way. He says that

other multitudes pressed forward, caught hold of the iron rod, and eventually partook of the fruit of the tree. Throngs made their way to the great and spacious building; still others were drowned in the fountain; and many were simply lost from view, wandering in strange roads. Great were the number who entered the strange building and pointed the finger of scorn at those who were partaking of the fruit. However, Lehi was greatly disturbed over the fact that his sons, Laman and Lemuel, partook not of the fruit.

The symbolism of this dream must not be pressed too far, but the moral and religious applications of it are fairly obvious and certain, thanks to Nephi's explicit interpretation (see 1 Nephi 11:21-36; 12:16-18; 15:21-36). The dream seems to have a two-fold application. First, it was given to Lehi as a warning that his oldest sons, Laman and Lemuel, would eventually depart from the faith and ways of their father. Second, it is of such general application that all of us may profit by its spiritual symbolism.

The man in the white robe who led Lehi through the dark and dreary waste would seem to symbolize a messenger of God who is able to guide and direct man. The dark and dreary waste probably represents the world with its doubts, uncertainties, and errors. The tree, whose fruit was sweet and agreeable, represents the tree of life or the love of God, which sheds itself abroad in the hearts of men. It is desirable above all things and the most joyous to the soul.

The river which Lehi saw represents the depths of hell. Nephi says that his father was so anxious about other things that he did not behold the filthiness of the water (1 Nephi 15:27). Moreover, the river represents the awful gulf which separates the wicked from the tree of life and the saints of God. The rod of iron represents the word of God. Those who hold to it will never perish; neither can temptations and the fiery darts of the adversary overpower and blind them or lead him away to destruction.

The numberless concourses of people pressing forward toward the straight and narrow path leading to the tree seem to represent the people of the world whose intentions and desires are good. The mist of darkness that arose after they had gained the path symbolizes the temptations of the devil, which blind the eyes and harden the hearts of men, and lead them away into broad roads to perish. The people who attain the tree, partake of its fruit, and then cast their eyes about as if ashamed, represent those persons who

have considerable spiritual insight and ability, but who lack stability and strength of character. They allow the wicked and unscrupulous to sway them from the plain course of duty and righteousness.

The great and spacious building on the other side of the river typifies the pride of the world. The multitudes within the building in the attitude of mocking and pointing their fingers at those who were partaking of the fruit of the tree represent the wicked world and the folly thereof. They include, according to Nephi, the house of Israel gathered together to fight against the twelve apostles of the Lamb (1 Nephi 11:35). He also informs us that the fall of the great and spacious building represents the destruction of all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people that shall fight against the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

Lehi's dream and its symbolism are impressive. They convey important spiritual lessons to us and should be taught and appreciated more than they are. At least one hymn has been written which is based on Lehi's dream. The words are by J. L. Townsend and the music by William Clayton:

The Iron Rod

To Nephi, seer of olden time,
 A vision came from God,
 Wherein the holy word sublime
 Was shown an iron rod.

While on our journey here below,
 Beneath temptation's pow'r,
 Through mists of darkness we must go,
 In peril ev'ry hour

And when temptation's pow'r is nigh,
 Our pathway clouded o'er,
 Upon the rod we can rely,
 And heaven's aid implore.

And, hand o'er hand, the rod along,
 Through each succeeding day,

With earnest prayer and hopeful song
We'll still pursue our way.

Afar we see the golden rest,
To which the rod will guide,
Where, with the angels bright and blest,
Forever we'll abide.

Chorus

Hold to the rod, the iron rod;
'Tis strong, and bright, and true;
The iron rod is the word of God;
'Twill safely guide us through.¹

Prophetic Narrative

Turning now to prophetic narrative, a number of examples are in the form of prediction. The reader's attention is called to the following references: 1 Nephi 10:2–14; Helaman 9:21–38; 13:5–15:17; Ether 13:2–12. In this type of literature the narrator, under the influence of the Spirit, speaks freely of future events or quotes the predictions of others. The first reference is a fine example; since it refers to the coming of Christ and his work, we present it here in its entirety:

For behold, it came to pass after my father had made an end of speaking the words of his dream, and also of exhorting them to all diligence, he spake unto them concerning the Jews—

That after they should be destroyed, even that great city Jerusalem, and many be carried away captive into Babylon, according to the own due time of the Lord, they should return again, yea, even be brought back out of captivity; and after they should be brought back out of captivity they should possess again the land of their inheritance.

¹ Hymn 274, in *Hymns of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985).

Yea, even six hundred years from the time that my father left Jerusalem, a prophet would the Lord God raise up among the Jews—even a Messiah, or, in other words, a Savior of the world.

And he also spake concerning the prophets, how great a number had testified of these things, concerning this Messiah, of whom he had spoken, or this Redeemer of the world.

Wherefore, all mankind were in a lost and in a fallen state, and ever would be save they should rely on this Redeemer.

And he spake also concerning a prophet who should come before the Messiah, to prepare the way of the Lord—

Yea, even he should go forth and cry in the wilderness: Prepare ye the way of the Lord, and make his paths straight; for there standeth one among you whom ye know not; and he is mightier than I, whose shoe's latchet I am not worthy to unloose. And much spake my father concerning this thing.

And my father said he should baptize in Bethabara, beyond Jordan; and he also said he should baptize with water; even that he should baptize the Messiah with water.

And after he had baptized the Messiah with water, he should behold and bear record that he had baptized the Lamb of God, who should take away the sins of the world.

And it came to pass after my father had spoken these words he spake unto my brethren concerning the gospel which should be preached among the Jews, and also concerning the dwindling of the Jews in unbelief. And after they had slain the Messiah, who should come, and after he had been slain he should rise from the dead, and should make himself manifest, by the Holy Ghost, unto the Gentiles.

Yea, even my father spake much concerning the Gentiles, and also concerning the house of Israel, that they should be compared like unto an olive-tree, whose

branches should be broken off and should be scattered upon all the face of the earth.

Wherefore, he said it must needs be that we should be led with one accord into the land of promise, unto the fulfilling of the word of the Lord, that we should be scattered upon all the face of the earth.

And after the house of Israel should be scattered they should be gathered together again; or, in fine, after the Gentiles had received the fulness of the Gospel, the natural branches of the olive-tree, or the remnants of the house of Israel, should be grafted in, or come to the knowledge of the true Messiah, their Lord and their Redeemer. (1 Nephi 10:2-14)

From the textual viewpoint 1 Nephi 10:9 has a very interesting reading and deserves comment. Nephi says, "And my father said he [Christ] should baptize in Bethabara, beyond Jordan." Most modern editors of the Greek text of the New Testament have John 1:28 read "Bethany beyond the Jordan." As a matter of fact most of the manuscript evidence justifies the reading "Bethany" as the editors have concluded. Even Origen (A.D. 185?-254), the most learned Christian writer before St. Jerome, points out that in his time practically all of the manuscripts read "Bethany." Nevertheless, he says he is convinced that it is not necessary to follow the manuscripts for the good reason that he visited Palestine and found no evidence of a Bethany except the one near Jerusalem. So Origen altered the text from Bethany to Bethabara, and this reading seems finally to have reached our King James Version as a result. His scholarly judgment is confirmed by the above passage from our Nephite scripture.

Prophetic Dialogue

Examples of the literature which may be termed prophetic dialogue are classified under five heads: (1) with the Lord: 1 Nephi 17:7-10, 12-14; Mosiah 26:14-32; (2) with the Holy Ghost: 1 Nephi 4:10-13; 11:1-13; (3) with angels: 1 Nephi 11:14-14:27; Mosiah 27:11-17; (4) with inquirers: 1 Nephi 15:6-16:5; and (5) with the world: Mosiah 12:25-37.

The above classification indicates the general nature of this literature. Considerations of space prevent the publication of examples under each head; it will suffice for our purposes here to illustrate the literature with a short passage from each of the first two. Prophetic dialogue with the Lord is illustrated when Nephi receives instructions to build a ship:

And it came to pass that after I, Nephi, had been in the land of Bountiful for the space of many days, the voice of the Lord came unto me, saying: Arise, and get thee into the mountain. And it came to pass that I arose and went up into the mountain, and cried unto the Lord.

And it came to pass that the Lord spake unto me, saying: Thou shalt construct a ship, after the manner which I shall show thee, that I may carry thy people across these waters.

And I said: Lord, whither shall I go that I may find ore to molten, that I may make tools to construct the ship after the manner which thou hast shown unto me?

And it came to pass that the Lord told me whither I should go to find ore, that I might make tools.
(1 Nephi 17:7-10)

Prophetic dialogue with the Holy Ghost may be indicated in the following passage (but see 1 Nephi 13).

For it came to pass after I had desired to know the things that my father had seen, and believing that the Lord was able to make them known unto me, as I sat pondering in mine heart I was caught away in the Spirit of the Lord, yea, into an exceeding high mountain, which I never had before seen, and upon which I never had before set my foot.

And the Spirit said unto me: Behold, what desirest thou?

And I said: I desire to behold the things which my father saw.

And the Spirit said unto me: Believest thou that thy father saw the tree of which he hath spoken?

And I said: Yea, thou knowest that I believe all the words of my father.

And when I had spoken these words, the Spirit cried with a loud voice, saying: Hosanna to the Lord, the most high God; for he is God over all the earth, yea, even above all. And blessed art thou, Nephi, because thou believest in the Son of the most high God; wherefore, thou shalt behold the things which thou hast desired. (1 Nephi 11:1-6)

The reader will do well to study examples under each of the headings not illustrated here.