

LIGHT REFLECTIONS

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July 2024

The Tongue of the Learned

An admired mentor once called my attention to a single sentence from the Book of Isaiah: “The Lord God hath given me the tongue of the learned, that I should know how to speak a word in season to him that is weary” (Isa. 50:4). It was my duty, my mentor taught me, to use whatever learning I might acquire, and whatever gifts of expression I might develop, to bring comfort and strength to my weary fellow Saints.

My desire to cultivate “the tongue of the learned” took root in eleventh grade. I had just quit the basketball team, thereby abandoning my dreams of NBA glory and triggering something of an identity crisis. A perceptive English teacher espied in me some promise as a writer, and she encouraged my intellectual awakening. For the first time, I worked hard in a class, not because I wanted an A, but in order not to let my teacher down.

I took especial care with a short essay about Arthur Miller’s play, *The Crucible*. I found myself toiling to write good prose. I even tried my hand at a lyrical peroration. I became conscious of an emerging talent, and I can only describe it as a spiritual experience. My teacher later read parts of my essay aloud to the rest of the class.

That class, and others that followed, quickened in me a love for language and a dream of wielding it well. “So long as I remain alive and well,” Orwell once wrote, “I shall continue to feel strongly about prose style.” With none of Orwell’s gifts, I too take pleasure in “words and their right arrangement”¹—in the magic and the miracle of speech, the wizardry and wonder of the word.

At the same time, I am keenly aware of scriptural warnings against eloquent flattery and

rhetorical manipulation. For every Apollos (“an eloquent man, and mighty in the scriptures” [Acts 18:24]) we encounter in the scriptures, we also find a Nehor, a Korihor, and a Sherem—a pre-conversion Alma, Zeezrom, or Saul. In one of its many undercurrents, the Book of Mormon supplies a sustained polemic on the perils of articulate unbelief.

Dig deeper, however, and it becomes clear that the tinselled oratory of the antichrists cannot hold a candle to the mighty eloquence of the prophets of God. From beginning to end, the Book of Mormon rings with Nephi’s rhythmic energy; with Jacob’s deep poetic power; with the balanced cadences of the repentant, converted Alma; with Samuel the Lamanite’s scorching trenchancy; with Mormon’s impassioned pleading; and with the unobtrusive beauty of Moroni’s valedictions.

The Book of Mormon also hints at a prophetic eloquence beyond our present comprehension. “Behold,” Moroni prays, “thou hast not made us mighty in writing like unto the brother of Jared, for thou madest him that the things which he wrote were mighty even as thou art, unto the overpowering of man to read them” (Ether 12:24). In its totality, the Book of Mormon exemplifies what it proclaims—namely, that there is power in combining deep learning with humble discipleship; that there is unexampled virtue in the word (see 2 Ne. 9:28; Alma 31:5).

Even so, the temptations that attend advanced learning and linguistic prowess are persistent and strong. Elder Jack N. Gerard recently urged us to “focus . . . on the Savior,” and to “go out of our way to avoid any perception that our actions may be influenced by the honors of men, to receive

personal recognition, generate more likes, be quoted or published.”²

This is a hard saying for academics haunted by the admonitions “Publish or perish!” and “Get cited or get lost!”³ But perhaps we would do well to remember *why* the Lord has given us opportunities to become educated and articulate: not for our own reputations and glory, but so that we can encourage and comfort the weary all around us. Collectively, we have unmatched opportunities to employ “the tongue of the learned” to bring strength to the Kingdom and build faith in our students.

¹ George Orwell, “Why I Write” (1946).

² Jack N. Gerard, “Integrity: A Christlike Attribute,” *Liahona*, May 2024.

In humanity’s earliest generations, “it was given unto as many as called upon God to write by the spirit of inspiration” (Moses 6:5). In all generations, “the baptism of fire and of the Holy Ghost” has empowered Christian disciples to “speak with the tongue of angels, and shout praises unto the Holy One of Israel” (2 Ne. 31:13).

May we all work to master the languages of learning, to merge them with the tongue of angels, and to employ them for the greater glory of God and the fuller blessing of His children.

³ To my knowledge, no one has ever actually used the second of these phrases. But the spirit of it strikes me as about right.