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**Title** The Journey of the Hero: Archetypes of Earthly Adventure and Spiritual Passage in 1 Nephi

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## The Journey of the Hero: Archetypes of Earthly Adventure and Spiritual Passage in 1 Nephi

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**Abstract:** Study of the varied metaphorical levels of the Book of Mormon continues to yield new insights into the message and meaning of that book. Several prominent typological readings of aspects of the Book of Mormon have been published, but despite calls for such an effort, little inquiry into its possible archetypal levels, or what has been called "the mythic dimension" of the book, has yet been undertaken. As an initial attempt at such an endeavor, I compare certain events described in 1 Nephi with the elements of one prominent mythic archetype, the hero's journey, as elucidated by Joseph Campbell in his famous *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. A strong correlation between the hero's journey archetype and the events from 1 Nephi is intriguing and seems to demonstrate at least the presence of mythic patterns in the Book of Mormon. This leads to some preliminary conclusions about what the apparent presence of such patterns might signify.

### The Mythic Dimension of the Book of Mormon

In an article published in *Dialogue* in 1968, non-Mormon scholar Douglas Wilson commented that "the possibility that serious literary commentators, in examining such a narrative as the Book of Mormon, will be particularly attracted and sensitive to its

mythic dimension is a foregone conclusion."<sup>1</sup> Despite the confidence underlying Dr. Wilson's statement, it is lamentable that this possibility has remained unfulfilled.

This condition may find its origin in the somewhat negative connotation that still seems to be associated with the word *mythic* when applied to religious writings, perhaps especially among Latter-day Saint scholars and writers.<sup>2</sup> Currently, writers and researchers are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of myth and mythic themes to society, culture, and even the psychological well-being of the individual.<sup>3</sup> In light of this, it must be conceded that to describe the Book of Mormon as having a "mythic dimension" is in no way to say that it is a myth. Far from detracting from its message and importance, a study of the mythic dimension of the Book of Mormon should serve to illuminate another fascinating aspect of this complex work. In the same article, Dr. Wilson also addresses this idea:

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas Wilson, "Prospects for the Study of the Book of Mormon as a Work of American Literature," *Dialogue* 3/1 (1968): 38.

<sup>2</sup> Three examples, from three authoritative sources, demonstrate this point. James Talmage defines myth as "a fictitious or conjectural narrative presented as historical, but without any basis of fact," in *Jesus the Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1977), 304; Bruce R. McConkie writes that "mythology is a substitute for and a perversion of true religion," in *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 524-25; and Hugh W. Nibley, in referring to the Book of Mormon specifically, states that "to call this record a myth is to condemn it as effectively as by calling it a fraud," in *Since Cumorah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), xiv. Part of this negativity could arise from a misapplication of the different meanings of the word *myth*. The two primary definitions of the word are "(1) a culturally significant story or explanation of how things came to be: for example, of how a god made the world or how a hero undertook a quest"; and "(2) a fictitious or dubious story, person, or thing." *The Oxford Companion to the English Language*, ed. Tom McArthur (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 675-76. The adjectives *mythic* and *mythical* are typically synonymous, but *mythic* is often used for the first meaning of myth, while *mythical* is reserved for the second. Throughout this article, I will use the words *myth* and *mythic* in their first, more positive senses.

<sup>3</sup> For a general introduction to some of the principal writers currently working in this field, as well as references to more thorough treatments, see Jonathan Young, ed., *Saga: Best New Writings on Mythology* (Ashland, Ore.: White Cloud, 1996).

The mythic approach to the Book of Mormon would not constitute, as some might fear, an attempt or intention to profane the sacred, but rather to apprehend it in a way that is meaningful and consistent with what is known about the way man sees and understands and projects the world and the life he lives in it.<sup>4</sup>

Promising forays have been made along related paths. Twelve years after Dr. Wilson's article appeared, and in reference to it, Bruce W. Jorgensen noted, "it is surprising that since Wilson's article no one has come along with some tools from Mircea Eliade, Joseph Campbell, or Northrop Frye to unfold the archetypal structure of the book."<sup>5</sup> Since the publication of that statement, some revealing applications of the work of Frye have been made to the Book of Mormon,<sup>6</sup> particularly in the arena of typological analysis, and a passing nod has been given to Eliade<sup>7</sup> on occasion, but no one yet has used any of the "tools from . . . Joseph Campbell" in an attempt to look at the mythic structure of the Book of Mormon. Since Joseph Campbell is widely recognized as one of the greatest mythologists of this generation,<sup>8</sup> I believe it would prove useful to apply some of his methods for evaluating the significance of myth to "unfolding the archetypal structure" of the Book of Mormon.

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<sup>4</sup> Wilson, "Prospects for the Study of the Book of Mormon," 39.

<sup>5</sup> Bruce W. Jorgensen, "The Dark Way to the Tree: Typological Unity in the Book of Mormon," in *Literature of Belief: Sacred Scripture and Religious Experience*, ed. Neal E. Lambert (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1981), 219.

<sup>6</sup> See for example Eugene England, "A Second Witness for the *Logos*: The Book of Mormon and Contemporary Literary Criticism," in *By Study and Also by Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley*, ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 2:94-97.

<sup>7</sup> See for example Alan Goff, "Mourning, Consolation, and Repentance at Nahom," in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1991), 94.

<sup>8</sup> For this and other positive assessments of Campbell's scholarly contributions, see Robert A. Segal, *Joseph Campbell: An Introduction* (New York: Mentor, 1990), 9-23. For a definitive and fascinating biography of Campbell, see Stephen and Robin Larsen, *A Fire in the Mind: The Life of Joseph Campbell* (New York: Doubleday, 1991).

One logical starting point to approaching the Book of Mormon mythically with some of these tools would be to determine if any pattern or archetype common to myth identified by Joseph Campbell is also functional in the Book of Mormon. Of course a systematic search for such correspondences is far beyond the scope of this brief essay, yet it is at least possible to try a test case. For this test case I have chosen to compare perhaps the most well-known archetype defined by Campbell, the hero's journey, with the experiences of one of the most prominent heroic figures in the Book of Mormon, Nephi, as recorded in 1 Nephi.<sup>9</sup>

### The Monomyth

The paradigmatic hero's journey is best elucidated by Joseph Campbell in his seminal work, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Campbell defines the basic course of this journey as follows: "The standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: separation—initiation—return: which might be named the nuclear unit of the monomyth."<sup>10</sup> Campbell further identifies a number of stages that make up each of the three main elements of what he calls the monomyth:<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> I am aware of only three analyses to date of Nephi as hero: Robert E. Nichols Jr. has written about Nephi as a heroic figure, but not on the inherent archetype driving his heroics. "Beowulf and Nephi: A Literary View of the Book of Mormon," *Dialogue* 4/3 (1969): 40–47. Hugh Nibley has obliquely addressed this topic, but again his treatment concerns itself with the heroic milieu and not the mythic archetype of the hero. *Lehi in the Desert, The World of the Jaredites, There Were Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 285–307. The most complete treatment is given by Richard Dilworth Rust, where he cites the presence of a hero as one aspect of the Book of Mormon as an epic and lists Nephi as an example of a hero, *Feasting on the Word: The Literary Testimony of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1997), 52–56.

<sup>10</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 30. Campbell notes that he takes the term *monomyth* from James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*.

<sup>11</sup> I have condensed the following information from Campbell's own summary of the aspects of the hero's adventure, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 245–51.

- **Separation** encompasses the call to adventure, the crossing of the threshold (which involves a struggle of some kind), the appearance of supernatural helpers, and the entrance into the inner kingdom.

- **Initiation** involves a series of tests culminating in a supreme ordeal, the meeting with the divine, and the bestowal of the boon.

- **Return** consists of the magic flight, the crossing of the return threshold, and the presentation of the boon gained to the waiting community.

It should be noted that the cycle as Campbell describes it is the full cycle—not every element of the monomyth appears in every story: “The changes rung on the simple scale of the monomyth defy description. Many tales isolate and greatly enlarge upon one or two of the typical elements of the full cycle. . . . Differing characters or episodes can become fused, or a single element can reduplicate itself and reappear under many changes.”<sup>12</sup>

Despite this caution, an analysis of the account of Nephi’s adventures as recounted in 1 Nephi yields a surprisingly close correspondence to many of the aspects of the hero’s journey as Campbell details them. In fact, it is remarkable to observe that the cycle seems to occur at least twice: first as a literal, earthly adventure where Nephi and his brothers journey to Jerusalem to obtain the plates of brass as recorded in 1 Nephi 3–5, and second as a symbolic, spiritual passage where Nephi is caught away and shown the great vision recorded in 1 Nephi 11–14.

## The Earthly Adventure

At the first stage of the mythological adventure, the hero is summoned to the task. Nephi receives his call from the Lord, via his father Lehi. Nephi reports that Lehi

spake unto [him], saying: Behold I have dreamed a dream, in the which the Lord hath commanded me that thou and thy brethren shall return to Jerusalem.

For behold, Laban hath the record of the Jews and also a genealogy of my forefathers, and they are engraven upon plates of brass.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 246.

Wherefore, the Lord hath commanded me that thou and thy brothers should go unto the house of Laban, and seek the records, and bring them down hither into the wilderness. (1 Nephi 3:2-4)

It is interesting to note that Lehi probably first extended the call to Laman and Lemuel, perhaps because they were the older brothers, but they refused:

And now, behold thy brothers murmur, saying it is a hard thing which I have required of them; but behold I have not required it of them, but it is a commandment of the Lord.

Therefore go, my son, and thou shalt be favored of the Lord, because thou hast not murmured. (1 Nephi 3:5-6)

The refusal of the call is also part of the archetype of the hero's journey, but in most cases such a choice understandably cuts the journey short. Campbell explains that "the refusal [of the call] is essentially a refusal to give up what one takes to be one's own interest."<sup>13</sup> In some cases, refusal of the call leads to other insights and opportunities, but not here. And, given what can be deduced about Laman's and Lemuel's character, their decline is no surprise.

Nephi, though, despite the inherent discomfort and outright danger of the task, accepts the call in what is arguably the most oft-quoted passage from the Book of Mormon:

And it came to pass that I, Nephi, said unto my father: I will go and do the things which the Lord hath commanded, for I know that the Lord giveth no commandments unto the children of men, save he shall prepare a way for them that they may accomplish the thing which he commandeth them. (1 Nephi 3:7)

For the hero, "the herald's summons . . . marks what has been termed 'the awakening of the self.' . . . The call rings up the cur-

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 60.



tain, always, on a mystery of transfiguration . . . the time for the passing of a threshold is at hand."<sup>14</sup>

For Nephi and his brothers, the crossing of the first threshold is represented by their initial approaches to Laban. Laban represents the presence of what Campbell calls "threshold guardians," whose purpose it is "to ward away all incapable of encountering the higher silences within."<sup>15</sup> Laman is the first to attempt to pass the threshold guardian, but his failure can be anticipated, for he has already demonstrated by his initial refusal of the call that he is not the hero. Another reason for his failure may be the entirely pedestrian way he attempts to gain the plates—he simply asks for them:

And he desired of Laban the records which were engraven upon the plates of brass, which contained the genealogy of my father.

And behold, it came to pass that Laban was angry, and thrust him out from his presence; and he would not that he should have the records. Wherefore, he said unto him: Behold thou art a robber, and I will slay thee.

But Laman fled out of his presence. (1 Nephi 3:12–14)

The brothers next try to exchange something of value for the boon Laban guards, but this attempt fails too. Regarding the non-heroic approach to accomplishing the heroic task, Campbell declares that "the usual person is more than content, he is even proud, to remain within the indicated bounds."<sup>16</sup> Despite their initial failures, they cannot turn back now, for Laban is aware of the brothers and their quest, although they yet lack an effective solution. It remains for the hero to step forward to confront the challenge on his own. To do this, he must face a final struggle, which in myth can be represented by any of several manifestations, one of which Campbell calls the "brother-battle."<sup>17</sup>

Nephi does in fact pose a method by which the goal can be achieved, but now Laman and Lemuel become the obstacle

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14 Ibid., 51.

15 Ibid., 92.

16 Ibid., 78.

17 Ibid., 245–46.

keeping him from it. In response to his plea to trust in the power of the herald who issued the original summons, Nephi relates that:

Laman was angry with me, and also with my father; and also was Lemuel, for he hearkened unto the words of Laman. Wherefore Laman and Lemuel did speak many hard words unto us, their younger brothers, and they did smite us even with a rod. (1 Nephi 3:28)

But the archetype of the hero's journey anticipates this struggle as well and provides a means to overcome it, most often in the form of some supernatural helper. When the conditions are right, and the hero is in need,

though omnipotence may seem to be endangered by the threshold passages, . . . protective power is always and ever present within the sanctuary of the heart and even immanent within, or just behind, the unfamiliar features of the world. One has only to know and trust, and the ageless guardians will appear.<sup>18</sup>

Having already demonstrated that he knows and trusts in the power behind his endeavor, **Nephi is aided by such a guardian:**

And it came to pass as they smote us with a rod, behold, an **angel of the Lord** came and stood before them, and he spake unto them, saying: Why do ye smite your younger **brother with a rod?** Know ye not that the Lord hath chosen him to be a ruler over you, and this because of your iniquities? Behold ye shall go up to Jerusalem again, and the Lord will deliver Laban into your hands.

And after the angel had spoken unto us, he departed. (1 Nephi 3:29-30)

With the struggle for the threshold won, the hero can proceed with the next phase of his quest, the passage into the "higher silences." **The great symbol associated with this phase is the descent into the belly of the whale, one of whose manifestations is cate-**

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 72.

gorized by Campbell as the “night-sea journey.”<sup>19</sup> This aspect of the overall quest represents the hero’s leap of faith into the unknown.

Nephi, initially in the company of his brothers, makes his journey literally at night, and then proceeds alone into the dark kingdom:

Nevertheless they did follow me up until we came without the walls of Jerusalem.

And it was by night; and I caused that they should hide themselves without the walls. And after they had hid themselves, I, Nephi, crept into the city and went forth towards the house of Laban. (1 Nephi 4:4–5)

But the hero is never truly alone; the supernatural help he has earned in successfully passing the threshold guardians remains with him. In explaining this aspect of the monomyth, Campbell writes:

Once having traversed the threshold, the hero moves in a dream landscape . . . where he must survive a succession of trials. . . . The hero is covertly aided by the advice, amulets, and secret agents of the supernatural helper whom he met before his entrance into this region. Or it may be that he here discovers for the first time that there is a benign power everywhere supporting him in his superhuman passage.<sup>20</sup>

Of course Nephi is already aware of the “benign power everywhere” (recall his acknowledgment of this when he accepts the call in 1 Nephi 3:7), but it is significant that as he approaches the crux of his quest, he is also cognizant of the presence and guidance of his “supernatural helper.” Nephi confirms that “I was led by the Spirit, not knowing beforehand the things which I should do” (1 Nephi 4:6).

After completing the night-sea journey, and with the ready aid of his supernatural helper(s), the hero now stands at the “nadir of

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19 Ibid., 95.

20 Ibid., 97.

the mythological round"<sup>21</sup>—he must face the final trial separating him from the boon he has come to win. This final trial is the supreme ordeal, the definitive demonstration of the mettle of the hero and his worthiness to receive the boon. Campbell outlines the severity of this test: "[The hero] must put aside his pride, his virtue, beauty, and life, and bow or submit to the absolutely intolerable."<sup>22</sup>

Using an economy of words that makes the statement all the more horrible, Nephi explains that for his final trial, "I was constrained by the Spirit that I should kill Laban" (1 Nephi 4:10). As if to underscore the critical role this event plays in the large-scale scheme of his journey, Nephi slows the narrative pace here drastically and explains in ominous detail his wrestle to accomplish what he has been asked to do. His agonized reticence leaves no doubt that to do this thing is "absolutely intolerable," yet he is the hero, and the hero must triumph: "Therefore I did obey the voice of the Spirit, and took Laban by the hair of the head, and I smote off his head with his own sword" (1 Nephi 4:18).

The triumph of the hero in his final test leads to the bestowal of the boon he has come so far to gain. A critical aspect of this stage of the monomyth is that in many cases the hero gains not only some tangible reward, but also an understanding of the divinity of the source of the reward. The intangible aspect of the hero's reward is typically symbolized in one of three ways: sacred marriage, apotheosis, or atonement with the father. This last idea is particularly important to the argument at hand. Campbell writes that the effect of the hero

going to meet the father is to open his soul beyond terror to such a degree that he will be ripe to understand how the sickening and insane tragedies of this vast and ruthless cosmos are completely validated in the majesty of Being. The hero transcends life with its peculiar blind spot and for a moment rises to a glimpse of the source. He beholds the face of the father, understands—and the two are atoned.<sup>23</sup>

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21 Ibid., 246.

22 Ibid., 108.

23 Ibid., 147.

In what ways is Nephi's particular experience "validated in the majesty of Being"? According to the archetype, by not only submitting to but ultimately surmounting the final test, one of the intangibles the hero gains is the self-confidence necessary to overcome any future challenge. In Nephi's case, by being commanded to perform an act he knows is specifically forbidden by the God who has forbidden the act, and then following through with the "absolutely intolerable" act of taking the life of another, he not only proves himself capable of any of the tasks that he will yet have to endure, but also seems to gain a certain understanding of what it actually means to obey God. As Campbell explains later, "The agony of breaking through personal limitations is the agony of spiritual growth."<sup>24</sup> Perhaps it is also the glimpse Nephi gains, not so much of the face of the father but of what the Father will have to face in being required to sacrifice his own Son, that augments this growth. Nothing in the text explicitly suggests this, but such a reading of this difficult episode using "tools from . . . Joseph Campbell"<sup>25</sup> allows for one possible insight into it and the reasons for its inclusion.<sup>26</sup>

Regardless of the magnitude of the victory and the significance of the insights gained, the cycle rolls on. If, despite his accomplishment of the supreme ordeal, the powers the hero is challenging remain essentially unfriendly, rather than have the boon simply bestowed on him, the hero may be required to steal it. In myth this act is symbolized by the "fire theft."<sup>27</sup> Its analogue in 1 Nephi is the stratagem Nephi employs to finally obtain the plates of brass:

I took the garments of Laban and put them upon mine own body; yea, even every whit; and I did gird on his armor about my loins.

And after I had done this, I went forth unto the treasury of Laban. And as I went forth towards the

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 190.

<sup>25</sup> Jorgensen, "The Dark Way to the Tree," 219.

<sup>26</sup> For another more detailed look at why Nephi killed Laban, see England, "A Second Witness for the *Logos*," 108–14. Note especially the similarity of the archetypal approach to Nephi's killing of Laban to Elder Jeffrey R. Holland's explanation of the act as quoted by England on pages 111–12.

<sup>27</sup> Campbell, *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 173.

treasury of Laban, behold, I saw the servant of Laban who had the keys of the treasury. And I commanded him in the voice of Laban, that he should go with me into the treasury.

And he supposed me to be his master, Laban, for he beheld the garments and also the sword girded about my loins. . . .

And I spake unto him as if it had been Laban.

And I also spake unto him that I should carry the engravings, which were upon the plates of brass, to my elder brethren, who were without the walls.

And I also bade him that he should follow me.  
(1 Nephi 4:19-21, 23-25)

The acquisition of the boon is only half the battle in the myth cycle, though. After penetrating to the center of the mystery, the hero must now begin the long return trek home:

The full round, the norm of the monomyth, requires that the hero shall now begin the labor of bringing the runes of wisdom, the Golden Fleece, or his sleeping princess, back into the kingdom of humanity, where the boon may redound to the renewing of the community.<sup>28</sup>

If the boon has been stolen by the hero rather than voluntarily bestowed, the next stage of the cycle is the "magic flight." Campbell notes that "another well-known variety of the magic flight is one in which a number of delaying obstacles are tossed behind by the wildly fleeing hero."<sup>29</sup>

Nephi wins free of the walls of Jerusalem, "the dark kingdom," still in the company of the servant of Laban, and is reunited with his brothers. It is a testimony to his compassion as well as his resourcefulness that the way Nephi diverts pursuit from their flight for the time being is simply to persuade the servant of Laban to the brothers' cause:

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 193.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 201.

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. . . .

Now we were desirous that he should tarry with us for this cause, that the Jews might not know concerning our flight into the wilderness, lest they should pursue us and destroy us.

And it came to pass that when Zoram had made an oath unto us, our fears did cease concerning him.

And it came to pass that we took the plates of brass and the servant of Laban, and departed into the wilderness, and journeyed unto the tent of our father. (1 Nephi 4:34, 36–38)

The penultimate stage of the mythological journey is the crossing of the return threshold. At this juncture, “the transcendental powers must remain behind; the hero re-emerges from the kingdom of dread.”<sup>30</sup> Nephi has not simply left the Spirit behind, nor has the Spirit abandoned him, but the fact remains that the brothers return to the camp of their father with no supernatural assistance (see 1 Nephi 4:38, quoted above). However, a very real sense of emergence from the “kingdom of dread” is particularly poignant in the reaction of Sariah and Lehi to the brothers’ safe return:

And it came to pass that after we had come down into the wilderness unto our father, behold, he was filled with joy, and also my mother, Sariah, was exceedingly glad, for she truly had mourned because of us. . . .

And when we had returned to the tent of my father, behold their joy was full, and my mother was comforted. (1 Nephi 5:1, 7)

The journey does not quite end with the hero’s safe return, for one final requirement must be filled. He must present the boon he has suffered so much to obtain to the community he serves, for

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 246.

the hero "brings back from his adventure the means for the regeneration of his society as a whole."<sup>31</sup>

The community to which Nephi returns is not yet in need of regeneration,<sup>32</sup> but the plates of brass, through the important information they contain, will function to preserve the community and prevent eventual societal degeneration.<sup>33</sup> Nephi confirms this by recording that after Lehi searches the plates,

He was filled with the Spirit, and began to prophesy concerning his seed—

That these plates of brass should go forth unto all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people who were of his seed. . . .

Wherefore, he said that these plates of brass should never perish; neither should they be dimmed any more by time. And he prophesied many things concerning his seed. . . .

And we had obtained the records which the Lord had commanded us, and searched them and found that they were desirable; yea, even of great worth unto us, insomuch that we could preserve the commandments of the Lord unto our children. (1 Nephi 5:17-19, 21)

Almost in anticlimax, the first round of the hero's journey comes to an end. In keeping with the true, humble nature of the hero, Nephi reveals the real power behind his accomplishment and acknowledges that though this cycle has ended, the larger journey continues:

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>32</sup> Although I have not used it as part of the present discussion, the second trip the brothers make to Jerusalem (as recorded in 1 Nephi 7) to recruit Ishmael and his family also follows the archetype of the hero's journey. In this case, the boon can be seen to be the children of Ishmael, who by marrying the children of Lehi literally serve to regenerate the society.

<sup>33</sup> As witness of a lack of plates (and the record they contain) contributing to just such a degeneration, see the account of the eventual discovery by Nephi's descendants of the people of Zarahemla as recorded in the book of Omni (particularly verses 14 and 17).



And it came to pass that thus far I and my father had kept the commandments wherewith the Lord had commanded us. . . .

Wherefore, it was wisdom in the Lord that we should carry [the plates] with us, as we journeyed in the wilderness towards the land of promise. (1 Nephi 5:20, 22)

### The Spiritual Passage

As a result of having traversed the road of trials and having gained the boon, whatever it may be, the mythological hero has "proven himself capable of facing a greater revelation."<sup>34</sup> It seems that Nephi, no doubt in part because of his successful retrieval of the plates of brass, now also finds himself in this enviable position. Not many pages after concluding his account of the adventure in Jerusalem, Nephi reports an even more momentous event.

This undertaking, too, adheres to the general pattern of the archetype of the hero's journey in that it can be divided into the phases of separation, initiation, and return; however, a crucial difference is obvious this time. Whereas the first journey was a literal, physical one, this time the passage will be spiritual. The result, or the boon achieved, is no less critical to the community nor the task of retrieving it fraught with any less difficulty. In fact the return to society is seemingly more problematic, as shall be seen.

Separation occurs quickly this time around. The call to this adventure is not unexpected and comes in fact because of Nephi's desire to depart. The threshold is crossed easily, for as has been pointed out, "the father admit[s] to his house only those who have been thoroughly tested,"<sup>35</sup> and Nephi has already passed the ultimate test. This may be why he is not required to face a threshold guardian this time, but instead finds himself immediately in the "dream landscape," already in the presence of his supernatural guide, the Spirit. Nephi writes that

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<sup>34</sup> Campbell, *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 148.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

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 exceedingly high mountain, which I never had before seen, and upon which I never had before set my foot. (1 Nephi 11:1)

Initiation is to proceed somewhat differently this time, for rather than being required to undergo an ordeal himself, Nephi is instead shown a vision of the supreme ordeal, the one his test in Jerusalem merely prefigured. The angel (who has replaced the Spirit as his supernatural helper) asks Nephi, "Knowest thou the condescension of God?" (1 Nephi 11:16).

In a display of acumen that not only reveals the depth of his spiritual maturity, but also reinforces his heroic humility, Nephi replies, "I do not know the meaning of all things" (1 Nephi 11:17), whereupon he is shown in vision "the Lamb of God, yea, even the Son of the Eternal Father" (1 Nephi 11:21) and how this "Son of the everlasting God was judged of the world; and . . . was lifted up upon the cross and slain for the sins of the world" (1 Nephi 11:32-33). This vision is followed by a remarkable unfolding of nothing less than the history of the world, from the proliferation of Nephi's posterity in the land of promise down to the end of the world, with particular emphasis on the role his posterity is to play in the great plan of God (see 1 Nephi 12-14).

In speaking of the mythological hero's experiences at this point, Campbell explains:

The disciple has been blessed with a vision transcending the scope of normal human destiny, and amounting to a glimpse of the essential nature of the cosmos. Not his personal fate, but the fate of mankind, of life as a whole, the atom and all the solar systems, has been opened to him.<sup>36</sup>

Nephi confirms the eternal scope of the things shown him, as much by what he cannot reveal as by what he has written:

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 234.

And behold, I, Nephi, am forbidden that I should write the remainder of the things which I saw and heard; wherefore the things which I have written sufficeth me; and I have written but a small part of the things which I saw. (1 Nephi 14:28)

This supreme knowledge is the boon Nephi wins in this cycle, and though he has acquired it without the initiatory ordeal, he is not free of the challenge, for he must still complete the round by making his return. His ordeal this time will be in attempting to convert an unappreciative community to the necessity of the elixir he brings. Such a passage is an ordeal for the mythological hero as well:

This brings us to the final crisis of the round, to which the whole miraculous excursion has been but a prelude—that, namely, of the paradoxical, supremely difficult threshold-crossing of the hero's return. . . . He has yet to re-enter with his boon. . . . He has yet to confront society with his ego-shattering, life-redeeming elixir, and take the return blow of reasonable queries, hard resentment, and good people at a loss to comprehend.<sup>37</sup>

For Nephi, the difficulty of facing his community lies in the essential difference in the nature of the elixir this time. Whereas the boon he brought from Jerusalem was tangible, this new boon, in keeping with the spiritual nature of his passage, is also spiritual. This becomes evident, after Nephi spends so much time attempting to explain the significance of what he now knows (see 1 Nephi 15), in Laman's and Lemuel's reply, "thou hast declared unto us hard things, more than we are able to bear" (1 Nephi 16:1), in which can be detected an echo of the "hard resentment" postulated by Campbell.

This same difficulty is faced by the mythological hero. Despite all he has encountered and overcome, "the returning hero, to complete his adventure, must survive the impact of the world . . .

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 216.

[and] retain his self-assurance in the face of every sobering disillusionment."<sup>38</sup>

Nephi's task from this point on then becomes twofold: on the one hand to try to convince Laman, Lemuel, and the others of the surpassing value of the knowledge he has brought back, and on the other not to become discouraged and abandon his task. The reason the hero must persist in this is that

the boon brought back from the transcendent deep becomes quickly rationalized into nonentity, and the need becomes great for another hero to refresh the word.

How teach again, however, what has been taught correctly and incorrectly learned a thousand thousand times, throughout the millennium of mankind's prudent folly? That is the hero's ultimate difficult task.<sup>39</sup>

To paraphrase Nephi's task in a more familiar way to readers of this journal, the hero, to complete his journey, must endure to the end. Was Nephi ultimately successful? Since in a very real way the boon with which he returned from his wonder-journey is still "redound[ing] to the renewing of the community,"<sup>40</sup> readers of 1 Nephi will have to answer that for themselves.

### The Point of Departure

To this point a relatively strong correlation between the facets of the monomyth—as delineated by Campbell—and Nephi's experiences—as recorded in 1 Nephi—has been demonstrated. But that demonstration should be taken with a modicum of caution. For as intriguing as the close correspondence is, it must also be noted that significant differences can be found between the archetype as I have attempted to map it onto Nephi's "adventure," and the adventure as it is recorded.

For example, in most myths the hero is called from a place or position of relative comfort to undertake his adventure, while in Nephi's case the archetype of the hero's journey seems to become functional only after Lehi and his family have left their

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 226.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 218.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 193.

privileged position at Jerusalem, and from this journey Nephi is called to return home. It is also of interest to note that in 1 Nephi the "magic flight" motif is never fully realized; the only real obstacle to the hero's return home is embodied in Zoram, who is quite easily convinced to throw in with Nephi and his family. Finally, the episode wherein Nephi receives the great vision recorded in 1 Nephi 11–14 is quite deficient relative to the stages of "separation" Campbell enumerates, although Nephi does in fact undergo a separation from the community.

But these differences and most others can be explained by Campbell's own caution about the too-close application of the archetype to any story cycle. Recall his qualification:

The changes rung on the simple scale of the monomyth defy description. Many tales isolate and greatly enlarge upon one or two of the typical elements of the full cycle. . . . Differing characters or episodes can become fused, or a single element can reduplicate itself and reappear under many changes.<sup>41</sup>

An analysis of these differences would also prove very interesting, for in many respects it is not the ways in which various myths are similar that are the most revealing, but rather the ways in which they are different. However, such an analysis is not the focus of the argument at hand.

One major difference remains between the hero's journey archetype—as defined by Campbell—and Nephi's story that is not accounted for by considering it simply one of the "changes rung on the simple scale of the monomyth," and that is the ultimate purpose the journey serves. In his final analysis regarding the significance of the journey of the hero, Campbell concludes that the earthly adventure and the spiritual passage are not really two separate things, but rather facets of the same experience:

The passage of the mythological hero may be over-ground, incidentally; fundamentally it is inward—into depths where obscure resistances are overcome, and

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 246.

long lost, forgotten powers are revived, to be made available for the transfiguration of the world.<sup>42</sup>

The idea that the ultimate realization of the journey is “inward” seems selfish and runs counter to what scripture for the most part teaches: the purpose of existence is to move outside ourselves, to “outwardly” serve the community and, by extension, God. M. Catherine Thomas, another Latter-day Saint scholar writing about journeys in the Book of Mormon, articulates this essential difference well:

All major journeys in the Book of Mormon are allegorical as well as actual, and reflect not only the different kinds of the Lord’s deliverances but also the principles on which the deliverances depend. All these journeys typify every person’s sojourn on earth and the tasks each is given to accomplish. . . .

The destination of each divinely guided journey is a promised land where spiritual enlargement is possible. The land prepared by God is “a land which is choice above all other lands” (1 Nephi 2:20; Ether 1:42). And, as the journeys represent the individual’s sojourn on earth, so the destinations represent the kingdom of heaven, or reentering the presence of God. Again, the journeys represented in the Book of Mormon typify everyone’s earthly sojourn and his or her need for divine help at every juncture.<sup>43</sup>

The significance of this insight seems to be that while the journey may initially require the hero to gather strength and conviction from within, the best use of those resources will always be outward.

### The Hero Today

From the preceding discussion, it would seem that the single mythic archetype I have chosen corresponds remarkably with the

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>43</sup> M. Catherine Thomas, *Doctrines from the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 186–87.

events recorded in 1 Nephi 3–5 and 11–14, and that such a correspondence would point to the existence of “a mythic dimension” of the Book of Mormon. But what does such an existence ultimately signify? I suggest two preliminary possibilities, one practical and one of fascinating potential.

The practical significance comes in recognizing that each person, like Nephi, is a hero, and then in applying the archetype of the hero’s journey in order to recognize significant experience better and integrate it effectively into our lives. This becomes another way, in the words of Nephi, to “liken all scripture unto us” (1 Nephi 19:23). By so doing we can gain a hint of what to expect in our lives as we determine to accept the call, cross the threshold, make spiritual allies, win the boon, and finally return with what we have acquired in order to serve our respective communities. Regarding the practical applicability of the archetype of the hero’s journey, Campbell writes:

The whole sense of the ubiquitous myth of the hero’s passage is that it shall serve as a general pattern for men and women, wherever they may stand along the scale. . . . The individual has only to discover his own position with reference to this general human formula, and let it then assist him past his restricting walls.<sup>44</sup>

For those readers still uncomfortable with the associative potentials of the word *archetype*, particularly when applied to scripture,<sup>45</sup> Campbell’s own use of the word *pattern* offers a viable alternative. This word choice is buttressed by Eugene England’s similar usage:

Patterns, and the process of patterning, are clearly central to both the Bible and the Book of Mormon. . . . We seem to yearn not only for pattern, but for

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>45</sup> Bruce Jorgensen also seemed a little leery of the word *archetype*. In the postscript to his essay on typology in the Book of Mormon, he writes: “In using the term archetype, I did not wish to invoke its Jungian connotations so much as its root sense of ‘primal type,’ the one type behind all types.” “The Dark Way to the Tree,” 228.

meaningful, saving patterns, involving what Lehi in the Book of Mormon (2 Nephi 2:13) called “things . . . to act”—living agents, mortals, and gods—rather than things “to be acted upon.” Patterns obsess us because they emphasize what is most fundamental in the universe, what is repeated, necessary, irresistible, final.<sup>46</sup>

And this leads to the second, far more intriguing possibility of what the presence of mythic patterns, particularly the pattern of the hero’s journey, in the Book of Mormon might signify. England talks about “meaningful, saving patterns.” What kind of patterns (or, for the bold, archetypes) would these be? Hugh Nibley, in discussing the relationship between myth and scripture, tells us:

If we attempt to untangle the probably historical from the fanciful, we soon discover the common ground on which they meet and fuse: it is *ritual*. Myths arise at attempts to explain ritual doings, whose meaning has been forgotten.<sup>47</sup>

The potential importance of this idea is vast. If the common ground that myth and scripture share is indeed ritual, then another reason for the presence of mythic patterns in the Book of Mormon would be to function as indicators of some deeper level of meaning, what Nibley goes on to call “a ritual reality.”<sup>48</sup> If this is indeed the case, then it raises many more questions than it answers, such as what relationship might exist between “a ritual reality” and an actual historical one. In relation to the discussion at hand, one might ask what ritual is being reflected in the main elements of “the ubiquitous myth of the hero’s passage,” particularly as they are manifested in Nephi’s account. Campbell unknowingly provides a possible clue:

Wherever a hero has been born, has wrought, or has passed back into the void, the place is marked and

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<sup>46</sup> England, “A Second Witness for the *Logos*,” 94.

<sup>47</sup> Hugh W. Nibley, *Old Testament and Related Studies* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1986), 42.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.



sanctified. A temple is erected there to signify and inspire the miracle of perfect centeredness; for this is the place of the breakthrough into abundance.<sup>49</sup>

The idea that the temple ceremony reveals one plane where a ritual reality and an historical reality intersect is not as unlikely as it might at first seem. Many statements from church leaders and scholars could be cited as evidence; one particularly applicable example will serve as a representative illustration. John Widtsoe wrote:

The temple endowment relates the story of man's eternal journey; sets forth the conditions upon which progress in the eternal journey depends; requires covenants or agreements of those participating, to accept and use the laws of progress; gives tests by which our willingness and fitness for righteousness may be known, and finally points out the ultimate destiny of those who love truth and live by it.<sup>50</sup>

Unfortunately, to pursue such questions fully is, again, beyond the scope of this essay. However, one significant conclusion can be drawn from the present comparison of the archetype of the hero's journey and Nephi's account of his adventures. Richard Dilworth Rust summarizes it this way: "In a sense, all the heroic qualities of all the heroes in the Book of Mormon are contained within one hero: Nephi. He, in turn, is a representative of the ultimate hero: Christ."<sup>51</sup> I, too, believe that the presence of this pattern in the Book of Mormon, in keeping with its purpose as "Another Testament of Jesus Christ," is to help us recognize not only that each person is a hero, on a hero's quest, but that as we

<sup>49</sup> Campbell, *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 43.

<sup>50</sup> John A. Widtsoe, *Program of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: General Boards of the MIA, 1938), 178.

<sup>51</sup> Rust, *Feasting on the Word*, 53. It should be noted that several pages later, Rust also acknowledges similarities between his ideas about heroes in the Book of Mormon and Campbell's exposition: "One of Joseph Campbell's ideas in *Hero with a Thousand Faces* is that all epic heroes have much in common with Christ" (*ibid.*, 56). In fact throughout his book Campbell repeatedly asserts that Christ is but one manifestation of the archetypal hero (see, for example, Campbell, *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 38, 129, 257).

live our lives we are to emulate the original hero, the one who endured the ultimate separation, agonizing initiation, and triumphant return.

**Conclusion**

From the discussion presented, it would seem that further exploration into the mythic dimension of the Book of Mormon has the potential to illuminate the text afresh, while opening another avenue for experiencing its power and universality.

Unfortunately, to pursue such questions fully is again beyond the scope of this essay. However, one significant conclusion can be drawn from the present comparison of the archetypes of the hero's journey and Nephi's account of his adventures. Richard Dilworth Rust summarizes it this way: "In a sense, all the heroic qualities of all the heroes in the Book of Mormon are contained within one hero: Nephi. He, in turn, is a representative of the true hero: Christ."<sup>21</sup> I, too, believe that the presence of this pattern in the Book of Mormon, in keeping with its purpose as "Another Testament of Jesus Christ," is to help us recognize not only that each person is a hero, or a hero's quest, but that as we

<sup>21</sup> Campbell, *How with a Thousand Faces*, 43.  
<sup>20</sup> John A. Widtsoe, *Program of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: General Board of the MIA, 1938), 178.  
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