

## Tumult in the Air

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On the fourth day of the 34th year measured by the believing Nephites from the coming of Christ (3 Nephi 2:8; 3:1; 4 Nephi 1:21, 48; Mormon 3:4), a great storm fell on their land with a fury. The stanza that introduces the storm (3 Nephi 8:5-7) begins with the chronological date (“A” lines) and then continues with a description of the tumult in the air (structure and italics added):

And it came to pass  
A<sub>1</sub> in the thirty and fourth *year*,  
A<sub>2</sub> in the first *month*,  
A<sub>3</sub> in the fourth *day* of the month,  
B<sub>1</sub> there arose *a great storm*,  
C<sub>1A</sub> such an one as *never had been known in all the land*;  
B<sub>2A</sub> and there was also *a great and terrible tempest*,  
B<sub>3A</sub> and there was *terrible thunder*,  
D<sub>1A</sub> insomuch that it *did shake the whole earth*  
E<sub>1A</sub> as if it was *about to divide asunder*,  
B<sub>4A</sub> and there was *exceeding sharp lightnings*,  
C<sub>1B</sub> such as *never had been known in all the land*.<sup>1</sup>

This stanza introduces the first segment (3 Nephi 8:5-18) of the text dealing with the sign of three days of darkness. The “B” lines describe four aspects of the atmospheric commotion: storm, tempest, thunder and lightnings. This initial list was modified by Mormon twice within the segment. Verse 12 lists tempest, whirlwinds, thunderings and lightnings (in that order); and verses 16 and 17 arrange the list as whirlwind, tempests, thunderings and lightnings. Then, in verse 19 (part of the next segment; 3 Nephi 8:19-22), Mormon again listed the four aspects of atmospheric disturbance that appear in verses 5-7, but in a partially reversed order: thunderings and lightnings, followed by storm and tempest.

Mormon’s changes with respect to the singular and plural forms of these words, and the order in which they appear in his lists, appear to have been substantive, so that the fulfillment of

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<sup>1</sup> Capitalization, punctuation and spelling are as set forth in Joseph Smith, Jr., author and proprietor, *The Book of Mormon* (Palmyra, New York: E.B. Grandin, 1830; Independence, Missouri: Herald Heritage Reprint, 1970), 470; or Wilford C. Wood, *Joseph Smith Begins His Work: Book of Mormon 1830 First Edition Reproduced from Uncut Sheets* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Publisher’s Press, 1958), 470. This text appears to have been typeset directly from the original manuscript rather than the printer’s manuscript. Royal Skousen, ed., *The Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon: Typographical Facsimile of the Extant Text* (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies [“FARMS”], 2001), 6; idem, *The Printer’s Manuscript of the Book of Mormon: Typographical Facsimile of the Entire Text in Two Parts, Part One* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2001), 3-4. The wording of the printer’s manuscript is the same as the 1830 edition, except for the addition of the word *that* after the phrase *came to pass* and Joseph Smith’s change of the last *was* to *were* for the 1837 edition. Royal Skousen, ed., *The Printer’s Manuscript of the Book of Mormon: Typographical Facsimile of the Entire Text in Two Parts, Part Two* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2001), 803. No material interpretive issue exists relative to the textual transmission of these verses; however, “there is some evidence from transmission errors by Oliver Cowdery that he could have accidentally added the *that* here when he copied from [the original manuscript] into [the printer’s manuscript]; usage elsewhere in the text supports the lack of *that* when a following adverbial phrase provides a complex reference to the time of the event.” Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon, Part Five* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2008), 3311.

the prophecies of Nephi (who, in part, referred to Zenos) and Samuel were recorded meticulously (3 Nephi 10:14). However, one cannot overlook or ignore the literary component of Mormon's changes in diction. For example, he used the singular term *whirlwind* stylistically (3 Nephi 8:16) when only the plural term appeared in Nephi's prophecy (2 Nephi 26:5). As I will discuss in part two of this chapter on "Jesus' Death and Resurrection," Mormon's other changes to his lists also appear to have been as much literary structure as prophetic substance.

In this part of the chapter, each of the aspects of atmospheric disturbance will be examined. In part two, the devastation associated with the earthquake will be studied. Mormon introduced the devastation of the earthquake in the immediately following stanza (3 Nephi 8:8-10) by referring to fire, water and earth.<sup>2</sup> Thus, in the first two stanzas introducing the sign of three days of darkness, Mormon depicted the devastation that came to the Nephites and Lamanites as involving four natural elements: air, fire, water and earth. For the ancients, all of nature was in commotion (see 1 Nephi 19:12) and all of the prophesied events occurred when the sign came to pass.<sup>3</sup>

*Lightnings.* The only aspect of the turbulent air that Mormon described consistently in his four lists was *lightnings* (3 Nephi 8:7, 12, 17, 19). In the prophecies themselves, the plural term *lightnings* was used in each instance (1 Nephi 12:4; 19:11; 2 Nephi 26:6; Helaman 14:21, 26), except one (where the singular term *lightning* was used by the Nephite recorder of Samuel's prophecies; Helaman 14:27). Neither term appears elsewhere in the Book of Mormon. Lightning was something that was seen (1 Nephi 12:4), a manifestation of God's power in or through nature (1 Nephi 19:11-12).

In the modern world, the word *lightning* means the "visible discharge of electricity between one group of clouds and another, or between the clouds and the ground. Also in particularized sense (now *rare*), A flash of lightning." The singular *lightning* may refer to multiple lightning flashes; e.g., "1859 *All Year Round* No. 17. 400 The lightning .. was chiefly 'sheet lightning', though now and then 'chained' or 'forked' was visible."<sup>4</sup> At the time of Joseph Smith, *lightning* carried similar meanings: "A sudden discharge of electricity from a cloud to the earth, or from the earth to a cloud, or from one cloud to another, that is, from a body positively charged to one negatively charged, producing a vivid flash of light, and usually a loud report, called thunder."<sup>5</sup> The plural

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Dilworth Rust recognized these three natural elements (in the stanza composed of verses 8-10), but he apparently did not identify the natural element of air (in the previous stanza, verses 5-7) as a symbol of the Holy Ghost. "The key forces of water, fire, and earth are involved in the destruction of the Nephite and Lamanite cities recorded in 3 Nephi 8 and 9.... Yet in 3 Nephi 11, uplift and even salvation are said to come through those same three elements: being baptized in water, being visited by fire and the Holy Ghost, and being built upon Christ's rock." Richard Dilworth Rust, "Book of Mormon Imagery," in John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne, eds. *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book and Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1991), 138-9.

<sup>3</sup> As an example of textual consistency, John W. Welch pinpointed Mormon's intent to document the prophetic fulfillment of Zenos' prophecy. John W. Welch, "Textual Consistency," in John W. Welch, ed., *Reexploring the Book of Mormon: The F.A.R.M.S. Updates* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book and Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1992), 23. Mormon's intent appears to have extended to five of the chronological prophecies and to the chronological framework of his entire book. See the chapter on "Chronological Structure" in this source book.

<sup>4</sup> *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, two vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), I: 1623 ("Lightning"), italics in original.

<sup>5</sup> Noah Webster, LL.D., *American Dictionary of the English Language*, two vols. (New York: S. Converse, 1828), II: [54-55] ("LIGHTNING"), accessed at [www.archive.org/details/americandictionary02websrich](http://www.archive.org/details/americandictionary02websrich). See also Noah Webster, LL.D., *Dictionary of the English Language: Abridged from the American Dictionary* (New

term *lightnings* appears in quotations in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as early as “c. 1423 CAPGRAVE *Chron.* (Rolls) 314 The moost horribil thunderes and litynnynngis that evyr ony man herd” and some 50 years after the first publication of the Book of Mormon, “1880 *Nature* XXI. 407 A few lightnings and rather more auroras were seen.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, the plural term *lightnings* in 3 Nephi 8 means multiple lightning flashes seen by Nephites and Lamanites.

*Thunderings.* The plural term *thunderings* appears throughout the prophecies associated with the sign of three days of darkness (1 Nephi 12:4; 19:11; 2 Nephi 26:6; Helaman 14:21, 26) and in Mormon’s description of the fulfillment of the sign (3 Nephi 8:12, 17, 19). However, the singular term *thunder* also appears in Samuel’s prophecy and in one of Mormon’s lists (Helaman 14:27; 3 Nephi 8:6), as well as in other Book of Mormon contexts (1 Nephi 17:45; 2 Nephi 27:2; Mosiah 27:11, 18; Alma 29:2; 36:7; 38:7; Helaman 5:30). Thunder was something that was heard (1 Nephi 12:4) as another manifestation of God’s power in or through nature (1 Nephi 19:11-12).

An angel could speak “like unto the voice of thunder, which did cause the earth to shake as if it were to divide asunder” (1 Nephi 17:45; see also Mosiah 27:11, 18; Alma 36:7; 38:7). Indeed, the shaking of the earth and changes to the face of the land seem to have been considered (and sometimes might have been) the results of lightning and thunder (Helaman 14:21; 3 Nephi 8:6, 12, 17). Thunder and “earthquakes” were linked with “all manner of tumultuous noises” as sounds of nature the people could hear (1 Nephi 12:4).

The modern definition of *thunder* refers to electrical discharges: the “loud noise accompanying a flash of lightning (apparently following it, being heard after it at an interval depending on distance), due to the sudden violent disturbance of the air by the electrical discharge; varying from a sharp report or crash to a prolonged roll of reverberation.” As with *lightning*, the singular *thunder* may refer to multiple thunderclaps; e.g. “1816 SCOTT *Old Mort.* xxxvii, Rather than ye suld ride on in the rain and thunner.”<sup>7</sup> At the time of Joseph Smith, *thunder* was understood to be the “sound which follows an explosion of electricity or lightning.”<sup>8</sup> According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the plural term *thunderings* is now considered rare or archaic, but instances are reported from “1526 TINDALE *Rev.* xix. 6 As the voyce off many waters, and as the voyce off stronge thondrynges” and “1884 TAIT *Mind in Matter* (1892) 200 At the bidding of Moses, thunderings, lightnings, and hail, by divine command, exhibited [etc.].”<sup>9</sup> Thus, *thunder* and *thunderings* in 3 Nephi 8 include multiple sounds of thunder heard by Nephites and Lamanites.

*Whirlwinds.* In Mormon’s second list, he referred to “the tempest and the whirlwinds” (3 Nephi 8:12), but in his third list, he switched the order and the singular and plural forms so that “the whirlwind” and “the tempests” occurred (3 Nephi 8:16-17). Nephi had prophesied “whirlwinds” that would carry the wicked away (2 Nephi 26:3-5); so, the reference in 3 Nephi 8:16 to “some who

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York: White, Gallaher, & White, 1831), 250 (“Light-ning”): “a flash or discharge of electricity;” and Samuel Johnson, LL.D, and John Walker, *A Dictionary of the English Language* (London: William Pickering, 1828), 432 (“LIGHTNING”): “The electrick flash that attends thunder” (both abridged dictionaries accessed through Google Books).

<sup>6</sup> *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, I: 1623 (“Lightning”), italics in original.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, II: 3312-13 (“Thunder”).

<sup>8</sup> Webster, *American Dictionary of the English Language*, II: [765] (“THUNDER”). See also Webster, *Dictionary of the English Language*, 442 (“Thun'-der”): “the sound which follows lightning;” and Johnson and Walker, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 740 (“THUNDER”): “A loud rumbling noise, which usually follows lightning.”

<sup>9</sup> *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, II: 3313 (“Thundering”).

were carried away in the whirlwind” may use the singular *whirlwind* to refer to multiple events, just as the singular terms *lightning* and *thunder* were used to refer to multiple instances of each.

In modern English, a *whirlwind* may be defined as a “whirling or rotating wind; an atmospheric eddy or vortex; a body of air moving rapidly in a circular or upward spiral course around a vertical or slightly inclined axis which has also a progressive motion over the surface of land or water. In its larger forms it constitutes a violent and destructive storm, as a cyclone or tornado.”<sup>10</sup> In Joseph Smith’s day, a *whirlwind* was a “violent wind moving in a circle, or rather in a spiral form, as if moving round an axis; this axis or the perpendicular column moving horizontally, raising and whirling dust, leaves and the like.”<sup>11</sup> Presumably, a violent circular or spiral wind that could carry away a person was a fierce hurricane or tornado.

*Tempests.* In three of Mormon’s four lists about the tumult in the air, the singular term *tempest* is used (3 Nephi 8:6, 12, 19), but in the third of his lists (3 Nephi 8:17), the plural term *tempests* appears. This was not merely a stylistic change by Mormon. The singular term occurs in the prophecies of Zenos (1 Nephi 19:11) and Samuel (Helaman 14:27), but Samuel also prophesied “great tempests” (Helaman 14:23). In Mormon’s later description of the destruction of the wicked during the upheaval and subsequent three days of darkness, he emphasized that prophets had warned them and that the lives of those who listened to the prophets were spared (3 Nephi 10:11-17). When referring to “all of these deaths and destructions by fire, and by smoke, and by tempests, and by whirlwinds, and by the opening of the earth” (3 Nephi 10:14), Mormon also used the plural term.

Mormon’s introductory reference to the “great and terrible tempest” (3 Nephi 8:6) closely tracks a phrase in the small plates of Nephi, which Mormon found and read before attaching them to his abridgement (Words of Mormon 1:1-8). Nephi had described an incident at sea when “there arose a great storm, yea, a great and terrible tempest” (1 Nephi 18:13). Mormon changed Nephi’s phrasing to underscore the ultimate severity of the new storm: “there arose a great storm, *such an one as never had been known in all the land. And there was also a great and terrible tempest*” (3 Nephi 8:5-6, italics added). Mormon’s emphatic description of the severity of the storm in the 34th year of the Nephites’ new era clearly refers back to the great storm and tempest experienced at sea by the followers of Lehi, but Mormon’s description seems to suggest that not since the time of the Nephites’ revered ancestors had such a great storm and tempest been experienced, and never had such a storm been known in the land of the Nephites and Lamanites.

When the tempest experienced at sea by Lehi and his followers had raged for four days, Nephi later recorded that, as an answer to repentance and prayer, “the winds did cease, and the storm did cease, and there was a great calm” (1 Nephi 18:14-15, 21). By using these terms (a *storm* and *tempest* came upon them, and then the *winds* and *storm* ceased), Nephi might be thought to have identified the *storm* as something different from the *tempest* or the *winds*, and perhaps to have equated the *tempest* only with *winds*. However, if Moroni’s use of the plural term *tempests* (Ether 6:6) is any indication, a *tempest* at sea was more than just *winds*.

Moroni appears to have paraphrased Nephi’s original phrase when he referred to “great and terrible tempests” to describe conditions experienced by the Jaredites during their ocean voyage. The Jaredite barges “were many times buried in the depths of the sea, because of the

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<sup>10</sup> *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, II: 3762 (“Whirlwind”).

<sup>11</sup> Webster, *American Dictionary of the English Language*, II: [921] (“WHIRLWIND”). See also Webster, *Dictionary of the English Language*, 503 (“Whirl-wind”): “a wind moving circularly;” and Johnson and Walker, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 818 (“WHIRLWIND”): “A stormy wind moving circularly.”

mountain waves which broke upon them, and also the great and terrible tempests which were caused by the fierceness of the wind” (Ether 6:6). Evidently, Moroni intended the term *tempests* to include not only “the fierceness of the wind,” but other water (presumably, wind-driven waves and perhaps rain, hail or air-borne seawater) that the furious winds pounded onto and over the barges, causing them to be “buried in the depths of the sea.”

Moroni’s other use of the plural term *tempests* indicates that such tumult in the air was not restricted to an occurrence over the sea. Describing the time when the Book of Mormon would come forth, Moroni prophesied that, among other things, “it shall come in a day when there shall be heard of fires, and tempests, and vapors of smoke in foreign lands” (Mormon 8:29). In large measure, this prophecy seems to be about the rapidity and safety of communication across the seas, but the prophecy of tempests “in foreign lands” is suggested.

Similarly, Nephi used *tempest* in prophesying about the last days. “[A]ll the nations ... will be drunken with iniquity and all manner of abominations ... [and] they shall be visited of the Lord of Hosts, with thunder and with earthquake, and with a great noise, and with storm, and with tempest, and with the flame of devouring fire” (2 Nephi 27:1-2). In addition, he recorded the prophecy of his brother, Jacob, concerning the last days that “they that believe not in [the Messiah] shall be destroyed, both by fire, and by tempest, and by earthquakes, and by bloodsheds, and by pestilence, and by famine” (2 Nephi 6:15). The final use of *tempest* in the Book of Mormon occurs in the risen Messiah’s teachings. In describing the gathering of Israel in the last days, the Messiah quoted Isaiah 54, including verse 11: “O thou afflicted, tossed with tempest, and not comforted! Behold, I will lay thy stones with fair colors, and lay thy foundations with sapphires” (3 Nephi 22:11). In none of these instances is the tempest restricted to turbulence over the sea.

To summarize, Mormon appears to have referred to a *tempest* and *tempests* with respect to the most furious of winds. On rivers, lakes or the sea, such winds could drive dangerous waves and, on the land, such winds presumably could carry hazardous materials such as tree branches, roofs, and clouds of dust or sand. These fierce winds could drive precipitation and toss and injure people.

In its modern meaning, a *tempest* is a “violent storm of wind, usually accompanied by a downfall of rain, hail, or snow, or by thunder.”<sup>12</sup> To Joseph Smith’s contemporaries, the word meant: “An extensive current of wind, rushing with great velocity and violence; a storm of extreme violence. We usually apply the word to a steady wind of long continuance; but we say also of a tornado, it blew a *tempest*. The currents of wind are named, according to their respective degrees of force or rapidity, a *breeze*, a *gale*, a *storm*, a *tempest*, but *gale* is also used as synonymous with *storm*, and *storm* with *tempest*. *Gust* is usually applied to a sudden blast of short duration. A tempest may or may not be attended with rain, snow or hail.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, it appears that a *tempest* may be understood as an extensive, lengthy and extremely violent wind; that it could be hazardous to life, limb, property and the natural environment; and that in the setting where the Book of Mormon came forth, there might have been some confusion between a *storm* and a *tempest* in the common understanding and use of the word *tempest*.

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<sup>12</sup> *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, II: 3255 (“Tempest”).

<sup>13</sup> Webster, *American Dictionary of the English Language*, II: [742], italics in original (“TEMPEST”). See also Webster, *Dictionary of the English Language*, 437 (“Tem’-pest”): “violent wind, a storm, a gale;” and Johnson and Walker, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 731 (“TEMPEST”): “The utmost violence of the wind: the names by which the wind is called according to the gradual increase of its force seem to be, a breeze; a gale; a gust; a storm; a tempest.”

*A Great Storm.* Mormon’s initial descriptions of the atmospheric commotion, “a great storm” and “a great and terrible tempest” (3 Nephi 8:5-6), appear to have been derived from Nephi’s phrases in the small plates (1 Nephi 18:13). Nephi’s use of the two terms, joined by the word *yea*, and his subsequent use of *storm* and *winds* (1 Nephi 18:21) suggest two separate aspects of the atmospheric tumult. Similarly, Mormon’s use of the word *also* suggests that he considered the *storm* and the *tempest* to be different in some way.

Does the text indicate how the storm might have differed from the tempest? To begin to answer this question, I think it is helpful to compare the four lists that appear in Mormon’s initial report.

3 Nephi 8:5-7	3 Nephi 8:12	3 Nephi 8:16-17	3 Nephi 8:19	Three-day Prophecies
storm			storm	Not mentioned
tempest	tempest	tempests	tempest	1 Nephi 19:11; Helaman 14:23, 27
	whirlwinds	whirlwind		2 Nephi 26:5
thunder	thunderings	thunderings	thunderings	1 Nephi 12:4; 19:11; 2 Nephi 26:6; Helaman 14:21, 26-27
lightnings	lightnings	lightnings	lightnings	1 Nephi 12:4; 19:11; 2 Nephi 26:6; Helaman 14:21, 26-27

The most striking aspect of this comparison is that a singular *storm* initiates the segment in which all the disorders of air, fire, water and earth are introduced (3 Nephi 8:5-18) and the segment in which the length of the great tumult of nature is described (3 Nephi 8:19-22), but there was no prophecy of a *storm* (whether from Zenos, Nephi or Samuel). Were storms so common that even a “great storm” was considered normal?

The singular term *storm* appears first in the Book of Mormon with Nephi’s great storm (1 Nephi 18:13, 21) and last with the great storm described by Mormon (3 Nephi 8:5, 19). In between, six different instances occur. In 2 Nephi 14, Nephi quoted Isaiah’s prophecy concerning the Lord’s protection and care of Zion (Isaiah 4), stating that there would be “a tabernacle ... for a place of refuge, and a covert from storm and from rain” (2 Nephi 14:6; compare Isaiah 4:6). Also, in 2 Nephi 27, Nephi paraphrased some of Isaiah’s prophecies about the Lord’s restoration of Israel in the last days and the coming forth of the Book of Mormon (Isaiah 29), stating that “all the nations ... will be drunken with iniquity and all manner of abominations ... [and] they shall be visited of the Lord of Hosts, with thunder and with earthquake, and with a great noise, and with storm, and with tempest, and with the flame of devouring fire” (2 Nephi 27:1-2; compare Isaiah 29:6). These uses of Hebrew words, sometimes translated as *storm* in the King James Version, will be examined in a subsequent part of this chapter.

Following the successful mission to the Lamanites carried out by the sons of king Mosiah and their companions, Ammon spoke about the thousands of Lamanites who had converted to the Lord. Like “sheaves” (of grain, which is not mentioned, but seems to be implied) that had been harvested and “gathered into the garners,” the Lamanite believers “shall not be beaten down by the storm at the last day; yea, neither shall they be harrowed up by the whirlwinds; but when the storm cometh they shall be gathered together in their place, that the storm cannot penetrate to them; yea, neither shall they be driven with fierce winds whithersoever the enemy listeth to carry them” (Alma 26:5-6). In this metaphor, the storm beats down sheaves that have not been harvested. Whirlwinds harrow them up and fierce winds drive them. However, sheaves that have been gathered into garners are protected from the storm; it cannot penetrate to them. The implication seems to be that the storm is something other than whirlwinds and fierce winds. While the storm is

associated with winds, the precipitation also related with the storm (hail or rain) can beat down unharvested sheaves or penetrate to, soak and destroy harvested sheaves that have not been carefully protected in garner.

A similar concept seems to be at work in the report about Helaman's words to his sons, Nephi and Lehi (Helaman 5:4-5). In part, Helaman counseled them: "And now, my sons, remember, remember that it is upon the rock of our Redeemer, who is Christ, the Son of God, that ye must build your foundation; that when the devil shall send forth his mighty winds, yea, his shafts in the whirlwind, yea, when all his hail and his mighty storm shall beat upon you, it shall have no power over you to drag you down to the gulf of misery and endless wo, because of the rock upon which ye are built, which is a sure foundation, a foundation whereon if men build they cannot fall" (Helaman 5:12). In this metaphor, the devil sends forth mighty winds, the most dangerous of which are whirlwinds filled with shafts (that presumably can kill or maim). In the parallel structure of this verse, the devil beats upon humans with hail (a perilous form of precipitation that can kill) and with his mighty storm that beats them with ground-soaking or flooding downpours driven by the wind.

How does this information relate to differences between Mormon's "great storm" and "great and terrible tempest"? I suggest that the *tempest* involved the most extreme form of wind, a geographically extensive, temporally lengthy and extremely violent wind—a wind that could hurl dangerous waves, tear loose hazardous materials, and drive precipitation and clouds of dust or sand. A tempest could toss and injure people. The tempest was distinguishable from a whirlwind, which was dangerous, too. Large whirlwinds (that today probably would be called tornadoes) carried people away. The word that Joseph Smith translated as *storm*, however, seems to have been related not just to winds, but to precipitation.

The word *storm* now usually refers to a "violent disturbance of the atmosphere, manifested by high winds, often accompanied by heavy falls of rain, hail, or snow, by thunder and lightning, and at sea by turbulence of the waves. Hence sometimes applied to a heavy fall of rain, hail, or snow, or to a violent outbreak of thunder and lightning, unaccompanied by strong wind."<sup>14</sup> At the time of Joseph Smith, a *storm* was defined as "A violent wind; a tempest. Thus a *storm of wind*, is correct language, as the proper sense of the word is rushing, violence. It has primarily no reference to a fall of rain or snow. But as a violent wind is often attended with rain or snow, the word *storm* has come to be used, most improperly, for a fall of rain or snow without wind."<sup>15</sup> The use of *storm* by Ammon, Helaman and Mormon seems to have included the wind with precipitation.

Russell H. Ball suggested that that great storm in the 34th year included neither "heavy rains" nor any precipitation at all.<sup>16</sup> However, his reasoning on this point was not thorough. The passages examined above were not mentioned. Instead, he focused on 3 Nephi 8:21, where Mormon reported that the Nephites' candles, torches and "fine and exceedingly dry wood" could not be made to burn during the three days of darkness. According to Ball, Mormon's "emphasis on the existence of dry wood after the destructive events seems to rule out the flooding of rivers, since it would have followed heavy rains, a fact which seems incompatible with the emphasis on dry

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<sup>14</sup> *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, II: 3072 ("Storm").

<sup>15</sup> Webster, *American Dictionary of the English Language*, II: [674], italics in original ("Storm"), accessed at [www.archive.org/americandictionary02websr](http://www.archive.org/americandictionary02websr). See also Webster, *Dictionary of the English Language*, 419 ("Storm"): "a violent wind, a tempest;" and Johnson and Walker, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 703 ("Storm"): "A tempest; a commotion of the elements" (both abridged dictionaries accessed through Google Books).

<sup>16</sup> Russell H. Ball, "An Hypothesis concerning the Three Days of Darkness among the Nephites," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2/1 (1993): 109-10, 113.

wood. Thus, it seems quite clear that this period of devastation included no rain.”<sup>17</sup> From the perspective of the principle of simplicity, Ball’s argument requires the following unnecessary assumptions: (1) the Nephites did not store their “fine and exceedingly dry wood” in watertight containers; (2) they did store such wood only in flood plains near rivers; (3) heavy rains would have caused flooding in such flood plains; and (4) if it rained at all, it had to be heavy rains. Thus, because “fine and exceedingly dry wood” existed, there could have been no rain at all.

None of the foregoing assumptions are required to interpret 3 Nephi 8:21. Ammon’s mention of “garners” (Alma 26:5-6) that could protect harvests from being penetrated by storm (impliedly by a rainstorm) suggests that “fine and exceedingly dry wood” could have been kept in watertight containers. The Nephites lived near a major river (Sidon; e.g., Alma 2:15, 34; 4:4; 22:29); so, presumably, they would have known better than to store all their kindling wood in its flood plain. Heavy rains might have caused flooding, but the Nephites may have been accustomed to heavy rains and flooding, and may have built their cities and storage facilities accordingly. Finally, the fact of a great storm does not necessarily require that it include heavy rains. The storm might have begun with great winds driving intermittent rain showers, but then become a rainless storm distinguished by its sharp lightning, booming thunder, furious tempest and whirlwinds. The text does not appear to contradict such alternative assumptions; rather, Ammon, Helaman and Mormon inferentially support them.

*The Whole Earth.* Each of the *Oxford English Dictionary* definitions for *storm*, *tempest* and *thunder* uses the adjective *violent*, which means “Of natural forces: Possessed of or operating with great force or strength; ... Of noise: Extremely loud.”<sup>18</sup> Mormon conveys part of this meaning with his repetition of the adjectives *great* and *terrible* in connection with *storm*, *tempest* and *thunder*. In the Book of Mormon context, a *great* storm or a *great* tempest would appear to be one “[h]aving a high position in a scale of measurement or quantitative estimation;” thus, perhaps, as to the precipitation or wind, “large amount,” or as to the storm’s or tempest’s size, “massive, big.”<sup>19</sup> However, a massive storm or tempest presumably would not have occurred exactly the same way in each location within the Nephite and Lamanite lands.

Some might question my references above to Nephite and Lamanite people and lands since 3 Nephi 8:6, 12, 17 and 18 all use the phrase *the whole earth*. Ball also examined this issue, in part by referring to the prophecies, which specify destruction within the Nephite and Lamanite zone (2 Nephi 26:1-9; Helaman 14:20), and to the voice of Jesus Christ “heard among all the inhabitants of the earth” (according to Mormon; 3 Nephi 9:1) during the three days of darkness. That voice referred to “many great destructions” that Christ had “caused to come upon *this land*, and upon *this people*, because of their wickedness and their abominations” (3 Nephi 9:12, italics added). Ball’s examination also considered other references to *the whole earth* in other parts of the Book of Mormon (in particular, Alma 36:7; 38:7; Helaman 3:8; 11:6; 14:22, 27; 3 Nephi 1:17; Ether 13:17). His conclusion is well-supported in the text of the Book of Mormon that “this was a localized phenomenon, even though the phrase *whole earth* is included in the description.”<sup>20</sup>

Was Mormon’s diction (*the whole earth* and *all the inhabitants of the earth*; 3 Nephi 8:6, 12, 17-18; 9:1) erroneous? Was Joseph Smith’s translation incorrect? Were such terms merely poetic

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>18</sup> *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, II: 3635 (“Violent”).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., I: 1198 (“Great”).

<sup>20</sup> Ball, “An Hypothesis concerning the Three Days of Darkness,” 113-19, at 115, italics in original.



hyperbole?<sup>21</sup> Such questions may not be answerable today, but they do exist and, if that is where the questions end, they may leave the speculative, but incorrect, impression that the Book of Mormon is in error on this point. Alternatively, was there some connotation in Mormon's language concerning the word *earth* or the phrase *whole earth* that was limiting, but did not translate into English? Perhaps. Such issues are beyond the scope of this source book. However, consistent with the principles of rational reserve and uncertain cultural comprehension, my inclination is not to view the *earth* or *whole earth* as errors or simple hyperbole, but as limited terms, the original meaning of which seems to relate to the separation of nature into the elements of air, fire, water and earth, as experienced or perceived directly by a person or group of people. Thus, the *earth* would be something like the ground that a person could stand upon or the dirt that could be picked up, and the *whole earth* would include the ground that could be seen or experienced by one's companions or other contemporaries as well. Such definitions would be consistent with Ball's correct conclusion that the tumult in the air was "a localized phenomenon." Such definitions also are speculative at this point, but I think such issues in the Book of Mormon deserve to be identified and analyzed by those competent to address the linguistic, cultural and geographic implications.

All of this suggests that on the fourth day of the 34th year measured by the believers from the coming of Christ, a great storm of wind with precipitation (perhaps hail and rain) fell on at least parts of the land with fury. Intense lightning and thunder rattled the earth. An immense tempest (with or without precipitation), accompanied by whirlwinds, howled and roared in the air. According to the angel's words to Samuel, the thunderings and lightnings were to last "for the space of many hours" (Helaman 14:26). Mormon recorded that the thunderings, lightnings, storm, tempest and quaking of the earth "did last for about the space of three hours; and it was said by some that the time was greater; nevertheless, all these great and terrible things were done in about the space of three hours—and then behold, there was darkness upon the face of the land" (3 Nephi 8:19). Thus, the three days of darkness commenced.

As a result of my division of this chapter into this first part, examining disturbances in the air, and the next part, dealing in more detail with destructions by air, fire, water and earth, I have not included above any examination of earthquakes and their related devastation. However, it would appear that from the first flash of lightning and terrifying thunder, the earth commenced shaking and continued to shake violently (probably more in some areas than in others) throughout a period of three or more hours. The subsequent trembling of the earth continued throughout the three days of darkness (3 Nephi 10:9). For those living through it, this would have seemed an interminable and terrifying disturbance of nature. The ultimate effects of this great tumult for the believers and non-believers will be examined in part three of this chapter. Following that, additional parts will examine the text in light of relevant outside sources, including Hebrew and Christian scriptures, and historical and scientific data concerning events such as storms, earthquakes, landslides and volcanoes.

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<sup>21</sup> John E. Clark has assumed that the phrase *whole earth* has no "concrete meaning" and is simply "poetic." John E. Clark, "Revisiting 'A Key for Evaluating Nephite Geographies,'" *Mormon Studies Review* 23/1 (2011): 40.