

The Book of Moses: The Most Surprising and Neglected Scripture



Harold Bloom, 1930-; <http://prelectur.stanford.edu/lecturers/bloom/gifs/hbportrait.gif>

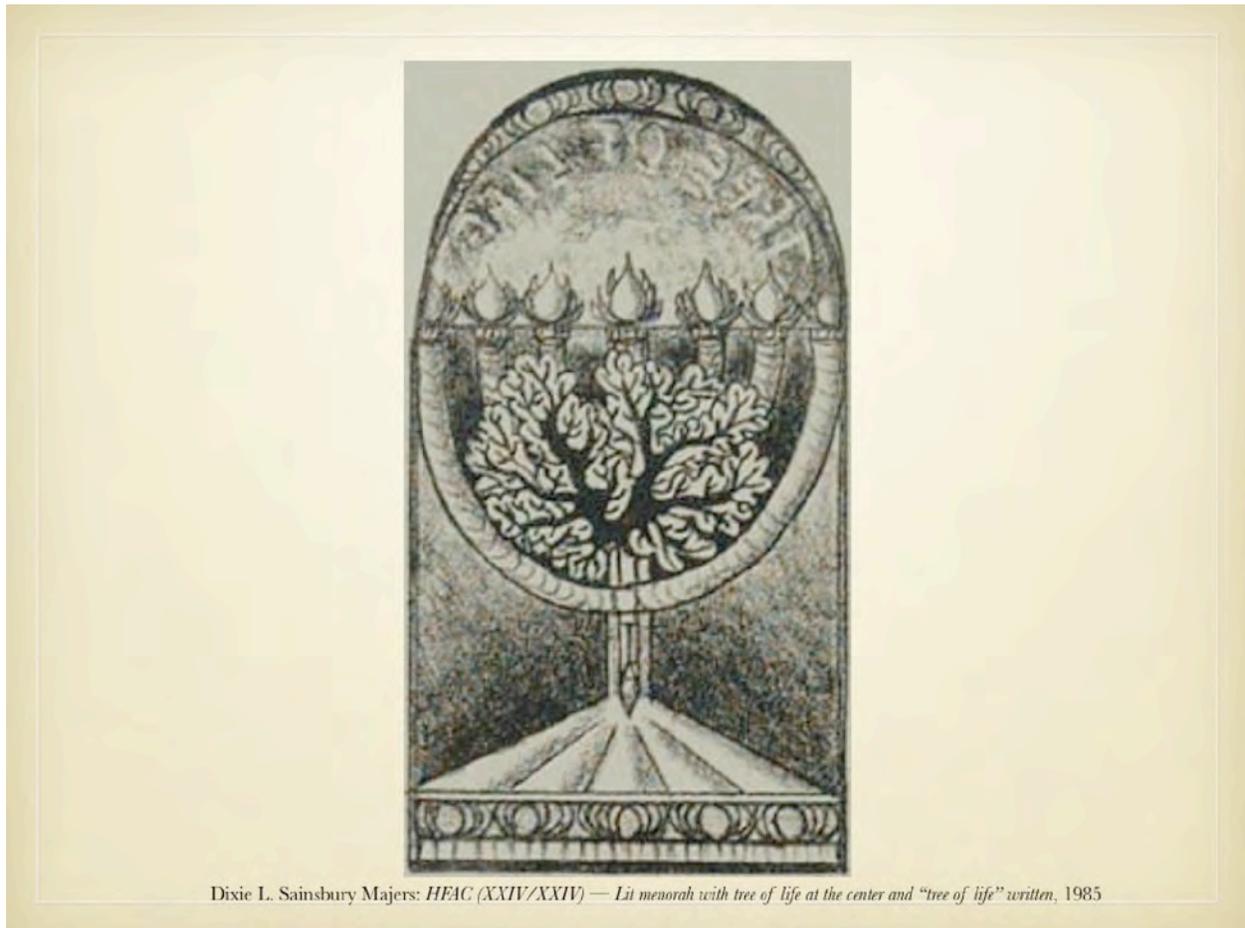
In 2005, the eminent Yale professor and Jewish literary scholar Harold Bloom called the book of Moses and the book of Abraham two of the “more surprising” and “neglected” works of LDS scripture.¹ With the great spate of publications over the forty years since fragments of Egyptian papyri were rediscovered in the Metropolitan Museum of Art,² we have begun to see a remedy for the previous neglect of the book of Abraham.³ Now, gratefully, because of wider availability of the original manuscripts and new detailed studies of their contents, the book of Moses is also beginning to receive its due.⁴

What did Professor Bloom find so “surprising” in the book of Moses? He said he was intrigued by the fact that many of its themes are “strikingly akin to ancient suggestions.” While expressing “no judgment, one way or the other, upon the authenticity” of LDS scripture, he found “enormous validity” in the way these writings “recapture... crucial elements in the archaic Jewish religion... that had ceased to be available either to normative Judaism or to Christianity, and that survived only in esoteric traditions unlikely to have touched [Joseph] Smith directly.”⁵ In other words, Professor Bloom had no idea how Joseph Smith could have come up with, on his own, a modern book that resembles so closely ancient Jewish and Christian teachings.

I have recently finished writing an in-depth commentary of 1100 pages on the first six chapters of the book of Moses. Having spent more than three years in focused study of this inspired work of scripture, I have also been astonished with the extent to which its words reverberate with the echoes of antiquity—and, no less significantly, with the deepest truths of my personal experience. Indeed, I would not merely assert that the book of Moses holds up well under close examination, but rather that, like a fractal whose self-similar patterns become more wondrous upon ever closer inspection, the brilliance of its inspiration shines most impressively under bright light and high magnification: there is glory in the details.

Throughout the coming year, members of the Church will be focusing on the Old Testament as part of the Sunday School Gospel Doctrine course of study for 2010. Each week in this column, we will explore some of the surprising ways in which ancient religious writings, sacred rituals, art, and music testify of the book of Moses as a revealed book of scripture. We will also explore related topics in other books of the Old Testament, especially as they touch on temple themes.

Temple Themes in the Scriptures



Allusions to temple themes can be found throughout the scriptures, but it is not always easy to recognize them. Our handicap is due in part to the fact that the words and images of scripture play a so much smaller role in our everyday conversation and experience than they did in

previous generations.⁶ Efforts have been made to bridge this gap through books that explain the meaning of specific symbols used in scripture and temple worship. However, most of us not only struggle with the meaning of individual concepts and symbols, but also—and perhaps more crucially—in understanding how these concepts and symbols fit together as a whole system. The symbols and concepts of the temple are best understood, not in isolation, but within the full context of temple teachings to which they belong.⁷ As Latter-day Saints, we are privileged to have access to more knowledge about the temple than has been available to any other group of people at any other time.

Because its stories form such an important part of the LDS temple endowment, the book of Moses is an ideal starting point for a scripture-based study of temple themes. It is well known, for example, that the endowment, like the book of Moses, includes “a recital of the most prominent events of the creative period, the condition of our first parents in the Garden of Eden, their disobedience and consequent expulsion from that blissful abode, their condition in the lone and dreary world when doomed to live by labor and sweat, the plan of redemption by which the great transgression may be atoned.”⁸ What is more rarely appreciated, however, is that the relationship between scripture and temple goes two ways. Not only have many of the stories of the book of Moses been included in the endowment, but also, in striking abundance, themes echoing temple architecture, furnishings, ordinances, and covenants have been deeply woven into the text of the book of Moses itself.

In the coming months, we will explore topics such as the following:

The Vision of Moses as a Heavenly Ascent. A careful examination of the structure of the Moses 1 reveals striking parallels to ancient accounts of other prophets who were invited to enter the presence of the Lord. While the experience of Moses describes the supreme reward of heavenly ascent, it also provides valuable insights about the preparatory journey that each of us take when we perform temple ordinances.

Creation and the Garden as Temple Models. The book of Exodus and later Jewish teachings assert that the days of Creation are mirrored in the architecture and furnishings of the Israelite temple. They also show how the layout of the Garden of Eden seems to have been modeled in the major divisions of temple structures. Ancient texts also reveal possible temple themes in the episode of Adam’s naming of the animals.

The Tree in the Midst of the Garden. Stories about the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge raise many fascinating questions. For example, did the Tree of Life promise immortality or eternal life? Why were the olive tree and the date palm attractive choices for representing the attributes of the Tree of Life? What is the significance of the placement of the Tree of Life in the center of the Garden? What are we to make of Eve’s statement that it is instead the Tree of Knowledge that is located in the center of the Garden? Though, to us, details about the nature and placement of the trees of Eden may seem obscure or unimportant, ancient readers familiar with the temple would have recognized their significance for the story of the Fall.

The Fall and the Temple. Modern revelation allows us to begin to reconstruct the differences between the program of God and that of Satan for the Fall of Adam and Eve. Satan’s plan seems

to have heavily relied on the strategy of confusion: confusion between the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge, confusion of identity between the true and the false “keeper of the gate,”⁹ and confusion between real and sham power and authority. Welcome light is thrown on the meaning of these events as they are considered in relation to the temple layout of the Garden of Eden.

The Nakedness and Clothing of Adam and Eve. Clues in scripture about the nakedness and the clothing of Adam and Eve reveal a correspondence between their movements in and out of the Garden of Eden and the movement of officiators between different areas of ancient temples. Such changes in clothing were used anciently to represent stages in progression through mortality and on to eternal life.

Covenant-Keeping and Covenant-Breaking. Ancient texts describe accounts of Satan’s continued attempts to deceive mankind after the Fall, as well as visits of heavenly messengers who came to reveal the Gospel. Chapters 5 through 8 of the book of Moses also include a sequence of covenants revealed to Adam and Eve and their posterity. Not only are these the same covenants that have always been made at the temple, but they also appear largely in the same order.¹⁰ Both the ultimate consequences of covenant-keeping as well as those of covenant-breaking are fully illustrated at the conclusion of the series: in the final two chapters of the book of Moses, Enoch and his people are taken up to walk in the presence of God while the wicked are destroyed in the great Flood.

Adam and the Atonement. Traditions about Seth’s quest for the oil of mercy relate to Christ’s atonement as “the whole meaning of the law.”¹¹ Those who, like Adam and Eve, receive the Gospel become “partakers of the divine nature”¹² and, by virtue of this fact, participate in Christ’s sufferings as well as His glory.

Learning to Read the Scriptures



Arthur Henry King, 1910-2000: From *Speak That I May See Thee*

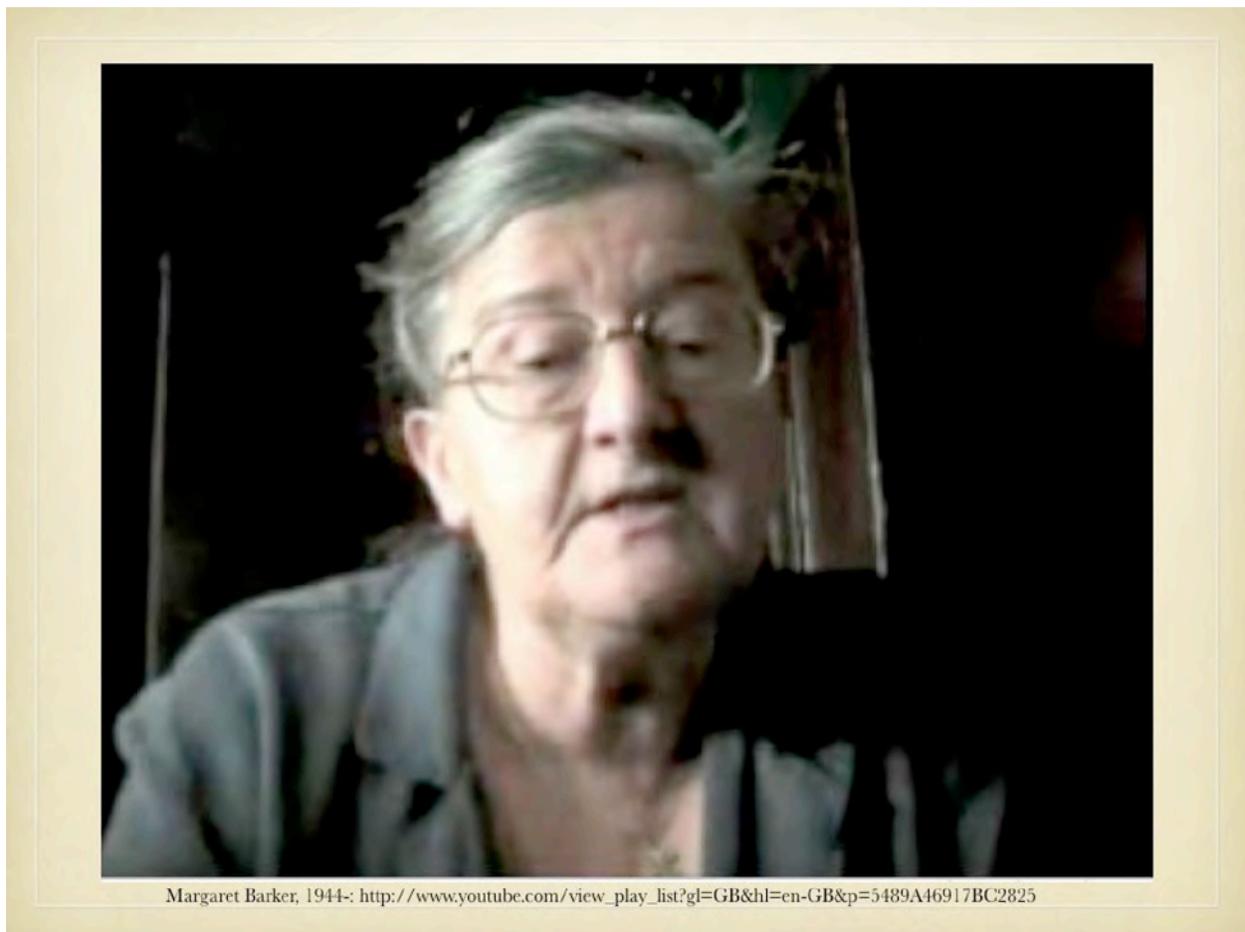
I owe my awakening to the literary beauty of scripture to a Brigham Young University (BYU) “Reading the Scriptures” course taught by Professor Arthur Henry King, or “Brother King” as he preferred to be called in class. Converted to Mormonism in Britain during his later years, Brother King was a Shakespeare scholar and professional “stylistician”—in other words, an expert in how the nuances of linguistic expression reveal to their readers, both intentionally and unintentionally, not only the literary characters but also the authors themselves. Indeed, Brother King often mentioned how it was the very style of the First Vision account that convinced him that Joseph Smith was telling the truth.¹³

Brother King believed strongly in the virtues of reading the scriptures aloud.¹⁴ He taught the members of our class how to experiment with different approaches to reading the same verse, how to listen to the wisdom of the spoken voice, and how the varying of emphasis and pauses for breath could highlight different shades of meaning in the text. Under his direction, we sang the scriptures as if they were music.

The Prophet Joseph Smith said that scripture should be “understood precisely as it reads.”¹⁵ Likewise, Brother King taught us to read slowly, and to persist in reading until the plain sense of the words became clear to us.¹⁶ This approach differs from the facile skimming for rapid information ingestion that is the stuff of our daily business—the great Jewish scholar Martin

Buber went so far as to term the application to scripture study of the modern unreflective method “the leprosy of fluency.”¹⁷

Once having gained confidence in our grasp of the plain sense of the words of scripture, we must still decode its pervasive imagery. Our problem in that respect is that we live on the near side of a great divide that separates us from the religious, cultural, and philosophical perspectives of the ancients.¹⁸ The Prophet Joseph Smith was far closer to this lost world than we are—not only because of his personal involvement with the recovery and revelatory expansion of ancient religion, but also because in his time many archaic traditions were still embedded in the language and daily experience of the surrounding culture.¹⁹ Margaret Barker, a Methodist preacher and renowned Old Testament scholar, describes the challenges this situation presents to contemporary students of scripture:



Like the first Christians, we still pray “Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven,”²⁰ but many of the complex system of symbols and stories that describe the Kingdom are not longer recognized for what they are.²¹

It used to be thought that putting the code into modern English would overcome the problem, and make everything clear to people who had no roots in a Christian community. This attempt has proved misguided, since so much of the code simply will

not translate into modern English... The task, then, has had to alter. The need now is not just for modern English, or modern thought forms, but for an explanation of the images and pictures in which the ideas of the Bible are expressed. These are specific to one culture, that of Israel and Judaism, and until they are fully understood in their original setting, little of what is done with the writings and ideas that came from that particular setting can be understood. Once we lose touch with the meaning of biblical imagery, we lose any way into the real meaning of the Bible. This has already begun to happen and a diluted “instant” Christianity has been offered as junk food for the mass market. The resultant malnutrition, even in churches, is all too obvious.²²

Consistent with Barker’s observations, many observers have documented a worldwide trend toward a religious mind-set that prizes emotion²³ and entertainment²⁴ as major staples of worship. Even when undertaken with evident sincerity, religious gatherings of this sort scarcely rise above the level of a “weekly social rite, a boost to our morale,”²⁵ with perhaps a few exhortations on ethics thrown in. When the Bible is consulted at all, it is too often “solely for its piety or its inspiring adventures”²⁶ or its admittedly “memorable illustrations and contrasts” rather than its “deep memories” of spiritual understanding.²⁷ All this has resulted not only in a regrettable “secularization of religious symbolic language,”²⁸ but also in what Prothero calls a widespread “religious amnesia” that has dangerously weakened the foundations of faith.²⁹ Little wonder that the teaching of the central doctrines of the Gospel has been a significant focus of LDS Church leadership in recent years.³⁰ In this connection, Elder Neal A. Maxwell once remarked: “God is giving away the spiritual secrets of the universe,” and then asked: “but are we listening?”³¹

It is my sincere prayer that past neglect of the Old Testament, and in particular the book of Moses, will be remedied in the coming year. This is a work of scripture containing a “feast”³² of spiritual light like no other.

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Endnotes

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- ¹ H. Bloom, *Names Divine*, p. 25.
- ² H. W. Nibley, *New Look*; H. D. Peterson, *Story*.
- ³ See especially e.g., E. D. Clark, *Blessings*; J. Gee *et al.*, *Astronomy*; H. W. Nibley, *Drama*; H. W. Nibley, *Message* 2005; H. W. Nibley, *Abraham* 2000; H. W. Nibley, *Teachings of the PGP*; M. D. Rhodes, *Hor*; J. A. Tvedtnes *et al.*, *Traditions*.
- ⁴ Forty years ago Richard P. Howard (R. P. Howard, *Restoration* 1969) and Robert J. Matthews (R. J. Matthews, *Plainer*) began publishing their pioneering studies of the Joseph Smith Translation or JST, of which the book of Moses is an extract. The wide availability of Matthews' exhaustive study, in particular, was very effective in abating the qualms of Latter-day Saints (T. E. Sherry, *Changing*), who had not yet had an opportunity to compare the RLDS (now Community of Christ) publication of Joseph Smith's "Inspired Version" of the Bible (J. Smith, Jr., *Holy Scriptures*) with the original manuscripts. Such qualms proved by and large to be unfounded. Matthews clearly established that recent editions of the "Inspired Version," notwithstanding their shortcomings, constituted a faithful rendering of the work of the Prophet Joseph Smith and his scribes—insofar as the manuscripts were then understood (R. J. Matthews, *Plainer*, pp. 200-201; see also K. P. Jackson, *Book of Moses*, pp. 20-33). Four years later, in 1979, the status of the JST was further enhanced by the inclusion of selections from the translation in the footnotes and endnotes of a new LDS edition of the King James Bible. Elder Boyd K. Packer heralded this publication event as "the most important thing that [the Church has] done in recent generations" (B. K. Packer, *Scriptures*, p. 53; cf. B. R. McConkie, *Sermons*, p. 236). Twenty-five years later, in 2004, with painstaking effort by editors Scott Faulring, Kent Jackson, and Robert Matthews

and the generous cooperation of the Community of Christ, a facsimile transcription of all the original manuscripts of the JST was at last published (S. H. Faulring *et al.*, Original Manuscripts). In 2005, as an important addition to his ongoing series of historical and doctrinal studies, Kent Jackson provided a detailed examination of the text of the portions of the JST relating to the book of Moses (K. P. Jackson, Book of Moses). Richard Draper, Kent Brown, and Michael Rhodes' verse-by-verse commentary on the Pearl of Great Price, also published in 2005, was another important milestone (R. D. Draper *et al.*, Commentary). Others have also made significant contributions. Taken together, all these studies allow us to see the process and results of the Prophet's work of Bible translation with greater clarity than ever before. See Royal Skousen for a review of these recent studies of the original JST manuscripts (R. Skousen, Earliest). I have recently published a detailed commentary on Moses 1-6:12 (J. M. Bradshaw, God's Image) and a smaller study focused on temple themes is slated to appear in mid-2010 (J. M. Bradshaw, Moses Temple Themes).

⁵ H. Bloom, *American Religion*, pp. 98, 99, 101.

⁶ A. H. King, *Joseph*, pp. 287-288; C. S. Lewis, *Description*; G. d. Santillana *et al.*, *Hamlet's Mill*, p. 10.

⁷ Cf. M. Barker, *Earth*, pp. 1-2; M. Barker, *Hidden*, p. 128. Chesterton has compared our position to that of a "sailor who awakens from a deep sleep and discovers treasure strewn about, relics from a civilization he can barely remember. One by one he picks up the relics—gold coins, a compass, fine clothing—and tries to discern their meaning" (P. Yancey, introduction to G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, p. xiii). The point is that the essential meaning is to be found not so much in the individual relics as in a true grasp of the milieu that produced them.

⁸ J. E. Talmage, *House of the Lord*, 4, p. 54.

⁹ 2 Nephi 9:41.

¹⁰ Compare J. W. Welch, *Temple in the Book of Mormon*, p. 373.

¹¹ Alma 34:14.

¹² 2 Peter 1:4.

¹³ A. H. King, *Account*, pp. 42-43, 45; A. H. King, *Joseph*.

¹⁴ A. H. King, *Afterword*, pp. 233-236; A. H. King, *Child*, pp. 101-102; A. H. King, *Rhetoric*, pp. 201-204; A. H. King, *Education*, pp. 240-242; cf. D. Packard *et al.*, *Feasting*, pp. 18-20, 199-203, 209-213.

¹⁵ J. Smith, Jr., *Words*, 29 January 1843, p. 161.

¹⁶ A. H. King, *Afterword*, pp. 233-234; D. Packard *et al.*, *Feasting*, pp. 8-10. Obviously, the more we know about Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and other relevant languages of antiquity, the better we can interpret the plain sense of scripture.

¹⁷ Cited in M. Fishbane, *Spirituality*, p. 12.

¹⁸ C. S. Lewis, *Description*; G. d. Santillana *et al.*, *Hamlet's Mill*, p. 10.

¹⁹ A. H. King, *Joseph*, pp. 287-288.

²⁰ Matthew 6:10.

²¹ M. Barker, *Hidden*, p. 128.

²² M. Barker, *Earth*, pp. 1-2.

²³ B. C. Hafen, *Anchored*, p. 3.

²⁴ On the origins of today's "praise and worship" services, "patterned after the rock concert of secular culture," see F. Viola *et al.*, *Pagan Christianity*, pp. 164-166.

²⁵ P. Tillich, cited in R. Coles, *Secular Mind*, p. 5. See also *ibid.*, p. 18.

²⁶ J. E. Seach, *Ancient Texts 1995*, p. vii.

²⁷ M. Barker, *Hidden*, p. 34.

²⁸ J. H. Charlesworth, *Protestant View*, p. 84.

²⁹ S. Prothero, *Literacy*, pp. 105-112.

³⁰ See, e.g., H. B. Eyring, Jr., *Power*; M. K. Jensen, *Anchors*; S. D. Nadauld, *Principles*, pp. 88-89; B. K. Packer, *Children*, p. 17; B. K. Packer, *Plan of Happiness*; B. K. Packer, *Do Not Fear*, p. 79; B. K. Packer, *Errand*, pp. 307-312. LDS writers have often noted the fact that "God gave unto [men] commandments, *after* having made known unto them the plan of redemption" (Alma 12:32, emphasis mine).

³¹ N. A. Maxwell, *Cosmos*, p. 2.

³² See 2 Nephi 31:20. See also the profound words of Herbert (G. Herbert, *Temple, The Call*, 125, p. 163):

Come, my Light, my Feast, my Strength:
Such a Light, as shows a feast:
Such a Feast, as mends in length:
Such a Strength, as makes his guest.