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## KnoWhy #503 - How Does the “Mosiah-First” Translation Sequence Strengthen Faith?

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**Abstract:** Most readers of the Book of Mormon naturally assume that Joseph Smith translated its books beginning in 1 Nephi 1:1 and ending with Moroni 10:34. It may be surprising, therefore, to learn that the Small Plates of Nephi (1 Nephi through Words of Mormon) almost certainly came last in the translation process, after the completion of the Large Plates of Nephi (Mosiah through Moroni and the Title Page). This unexpected turn of events provides remarkable evidence for the Book of Mormon’s authenticity.

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Still Image from “Seer Stones and the Translation of the Book of Mormon” via LDS Church History

## HOW DOES THE “MOSIAH-FIRST” TRANSLATION SEQUENCE STRENGTHEN FAITH?

“Wherefore, I chose these things, to finish my record upon them, which remainder of my record I shall take from the plates of Nephi.”

Words of Mormon 1:5

### THE KNOW

Many readers of the Book of Mormon naturally assume that Joseph Smith translated its books in the order that we find them today, that is, beginning with the Title Page, and then translating 1 Nephi 1:1 through Moroni 10:34. It may be surprising to learn that the books from the Small Plates of Nephi (1 Nephi through Words of Mormon) almost certainly came last in the translation process, after the completion of Mormon’s abridgment of the Large Plates of Nephi (Mosiah through 4 Nephi) followed by the books of Mormon, Ether, Moroni, and the Title Page.

This unexpected translation sequence is due to the fact that the first 116 pages of the Book of Mormon’s translation—which contained a record called the book of Lehi—were lost by Martin Harris in the summer of 1828. When the translation resumed in April 1829, it appears Joseph Smith picked up where he had left off, namely in the early chapters of Mosiah,<sup>1</sup> rather than retranslating Mormon’s record from the beginning.<sup>2</sup>

Thankfully, the Lord had a plan, more than two millennia in advance, to compensate for the lost book of Lehi. Important ancient documents were often “doubled,” and backup copies provided a safeguard against loss or damage.<sup>3</sup> In keeping with this ancient practice, the Lord told Nephi to keep two sets of

records—a historical and public record on his Large Plates, and a shorter, more spiritually focused record on his Small Plates.<sup>4</sup> Thus, Nephi’s Small Plates contained an abbreviated account of what was on the book of Lehi, which was recorded in Nephi’s Large Plates (see 1 Nephi 19:1).<sup>5</sup> Hundreds of years later, the Lord inspired Mormon to append Nephi’s Small Plates to his own abridgment (see Words of Mormon 1:3–7).<sup>6</sup>

This explains why the books from the Small Plates would show up last, rather than first in the translation process—that was their order on the plates themselves. When it came time to publish the Book of Mormon, Joseph and Oliver moved the transcription of Nephi’s Small Plates to the beginning of the text, where it provided an ideal starting point and replacement for the lost book of Lehi.

This order of translation, commonly called the “Mosiiah-First” theory or sequence, is strongly supported by multiple lines of evidence and is now favored by a solid scholarly consensus.<sup>7</sup> Besides making clear sense of the manuscript and historical data, this understanding of the translation sequence also provides fascinating and somewhat unexpected evidence for the Book of Mormon’s authenticity. This is because many passages from Mormon’s abridgment of the Large Plates, as well as from the books of Mormon, Ether and Moroni, refer *back* to content from the Small Plates, even though the Small Plates hadn’t even been translated yet!

For instance, in Alma 36:22 Alma says that he thought he saw God even as Lehi had seen Him, “sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels, in the attitude of singing and praising their God.” Those words are a direct quote from the prophet Lehi found in 1 Nephi 1:8.

In Alma 50:23 Mormon stated that “there never was a happier time among the people of Nephi, since the days of Nephi, than in the days of Moroni.” This is surely a direct allusion by Mormon back to 2 Nephi 5:27, where Nephi had said that his people “lived after the manner of happiness.”<sup>8</sup> Likewise, when the Amlicites set a mark upon their foreheads, Mormon declared, “Thus the word of God is fulfilled, for these are the words which he said to Nephi” (Alma 3:14). Mormon’s following statement, which shows how the

curse of the Lamanites also came upon the Amlicites, is an obvious and extensive utilization of 2 Nephi 5:21–24.<sup>9</sup>

In yet another example, when Alma delivered his famous sermon on faith, he referred to the fruit of the Tree of Life as being “sweet above all that is sweet” and “white above all that is white” (Alma 32:42). This is a reference to the fruit in 1 Nephi 8:11 which Lehi described as being “most sweet, above all that I ever before tasted” and “white, to exceed all the whiteness that I had ever seen.” Similar allusions to Lehi’s and Nephi’s visions of the Tree of Life, as well as other content from Nephi’s Small Plates, can be found scattered throughout Mormon’s abridgment and Moroni’s conclusion.<sup>10</sup>

## THE WHY

These relatively frequent allusions and references back to earlier textual strata make complete sense if the Book of Mormon is truly what it claims to be. Mormon, Alma, and other later prophets would have had Lehi’s and Nephi’s earlier writings to refer to and quote from.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, these allusions are difficult to explain if Joseph was simply making up the Book of Mormon’s content, as some have supposed.

Under the theory that Joseph composed (rather than translated) the text, he would have needed to make many detailed references back to passages that he hadn’t yet created. Not only that, but according to the eyewitnesses to the translation, he would have had to create and then remember all these references in a fast-paced translation setting, without any working notes or reference materials to aid his memory.<sup>12</sup> And then, he would have needed, in composing the Small Plates last, to remember to accurately create the earlier layer of texts that later prophets had already referred and alluded to.

Commenting upon the allusions to the visions of the Tree of Life recorded in the Small Plates, literary scholar Alan Goff has argued, “It seems overly complicated to posit that a whole web of allusions to these tree of life images is created first and then later the coherent story that ties them all together.” Likewise, in regard to Mormon’s reference to 2 Nephi 5:21–24, as found in Alma 3:14, Goff explained,

If the Alma passage were written prior to the 2 Nephi passage, then Joseph Smith not only would have had to remember to pen the Nephi text without being able to refer back to the other passage but would also have had to build the specific reference to Nephi as the original source long before Nephi became the original source. All of this Joseph Smith would have to do without being able to refer to notes while composing at a rate of thirty-five hundred words a day.<sup>13</sup>

Further analysis suggests the task would have been even more difficult than Goff has proposed. Not only does Mormon’s abridgment repeatedly refer to specific passages in the Small Plates, but it seems that some of its major narratives were specifically designed to show the fulfillment of Nephi’s earlier prophecies.<sup>14</sup> In other words, not only minor textual elements, but the core design and undergirding structure of Mormon’s abridgment was likely based on passages that, if Joseph were just making things up, hadn’t yet been written. That is a tall order for any writer, to say nothing of a manual laborer like Joseph Smith, who had little formal education and had never published a word in his life.<sup>15</sup>

This textual evidence casts significant doubt on the notion that Joseph was responsible for the content and wording of the Book of Mormon. It also helps demonstrate the Book of Mormon’s remarkable complexity and sophistication.<sup>16</sup> As readers carefully pore over its pages, they will be continually rewarded with insights and connections that they hadn’t previously noticed. Upon reflection and pondering, they might happily discover new and unexpected reasons to trust that the Book of Mormon came forth as Joseph Smith repeatedly claimed—“by the gift and power of God.”<sup>17</sup>

## FURTHER READING

John W. Welch, “Timing the Translation of the Book of Mormon: ‘Days [and Hours] Never to Be Forgotten,’” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 57, no. 4 (2018): 10–50.

John W. Welch, “The Miraculous Timing of the Translation of the Book of Mormon,” in *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–1844*,

ed. John W. Welch, 2nd edition (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and BYU Press, 2017), 121–125; for a detailed discussion of the Mosiah-first translation theory, see the [1st edition](#), 2005, 115–117).

Steven L. Olsen, “[Prophecy and History: Structuring the Abridgment of the Nephite Records](#),” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 15, no. 1 (2006): 18–29, 70–71.

Alan Goff, “[Positivism and the Priority of Ideology in Mosiah-First Theories of Book of Mormon Production](#),” *FARMS Review* 16, no. 1 (2004): 11–36.

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## NOTES

1. See Book of Mormon Central, “[What if Martin Harris Didn’t Lose all of the 116 Pages?](#) (Words of Mormon 1:18),” *KnoWhy* 331 (June 26, 2017).
2. In not retranslating the Book of Lehi, Joseph adhered to a revelation given to him by the Lord which warned that wicked men would use the retranslation to “destroy the work of God” (see [Doctrine and Covenants 10:23](#)).
3. See John W. Welch, “[Doubled, Sealed, Witnessed Documents: From the Ancient World to the Book of Mormon](#),” in *Mormons, Scripture, and the Ancient World Studies in Honor of John L. Sorenson*, ed. Davis Bitton (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998), 391–444; Book of Mormon Central, “[Why Would a Book Be Sealed?](#) (2 Nephi 27:10),” *KnoWhy* 53 (March 14, 2016).
4. See [1 Nephi 1:16; 6:3; 8:29; 9:1](#). See also, S. Kent Brown, “[Nephi’s Use of Lehi’s Record](#),” in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon: Insights You May Have Missed Before*, ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1991), 3–14; S. Kent Brown, “[Recovering the Missing Record of Lehi](#),” in *From Jerusalem to Zarahemla: Literary and Historical Studies of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1998), 28–54.
5. See David E. Sloan, “[The Book of Lehi and the Plates of Lehi](#),” in *Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon: The FARMS Updates of the 1990s*, ed. John W. Welch and Melvin J. Thorne (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1999), 59–62.
6. See Book of Mormon Central, “[Why is ‘Words of Mormon’ at the End of the Small Plates?](#) (Words of Mormon 1:3),” *KnoWhy* 78 (April 14, 2016).
7. See John W. Welch, “Timing the Translation of the Book of Mormon: ‘Days [and Hours] Never to Be Forgotten,’” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 57, no. 4 (2018): 22–23; John W. Welch, “[The Miraculous Timing of the Translation of the Book of Mormon](#),” in *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–1844*, ed. John W. Welch, 1st edition (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and BYU Press, 2005), 115–117.
8. This connection is developed in Alan Goff, “[Positivism and the Priority of Ideology in Mosiah-First Theories of Book](#)

- [of Mormon Production](#),” *FARMS Review* 16, no. 1 (2004): 31–32.
9. See Goff, “[Positivism and the Priority](#),” 32–33.
  10. See Goff, “[Positivism and the Priority](#),” 30–31.
  11. See Steven L. Olsen, “[Prophecy and History: Structuring the Abridgment of the Nephite Records](#),” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 15, no. 1 (2006): 18–29, 70–71; Steven L. Olsen, “[Prospering in the Land of Promise](#),” *FARMS Review* 22, no. 1 (2010): 229–232; Book of Mormon Central, “[How Is Prosperity Defined in Nephi’s Small Plates?](#) (Words of Mormon 1:6),” *KnoWhy* 383 (November 21, 2017).
  12. See Book of Mormon Central, “[Why Did the Book of Mormon Come Forth as a Miracle?](#) (2 Nephi 27:23),” *KnoWhy* 273 (February 10, 2017); Book of Mormon Central, “[How Did Emma Smith Help Bring Forth the Book of Mormon?](#) (2 Nephi 27:6),” *KnoWhy* 386 (November 30, 2017); John W. Welch, “The Miraculous Timing of the Translation of the Book of Mormon,” in *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–1844*, ed. John W. Welch, 2nd edition (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and BYU Press, 2017), 168.
  13. See Goff, “[Positivism and the Priority](#),” 33.
  14. See Olsen, “[Prophecy and History](#),” 18–29, 70–71; Book of Mormon Central, “[How Does Prophecy Shape the Book of Mormon’s Content and Structure?](#) (Words of Mormon 1:4),” *KnoWhy* 498 (January 15, 2009).
  15. For information about Joseph Smith’s education, see Book of Mormon Central, “[Why Would God Use an Uneducated Man to Translate the Book of Mormon? \(2 Nephi 27:19\)](#),” *KnoWhy* 397 (January 9, 2017). For analysis of Joseph Smith’s literary abilities at the time of the translation, see Robert A. Rees, “[Joseph Smith, the Book of Mormon, and the American Renaissance](#),” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 35, no. 3 (2002): 83–112; Robert A. Rees, “[Joseph Smith, the Book of Mormon, and the American Renaissance: An Update](#),” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 19 (2016): 1–16; Robert A. Rees, “[John Milton, Joseph Smith, and the Book of Mormon](#),” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 54, no. 3 (2015): 6–18.
  16. See Book of Mormon Central, “[Evidence of the Book of Mormon: Internal Complexity](#),” online at [bookofmormoncentral.org](http://bookofmormoncentral.org); Melvin J. Thorne, “[Complexity, Consistency, Ignorance, and Probabilities](#),” in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1997), 179–193; John W. Welch, “[Textual Consistency](#),” in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon: A Decade of New Research*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992), 21–23; Book of Mormon Central, “[How Does Prophecy Shape the Book of Mormon’s Content and Structure?](#) (Words of Mormon 1:4),” *KnoWhy* 498 (January 15, 2019).
  17. See Michael Hubbard MacKay and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, “Firsthand Witness Accounts of the Translation Process,” in *The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon: A Marvelous Work and a Wonder*, ed. Dennis L. Largey, Andrew H. Hedges, John Hilton III, and Kerry Hull (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2015), 63.
  18. While the chart in this appendix presents many references and allusions back to the Small Plates, it should not be viewed as final or complete. Much work remains to be done in tracking down all possible intertextual relationships between the Small Plates and later prophetic writings in the Book of Mormon.
  19. Matthew L. Bowen, “[He Is a Good Man’: The Fulfillment of Helaman 5:6–7 in Helaman 8:7 and 11:18–19](#),” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 17 (2016): 167–168; Book of Mormon Central, “[What Is So Good about Nephi’s Name?](#) (1 Nephi 1:1),” *KnoWhy* 445 (June 28, 2018).
  20. See Matthew L. Bowen, “[Nephi’s Good Inclusion](#),” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 17 (2016): 181–195.

APPENDIX<sup>18</sup>

| References and Allusions to the Small Plates                             |  |   |
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| Topic  | Reference/Allusion   | Small Plates  |
| Nephi and Lehi's Goodness <sup>19</sup>                                  | Helaman 5:5–6  | 1 Nephi 1:1   |
| Similar Introductions <sup>20</sup>                                      | Mosiah 1:2–6<br>Mosiah 9:1<br>Mosiah 17:2<br>Alma 19:6<br>Mormon 1:2   | 1 Nephi 1:1–2<br>2 Nephi 2:16<br>Enos 1:1   |
| Make Record in the Egyptian Language according to the Writer's Knowledge | Mormon 9:32  | 1 Nephi 1:2–3   |
| Make Records With Hands and Know Record's Truth                          | 3 Nephi 5:11, 18   | 1 Nephi 1:3, 17   |
| God Sitting on His Throne  | Alma 36:22   | 1 Nephi 1:8   |
| Choirs Singing and Praising God  | Mosiah 2:28<br>Mormon 7:7  | 1 Nephi 1:8   |
| Christ Descending Out of Heaven  | 3 Nephi 11:8   | 1 Nephi 1:9   |
| Firm, Steadfast, and Immovable   | 3 Nephi 6:14   | 1 Nephi 2:10  |
| Lehi's Posterity Will Prosper or Be Cursed                               | Mosiah 1:7<br>Mosiah 2:22, 31<br>Mosiah 9:9<br>Alma 9:13<br>Mosiah 10:5<br>Mosiah 21:16<br>Mosiah 23:19–20<br>Mosiah 25:24<br>Alma 36:1, 30<br>Alma 37:13<br>Alma 38:1<br>Alma 45:8<br>Alma 48:15,25<br>Alma 50:18–22<br>Alma 59:3<br>Alma 62:48, 51<br>Helaman 3:20<br>Helaman 4:13<br>Helaman 11:20<br>3 Nephi 6:4-5<br>4 Nephi 1:7<br>Ether 7:26<br>Ether 10:16, 28 | 1 Nephi 2:20<br>1 Nephi 4:14<br>2 Nephi 1:9, 20<br>2 Nephi 4:4<br>2 Nephi 5:13<br>Omni 1:6<br>Jarom 1:9 |
| Brass Plates Will Be Preserved   | Mosiah 1:3, 16<br>Mosiah 28:11, 20<br>Alma 37:1–12<br>3 Nephi 1:2<br>3 Nephi 10:17   | 1 Nephi 5:18–19   |
| Desirable Fruit  | Alma 32:39   | 1 Nephi 8:10, 12, 15<br>1 Nephi 11:22<br>1 Nephi 15:36  |
| Sweet/White Fruit  | Alma 32:42   | 1 Nephi 8:11<br>1 Nephi 11:8  |
| Iron Rod/Word of God   | Helaman 3:29   | 1 Nephi 8:24<br>1 Nephi 15:24   |
| Grafted into the True Vine   | Alma 16:17   | 1 Nephi 15:15, 16   |
| Days of Probation  | Helaman 13:38  | 1 Nephi 10:21   |

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|  | Mormon 9:28  | 1 Nephi 15:31–32<br>2 Nephi 2:30<br>2 Nephi 9:27<br>2 Nephi 33:9 |
| Partake of Fruit/Waters of Life                        | Alma 5:34, 62  | 1 Nephi 11:25  |
| Living Waters/Love of God                              | Mosiah 18:5, 21<br>Ether 12:28<br>Moroni 7:1, 11, 44–47  | 1 Nephi 11:25  |
| Tumultuous Noises Will Be Heard                        | 3 Nephi 8:23<br>3 Nephi 10:9                             | 1 Nephi 12:4   |
| Rocks and Earth Will Be Rent                           | 3 Nephi 8:6, 18  | 1 Nephi 12:4<br>1 Nephi 19:12                                    |
| Cities Will Be Sunken                                  | 3 Nephi 8:9, 14<br>3 Nephi 9:4–8<br>3 Nephi 10:13        | 1 Nephi 12:4   |
| Cities Will Be Burned                                  | 3 Nephi 8:8, 14<br>3 Nephi 9:3, 9–11<br>3 Nephi 10:13–14 | 1 Nephi 12:4   |
| Cities Will Be Shaken and Tumble                       | 3 Nephi 8:14   | 1 Nephi 12:4   |
| Vapor of Darkness Will Be Removed                      | 3 Nephi 10:9   | 1 Nephi 12:5   |
| Righteous Will Be Preserved from Destruction           | 3 Nephi 9:13<br>3 Nephi 10:12–13                         | 1 Nephi 12:5<br>2 Nephi 26:8                                     |
| Heavens Will Open                                      | 3 Nephi 11:8   | 1 Nephi 12:6   |
| Lamb of God Will Descend                               | 3 Nephi 11:8   | 1 Nephi 12:6   |
| Holy Ghost Will Fall on Twelve Disciples               | 3 Nephi 19:9–13  | 1 Nephi 12:7   |
| Twelve Disciples Will Be Chosen and Ordained           | 3 Nephi 12:1<br>3 Nephi 13:25<br>3 Nephi 19:4            | 1 Nephi 12:7   |
| Twelve Disciples Will Judge the Nephites               | Mormon 3:18–19   | 1 Nephi 12:10  |
| Righteous Generations Will Precede Final Destruction   | 3 Nephi 27:30–31<br>3 Nephi 28:23<br>4 Nephi 1:14–22     | 1 Nephi 12:11–12<br>2 Nephi 26:9                                 |
| Lamanites will Overcome Nephites                       | Mormon 6:8–20  | 1 Nephi 12:19  |
| Nephite/Lamanite Mixture Won't Be Utterly Destroyed    | Helaman 3:16<br>Moroni 1:2<br>Moroni 9:24                | 1 Nephi 13:30<br>2 Nephi 3:3<br>2 Nephi 9:53                     |
| Nephites Will Record Christ's Words                    | 3 Nephi 23:4<br>3 Nephi 27:23                            | 1 Nephi 13:35  |
| Justice/Hell Imagery                                   | Mosiah 2:38<br>Mosiah 3:27<br>Alma 12:17                 | 1 Nephi 15:28–30<br>2 Nephi 9:16<br>Jacob 6:10                   |
| Those Who Are Filthy Can't Enter God's Kingdom         | Alma 7:21  | 1 Nephi 15:33–34   |
| Lord Will Visit the Righteous with His Voice           | 3 Nephi 11:1–11<br>3 Nephi 9:13<br>3 Nephi 10:12–13      | 1 Nephi 19:11  |
| Earth Will Groan                                       | 3 Nephi 10:9   | 1 Nephi 19:12  |
| Travelers to the Promised Land Must Be Led by the Lord | Omni 1:16<br>Helaman 6:10<br>Ether 11:21                 | 2 Nephi 1:6  |
| God Will Mark Lamanites to Make Them Unenticing        | Alma 3:14  | 2 Nephi 5:21–22  |
| Nephites Who Mix with Lamanites Will Be Cursed         | Alma 3:15  | 2 Nephi 5:22   |
| Living after the Manner of Happiness                   | Alma 50:23<br>Helaman 7:7<br>4 Nephi 1:16–17             | 2 Nephi 5:27   |

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| Signs Will Be Given of Christ's Birth  | Helaman 14:2-6                                   | 2 Nephi 26:3  |
| Signs Will Be Given of Christ's Death  | Helaman 14:14-28                                 | 2 Nephi 26:3  |
| Wicked Will Perish for Stoning, Slaying, and Casting out Prophets                            | 3 Nephi 9:10-11                                  | 2 Nephi 26:3  |
| Blood of Saints Will Cry from the Ground   | 3 Nephi 9:7, 11                                  | 2 Nephi 26:3  |
| Depths of the Earth Will Swallow the Wicked  | 3 Nephi 9:6, 8                                   | 2 Nephi 26:5  |
| Mountains Will Cover the Wicked  | 3 Nephi 9:5                                      | 2 Nephi 26:5  |
| Whirlwinds Will Carry Away the Wicked  | 3 Nephi 8:12, 16<br>3 Nephi 10:13-14             | 2 Nephi 26:5  |
| Buildings Will Fall and Crush the Wicked   | 3 Nephi 8:14                                     | 2 Nephi 26:5  |
| Despite Persecution, Righteous Saints Will Steadfastly Look for the Signs of Christ's Coming | 3 Nephi 1:8-9                                    | 2 Nephi 26:8  |
| Christ Will Heal the People  | 3 Nephi 9:13<br>3 Nephi 17:7-10<br>3 Nephi 26:15 | 2 Nephi 26:9  |
| Christ's Ministry Will Be Followed by Generations of Peace                                   | 4 Nephi 1:1, 22                                  | 2 Nephi 26:9  |
| Spirit Will Cease to Strive with the Nephites  | Mormon 5:16                                      | 2 Nephi 26:11 |
| Nephites Will Be Speedily Destroyed  | Mormon 4:18<br>Mormon 8:7                        | 2 Nephi 26:10 |