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Historians of the Book of Mormon

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Abstract: A synopsis of the prominent record keepers of the Book of Mormon. A serviceable chart notes the authors, the time span they covered, and the amount of pages their writings occupy.

Historians of the Book of Mormon

by Richard O. Cowan*

About ten years after Lehi and his colony left Jerusalem (or about 590 B.C.) the Lord commanded Nephi to form a set of metallic plates on which to engrave the record of his people; these records subsequently became known as the "Large Plates of Nephi." (1 Nephi 19:1-4.)

About 20 years later (570 B.C.) the Lord directed Nephi to make another set of records which became known as the "Small Plates of Nephi." (2 Nephi 5:28-33.) The Lord explained that He had a "wise purpose" for having the Nephites keep two parallel accounts. (1 Nephi 9:5.)

He instructed them to record the words of the prophets and the religious history on the Small Plates, while their civil and military record was to be written primarily on the Large Plates. (1 Nephi 9:3-4.)

Nephi's accounts on both sets of plates probably began with the departure of his father, Lehi, from Jerusalem in 600 B.C. Following Nephi's death, the kings kept the civil record on the Large Plates while the prophets recorded the work of the ministry on the Small Plates. (Omni 1:11; See also *Words of Mormon* 1:9-11.)

By about 150 B.C. the Small Plates contained what are now the first six books of the Book of Mormon and were full. The last historian to write on the Small Plates was Amaleki. Because he had no children to whom to entrust the sacred records, he turned them over to King Benjamin, who was a man of God in addition to being the monarch.

Not only did Benjamin receive the Small Plates, but as king he also became custodian of the Large Plates. Thus from 600 to 150 B.C. the Nephites had kept two parallel histories. By c. 130 B.C. the Nephites kept only one account, the Large Plates, which integrated both the civil and religious records.

Benjamin was succeeded on the throne by his

son Mosiah who also was responsible for the sacred records. Like his father, Mosiah was the civil and religious leader of his people. Just before his death, Mosiah entrusted the records to Alma the Younger; and, from that time until the end of the Nephite history, these records were kept by the prophets.

Mormon was the last of these prophets to write on the Large Plates. By his time, the plates had grown in number to become a sizable library. He was inspired by the Lord to begin a project of abridging or condensing the record on the Large Plates. His abridgment included the books of *Lehi*, *Mosiah*, *Alma*, *Helaman*, *Third and Fourth Nephi*, and *Mormon* chapters 1-5, which represent Mormon's condensation of his own record originally made on the Large Plates. Mormon then added what are now chapters 6 and 7 to his own record in order to bring it up to date. During the course of his work, he found the Small Plates of Nephi and was impressed by the beauty of their spiritual teachings; he therefore included them in their entirety with his own record.

Mormon entrusted these records to his son, Moroni, who added chapters 8 and 9 to his father's record. Moroni then made an abridgment of his own by condensing the Plates of Ether which contained the history of the Jaredites who had inhabited the continent before the arrival of Lehi's people. He then added his own book containing ten chapters, and finished his work by preparing a summary which may now be found on the title page of our Book of Mormon.

By comparing the two columns in the accompanying chart, some interesting facts about the Nephite historians may be suggested. For example, notice how in *The Book of Omni* five writers cover more than 200 years of history in only a few pages; verse 9 may give a clue to the brevity of Nephite historians at that period.

On the other hand, notice how Mormon devoted such a large portion of his abridgment to the record contained in *The Book of Alma*, which covered only 39 years of history. Mormon as a prophet was impressed by the great teachings of Alma; as a military leader he was thrilled by the victories of Moroni, and may have named his own son after this righteous Nephite chief captain.

Note further how fully Mormon reported the visit of the resurrected Saviour; he would have included more, but was specifically commanded to give no more than our present generation could bear (3 Nephi 26:6-9.). This may be one reason for Mormon's not devoting more space to the record of *Fourth Nephi* containing the sacred history of the Nephites during their 200 years of peace following the visit of Christ.

*For Course 11, lesson of February 3, "Origin of the Book of Mormon"; for Course 15, lesson of January 20, "Structure and Purpose of the Book of Mormon"; and for Course 29, lesson of February 17, "The Book of Mormon."

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