



Type: Journal Article

---

## Labor Diligently to Write: The Ancient Making of a Modern Scripture

Author(s): Brant A. Gardner

Source: *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Faith and Scholarship*,  
Volume 35 (2019), pp. 1-46

Published by: The Interpreter Foundation

---

**Abstract:** We are pleased to present the first installment from a book entitled *Labor Diligently to Write: The Ancient Making of a Modern Scripture*. It is being presented in serialized form as an aid to help readers prepare for the 2020 Come Follow Me course of study. This is a new approach for Interpreter, and we hope you find it helpful.

# INTERPRETER



A JOURNAL OF LATTER-DAY SAINT  
FAITH AND SCHOLARSHIP

Volume 35 · 2019 · Pages 1 - 46

## **Labor Diligently to Write: The Ancient Making of a Modern Scripture**

Brant A. Gardner

Offprint Series

© 2019 The Interpreter Foundation. A 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 444 Castro Street, Suite 900, Mountain View, California, 94041, USA.

ISSN 2372-1227 (print)  
ISSN 2372-126X (online)

The goal of The Interpreter Foundation is to increase understanding of scripture through careful scholarly investigation and analysis of the insights provided by a wide range of ancillary disciplines, including language, history, archaeology, literature, culture, ethnohistory, art, geography, law, politics, philosophy, etc. Interpreter will also publish articles advocating the authenticity and historicity of LDS scripture and the Restoration, along with scholarly responses to critics of the LDS faith. We hope to illuminate, by study and faith, the eternal spiritual message of the scriptures—that Jesus is the Christ.

Although the Board fully supports the goals and teachings of the Church, The Interpreter Foundation is an independent entity and is neither owned, controlled by nor affiliated with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or with Brigham Young University. All research and opinions provided are the sole responsibility of their respective authors, and should not be interpreted as the opinions of the Board, nor as official statements of LDS doctrine, belief or practice.

This journal is a weekly publication of the Interpreter Foundation, a non-profit organization located at [InterpreterFoundation.org](http://InterpreterFoundation.org). You can find other articles published in our journal at [Journal.InterpreterFoundation.org](http://Journal.InterpreterFoundation.org). You may subscribe to this journal at [InterpreterFoundation.org/annual-print-subscription](http://InterpreterFoundation.org/annual-print-subscription).

# LABOR DILIGENTLY TO WRITE: THE ANCIENT MAKING OF A MODERN SCRIPTURE

---

**Brant A. Gardner**

[Editor’s Note: We are pleased to present the first installment from a book entitled *Labor Diligently to Write: The Ancient Making of a Modern Scripture*. It is being presented in serialized form as an aid to help readers prepare for the 2020 *Come Follow Me* course of study. This is a new approach for *Interpreter*, and we hope you find it helpful.]

## **PART 1: THE STRUCTURING OF NEPHITE STYLE**

The Book of Mormon tells the story of the Nephite people. That story began on plates the first writer, Nephi, made by hand. Their story ended on plates the last writer, Mormon, made by hand.<sup>1</sup> Nephi created one record that chronicled the reigns of the kings and a second that covered the ministry.<sup>2</sup> Mormon wrote in the official Nephite chronicle of the reigns of the kings<sup>3</sup> but wrote a second work for a different and more sacred purpose.<sup>4</sup>

---

1. Mormon was the last Nephite recorder. By the time Moroni was writing, there was no more Nephite nation. Moroni was never the Nephite recorder; he was custodian of the record his father conceived and wrote, and his writings are an addendum to that record.

2. 1 Nephi 9:3–4, 10:1, and 19:3–4.

3. Implied by Ammaron’s transmission of the plates to Mormon (Mormon 1:3–4). The commission was to “engrave on the plates of Nephi all the things that ye have observed concerning this people” (v.4). See also Mormon 2:17.

4. Mormon doesn’t give a description of his decision to write on the plates that were ultimately given to Joseph Smith. It is possible that such an account was in an introduction lost with the 116 pages, but that is speculation. What we know is that

Mormon's writing career was bracketed by plates buried in a hill. The same plates Mormon removed from the hill Shim at the beginning of his writing career (Mormon 1:3, 4:23), he interred in the hill Cumorah at the end (Mormon 6:6). In the intervening years, Mormon's relationship to those plates shifted from recorder of events to interpreter of events. Mormon buried the Nephite archive in the hill Cumorah to preserve it, but he gave Moroni a more important set of plates to preserve. Those were later buried in a hill.<sup>5</sup>

Joseph Smith recovered the plates Moroni preserved — those Mormon entrusted to Moroni and to which Moroni added his addenda — and translated them into the Book of Mormon. Mormon's ultimate masterwork has become the cornerstone of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

There are many ways to approach the Book of Mormon, and any number of books assist with those various approaches.<sup>6</sup> Books have been written to highlight the important spiritual message of the Book of Mormon. This isn't one of those books. Books have been written to examine the literary qualities of the writing in the Book of Mormon. This isn't one

---

the Book of Mormon is more than Mormon's observations about the people, which would have fulfilled the obligation given by Ammaron (Mormon1:4).

5. Mormon tells us that he buried plates in Cumorah but that they were not those on which the Book of Mormon was written. Perhaps he returned to Cumorah, but that is speculation. All the text tells us for certain is that the Book of Mormon plates were not buried in Cumorah, although others were.

And it came to pass that when we had gathered in all our people in one to the land of Cumorah, behold I, Mormon, began to be old; and knowing it to be the last struggle of my people, and having been commanded of the Lord that I should not suffer the records which had been handed down by our fathers, which were sacred, to fall into the hands of the Lamanites, (for the Lamanites would destroy them) therefore I made this record out of the plates of Nephi, and hid up in the hill Cumorah all the records which had been entrusted to me by the hand of the Lord, *save it were these few plates which I gave unto my son Moroni.*" (Mormon 6:6)

6. John W. Welch, "The Miraculous Translation of the Book of Mormon," *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations 1820–1844*, eds. John W. Welch and Erick B. Carlson (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2005), 78:

Numerous approaches can and should be taken in approaching the Book of Mormon. This complex book has been read and scrutinized in many ways: textually, doctrinally, historically, comparatively, literarily, legally, statistically, geographically, philosophically, practically, biographically, intellectually, prayerfully, and spiritually — to name some of the most obvious.

of those books. Books have been written to examine the geography and history described in the Book of Mormon. This isn't one of those books.

This book is about a very specific aspect of two different men. Nephi conceived writing Nephite history. Mormon conceived turning that history into a message to a future generation. Each wrote with purpose and elaborated that purpose by recounting stories. Knowing that each man used a chronology of events as the backbone structuring his intent, how did they select and then write the stories so Nephite history served their larger intent?

Hunter R. Rawlins III wrote a book entitled *The Structure of Thucydides' History*. He noted:

The structure of an historical work is not often discussed or even recognized as an important object of study. The historian's narrative is, after all, determined by the facts or events he narrates. We are far more likely to pay attention to the architecture of a play or novel than to that of an historical work, usually with good reason. The modern historian is himself often quite innocent of reflection or concern with the literary form of his narrative. Although his unconscious selection and arrangement of facts can, when subjected to rigorous analysis and criticism, reveal his approach and perspective and often his prejudices, only rarely does one meet an historian who gives careful attention to the literary presentation of his material.<sup>7</sup>

Rawlings then says of Thucydides what I echo for Nephi and Mormon: "Thucydides does not mention his own artistry. He lets it speak for itself. This does not make it less effective; quite the contrary, it is for that reason even more powerful. But it does mean that in order to understand Thucydides' artistry one must study it with great care."<sup>8</sup> This book attempts to lay the foundation for the great care with which we might study how Nephi and Mormon wrote.

One of the subtle impediments to understanding the Book of Mormon is that we don't have the book Mormon conceived.<sup>9</sup> His

---

7. Hunter R. Rawlings III, *The Structure of Thucydides' History* (Princeton University Press, 1981), 3. I note that I was introduced to Rawlings work after Grant Hardy cited him in Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 167.

8. *Ibid.*, 4.

9. The book of Moroni was not part of Mormon's planned text, although it is probable that Moroni's editing of Ether's record was. Mormon promised that the

well-laid plan was disrupted with the loss of 116 manuscript pages that translated the beginning of Mormon's book up until the reign of king Benjamin. The divine solution to forego re-translating the beginning of the Book of Mormon and replacing it with a different record means that modern readers start reading Nephi's book, not a Mormon's. Nearly a thousand years separated them, and the reasons they wrote and the way they embedded those reasons in their texts are different.

For example, we learn from Nephi that the Lamanites are the quintessential Nephite enemies. When Jacob suggests the Lamanites might be better than the Nephites, it wasn't to suggest the Lamanites were good but rather that the Nephites had become very bad:

Behold, the Lamanites your brethren, whom ye hate because of their filthiness and the cursing which hath come upon their skins, are more righteous than you; for they have not forgotten the commandment of the Lord, which was given unto our father — that they should have save it were one wife, and concubines they should have none, and there should not be whoredoms committed among them. (Jacob 3:5)

Contrast that with a similar — yet very different — passage from Mormon:

And it came to pass that when the sixty and second year of the reign of the judges had ended, all these things had happened and the Lamanites had become, the more part of them, a righteous people, insomuch that their righteousness did exceed that of the Nephites, because of their firmness and their steadiness in the faith. (Helaman 6:1)

In Mormon's writings, it was possible for Lamanites to become truly righteous. Lamanites are not written with that hope in Nephi or Jacob's writings. Nephi described the Lamanites as the singular Nephite enemies, but Mormon sees them as much less dangerous than Nephite apostates or Gadianton robbers.

To ameliorate the power of our modern assumptions, I have reversed the typical order of examination — I look at Mormon first and then at Nephi. The Book of Mormon was Mormon's book, after all, and not Nephi's. Beginning with the man who created the Book of Mormon may

---

Jaredite story would be told (Mosiah 28:19), but there is no indication that he began to work on it. It was therefore left for Moroni to add, perhaps as an appendix.

help us understand what he was trying to say even if we do not have the beginning of the book he wrote.

I have divided this book into two parts. In this part, I look at Mormon and Nephi as writers. How did they learn to do what they did? What sources did they use, and what techniques did they employ to further their messages? In this first section, examples are pulled from across their writings to illustrate specific features.

The second part reverses the process. What drove the creation of specific chapters?<sup>10</sup> What message was intended by the stories selected and the way they were told? In that part, I return to the standard reading order. Applying the concepts from this part allows us to see each writer develop the longer arcs of his individual arguments and elucidate his overarching themes.

---

10. The current Book of Mormon chapters are the result of Orson Pratt's 1879 changes, which also added versification. While neither the original nor the printer's manuscripts had sentences or paragraphing, the evidence from the manuscripts indicates that the chapter breaks were part of the dictation. Thus, the chapters as they appeared in 1830 were part of the original plate text. See Royal Skousen, "Critical Methodology and the Text of the Book of Mormon," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 6, no.1 (1994): 137.

## Section 1: Mormon the Writer

### Chapter 1: Mormon Preparing

Ammaron was entrusted with the sacred Nephite archives. Although he recorded Nephite history in the same way so many of his predecessors had, we have nothing that he wrote. As the penultimate official Nephite historian, we know that he wrote and cared for the sacred Nephite records in perilous times.<sup>11</sup> Rather than his writings, however, we have the record of his efforts to preserve and continue the plates. We learn that: “Ammaron, being constrained by the Holy Ghost, did hide up the records which were sacred — yea, even all the sacred records which had been handed down from generation to generation, which were sacred — even until the three hundred and twentieth year from the coming of Christ” (4 Nephi 1:48). In that year, Ammaron searched for a new recordkeeper and found ten-year-old Mormon. Mormon wrote of his meeting with Ammaron:

And about the time that Ammaron hid up the records unto the Lord, he came unto me, (I being about ten years of age, and I began to be learned somewhat after the manner of the learning of my people) and Ammaron said unto me: I perceive that thou art a sober child, and art quick to observe;

Therefore, when ye are about twenty and four years old I would that ye should remember the things that ye have observed concerning this people; and when ye are of that age go to the land Antum, unto a hill which shall be called Shim; and there have I deposited unto the Lord all the sacred engravings concerning this people.

And behold, ye shall take the plates of Nephi unto yourself, and the remainder shall ye leave in the place where they are;

---

11. Both Ammaron and Mormon were official Nephite historians writing on the large plates. While Moroni wrote on Mormon’s plates, he probably didn’t write on the large plates, as they had been buried in Cumorah, and he did not have access to them. He might have gone back to Cumorah for those plates, but there is no evidence that he did. Mormon gave Moroni the plates on which he had written. It would appear that the small plates were also included and intended as an appendix. Moroni certainly had either the plates of Ether or Mosiah<sub>1</sub>’s translation of those plates. My opinion is that Moroni used Mosiah<sub>1</sub>’s translation rather than creating a new translation.

and ye shall engrave on the plates of Nephi all the things that ye have observed concerning this people. (Mormon 1:2–4).

Mormon mentions only that he “began to be learned somewhat.” We may infer that his education included learning to read and write, else he could never have become the Nephite recordkeeper. We may also infer that Mormon was one of the elites of Nephite society, as it is probable that education in reading and writing was most common among elites, if not reserved for elites.<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps there was some formal training for Nephite scribes that would include instructions on what was to be included on the large plates of Nephi. There is no indication that Ammaron provided Mormon with anything more than the command to retrieve the plates. Regardless of what kind of scribal training Mormon might have received, circumstances dictated that before Mormon could become a writer, he became a fighter. Mormon wrote: “And it came to pass that I, being eleven years old, was carried by my father into the land southward, even to the land of Zarahemla” (Mormon 1:6).<sup>13</sup> He does not tell us why, but he does immediately begin to discuss a war that began in that year (Mormon 1:8). As the war “began to be among them [Lamanites and Nephites] in the borders of Zarahemla, by the waters of Sidon,” (Mormon 1:10), it is a reasonable assumption that Mormon’s father’s relocation to that area was related to the conflict. If his father was a military man, Mormon probably learned about being a military leader at his father’s knee.

At the age of 15 he was “visited of the Lord, and tasted and knew of the goodness of Jesus” (Mormon 1:15). That visitation would have solidified Mormon’s faith — a faith that would be tested in the years to come. Perhaps part of that testing was that his desire to share that faith was constrained:

And I did endeavor to preach unto this people, but my mouth was shut, and I was forbidden that I should preach unto them;

---

12. Christopher A. Rollston, *Writing and Literacy in the World of Ancient Israel: Epigraphic Evidence from the Iron Age* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010), 134. While Rollston is specifically commenting on the Old World, there is no indication that anything is significantly different in the New World. See Brant A. Gardner, “Literacy and Orality in the Book of Mormon,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 9 (2014): 29–85.

13. The first time we can place Mormon’s age into the Nephite year counts is in the 326th year, when Mormon was 16 (Mormon 2:2). That gives his year of birth as 310 Nephite years from the birth of Christ. Randall Spackman makes an excellent case that the Nephite year was lunar based rather than our solar year. That means that Nephite years will not match precisely with modern dating. See Randall P. Spackman, “The Jewish/Nephite Lunar Calendar,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 7, no. 1 (1998): 48–59.

for behold they had wilfully rebelled against their God; and the beloved disciples were taken away out of the land, because of their iniquity.

But I did remain among them, but I was forbidden to preach unto them, because of the hardness of their hearts; and because of the hardness of their hearts the land was cursed for their sake. (Mormon 1:16–17)

Perhaps Mormon was fated to have a military career even without the prohibition to preach.<sup>14</sup> Regardless, his military career began in “that same year [when] there began to be a war again between the Nephites and the Lamanites. And notwithstanding I being young, was large in stature; therefore the people of Nephi appointed me that I should be their leader, or the leader of their armies. Therefore it came to pass that in my sixteenth year I did go forth at the head of an army of the Nephites, against the Lamanites” (Mormon 2:1–2).

Having been forbidden to cry repentance, Mormon cried war. His cries were laments for a people who had lost Yahweh’s protection. His military career continued throughout his life, ending only after the destruction of the Nephite nation at the hill Cumorah. By the time he was writing his own book of Mormon in what we now know as the larger Book of Mormon, he was more interested in telling his military story than in documenting his career as the Nephite historian.

Mormon described himself as the Nephite recordkeeper only as an aside in a discussion of military actions:

And it came to pass that in the three hundred and forty and fifth year the Nephites did begin to flee before the Lamanites; and they were pursued until they came even to the land of Jashon, before it was possible to stop them in their retreat.

And now, the city of Jashon was near the land where Ammaron had deposited the records unto the Lord, that they might not be destroyed. And behold I had gone according to the word

---

14. It is probable that Mormon was part of a military caste or some other designation for a social elite with that particular profession. His call as a military leader at the age of 16 suggests there was some social assumption behind that selection. John A. Tvedtnes, “Book of Mormon Tribal Affiliation and Military Castes,” in *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, eds. Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1990), 317.

of Ammaron, and taken the plates of Nephi, and did make a record according to the words of Ammaron.

And upon the plates of Nephi I did make a full account of all the wickedness and abominations; but upon these plates I did forbear to make a full account of their wickedness and abominations, for behold, a continual scene of wickedness and abominations has been before mine eyes ever since I have been sufficient to behold the ways of man. (Mormon 2:16–18)

From the way Mormon wrote this, it is possible to conclude that he first retrieved the plates of Nephi in the 345th year when the Nephites had been pushed north to the city of Jashon. However, that would make Mormon 34 years old.<sup>15</sup> Ammaron had told Mormon to retrieve the plates of Nephi when he was 24. Had Mormon ignored that commandment for ten years?

I suggest that it is best to read this passage as an aside in which Mormon supplied information he realized he had skipped when it was chronologically appropriate.<sup>16</sup> The difficulties in editing engraved writing easily explain why Mormon could not later insert this material at the earlier point. The reason he missed describing retrieving the records was that he had begun to discuss Nephite military actions, and the narrative flow both before and after these verses concerns the long conflict between the Nephites and the Lamanites.

When Mormon comes to this part of the history, he notes that Jashon is near the hill Shim, and that triggers the aside designed to fill in the history he had skipped. That is the reason that he says, “I had gone according to the word of Ammaron.” With this understanding, we can see Mormon fulfilling Ammaron’s commandment that he retrieve the plates of Nephi when he was 24, even though Mormon inserts that retrospective incident into his account of the 45th year.<sup>17</sup>

---

15. Mormon was born during the 310th year, although Mormon never specifically gives us his birth year. We can deduce this date from when Ammaron hid the plates and called Mormon to a future role as the Nephite scribe. Ammaron hid the plates in the 320th year (4 Nephi 1:48) and Mormon was ten years old “about the time that Ammaron hid up the records unto the Lord” (Mormon 1:2).

16. Mormon often interrupted his narrative to insert material. See the discussion under Mormon’s Interaction with this Text.

17. This chronology is easy to mistake without careful examination of the dating. For example, I clearly did not make a sufficiently careful examination of the timeline and got both Mormon’s age and the plates he took wrong when I looked at these verses in Brant A. Gardner *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual*

The next question that requires clarification is what Mormon took from the hill Shim when he was 24. Ammaron had hidden up “all the sacred records which had been handed down from generation to generation” (4 Nephi 1:48). Did Mormon take all the records Ammaron had placed in the hill?

Mormon says that he took the plates of Nephi (Mormon 2:17). Ammaron had instructed him that: “ye shall take the plates of Nephi unto yourself, and the remainder shall ye leave in the place where they are” (Mormon 1:4). So Mormon took the plates of Nephi but left the “remainder.” Mormon gives us no indication of when he conceived of the project to create The Book of Mormon, but he could not have created that work without the full archive of records. In my reading of what Mormon took from the hill Shim when he was 24, Mormon did not have what he needed to begin his project until he recovered the complete archive from the hill Shim in the year 375 (when Mormon was 65).<sup>18</sup>

When Mormon finally had all the plates, he likely spent some time reading and mentally organizing his thoughts for his abridgement. The Book of Mormon was probably conceived, and much of it written, in the city of Jordan. After taking the records from the hill Shim, Mormon and his people were driven to the city of Jordan (in the 375th year, Mormon 4:23), a position they were able to defend and maintain for about

---

*Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 5:65–66. Most commentaries are interested in the person or theology and don’t pay attention to this question of the dating.

The exception was an article Leland H. Monson, “Mormon, Part 1,” *Improvement Era* (September 1945): 550: “It was in 345 A.D., when Mormon was 34 years of age and was serving as commander-in-chief of all the Nephite forces, that he went a second time to the hill Shim and took therefrom the large plates of Nephi.”

18. Mormon 4:23. This contrasts with Marilyn Arnold’s suggestion that Mormon had begun reading the whole of the plates of Nephi during a ten-year time of peace after retrieving the records the first time. Marilyn Arnold, “Mormon,” in *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, ed. Dennis L. Largey (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 547–48: “Nevertheless, when Mormon was in his middle thirties (AD 346), the Nephites rallied under his inspired leadership and met with success on the battlefield. A treaty was signed (AD 350), and ten years of relative peace ensued. The Lord, in an attempt to bless the Nephites, instructed Mormon to urge them to repent and promised they would be spared. This ten-year hiatus in fighting may have given Mormon the opportunity he needed to study the Nephite records, perhaps even to begin the work of abridgment.” Arnold is correct that Mormon would have had the time, but it would have been possible only if he had all of the requisite records, which I don’t believe he had until 25 years later.

five years. Nevertheless, it was not a time of peaceful reflection. In addition to writing, Mormon was probably actively involved in the city's defense.

The Nephites withstood a Lamanite invasion in the 379th year (Mormon 5:5), but when the Lamanites came again in the 380th year, "those whose flight was swifter than the Lamanites' did escape, and those whose flight did not exceed the Lamanites' were swept down and destroyed" (Mormon 5:7). The next known resting place of the Nephites is Cumorah, where the Nephites had gathered by the Nephite year 384 (Mormon 6:5). Mormon doesn't tell us where the people were between the years 380 and 384. He does note that he "wrote an epistle unto the king of the Lamanites, and desired of him that he would grant unto us that we might gather together our people unto the land of Cumorah, by a hill which was called Cumorah, and there we could give them battle" (Mormon 6:2). It is possible that they traveled toward Cumorah after the defeat in the city of Jordan, and that the year 384 marks the end of a gathering that had taken time.

Using this reconstruction of Mormon's timeline, he had about five years in the city of Jordan and fewer than four years in the land of Cumorah to write. He was certainly writing his book of Mormon (not The Book of Mormon) while at Cumorah, since he includes descriptions of the events at Cumorah. He could have been working on both simultaneously or simply finishing his eponymous book after having completed the rest. Thus, Mormon had fewer than ten years available to conceive his project, read the plates of Nephi, organize his thoughts, and finish a record he could give as a nearly finished project to his son, Moroni (Mormon 6:6).<sup>19</sup>

The Book of Mormon appears to have been something new in Nephite literature.<sup>20</sup> While he built upon the Nephite historical tradition, Mormon created a text that departed dramatically from that tradition. It was no longer a record of the past but a promise for the future. It was not written so that a people might consult their history but to restore

---

19. For more on Mormon and his history, see: Marilyn Arnold, "Mormon," in *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, 547–51. Gary Layne Hatch, "Mormon and Moroni: Father and Son," in *The Book of Mormon: Fourth Nephi Through Moroni, From Zion to Destruction*, (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1994), 105–15. Jeffrey Holland, "Mormon: The Man and the Book," in *The Book of Mormon: It Begins with a Family*, rev. ed (1993; repr., Sandy, UT: LDS Classic Paperback Library, 2005), 211–25. Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, "Mormon, the Man and the Message," in *The Book of Mormon: Fourth Nephi Through Moroni, From Zion to Destruction*, (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1994), 117–31.

20. We have only a partial indication of the nature of Nephite literature and nothing in the kinds of records that can be reconstructed point to this type of treatment of history. Even the brass plates would not have inspired this kind of editing of Nephite history. While Old Testament writers might have done something similar, their writings do not as clearly edit longer texts in ways that Mormon could have seen.

a future population to its rightful place in history. Mormon's concluding plea highlights the purpose of his entire text:

Therefore repent, and be baptized in the name of Jesus, and lay hold upon the gospel of Christ, which shall be set before you, not only in this record but also in the record which shall come unto the Gentiles from the Jews, which record shall come from the Gentiles unto you.

If ye believe this ye will know concerning your fathers, and also the marvelous works which were wrought by the power of God among them.

And ye will also know that ye are a remnant of the seed of Jacob; therefore ye are numbered among the people of the first covenant; and if it so be that ye believe in Christ, and are baptized, first with water, then with fire, and with the Holy Ghost, following the example of our Savior, according to that which he hath commanded us, it shall be well with you in the day of judgment. Amen. (Mormon 7:8–10)

Mormon's masterpiece is unique in its conception and construction. History was transformed into a sacred tapestry of instruction in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

## Chapter 2: Mormon and the Nephite Archive

Nephite written history began with Nephi, perhaps soon after the family arrived in the New World (1 Nephi 19:1). As far as we can tell, the Nephite historical tradition continued in an essentially unbroken line until Mormon, who was the last official historian.<sup>21</sup> Nephite historians not only wrote, but preserved. Jacob specifically notes: “we know that the things which we write upon plates must remain; [b]ut whatsoever things we write upon anything save it be upon plates must perish and vanish away” (Jacob 4:1–2). The Old World tradition also preserved records,<sup>22</sup> but something about the New World suggested the need for an imperishable medium.

The plates upon which Nephite historians wrote directly link Nephi to Mormon. Nephi declared: “I make an abridgment of the record of my father, upon plates which I have made with mine own hands” (1 Nephi 1:17). Likewise, Mormon stated: “I do make the record on plates which I have made with mine own hands” (3 Nephi 5:11).<sup>23</sup> Nephi had probably learned some metalworking from his father, and it appears that Nephite scribal training included the necessary training in metallurgy

---

21. Moroni may have been the last Nephite writing, but he wrote after the end of the Nephite nation. Moroni was never the Nephite historian, as Mormon had been. The idea of the unbroken line is an assumption of some continuity through the destruction of the Nephite polity just before Christ came and the apparent restructuring of Nephi government in the post-Christ time period. It is also possible there was a hiatus corresponding to that time, when there was no overarching Nephite government for the various tribes.

22. This statement is evidenced by the familiar story of Laban as the Old-World keeper of records that Nephi and his brothers were commanded to procure. (See 1 Nephi 3–5.)

23. Eldin Ricks, “The Small Plates of Nephi and the Words of Mormon,” in *The Book of Mormon: Jacob Through Words of Mormon, To Learn with Joy*, eds. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate, Jr. (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1990), 212, makes a strange assertion: “[Mormon] first formed a separate metal volume. I judge that he did so in some degree of secrecy as he employed no craftsmen to make it, but constructed it, he says, “with mine own hands” (3 Nephi 5:11).”

I cannot see secrecy implied in Mormon’s creation of the plates. He made them, as did Nephi, and as I suspect did other Nephite recordkeepers. It was probably part of the training for the position. Given that the creation of the plates had to have occurred as Mormon was leading a fleeing people, the chances for secrecy were significantly diminished, especially since Mormon was considered a military and perhaps political leader.

for a scribe to create his own plates.<sup>24</sup> Moroni corroborates this when he ended his father's record: "I would write it also if I had room upon the plates, but I have not; and ore I have none" (Mormon 8:5). Moroni intimates that he had the necessary skill to create more plates, had he the necessary ore. Nephite historians not only preserved history but often personally created the plates upon which it was preserved.<sup>25</sup>

Nephi created two sets of plates. He began with what might be described as a royal record, and then added a second record when the Lord required it of him. Rather unhelpfully, he referred to both records with the same designation:

And now, as I have spoken concerning these plates, behold they are not the plates upon which I make a full account of the history of my people; for the plates upon which I make a full account of my people *I have given the name of Nephi*; wherefore, they are called the plates of Nephi, after mine own name; and *these plates also are called the plates of Nephi*.  
(1 Nephi 9:2)

When Nephi speaks of "these plates" he is speaking of those we call the small plates of Nephi. When he speaks of the "plates upon which I make a full account of my people," he is speaking of what we call the large plates of Nephi. He frustratingly named them both the *plates of Nephi*. It is unclear whether Nephi intended his *naming* to be a name or a description. Whatever his intention, the *plates of Nephi* could refer to either set.<sup>26</sup>

The designation "small plates" comes from Jacob 1:1: "Nephi gave me, Jacob, a commandment concerning the small plates, upon which these things are engraven." They were physically the same plates upon

---

24. Although it is possible (and likely) that there were literate women, we have no indication of a woman acting as the official Nephite archivist, hence the male pronoun here.

25. The inherent difficulty in creating plates strongly suggests that when a recordkeeper created plates, they created a large number of blank plates, which they might not have personally filled. We see this specifically in the small plates, which Nephi created but were not completely full until Amaleki had to cease writing because they were full (Omni 1: 30).

26. 1 Nephi 9:2 is the only time when that name is specifically attached to the small plates. The writers on the small plates simply refer to "these plates." That difference occurs because Nephi had possession of both sets of plates. The small plates and the large plates had separate transmission lines, and those writing on the small plates knew only that set, hence referred only to "these plates."

which Nephi wrote the books we know as 1 Nephi and 2 Nephi.<sup>27</sup> The small plates contain the records of Nephi, Jacob, Enos, Jarom, and Omni (including those who also wrote in the book of Omni — Amaron, Chemish, Abinadom, and the last writer on the small plates, Amaleki).

Nephi created the small plates by the Lord’s direct command without understanding their purpose (1 Nephi 9:5). They were a secondary record Nephi established with a different charter than the other plates of Nephi (which we know as the large plates of Nephi). According to Nephi, the small plates were to cover “the more part of the ministry” (1 Nephi 9:4). Nephi later repeated that mandate (1 Nephi 19:3) and noted that “I do not write anything upon plates save it be that I think it be sacred” (1 Nephi 19: 6).<sup>28</sup>

Jacob gives us a more detailed picture of the nature of this secondary record:

And he [Nephi] gave me, Jacob, a commandment that I should write upon these plates a few of the things which I considered to be most precious; that I should not touch, save it were lightly, concerning the history of this people which are called the people of Nephi.

For he said that the history of his people should be engraven upon his other plates, and that I should preserve these plates and hand them down unto my seed, from generation to generation.

And if there were preaching which was sacred, or revelation which was great, or prophesying, that I should engraven the heads of them<sup>29</sup> upon these plates, and touch upon them as

---

27. The small plates were included in the set of plates Joseph received. No one mentioned differently sized plates, so we may assume a “Nephite standard size” for individual plates. The small plates were thus small in quantity rather than size.

28. Nephi has been referencing the small plates and the requirement that they cover the “more plain and precious parts” of the ministry (1 Nephi 19:3). It is probable that Nephi intends his readers to understand that when he said he did not write “anything upon plates save it be that I think it be sacred” that he meant the small plates rather than any other set of plates. While it is possible he also assumed the history of his people was part of sacred history, it is unlikely he felt the large plates contained sacred writings in the same way as his charter for the small plates.

29. It is not clear what Jacob means by engraving the “heads” of these things. Jacob likely meant a synopsis of the most important aspects rather than a full treatment. Royal Skousen, *Volume 4: Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon, Part Two: 2 Nephi 11 – Mosiah 16* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2005), 937 notes that this usage of “heads” is listed in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

much as it were possible, for Christ's sake, and for the sake of our people. (Jacob 1:2–4)

Nephi gave the small plates to his brother and commanded that they should be preserved and handed down through Jacob's descendants, a different line of transmission from that of the large plates, which were passed down through political lines.

John W. Welch looked at the way Nephi's essential charter for the small plates was perpetuated through all the books found on those plates. He concluded:

The textual evidence is persuasive that the command of Nephi was consciously followed by Jacob and his descendants as they wrote the books of Jacob, Enos, Jarom and Omni. Although these writers are most often thought of simply for their terseness and lack of substance, modern readers should not overlook the fact that their brevity was dictated in large part by the small size of the plates, and by the specific limitations of Nephi's command. Modern readers should also not underrate the consistent and subtle way in which the record shows that this command was dutifully obeyed to the end of this line of Jacob's lineage.<sup>30</sup>

Just as we derive *small plates* from Jacob's description, so too does Jacob provide the naming convention for the large plates: "And a hundredth part of the proceedings of this people, which now began to be numerous, cannot be written upon these plates; but many of their proceedings are written upon the larger plates, and their wars, and their contentions, and the reigns of their kings" (Jacob 3:13). Jacob notes that the larger plates contain the accounts of Nephite wars, contentions, and the reigns of the Nephi kings.<sup>31</sup>

Jacob's description of the large plates as the location for information on wars, contentions, and the reigns of kings follows Nephi's definition of what was to be on the large plates: "Upon the other plates [large plates] should be engraven an account of the reign of the kings, and the wars and contentions of my people" (1 Nephi 9:4). In Nephi's second description of the two records, he reiterates that the large plates gave "a greater account of the wars and contentions and destructions of my people" (1 Nephi 19:4). Nephi made it clear that the large plates were

---

30. John W. Welch, "The Father's Command to Keep Records in the Small Plates of Nephi," FARMS Preliminary Report (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1985), 12.

31. The contrast between smaller and larger was related to quantity, not physical dimensions. See the section on Records on Plates in the Archive.

to catalog the wars and contentions, and the paired terms *wars* and *contentions* are a leitmotif throughout all the books Mormon abridged from the large plates.<sup>32</sup>

### Records on Plates in the Archive

When Mormon declared that he “made this record out of the plates of Nephi” (Mormon 6:6), it might appear that there was only a single physical set of plates from which Mormon extracted all his information. This is undoubtedly incorrect. Not only might we suspect that each named book was on a separate set of bound plates, but it is also probable that some named books might have existed on multiple sets of plates.

According to Joseph Smith, the first book on the lost pages was called the book of Lehi.<sup>33</sup> It is difficult to understand how any reasonable history of the Nephites over the 400 years covered by the book of Lehi might have fit onto a single physical set of plates. Mormon indicated that he found the small plates only while looking for the next set of records that would continue the story of king Benjamin (Words of Mormon 1:3). Had the book of Mosiah existed solely on a single set of plates, there would have been no need to search. When the 24-year-old Mormon took plates from the hill Shim, he took those which pertained to his current time. The rest of the archive remained in the hill Shim (Mormon 1:4). We understand that he took the current Nephite record, not the entire archive. The use of *plates of Nephi* as both a name and a description makes it difficult to know to which record any given author is referring. When we see Mormon use the term *plates of Nephi*, we should understand that he is referencing the large collection of plates in the archive. Thus, his source was the *plates of Nephi*, the continuous record begun by Nephi but continued by subsequent scribes, rather than any specific single set of plates.

The problem of multiple ways in which the *plates of Nephi* might be used with different meanings is amplified by an ambiguity in Jacob: “These plates are called the plates of Jacob, and they were made by the

---

32. The Book of Mormon uses the paired phrase “wars and contentions” as a set. A search for *wars and contentions* in the LDS View software returns 37 instances, exclusively in the Book of Mormon, and occurring in books from both the small and large plates (as well as one instance from the book of Ether). It is not clear what distinction might be intended between *contentions* and *wars*, though my suspicion is that contentions are internal and wars external.

33. Joseph Smith, “Preface,” *Book of Mormon* (1830; repr., Independence, MO: Herald House, 1970), 1.

hand of Nephi. And I make an end of speaking these words” (Jacob 3:14). Jacob is clearly telling us the *book of Jacob* and the *plates of Jacob* are equivalent terms and that the *book of Jacob* (or *plates of Jacob*) were written upon the very plates Nephi had called the *plates of Nephi*.<sup>34</sup>

This duality of naming suggests a solution to another naming conundrum. Joseph wrote in the preface to the 1830 Book of Mormon that “I would inform you that I translated, by the gift and power of God, and caused to be written, one hundred and sixteen pages, the which I took from the book of Lehi, which was an account abridged from the plates of Lehi, by the hand of Mormon”<sup>35</sup> I suggest we see Jacob’s model as the solution. At least, early in the Nephite record keeping, there was no clear distinction between *book-of-Lehi* and *plates-of-Lehi*, or *book-of-Jacob* and *plates-of-Jacob*, since the books were written on plates.<sup>36</sup> The book of Lehi was simply the first on the large plates of Nephi and was named just as the books of Mosiah and Alma were named books on the large plate.

A second and related issue is found in the aftermath of the loss of the 116 pages. In Doctrine and Covenants 10:44, the Lord notes that “they have only got a part, or an abridgment of the account of Nephi.” How is it that the 116 pages contained the *book of Lehi*, the *plates of Lehi*, and also an abridgment of the *account of Nephi*? Seeing the *book of Lehi* and *plates of Lehi* as equivalent terms allows us to understand why both terms are used. Since the account of Nephi as leader of his people would have been a significant story in the *book of Lehi*, we may understand that this verse refers to the account of Nephi as recorded in the *book of Lehi* (which might also be called the *plates of Lehi*).

When Ammaron placed the Nephite archive in the hill Shim, it consisted of “all the sacred records which had been handed down from

---

34. It is not clear whether this naming issue is the result of the translation process or was original to the plates. While it is possibly due to the translator, the general fluidity of named records suggests it is due to the original.

35. Smith, “Preface.” *Book of Mormon*, 1, (see the earlier note on the numbering issue).

36. In this, I differ from David E. Sloan, “The Book of Lehi and the Plates of Lehi,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 6, no.2 (1997): 271. Sloan concludes “the terms “Book of Lehi,” “plates of Lehi,” and “account of Nephi” are distinct phrases with distinct meanings.” Sloan writes: “If the large plates of Nephi began with Lehi’s record, this portion of the large plates could accurately be called the plates of Lehi.” (Ibid., 270). He justifies this assumption by referring to Jacob’s statement about the plates of Jacob. However, Jacob’s model does not suggest an internal division, but rather an equivalence. Refer to the discussion of the sources for 3 and 4 Nephi later in this book for more information about the problems of understanding plates and books with relation to their writer.

generation to generation, which were sacred” (4 Nephi 1:48). While this doesn’t explicitly name the various records that he included, we can surmise the nature of the archive from both the history of what was considered sacred as well as the information we can glean from Mormon.

First in the category of sacred records would have been the brass plates.<sup>37</sup> Nephi and his brothers endured much to acquire them from Laban before the family journeyed to the New World. Nephi recorded:

And after they had given thanks unto the God of Israel, my father, Lehi, took the records which were engraven upon the plates of brass, and he did search them from the beginning.

And he beheld that they did contain the five books of Moses, which gave an account of the creation of the world, and also of Adam and Eve, who were our first parents;

And also a record of the Jews from the beginning, even down to the commencement of the reign of Zedekiah, king of Judah;

And also the prophecies of the holy prophets, from the beginning, even down to the commencement of the reign of Zedekiah; and also many prophecies which have been spoken by the mouth of Jeremiah. (1 Nephi 5:10–13)

They were included in the set of sacred relics passed from Benjamin to Mosiah<sub>2</sub>:

And it came to pass that after king Benjamin had made an end of these sayings to his son, that he gave him charge concerning all the affairs of the kingdom.

And moreover, he also gave him charge concerning the records which were engraven on the plates of brass; and also the plates of Nephi; and also, the sword of Laban, and the ball or director, which led our fathers through the wilderness, which was prepared by the hand of the Lord that thereby they might be led, every one according to the heed and diligence which they gave unto him. (Mosiah 1:15–16)

The brass plates were still transmitted along with the plates of Nephi prior to the birth of Christ: “And Nephi, the son of Helaman, had departed

---

37. All textual references are to the *plates of brass*, not the *brass plates*. I consider that a distinction without a difference, related to the translation process rather than an important textual distinction.

out of the land of Zarahemla, giving charge unto his son Nephi, who was his eldest son, concerning the plates of brass, and all the records which had been kept, and all those things which had been kept sacred from the departure of Lehi out of Jerusalem” (3 Nephi 1:2). It is reasonable to assume they continued to be part of the Nephite archive Mormon retrieved from the hill Shim. Although the plates of brass were of supreme importance for Nephi, Mormon does not appear to have used them.<sup>38</sup>

Along with the large plates of Nephi, the small plates of Nephi were obviously in the archive. Mormon found them among the other records and added them to his plates, upon which he wrote the Book of Mormon. Mormon found them among the records while looking for something else (Words of Mormon 1:3), suggesting that he did not previously know about them.

The plates of Ether were not a Nephite record but were kept with the Nephite archive. Zeniff’s people sent a search party to find Zarahemla and instead found remains of a Jaredite civilization. One of the treasures they brought back was a set of 24 gold plates. These were delivered to king Mosiah<sub>2</sub> who used the interpreters to translate them (Mosiah 28:13). When Mosiah<sub>2</sub> created the reign of the judges, he passed the sacred records to Alma<sub>2</sub>:

Therefore he took the records which were engraven on the plates of brass, and also the plates of Nephi, and all the things which he had kept and preserved according to the commandments of God, after having translated and caused to be written the records which were on the plates of gold which had been found by the people of Limhi, which were delivered to him by the hand of Limhi ...

And now, as I said unto you, that after king Mosiah had done these things, he took the plates of brass, and all the things which he had kept, and conferred them upon Alma, who was the son of Alma; yea, all the records, and also the interpreters,

---

38. Abinadi quotes from the brass plates, but Mormon quotes Abinadi rather than the brass plates. Similarly, the Savior references writings that would have been on the brass plates, but Mormon records what the Savior said and did not use the brass plates as a source. Not only does Mormon not use the brass plates as a source record, he does not quote scripture — which the Nephites understood as writings from the brass plates.

Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, 122, notes that while Mormon does include embedded documents, he does not insert “extended passages from scripture.” Mormon doesn’t even include short passages from scripture — those present in books he edited came from copying what someone else had quoted.

and conferred them upon him, and commanded him that he should keep and preserve them” (Mosiah 28:11, 20).

The plates of Ether were included in the sacred records along with the brass plates and the plates of Nephi. I suggest there is an additional record we can infer was part of this Nephite archive. Mosiah<sub>2</sub> translated the plates through a seer stone. There is no indication that anyone else was able to read the plates.<sup>39</sup> Hence, while the plates of Ether were certainly included as a sacred artifact, it is also logical to assume that Mosiah<sub>2</sub>'s translation was included with the sacred records.<sup>40</sup>

### Records on Other Media in the Archive

The story of Alma and Amulek in Ammonihah has an interesting phrase that provides some information about some of the records available to Nephites: “they also brought forth their records which contained the holy scriptures, and cast them into the fire also, that they might be burned and destroyed by fire” (Alma 14:8). That the records could be burned suggests that in addition to plates, the Nephites had records on perishable materials. The small plates of Nephi apparently end when there are no more individual plates upon which to write (Omni 1:30). The most logical assumption would be that only the royal line could keep metal records and that copies were made on more accessible and perishable materials.<sup>41</sup> If the Book of Mormon events took place in Mesoamerica, there is clear evidence that a type of paper was available.<sup>42</sup> Certainly, writing on perishable material would have been much more widespread than the records kept on plates.

---

39. Moroni edits Ether's record. Although he states that he took his account “from the twenty and four plates which were found by the people of Limhi” (Ether 1:2), I believe he used Mosiah<sub>1</sub>'s translation rather than creating one from scratch. Although Moroni had ample time, he did not know that at the beginning. When he has finished with the book of Ether, he eventually begins the book of Moroni, in which he states: “but I have not as yet perished” (Moroni 1:1). However, his apparent pleasant surprise at remaining alive suggests that he might not have felt he had that much time when he began Ether, and hence used Mosiah<sub>1</sub>'s translation. After all, it had already, previously, been translated by a prophet.

40. Perhaps it was engraved on plates, but there is no evidence at all to help us determine the medium upon which Mosiah<sub>2</sub>'s translation was preserved.

41. A sufficiently hot fire could also destroy metal plates, but it is reasonable that this verse refers to a more easily destroyed medium.

42. Lynn V. Foster, *Handbook to the Life in the Ancient Maya World* (2002; repr., New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 318. Foster notes that while it is unknown when paper began to be used, there is evidence that it was being made 2,000 years ago.

The more interesting part of the statement is that they “brought forth their records *which contained* the holy scriptures.” That might be a circumlocution simply stating that the scriptures were on the flammable records, but it does raise the interesting possibility of other types of records kept alongside the holy scriptures. If the Nephites continued the practice (similar to what we see in the New Testament) of referring only to the older records as scripture, then there were copies of brass-plate scriptures on perishable media which also held other writings. Perhaps some of those writings might have been parallel to the early documents of the New Testament, where the writings were clearly important, but had not yet gained the cachet of *scripture*.<sup>43</sup>

The availability of some perishable documents raises a question about the source of the letters copied into the end of the book of Alma. There are two possibilities. One is that Helaman<sub>1</sub> copied the perishable letters onto the imperishable plates. The second is that the letters were kept in the original, and Mormon consulted them separately from the material on the large plates. There is no way to be certain which of the two options accurately describes how the content of the letters was present in the Nephite archive. The difficulties of preserving letters through war’s field conditions suggests they might have required copying to preserve them.<sup>44</sup>

---

43. J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, rev. ed (1960; repr., San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1978), 52.

44. It is also possible, given the way Mormon creates dialogue, that the letters were either entirely a literary convention, or there was some record that letters were exchanged, and the specifics were a literary convention.

### Chapter 3: Mormon's Use of the Archive

Understanding how Mormon used the Nephite archive is an exercise in deduction. One exception is found in Words of Mormon, where Mormon inadvertently describes an important aspect of his work: “And now, I speak somewhat concerning that which I have written; for after I had made an abridgment from the plates of Nephi, down to the reign of this king Benjamin, of whom Amaleki spake, I searched among the records which had been delivered into my hands, and I found these plates, which contained this small account of the prophets, from Jacob down to the reign of this king Benjamin, and also many of the words of Nephi” (W of M. 1:3).

From this we learn that Mormon would take a source from the archives and work with it. When he finished with that source, he went for the next source. That he had to search through the archives strongly suggests that when they were hurriedly taken from the hill Shim and then deposited in a new location, whatever orderly arrangement they might have had previously fell prey to the need for speed. There was clearly no easy index that allowed Mormon to find what he was looking for.

Mormon used the archive in at least two ways. The obvious use was for the source material from which he selected the contents of the Book of Mormon. The second is Mormon's adoption and adaptation of features on the plates to his own literary creation.

#### Mormon's Use of Outline (Synoptic) Headers

Each book Mormon edited begins with a synopsis of the book that is separate from both the title and the beginning of the first chapter (except the book of Mosiah<sup>45</sup>). In the original manuscript, the only remaining synoptic header comes at the beginning of the book of Helaman. It has a long line drawn to separate the header from the beginning of the first chapter.<sup>46</sup> Oliver and other scribes copied the text of the original manuscript to create a second copy, commonly called the printer's manuscript. When the header for Helaman was copied onto the printer's manuscript, a line was also drawn to separate the header from the text.

---

45. When the book of Lehi was lost, so too was the beginning of the book of Mosiah. There surely was a synoptic header at the beginning of the book of Mosiah, but it was lost when the original opening chapter was lost. I will examine what might have been lost later in this book.

46. Royal Skousen, ed., *Volume 1: The Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998), 1:487.

On the printer's manuscript there is a line between the header and the beginning of the chapter, suggesting there was a line on the original manuscript that was being copied.<sup>47</sup> A line clearly separates 3 Nephi's header from the beginning of the chapter in the printer's manuscript, but the book title is not clearly separated from the header.<sup>48</sup> There are clear outline headers for 1 Nephi, 2 Nephi, and Jacob, but there is no indication of where the header should end and the text begin. Thus, John Gilbert (the compositor for Grandin Publishers) initially created the divisions based uniquely on the content, not a visual indicator.<sup>49</sup>

Nephi was the author of both the small and large plates. Our text beginning with 1 Nephi and continuing through the end of Omni comes directly from the small plates without any editorial hand. Therefore, when we see outline headers for 1 Nephi and 2 Nephi, we may assume that Nephi created them. There is also a synoptic header for Jacob but beginning with Enos the practice of the synoptic header fell into disuse on the small plates.

Mormon created outline headers. It is probable he did so because there were outline headers on the large plates (assuming that Nephi created them on the small plates because it was part of the style he had already incorporated for the large plates). While Mormon probably saw a header for each named book he edited, the specific headers he included were his own text, not copies of what was on the large plates. Mormon's headers are specific to the selections he made from the large plates. Therefore, Mormon copied the concept of the headers, but not the text of the headers.

For example, the header for Helaman is descriptive of that book's content, specifically content referencing the coming of Christ that does not appear in the book of Helaman:

An account of the Nephites. Their wars and contentions, and their dissensions. And also the prophecies of many holy prophets, before the coming of Christ, according to the records of Helaman, who was the son of Helaman, and also according to the records of his sons, even down to the coming of Christ. And also many of the Lamanites are converted. An account of their conversion. An account of the righteousness of the Lamanites, and the wickedness and abominations of

---

47. Joseph Smith, *Revelations and Translations, Volume 3: Printer's Manuscript of the Book of Mormon*, eds., Royal Skousen and Robin Scott Jensen (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2015) 1:356–57.

48. *Ibid.*, 1:356–57, 2:206–7.

49. *Ibid.* 1: 20–21, 110–11, 208–09.

the Nephites, according to the record of Helaman and his sons, even down to the coming of Christ, which is called the book of Helaman, and so forth.

This header certainly suggests a knowledge of the contents that would be included in Helaman but also a knowledge of the events recorded in 3 Nephi.<sup>50</sup> When Mormon created his masterwork, he repurposed the idea of the outline headers without copying the content of the headers as they might have been on the large plates of Nephi. Interestingly, Mormon's outline headers deal only with the information taken from the large plates. Any information from an alternative source was not included in the header.

### **Mormon's Alternative Sources**

As Mormon wrote, he consulted his sources from the Nephite archive.<sup>51</sup> Thomas W. Mackay noted: "That Mormon scrupulously names his sources is a stunning feat."<sup>52</sup> His main source was the large plates of Nephi, but there are other records he consulted. When he used a different source, he indicated the change with a synoptic header for a chapter, similar to those he used for books.<sup>53</sup> Most often, these specifically declare the new

---

50. The information taken from Alma<sub>2</sub>'s personal record is not included in the synoptic header for the book of Alma. Similarly, the header for the book of Helaman synthesizes the information from the large plates, but not Nephi<sub>2</sub>'s personal record that is entered under a separate header, nor for the prophecy of Samuel the Lamanite.

51. Holzapfel, "Mormon, the Man and the Message," in *The Book of Mormon: Fourth Nephi Through Moroni, From Zion to Destruction*, 119:

Mormon used a range of introductory and inserted notations to guide his readers: such as the names of authors for records, speeches, and epistles that are quoted or abridged — imbedded source indicators; genealogical or other authenticating information about the authors; and brief or extended summaries of contents, including subheadings for complex inserts or documents. Mormon's contribution as editor like in the fact that he assiduously presents source documents and texts while retaining a unity of narrative flow in his historical account.

52. Thomas W. Mackay, "Mormon as Editor: A Study in Colophons, Headers, and Source Indicators," in *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2, no. 2 (Fall 1993): 91–92.

53. J. N. Washburn, *The Contents, Structure, and Authorship of the Book of Mormon*, (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954), 43 notes:

I believe it was Dr. Sidney B. Sperry who first called to my attention the fact that there is a concentration of chapter superscriptions in the Book of Alma. The fact is that in the entire volume of 239 chapters, in our modern

source for the chapter's material, but at times the source is only implied by the content of the header.

Understanding the relationship of headers and chapters requires that we examine the chapters as they existed for the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon. Those chapters replicated some indication that Joseph saw as he translated which had him indicate to his scribe that a new chapter was to begin.<sup>54</sup> The chapters, as well as the versification, in our modern editions were first created for the 1879 edition. In order to discuss the original chapters but retain the ability to look up verses in the modern editions, I follow the convention of using Roman numerals for the 1830 chapters and Arabic numerals for the modern chapters. Thus 1 Nephi I (1–5) indicates that the 1830 chapter I covered what we now number chapters 1–5.

The most obvious marking of a new source record comes before Mosiah VI (9–10): “The Record of Zeniff — An account of his people, from the time they left the land of Zarahemla until the time that they were delivered out of the hands of the Lamanites.” Chapter VI (9–10) is a copy from Zeniff's record onto Mormon's plates. Beginning in chapter VII (11–13:24), Mormon continues to use that source, but changes to intermixing his own narrative of Abinadi's story with quotations from Abinadi's discourse that must have come from Zeniff's record.<sup>55</sup>

We know when Mormon ceases to use the record of Zeniff as a source because he writes a synoptic header for chapter XI (23–27) which reads: “An account of Alma and the people of the Lord, who were driven into the wilderness by the people of King Noah.” That chapter no longer uses the record of Zeniff, but changes to a record Alma<sub>1</sub>'s people kept.

The book of Alma began with Alma<sub>2</sub> as both the chief judge and the Nephite recordkeeper. When Alma<sub>2</sub> abdicated the chief judgeship, he retained the function of Nephite recordkeeper, at least for the book of Alma (the new dynastic book).<sup>56</sup> When Alma<sub>2</sub> began his proselytizing

---

editions, there are twenty-one introductory explanations before chapters. Ten of them are in the Book of Alma with its sixty-three chapters.

While Sperry and Washburn noticed the chapter headers, they apparently did not associate them with a change in source, or, indeed, any other specific function.

54. Skousen, “Critical Methodology and the Text of the Book of Mormon,” 137.

55. The record of Zeniff is also a dynastic record, including the text Mormon copied from Zeniff, but also served as the source of Mormon's information on Noah and Limhi.

56. “And it came to pass that in the same year that the people of Nephi had peace restored unto them, that Nephiah, the second chief judge, died, having filled the judgment-seat with perfect uprightness before God. Nevertheless, he had refused Alma to take possession of those records and those things which were esteemed by

tour, he kept a second record. In that record, we have the accounts of Alma<sub>2</sub>'s sermons and missionary journey to Ammonihah and later to Antionum (a city of the Zoramites). Mormon used Alma<sub>2</sub>'s personal record up through and including the chapters containing his final charge to his sons (chapters XVII–XIX (36–42)).

Mormon marked the beginning of his use of Alma<sub>2</sub>'s personal record in the header to Alma chapter III (5): “The words which Alma, the High Priest according to the holy order of God, delivered to the people in their cities and villages throughout the land.” That header doesn't state the source, but verse 2 clarifies that it is from Alma<sub>2</sub>'s record. It is explicit in chapter V (7): “The words of Alma which he delivered to the people in Gideon, according to his own record.”

The header for chapter XII (17–20) declares that it is: “An account of the sons of Mosiah, who rejected their rights to the kingdom for the word of God, and went up to the land of Nephi to preach to the Lamanites; their sufferings and deliverance — according to the record of Alma.” This information comes from Alma<sub>2</sub>'s record, but the original source was a separate “account of the sons of Mosiah.” Alma<sub>2</sub> had access to that record and copied — or abridged — it onto his own record. Mormon still marked the ultimate change in the source of the information. It is an important distinction as Alma<sub>2</sub> could not have known this information without the record (or records) of the sons of Mosiah.

The information from Ammon's record is recorded in chapter XII (17–20). I believe that it was also found on Alma<sub>2</sub>'s record. The very next chapter, XIII (21–22) begins with a new header: “An account of the preaching of Aaron, and Muloki, and their brethren, to the Lamanites.” This information recounts the experiences of the brothers who were not with Ammon, and therefore could not have originally been part of Ammon's account.

Mormon doesn't list a separate source for chapter XIV (23–26), where he tells the story of the conversion of those who would be called the Anti-Nephi-Lehies. Nevertheless, the brothers had apparently been united by this time, and this information came from an account that could include all of them. The final statement of chapter XIII is “And now I, after having said this, return again to the account of Ammon and Aaron, Omner and Himni, and their brethren” (Alma 22:35). Who is “I” in this verse? Mormon is still citing from Alma<sub>2</sub>'s personal account. It appears that the story of the brothers had been copied onto Alma<sub>2</sub>'s personal

---

Alma and his fathers to be most sacred; therefore Alma had conferred them upon his son, Helaman” (Alma 50:37–38).

record, and thus the “I” in Alma 22:35 was Alma<sub>2</sub>. The prominence of Ammon suggests that it was his journal that Alma<sub>2</sub> copied.

Chapter XVII (36–37) contains “the Commandments of Alma to his son Helaman.” Chapter XVIII (38) contains “the Commandments of Alma to his son Shiblon.” Chapter XIX (39–42) contains “the Commandments of Alma to his son Corianton.” Certainly, each of these chapters came from Alma<sub>2</sub>’s personal record, and our chapters appear to copy them as Alma<sub>2</sub> recorded them. As an interesting possible exception to this copying, Mormon may have altered the names of the sons for his own purposes (see the “Subtle Manipulation of Names” section).

When Mormon began using a new source, he created a new chapter. He did not mark times when that same source was used for more than one chapter. Sometimes he notes that he is finished with a source and is returning to the large plates. For example, after he finished copying from Alma<sub>2</sub>’s personal record, we can see Mormon returning to the large plates in chapter XX (43–44). After two verses that provide the necessary transition between the text from Alma<sub>2</sub>’s personal record and the political history from the large plates, Mormon specifically stated: “And now I return to an account of the wars between the Nephites and the Lamanites, in the eighteenth year of the reign of the judges” (Alma 43:3).

I suggest that when we see Mormon saying, “and now I return to an account,” that this was not a figurative change in subject but an indication of an actual physical event.<sup>57</sup> There is a change in source material, which was likely a physical process. Mormon had to move one set of plates from a position of easy reference to another location and then put the current source in place. For Mormon, it was literally a physical return to the large plates. That he returned to the large plates is signaled by the phrase “an account of the wars,” which intentionally echoes part of the charter for the large plates.<sup>58</sup> From this point on, the book of Alma dwells extensively on war, consistent with the type of information that would have been on the large plates.

Mormon does not, however, always tell his readers if he is returning to the large plates. Most notably, Mormon used Alma<sub>2</sub>’s personal record in Alma X (13:10–15) and uses it again in Alma XII (17–20) which begins with a header. Chapter XI (16) is not taken from Alma<sub>2</sub>’s personal record

---

57. The phrase indicates a change of source in this context. It also appears to indicate a change of source in Alma 22:1, though the “return” to a different account is not the large plates. In that same chapter, however, the phrase indicates Mormon’s “return” from an aside to the original record (Alma 22:35).

58. 1 Nephi 9:3–4, 10:1, and 19:3–4.

but rather from the large plates. There is no header and no statement of returning. The source is indicated by the content that parallels other material taken from the large plates: a beginning marking the year and the more historical rather than religious content.

The header to Helaman V (13–16) gives notice of a separate source: “The prophecy of Samuel, the Lamanite, to the Nephites.” As with Zeniff’s dynastic record that recorded the reigns of Noah and Limhi, Mormon uses the new source but does not quote it in its entirety. Rather than the first-person narrative in Zeniff’s record, Mormon’s narration is all in third person. Mormon also apparently returns to his large plate source inside chapter V. Mormon ends working with that source at Helaman 16:8. At that point, Mormon notes: “And thus ended the eighty and sixth year of the reign of the judges over the people of Nephi. And thus ended also the eighty and seventh year of the reign of the judges, the more part of the people remaining in their pride and wickedness, and the lesser part walking more circumspectly before God” (Helaman 16:9–10). That marks the shift back to the large plate material. Changing sources marked the beginning of a chapter but did not trigger the end of a chapter if the source change was a return to the large plates.

### **Mormon’s Named Books and their Sources**

The most recognizable organizational structure in Mormon’s creation of *The Book of Mormon* is the division of the text into books that bear a person’s name. Evidence from the original manuscript indicates that these book divisions were part of the dictated text, and therefore represent organizational structures that existed on Mormon’s plates. Although we do not have the complete original manuscript, there are places in what we do have where we can see how the transition to a new book was handled during dictation. At the transition from the book of Alma to the book of Helaman, Oliver Cowdery continued to write on the same page. However, he drew a horizontal line covering most of the page following the end of Alma and just prior to beginning Helaman. Below this solid ink line is a slightly indented title “The Book of Helaman.” The next line has a roughly centered “Chapter I” and the following line begins the chapter synopsis.<sup>59</sup>

The solid line appears before the information that there is a new book beginning.<sup>60</sup> It appears there was some indication on the plates

---

59. Skousen, *Volume 1: The Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon*, 1:487.

60. While there are no other book markers preserved in the original manuscript for Mormon’s text, there are two more examples in the 1 Nephi to Omni section. The

that a break was coming, which Joseph indicated to Oliver.<sup>61</sup> Oliver used a line to indicate the break, but it is doubtful Joseph told him to draw a line. It is more likely that Joseph indicated the break in some way, and Oliver elected to use a line.

If we had the Book of Mormon that Mormon created, it would have had the following divisions (names are given as they appear in the 1830 edition, including capitalization):

- The book of Lehi<sup>62</sup>
- The book of Mosiah
- The book of Alma, the Son of Alma
- The book of Helaman
- The book of Nephi, the Son of Nephi, which was the Son of Helaman
- The book of Nephi, which is the Son of Nephi, One of the Disciples of Jesus Christ
- The book of Mormon
- Appendices: Words of Mormon, Small Plates, Moroni's editing of Ether<sup>63</sup>

The use of numbers to differentiate between the two books of Nephi is a later addition to the text and was not part of Mormon's plates. Our

---

extant manuscript preserves the change from 1 Nephi to 2 Nephi and a damaged page where Jacob changes to Enos. Neither of those two book breaks employs the horizontal line divider. This evidence tells us that there was something in the small plates of Nephi that indicated a book change as well as in Mormon's text. However, with so little information, we cannot suggest that the line used on the one instance extant from the large plates of Nephi indicates a different type of book marker, or simply that Oliver's convention changed over time.

61. Skousen, "Critical Methodology and the Text of the Book of Mormon," 137.

62. Smith, "Preface," *Book of Mormon*, 1: "I would inform you that I translated, by the gift and power of God, and caused to be written, one hundred and sixteen pages, the which I took from the Book of Lehi, which was an account abridged from the plates of Lehi, by the hand of Mormon." Note that the facsimile reprint shows this page as 1, but the next page as iv. The First Book of Nephi begins on page 5.

63. I have labeled these as appendices because there is evidence that Mormon intended to include them, but they were not integral to his own work. Words of Mormon is its own evidence, being an introduction to the small plates. It explains that they were interesting, and Mormon wanted them to be known, but Mormon did not write on them, nor do any editing of the material. Thus, they were to be included, but as an appendix. They became more than that after the loss of the 116 pages. Moroni's editing of Ether fulfills Mormon's promise in Mosiah 28:19, but there is no indication that Mormon intended to do anything more with the plates of Ether than what he had already integrated into his text.

books from 1 Nephi to Omni were translated from the small plates which Mormon included but did not edit. Words of Mormon 1:3–5 tells us he added them intentionally, but they were not part of what Mormon conceived for his masterwork. Similarly, Mormon declared that an account of Ether’s record would “be written hereafter” (Mosiah 28:19), although there is no indication that he did any work on it. It was left to Moroni to fulfill that declaration.

Where did the names of the books come from? Were they part of the large plates of Nephi, or did Mormon invent them? As with most questions about the original composition of the Book of Mormon, the answer must be deduced from clues Mormon left in the text. When John L. Sorenson analyzed the nature of the Nephite record, he suggested:

Nephi could not have anticipated how many metal plates this secular history would eventually require, so blank sheets of hammered metal must have been added periodically to his original set to accommodate the writings of later generations of historians; but the name of the record, “the plates of Nephi,” was retained for the enlarged set in honor of the founder of the tradition.

There is reason to believe that when successive portions of the master record were added, they were labeled “the book of so-and-so” even though they were integral parts of “the plates of Nephi.” While named after the principal individual who began each section, they sometimes also included records kept by that person’s descendants (e.g., Alma 63:17, “the account of Alma, and Helaman his son, and also Shiblon, who was his son”).<sup>64</sup>

---

64. John L. Sorenson, “Mormon’s Sources,” *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 20, no.2 (2011): 5. Sorenson continues: “It seems reasonable that each of the component books represented a number of metal plates manufactured at the onset of the named scribe’s tenure; these would have been filled up by him and his descendants, after which a new major writer would craft new plates and begin another installment of the ongoing historical record.” I would disagree with that statement. Certainly, scribes created a number of plates, but there was no reason to worry about the number of the plates. With ties to the government, new plates could be created as needed, and one must suppose that even had they been bound with metal rings, those rings might be opened to add or remove plates as might be needed. It is doubtful, for example, that there were blank plates at the end of one record that remained blank because the next scribe created a new set of empty plates.

Sorenson's suggestion is a commonly held assumption: the books were named for the "principal individual who began each section." That, however, is an insufficient reason to explain why a new book with a new name was created.

Mormon's first three books (Lehi, Mosiah, and Alma) provide the essential pattern. Note that this analysis deals with the books on the large plates of Nephi from which Mormon took his account. A different process lies behind the books on the small plates, consistent with their different transmission line.<sup>65</sup>

Each book is associated with multiple writers. The book of Lehi covered nearly four hundred years, requiring many different scribes (Lehi was not one of them).<sup>66</sup> Similarly, the book of Mosiah contains writings of Benjamin and Mosiah<sub>2</sub> (and presumably Mosiah<sub>1</sub> in the lost chapter or chapters). The book of Alma contains information scribed by both Alma<sub>2</sub> and his son, Helaman<sub>1</sub>.

The book names clearly do not change to indicate a new writer. Rather, a book name changes to represent a change in the political dynasty. Given Nephi's charter to record the deeds of the kings, such a naming system fits with the more political nature of the large plates. When there was a direct continuation from ruler to ruler (typically father to son, although at times brother to brother), then the new writers continued in the book named for the man associated with the beginning of the dynasty. The name changes when there is a disruption in the ruling line and a new dynasty begins.

The book of Lehi is not extant, but there is nothing in the small plates text that replaced it that suggests that there was a king who was not

---

65. The large plates followed the kings, and specifically dealt with the reigns of the kings. Hence, the naming convention following something in the political line is appropriate. The small plates were given to Nephi's brother, Jacob, and followed Jacob's descendants, who were not in the political arena. Hence, they wrote books under their own name, until Omni, which collects multiple authors.

66. Here I disagree with Ricks, "The Small Plates of Nephi and the Words of Mormon," 211: "The book of Lehi title evidently originated with Lehi's journal, or sacred personal record, that Nephi transcribed at the beginning of his large plates of Nephi (1 Nephi 19:1)."

Nephi certainly named the book for his father, and clearly entered information about his father and their journey to the New World, just as he did in his eponymous book on the small plates. However, the naming convention had to have a different meaning that simply following the title of Lehi's record, since it persisted for about four hundred years. The analysis of how Nephi incorporated Lehi's record is covered in the section discussing Nephi.

a lineal descendant of Nephi. Nephi's father, Lehi, was never a Nephite. The people of Nephi were created only after Lehi's death and the departure of Nephi and his followers from Nephi's brothers. It appears that Nephi considered his father to be the beginning of the dynasty and therefore named the lineage for him. Perhaps Nephi saw this as a way of reinforcing the ties the records and the Nephites had to the Old World, which would have been a prestigious connection.

The Lehite dynasty ruled in the city of Nephi until a Lamanite invasion caused the Lord to warn Mosiah<sub>1</sub> to flee. When the Nephites entered the new land of Zarahemla and established a new overarching government for Nephites and Zarahemlites, a new dynastic record began. The end of the book of Mosiah records another major political upheaval. The reign of the kings was dissolved, and a new form of government by judges was instituted. As the first chief judge, Alma<sub>2</sub> began a new record under a new name.

The nature of the books becomes more complicated in the book of Alma. Although created according to expectation, Alma<sub>2</sub> complicates the transmission line when he abdicates his position as chief judge to concentrate on a more religious mission (Alma 4:16–18). At that time, the newly appointed chief judge, Nephihah, declined to accept the records (Alma 50:38). If Nephihah had his own dynastic record, we have no evidence for it in what Mormon edited. What we know is that the book of Alma left the political realm, although Alma<sub>2</sub> continued to write in it according to the large plate charter. When his son, Helaman<sub>1</sub>, wrote on the plates, they continued to be outside of the line of political inheritance.

The book of Helaman does not begin with Helaman<sub>1</sub> but rather with Helaman<sub>2</sub>. Helaman<sub>2</sub> is appointed to be chief judge (Helaman 2:2), and therefore the plates reenter the political line with a new dynastic name. Helaman<sub>2</sub> received the plates from his father, Helaman<sub>1</sub>, as recorded in Alma 63:11. Although the transfer of the plates had already occurred, the book of Helaman is probably not named as a separate book until Helaman<sub>2</sub> is seated as the chief judge.<sup>67</sup>

The nature of the book divisions becomes further complicated with the final two books Mormon edited (3 Nephi and 4 Nephi). Mormon clearly indicates the termination of his source for the book of Helaman: “and thus ended the book of Helaman, according to the record of Helaman and his sons” (Helaman 16:25). What we expect is that early in

---

67. Mormon modified what was recorded at the end of the book of Alma and the beginning of the book of Helaman to highlight a significant year marker. See Chapter 15: The Book of Helaman.

the book of 3 Nephi we should have an indication that the writer is ruler and starting a new dynasty. We don't get that. What we get are some unusual statements about the text.

The first unusual aspect of 3 Nephi is the synoptic book header. These have typically told us something about the contents of the book. The book header for 3 Nephi is: "And Helaman was the son of Helaman, who was the son of Alma, who was the son of Alma, being a descendant of Nephi who was the son of Lehi, who came out of Jerusalem in the first year of the reign of Zedekiah, the king of Judah." The header is unusual in its content, which and may be due to the compositor's decision to create a book header similar to other books. In this case, it is possible that what we have typeset as a header was intended to be a continuation of the title. Rather than a title and header, it is possible the name should be: "The book of Nephi, the son of Nephi, who was the son of Helaman. And Helaman was the son of Helaman, who was the son of Alma, who was the son of Alma, being a descendant of Nephi who was the son of Lehi, who came out of Jerusalem in the first year of the reign of Zedekiah, the king of Judah."<sup>68</sup>

I suggest this unusual title serves two purposes. First, it signals a shift in the way Mormon is sourcing his material. A book name change has signaled a change in dynasty, but this book does not. Secondly, the long title emphasizes both genealogy and continuation. As I will discuss in the section on "Subtle Manipulation of Names," the unusual replication of names with Nephi, son of Nephi, son of Helaman, son of Helaman, son of Alma, son of Alma, has a narrative function to indicate the religious continuity among political turmoil. This title reinforces that and makes the linking clear by associating the later Nephites with the original "Nephi who was the son of Lehi." These unusual features suggest there was no book of Nephi, son of Nephi, son of Helaman on the large plates. This is a book Mormon has created to isolate and emphasize the appearance and teachings of the Savior in the New World.

Mormon had ended the book of Helaman with two inserted sources not part of the book of Helaman as written on the plates of Nephi. The political situation became murky with the advent of Gadianton influence and dominance in Nephite politics, and the inserted "prophecy of Nephi" (Helaman 7, beginning of III) section clearly shows Nephi<sub>2</sub> outside the political leadership. Nephi<sub>3</sub> not only continues to be outside of the ruling clan, but he also witnesses the complete dissolution of Nephite government as the Nephites dissolve into separate tribes (3 Nephi 7:2–3).

---

68. I owe this insight to Mark A. Wright, personal email in my possession.

The Nephite record must have continued because Nephi<sub>3</sub> had been given charge of the records. Mormon gives us the solution when he notes that he is taking the information in 3 Nephi from a different source: “But behold there are records which do contain all the proceedings of this people; and a shorter but true account was given by Nephi” (3 Nephi 5:9). Given dominance of the Gadiantons that resulted in Nephi<sub>2</sub>’s prophecy recorded in Helaman, there is little chance that official historical records would have been particularly sympathetic to either Nephi<sub>2</sub> or Nephi<sub>3</sub>. To get the non-Gadianton version of history, Mormon used different sources — a separate record he calls “the prophecy of Nephi,” in Helaman and the “shorter but true” account of Nephi<sub>3</sub> for 3 Nephi. The name of this book of Nephi comes from the separate record, and not the large plates. Those plates might have had a different new dynastic name, but Mormon doesn’t give us any information about that record at all.

The book of 4 Nephi is even more enigmatic. Because it follows 3 Nephi, it has been posited that there was another Nephi for whom that book was written. Clyde James Williams wrote the paragraph on Nephi<sub>4</sub> in the *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*:

The son of Nephi<sub>3</sub>, one of the twelve disciples of Jesus Christ. Nephi<sub>4</sub> inscribed the record of his people on the plates of Nephi (4 Nephi 1:19; circa AD 34). He lived during the era of peace and unity that followed the ministry of Jesus Christ among the Nephites (4 Nephi 1:15–17). After Nephi’s death, Amos<sub>1</sub>, his son, kept the record.<sup>69</sup>

That is the sum of what might be known for Nephi<sub>4</sub>. I suggest that it is incorrect. There was no Nephi<sub>4</sub>. First, we need to understand the listed genealogy. Because it is separated into two books, we should examine it carefully. First, we have the basic descending lineage that is quite complete: Alma begets Alma, who begets Helaman, who begets Helaman, who begets Nephi, who begets Nephi. At the beginning of 4 Nephi we have: “The Book of Nephi, Who is the Son of Nephi — One

---

69. Clyde James Williams, s.v. “Nephi<sub>4</sub>,” in *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, ed. Dennis L. Largey (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 589. Note that the *Book of Mormon Reference companion* uses superscripts to differentiate people with the same name. I standardized the superscript to the convention I have been using in this book.

J. N. Washburn, *The Contents, Structure, and Authorship of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954), 49; used letters to identify the different men of the same name. He noted: “But Nephi X also had a son Nephi, the leading character in 4 Nephi. He would, of course, be Nephi Y.”

of the Disciples of Jesus Christ.” That might indicate that we have yet another Nephi (Nephi<sub>4</sub>, son of Nephi<sub>3</sub>, son of Nephi<sub>2</sub>), but there is no indication of his birth and no indication that his father passed away and gave him the records. It would be the only time we had three related men with the same name. While possible, it would not only be unusual, it would break the very clear pattern up to this point.

We do learn that this particular Nephi was one of the disciples of Jesus Christ. That was clearly true of Nephi<sub>3</sub>: “And it came to pass that when Jesus had spoken these words unto Nephi, and to those who had been called, (now the number of them who had been called, and received power and authority to baptize, was twelve)” (3 Nephi 12:1). It is difficult to see Nephi<sub>3</sub> separate from the called twelve, given his apparent priority in this verse. The book of 4 Nephi also begins within a few years of Christ’s appearance in Bountiful. Nephi<sub>3</sub> was certainly alive at that point, and having been the recordkeeper, was likely to have continued to be the recordkeeper.

The biggest complication in considering that it is the same Nephi in both books is that there would be only four recordkeepers from the time of Christ until Ammaron gave up the records in the Nephite year 320 (from Christ’s birth). Frankly, the addition of another Nephi doesn’t help with that timeline.

It is possible that the number of recordkeepers is intentional. Mormon is recounting four centuries and gives us a recordkeeper for each of the four centuries, until Mormon becomes the final recordkeeper. Thus, Nephi<sub>3</sub> is the recordkeeper for the first hundred years, Amos<sub>1</sub> for the second, and Amos<sub>2</sub> for the third. In the fourth hundred years we have Ammaron, who in turn gives the final recordkeeper, Mormon, the plates and the responsibility. This is a symbolic correlation only, as the lifespans of these men could not fit within their assigned centuries. Still, a man named Nephi covers the beginning, and there are only three more men named prior to Mormon’s receiving the plates. It appears that Mormon is working more symbolically than literally in 4 Nephi (born out in the minimal history included in the book).

I also suggest that 4 Nephi is where Mormon returns to the plates of Nephi as a general source. The header for the book notes that it is “[a]n account of the people of Nephi, according to his record.” Who are the “people of Nephi?” The term *Nephite* had been used as a political designation since Jacob’s time (Jacob 1:14). After the dissolution of the Nephite nation (3 Nephi 7:1–4), there was no government but only tribes. At some point after Christ came, the people re-established a government. I suggest that Nephi<sub>3</sub> was the leader and that “people of Nephi” could refer

to those who followed Nephi<sub>3</sub> as the head of the new government. Hence the phrase “according to his record.” A new ruler would have a new book on the plates of Nephi — and the name for the new dynasty was Nephi. I suggest this hypothesis is confirmed when Mormon records: “And it came to pass that Amos died also, (and it was an hundred and ninety and four years from the coming of Christ) and his son Amos kept the record in his stead; and he *also kept it upon the plates of Nephi; and it was also written in the book of Nephi, which is this book*” (4 Nephi 1:21). Further confirmation would be the return to a heavy use of dates in the record, although many of them are unrelated to any event.

### **Years as an Organizational Framework**

The small plates have a general chronological organization but not one which required strict adherence to a single timeline. For example, the end of 1 Nephi 9 leaves the historical narrative to insert comments about the plates upon which Nephi is writing almost 30 years later. The fundamental organization is chronological only in that the text tends to move through events as they occurred. However, neither Nephi nor the other small-plates writers insert the specific years very often. Thus, the organization follows the timely order of events, but it rarely tied events to a larger structure or a specific year in which they occurred. Time is even less of an organizational principle in 2 Nephi because 2 Nephi itself departs from primarily historical narrative to primarily timeless religious principles. When the small plates do specify time, they do so by marking years from the Lehite departure from Jerusalem.

When we return to text taken from the large plates, we find the book of Mosiah follows the same conventions about time as we see in the small plate books. The book of Mosiah periodically mentions the number of years that had passed from the ethnocentric beginning point of the departure from Jerusalem. This method allows the modern reader to place the events in a general timeframe, while the described events occur in narrative order.

This method of marking time works in general, but because it occurs sporadically, there are times when it is difficult to work out when certain events took place. This is particularly true in the book of Mosiah, when Mormon tells two different stories which overlap in time. He tells both about the Nephites in Zarahemla and a small group which returned to the land of Nephi. The stories of Zeniff, Noah, Limhi, Abinadi, and Alma<sub>1</sub> all take place in a different location but at the same time as other described

events in Zarahemla. There are too few dates listed to be precise about many elements of these stories.

Had those stories occurred perhaps fewer than 50 years later, it might not have been quite so difficult. Beginning with the book of Alma, a different method of using years to structure texts was introduced. We are never told why. We see only the result of the change. The book of Alma changes both the ethnocentric base from which years were counted as well as the way years are used to record history.

The very first verse of the first chapter in the book of Alma presents both changes: “Now it came to pass that in the first year of the reign of the judges over the people of Nephi...” (Alma 1:1). From this point through the end of the book of 4 Nephi, the passage of years is a narrative structure that frames events and therefore the way the text represents those events. We even find Mormon including years without accompanying text, such as in 4 Nephi 1:6, which declares: “And thus did the thirty and eighth year pass away, and also the thirty and ninth, and forty and first, and the forty and second, yea, even until forty and nine years had passed away, and also the fifty and first, and the fifty and second; yea, and even until fifty and nine years had passed away.”

Grant Hardy noticed: “Almost every year is mentioned individually, even if Mormon does not give them equal coverage. Sometimes nothing of note seems to have happened and a year is passed by in a sentence or less. Often, however, the dates come in pairs as Mormon indicates both the beginning and ending of a particular year. These references can be separated by only a few verses, but frequently they are several chapters apart (e.g. 83 B.C., the eighteenth year of the reign of the judges, begins at Alma 35:13 and ends at 44:24).”<sup>70</sup>

John L. Sorenson describes this organizational feature:

The fundamental format of the plates of Nephi was that of annals. Annals are yearly summaries of salient events. This format is clearly reflected at many points in the Book of Mormon, for example in Helaman 6:15: “And it came to pass that in the sixty and sixth year of the reign of the judges, behold, Cezoram was murdered by an unknown hand as he sat upon the judgment-seat. And it came to pass that in the same year, that his son, who had been appointed by the people in his stead, was also murdered. And thus ended the sixty and

---

70. Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, 103.

sixth year.” That is how Mormon chose to summarize the record for that year.

Generally these annalistic entries were succinct. As an example, Mormon’s record for the twenty-six years documented in Helaman, chapters 2 through 6, averages fewer than seven verses per year.<sup>71</sup>

Hardy and Sorenson correctly note the pattern but do not clarify that earlier books do not follow the annalistic pattern. The way time is used changes between the book of Mosiah and the book of Alma — both books Mormon edited. Therefore, it is unlikely that this is Mormon’s convention but rather a reflection of a difference in his sources.

There are insufficient data to suggest a cultural influence, but it is important to note that this method of recording annalistic history was part of the cultures of Mesoamerica, which I consider the most plausible location of the Book of Mormon events. Perhaps the change to the way time was recorded was influenced by the introduction of the long count among the Maya. That took a calendar that repeated dates in cycles and tied it to a beginning point. It allowed for a more absolute construction of time.

Whether or not that influenced the change in Alma, we do see the parallel use of annalist histories for both the Aztec and Maya peoples. Although both known examples postdate the Book of Mormon, they show that a historical document anchored in the passage of years existed in the region where most scholars believe the events in the Book of Mormon took place. Two texts have been preserved in their respective native language, although written in western script. One was written by Central Mexican Aztec historians, and one comes from the Cakchiquel Maya.

The *Annals of Cuauhtitlan* is a historical document originally written in Nahuatl, the Aztec language. The extant copy is a transcription from an earlier document. The orthography provides the earliest possible date for the copy as 1590.<sup>72</sup> The entire document is organized around years, and just as we saw in 4 Nephi 1:6, there are several years listed where no event accompanies the year. In the following excerpt from the history of the fall of Tollan (an important city state from around AD 900), the years are noted according to the Mesoamerican method of designating years. In the following, 2 Flint, 3 House, 4 Rabbit, etc. are years as represented in the Mesoamerican system:

---

71. Sorenson, “Mormon’s Sources,” 4.

72. John Bierhorst, trans., *History and Mythology of the Aztecs: The Codex Chimalpopoca* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1992), 12.

[The fall of Tollan: AD 896–1070]

2 Flint. 3 House. 4 Rabbit. 5 Reed. 6 Flint. 7 House. 8 Rabbit.  
9 Reed.

10 Flint. 11 House. 12 Rabbit. 13 Reed. 1 Flint. 2 House. 3  
Rabbit.

4 Reed. 5 Flint. 6 House. 7 Rabbit. 8 Reed. 9 Flint. 10 House.  
11 Rabbit. 12 Reed. 13 Flint. 1 House. 2 Rabbit. 3 Reed. 4  
Flint.

5 House. 6 Rabbit. 7 Reed. 8 Flint. 9 House.

10 Rabbit [A.D. 930]. Ayauhcoyotzin, ruler of Cuauhtitlan, died in that year. He had ruled for 55 years. Matlaxochitzin, ruler of Tollan, also died then, and Nauhyotzin was inaugurated, succeeding him as Tollan's ruler.

11 Reed [931]. The Cuauhtitlan ruler Necuamexochitzin was inaugurated in that year. His palace was in Tepotzotlan Miccacalco. The reason it was called *Miccacalco* [At the House of the Dead] is that lightning struck there, killing noblemen and ladies, and so they changed residence. Nothing was left standing but the Chichimec rulers' straw-house. They did not dare go back to their palace.

12 Flint. 13 House. 1 Rabbit. 2 Reed. 3 Flint. 4 House.  
5 Rabbit.

6 Reed. 7 Flint. 8 House. 9 Rabbit. 10 Reed. 11 Flint.

12 House [945]. It was the year the Cuauhtitlan ruler called Necuamexochitzin died. He had ruled for 15 years. Also at that time the Tollan ruler, Nauhyotzin, died, and Matlaccoatzin was inaugurated, succeeding him.

13 Rabbit [946]. In that year Mecellotzin was inaugurated as ruler of Cuauhtitlan. His palace was built in a place called Tianquizzolco Cuauhtlaapan.<sup>73</sup>

The second document is from farther south, from the Maya rather than the Aztec. Written in the *Cakchiquel* Maya language, the *Annals of the Cakchiquels* shows a similar structure, but in this case listed by days rather than years:

A little less than two years after the death of the Tukuchés, the Zutuhils were killed in *Zahcab* on the day 1 Ah-mak [July 10,

---

73. Ibid., 37. The Mesoamerican calendar rotated a set of named days through numbers. The nature of the cyclical repetition was such that a certain number and day could only occur once every 260 days.

1495]. The Zutuhils were killed and annihilated, and their chiefs *Nahtihay* and *Ahquibihay* surrendered. Only the lord Voo Caok, the Ahtziquinahay, did not surrender, but his heart was full of evil intentions toward the Cakchiquels.

On the day 5 Ah [ July 27, 1495] ended the second year after the revolution.

On the day 2 Ah [August 30, 1496] ended the third year after the revolution.

On the day 3 Queh [September 13, 1496, or May 31, 1497] there was a revolt in the Quiché. The Tukuchés went to take part in it there in the Quiché.

On the day 12 Ah [October 4, 1497] ended the fourth year after the revolution.

During the fifth year those of *Mixcu* died, subjects of the king Cablahuh Tihax, who wished to assume power. On the day 7 Camey [December 16, 1497] the warriors fell on the city of those of Mixcu and annihilated them.

Then the Yaquis of *Xivicu* died who had joined the king Voo Caok, lord of the Akahals, when the Akahal people revolted, wishing to take command of that place.<sup>74</sup>

The obvious difference between the Nephite annals and the examples from the *Annals of Cuauhtitlan* or the *Annals of the Cakchiquels* is that the latter two had extremely abbreviated entries. Mormon clearly had more to work with. Nevertheless, all three (*Annals of Cuauhtitlan*, *Annals of the Cakchiquels*, and Mormon's abridgement of the large plates) mark years in which no events are listed. Both the *Annals of the Cakchiquels* and Mormon's abridgement often note the ending of a year. Note that in the *Annals of the Cakchiquels* there is a count from a specific event rather than a single fixed origin point for dating ("the second year after the revolution" and "the third year after the revolution").

The very strict annalistic structure of the large plates may also serve as a textual diagnostic for when Mormon is using the large plates as his source. It cannot be an exclusive diagnostic because Alma<sub>2</sub> records some years in his non-large-plate personal record. However, when we know

---

74. José José Chonay and Delia Goetz, trans., *Annals of the Cakchiquels and Title of the Lords of Totonicapan* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1974), 110.

we are using a separate source that marks a few years, and then a new chapter begins with the annalistic year counts, we may be sure that Mormon is taking that information from the large plates.

That this was a plate-based convention is suggested by the way Mormon treats years when he is no longer abridging. When he writes his own history, he returns to a more sporadic notification of the years, if he notes them at all. For example, Words of Mormon simply indicates: “And it is many hundred years after the coming of Christ that I deliver these records into the hands of my son” (Words of Mormon 1:2).

### **Mormon’s Outline**

It is likely that Mormon worked from at least an outline as he wrote. Textual hints support this supposition. An important confirmation that Mormon understood what was to come in his text is found in his promises of future content. To make such promises, Mormon must have known that he already planned to include them later.

John A. Tvedtnes writes of seven times Mormon promised future content:

1. Mormon spoke in Mosiah 21:35 of Limhi’s people, saying that “an account of their baptism shall be given hereafter.” Almost a hundred verses followed before he told in Mosiah 25:17–18 about that ordinance being performed.
2. The preaching mission of the sons of Mosiah was related in Alma 17–25, eighteen chapters after Mormon had said in Mosiah 28:9 and 19–20 that he would later tell about it.
3. In Alma 35:13, Mormon promised to describe the Nephite-Lamanite war that began in the eighteenth year. But, since he proposed first to copy Alma’s teachings to his sons, he postponed the story of the war until Alma 43, where in verse three he introduced the topic with the words, “And now I return to an account of the wars.”
4. Writing in Mosiah 28:11–19, Mormon said that he would later give the story of the Jaredites. He made this statement at the point where he mentioned that King Mosiah had translated the record of that people. Apparently the problems he faced in his role as commander of the Nephite armies in his people’s battles against the Lamanites kept him from abridging the Jaredite record. But his son, Moroni, fulfilled the promise by giving us the Book of Ether. So Moroni preserved the Book

- of Mormon editorial pattern of not failing to cover what was promised, even though it took a generation.<sup>75</sup>
5. Third Nephi 18:36–37 contains Mormon’s statement that Jesus had given his twelve disciples “power to give the Holy Ghost.” He added, “I will show unto you hereafter that this record is true.” In the next chapter, verse thirteen, he described how the Holy Ghost fell on the twelve after their baptism. Then at 4 Nephi 1:1, he wrote that those baptized by the twelve “did also receive the Holy Ghost.” Further consistency was shown in Moroni’s later quotation of Christ’s words to the twelve, which Mormon had left out in 3 Nephi 18 where they logically might have been given: “Ye shall have power that to him upon whom ye shall lay your hands, ye shall give the Holy Ghost” (Moroni 2:2). He then added, “On as many as they laid their hands, fell the Holy Ghost” (v. 3). The reporting of the matter involved two prophets and four distinct passages of scripture, but eventually nothing was left out of the story.
  6. What is in our present scripture under the title the Words of Mormon serves as an editorial bridge between the book of Omni on the small plates and the book of Mosiah in Mormon’s abridgment of the large plates. In verse two of Words of Mormon, Mormon said he hoped that his son Moroni would write “concerning Christ.” That hope was realized about 350 pages later when Moroni told important matters concerning the Savior in Ether 3:17–20 and in 12:7, 16–22, and 38–41. At the very end of the whole volume (Mormon 9 and Moroni 2, 6, 7, 10), the son included his own testimony of Christ.
  7. In Helaman 2:12–14, Mormon said that he would speak more of Gadianton and his secret band “hereafter.” Indeed, he did. The problems caused by the robbers and much about their characteristics were detailed in Helaman 6; 3 Nephi 1:27–29; 2:11–18; 3:1–4:29; and beyond in 4 Nephi and Mormon.<sup>76</sup>

---

75. I differ with Tvedtnes’s interpretation of Mormon’s intention to include Ether. I see no indication that Mormon intended that he himself include it. I see Mormon as having known he would assign Moroni to complete the editing of Ether. See reference in next note.

76. John A. Tvedtnes, “Mormon’s Editorial Promises,” in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, eds. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1991), 29–31. Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, 97, also notes editorial promises as a feature of Mormon’s editing.

Tvedtnes skipped Mosiah 28:9 which promised the account of the preaching of the sons of Mosiah, which Mormon covered in Alma 17–27. Grant Hardy explains that Mormon used narrative foreshadowing, such as:

“I will show unto you that they were brought into bondage, and none could deliver them but the Lord their God” (Mosiah 23:23).

“But behold, we shall see that his promise which he made was rash” (Alma 51:10).

“Now behold, I will show unto you that they did not establish a king over the land” (3 Nephi 7:1).<sup>77</sup>

Each of these editorial promises was fulfilled (though the promise to include the record of Ether was fulfilled by Moroni, not Mormon). Each required the editorial knowledge of what was to come.

Knowing what was to come indicates that prior to writing, Mormon had already decided what was going to be included. When he began writing, he wrote in the order that we read the text. The “I will show you” statements only make sense as inclusions that referenced what he knew he would later write.

Having access to all the Nephite records meant it was theoretically possible for him to begin with the earliest of the large plates and simply abridge to the end. He didn’t do that. What he did can be seen in Mosiah 17: 4, which speaks of Alma<sub>1</sub>: “But he fled from before them and hid himself that they found him not. And he being concealed for many days did write all the words which Abinadi had spoken” (Mosiah 17:4).

This is the final verse of an aside Mormon inserted into his record of Abinadi before Noah. Verses 2 and 3 simply tell that Alma believed Abinadi and was cast out. It is possible the information written in verses 2 and 3 could have come from the official court records. However, knowing what Alma<sub>1</sub> did after he had been cast out could not have been in the court records. The only way Mormon would know was to have read Alma<sub>1</sub>’s personal account. Mormon includes that account later in Mosiah 23 and 24. However, including this little snippet of information

---

77. Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, 98. We may add 3 Nephi 10:18 “And it came to pass that in the ending of the thirty and fourth year, behold, I will show unto you that the people of Nephi who were spared, and also those who had been called Lamanites, who had been spared, did have great favors shown unto them, and great blessings poured out upon their heads, insomuch that soon after the ascension of Christ into heaven he did truly manifest himself unto them.”

in Mosiah 17 required that Mormon had already found and read Alma<sub>1</sub>'s personal record of those events. Mormon did not integrate information as he found it but first searched through all the records to find the stories that would best communicate the messages he wanted to tell. Mormon did not just record history, he transformed the records of history into subtle lessons.

**Brant A. Gardner** (MA, State University of New York Albany) is the author of *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon* and *The Gift and Power: Translating the Book of Mormon*, both published through Greg Kofford Books. He has contributed articles to *Estudios de Cultura Nahuatl* and *Symbol and Meaning Beyond the Closed Community*. He has presented papers at the FairMormon conference as well as at Sunstone.

