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## The Record of My Father

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Clifford P. Jones

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# THE RECORD OF MY FATHER

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Clifford P. Jones

***Abstract:** In 1 Nephi 1:16–17, Nephi tells us he is abridging “the record of my father.” The specific words Nephi uses in his writings form several basic but important patterns and features used repeatedly by Nephi and also by other Book of Mormon writers. These patterns and features provide context that appears to indicate that Nephi’s abridgment of Lehi’s record is the third-person account found in 1 Nephi 1:4 through 2:15 and that Nephi’s first-person account of his own ministry begins in 1 Nephi 2:16.*

This paper begins with a synopsis of the history of Nephi’s two sets of plates. It then reviews the literature that discusses Nephi’s abridgment of Lehi’s record. Textual analysis is then presented to suggest that Nephi’s abridgment of Lehi’s record begins in 1 Nephi 1:4 and continues (interspersed with Nephi’s editorial comments) through 1 Nephi 2:15, and is followed, beginning in 1 Nephi 2:16, by Nephi’s account of his own ministry. The paper then briefly suggests that these accounts highlight the ministries of Lehi and Nephi. It also suggests that the period covered by Lehi’s original record probably matches the time covered by the abridgment.

## Nephi’s Two Sets of Plates

It should be clear to any reader of the Book of Mormon that Nephi kept his record on two sets of plates. The first set, often called the large plates of Nephi, begins with Lehi’s record, followed by other records added by Nephi (see 1 Nephi 19:1–2). The second set, often called the small plates of Nephi, begins with Nephi’s abridgment of Lehi’s record and Nephi’s account of his own ministry (see 1 Nephi 1:16–17).

## Nephi's Large-Plate Record

The Lord commanded Nephi to make his large plates shortly after the family arrived in the promised land (see 1 Nephi 18:23–19:2). The Book of Mormon contains two short summaries of the early large-plate records. In each summary, Nephi lists “the record of my father” (1 Nephi 19:1–2)<sup>1</sup> as the initial record on these plates.<sup>2</sup> After engraving Lehi’s record onto the large plates, Nephi added other information about the history of his people. Lehi continued to live and to prophesy after Nephi had engraved “the record of my father” onto the large plates (see, for example, 2 Nephi 1–4). Nephi’s record on the large plates includes many of Lehi’s prophecies (see 1 Nephi 10:15) and many of Nephi’s own prophecies (see 1 Nephi 19:1).

By the time the Lord commanded Nephi to create the small plates (see 2 Nephi 5:30), a total of 30 years had passed since the family left Jerusalem (see 2 Nephi 5:28). During the intervening years in the promised land, Lehi had died, Laman and Lemuel had tried to kill Nephi (see 2 Nephi 5:2), and Nephi and his followers had fled to the land of Nephi (see 2 Nephi 5:4–28). By then, the large-plate record was already a comprehensive record, beginning with Lehi’s record and continuing with Nephi’s account of many subsequent events (see 1 Nephi 9:2, 1 Nephi 19:1–2, and 2 Nephi 5:29). Nephi explains that, “the things which transpired before that I made these plates [the small plates] are of a truth more particularly made mention upon the first plates [the large plates]” (1 Nephi 19:2).

The large-plate record contains visions and prophecies (see, for example, 1 Nephi 9:2; 10:15; and 19:1), but it also contains more secular writings than the small-plate record. Nephi tells us that the large plates contain “a full account of the history of my people” (1 Nephi 9:2) including “the more part of the reign of the kings and the wars and contentions of my people” (1 Nephi 9:4) or “a greater account of the wars and contentions and destructions of my people” (1 Nephi 19:4). It may be reasonable to speculate that Lehi’s record, the initial record on the large plates, is similarly broad-based and served as a template for Nephi’s continuing large-plate record.

While the Nephite civilization remained, the Lord never rescinded the commandment to add to the large plates. Nephi continued to add to

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1. All Book of Mormon quotations are from Royal Skousen, ed., *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

2. The inclusion of Lehi’s record as the first record on the large plates tends to confirm the fact that this record was closed at least by the time Nephi engraved the initial records onto the large plates — sometime before the end of Lehi’s ministry.

this record during his life and others continued the effort for centuries. Mormon added the final large-plate entry (see Mormon 2:17–18).

Joseph Smith never received the original large-plate record that included Lehi's record. Mormon abridged that voluminous record, and Joseph Smith translated Mormon's abridgment. However, the translation of the first part of that abridgment, which included Mormon's abridgment of Nephi's large-plate record, was lost by Martin Harris and is not available in our day. The books of Words of Mormon, Mosiah, Alma, Helaman, 3 Nephi, 4 Nephi, and the first part of Mormon contain the portion of Mormon's abridgment of the large-plate record found in the Book of Mormon.

### **Nephi's Small-Plate Record**

As mentioned above, the Lord didn't command Nephi to create the small plates until at least 30 years after Lehi's family left Jerusalem (see 2 Nephi 5:28). The small plates were made for a wise purpose known only to the Lord (see 1 Nephi 9:5). Nephi describes in three separate passages the information these plates should contain. In the first, he says they should contain an account "of the ministry of my people" (1 Nephi 9:3). Later, Nephi says that the small plates were to contain "the ministry and the prophecies — the more plain and precious parts of them —" (1 Nephi 19:3), and that he made them "that the more sacred things may be kept" (1 Nephi 19:5). Finally, Nephi tells us that the Lord said, "Make other plates [the small plates]; and thou shalt engraven many things upon them which are good in my sight for the profit of thy people" (2 Nephi 5:30).

Nephi engraved his abridgment of Lehi's record onto his small plates. He added an account of his own proceedings, reign, and ministry (see 1 Nephi 1:16–17). Later, Nephi's brother Jacob and Jacob's descendants added their records to the small plates (see Words of Mormon 1:3). Joseph Smith's translation of this special small-plate record is found, in its entirety, in the Book of Mormon. Nephi's small-plate record comprises the books of 1 Nephi and 2 Nephi. Jacob and his descendants added the books of Jacob, Enos, Jarom, and Omni.

### **Reviewing the Applicable Literature**

Only 16 verses into his small-plate record, Nephi mentions (twice) that it includes both an abridgment of his father's record and an account of his own life:

And now I Nephi do not make a full account of the things which my father hath written, for he hath written many things which he saw in visions and in dreams. And he also hath

written many things which he prophesied and spake unto his children, of which I shall not make a full account. But *I shall make an account of my proceedings in my days*. Behold, I make *an abridgment of the record of my father* upon plates which I have made with mine own hands. Wherefore, *after I have abridged the record of my father, then will I make an account of mine own life*. (1 Nephi 1:16–17, emphasis added)

To date, the discussion about the location and extent of Nephi's abridgment of Lehi's record has focused on 1 Nephi 10:1, which says, "And now I Nephi proceed to give an account upon these plates of my proceedings and my reign<sup>3</sup> and ministry. Wherefore to proceed with mine account, I must speak somewhat of the things of my father and also of my brethren." Over the years, a number of students of the Book of Mormon have asserted that these words mark the transition point between Nephi's abridgment of Lehi's record and Nephi's own account.<sup>4</sup>

This oft-repeated assertion appears to be based on an unstated assumption that, in 1 Nephi 10:1, the verb *to proceed* means *to begin*. While this is a reasonable assumption, this paper explores another reasonable possibility. The verb *to proceed* can mean either *to begin* or *to continue*, depending on the context.<sup>5</sup> The context of this passage may suggest that the verb *to proceed* is intended to mean *to continue*.

Noel B. Reynolds appears to recognize some incongruity between the common assertion that 1 Nephi 10:1 divides these two accounts and the context in which Nephi writes this passage.<sup>6</sup> To Reynolds, the words

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3. The word *reign* needn't refer to a monarch. It can refer to the period during which someone is pre-eminent or holds a religious or public service position. Oxford English Dictionary Online, "Reign," June 2007. Oxford University Press, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/151777?rskey=srefbW&result=2&isAdvanced=false#eid>.

4. See George Reynolds and Janne M. Sjodahl, *Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, 3rd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1961), 1:66, 69; Sidney B. Sperry, *Book of Mormon Compendium* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1968), 94; Eldin Ricks, *Book of Mormon Commentary* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1951), 1:110-111; and Joseph Fielding McConkie and Robert L. Millett, *Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1987), 1:27, 62.

5. Oxford English Dictionary Online, "Proceed," June 2007. Oxford University Press, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/151777?rskey=srefbW&result=2&isAdvanced=false#eid>.

6. See Noel B. Reynolds, "Nephi's Outline," in *Book of Mormon Authorship: New Light on Ancient Origins*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1982), 53-74, <https://archive.bookofmormoncentral.org/content/nephis-outline>.

at the end of the previous chapter, “and thus it is. Amen” (1 Nephi 9:6), followed by these words about Nephi’s reign and ministry, initially appeared to mark the end of one account and the beginning of another. He thought they suggested “an abridgment of Lehi’s record followed by an account of Nephi’s proceedings.”<sup>7</sup> But then Reynolds realized that this view clashes with surrounding context, which suggests a continuing story, not the beginning of a new record. He notes that, absent this reading of these words “we would never suspect two records. The story is *continuous*. . . . And the very next verse *continues* the speech of Lehi that was interrupted to end chapter 9.”<sup>8</sup>

This realization led Reynolds to question the existence of any abridgment of Lehi’s record. He states, “Nephi is the narrator of the entire book [1 Nephi] from beginning to end. . . . We know of Lehi’s teachings through Nephi’s report, not through a condensation of Lehi’s own record.”<sup>9</sup> Thus (incorrectly) concluding that 1 Nephi contains no abridgment of Lehi’s record, Reynolds then employs the words in 1 Nephi 9:6 and 10:1 as support for a very different thesis, “not that there are two distinct records in 1 Nephi, but rather that the book is divided [between chapters 9 and 10] into two parallel structures. [1 Nephi 9:6 and 10:1] serve primarily to call our attention to that structural division.”<sup>10</sup> So, to Reynolds, these passages support a “structural division” in 1 Nephi, but no true abridgment by Nephi of Lehi’s record.

S. Kent Brown also disagrees with the assertion that Nephi’s words in 1 Nephi 10:1 divide the abridgment of Lehi’s record from Nephi’s own account. In a 1991 article, Brown suggests this abridgment is not found in 1 Nephi, but his reasoning is very different from that of Reynolds.<sup>11</sup> Brown may conflate “the record of my father” (1 Nephi 19:1), which Nephi engraved on the large plates, with the “abridgment of the record of my father” (1 Nephi 1:17), which Nephi engraved on the small plates.

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7. N. Reynolds, “Nephi’s Outline,” 56.

8. *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.* Note that Reynolds bases some of his analysis on his mistaken conclusion that the term “And thus it is. Amen” appears only twice in 1 Nephi. He sees significance in the fact that this term appears only at the end of each part of his linguistic structure. In reality, though, this term appears three times in 1 Nephi (9:6, 14:30, and 22:31) and the very similar term “And thus I spake unto my brethren. Amen” (1 Nephi 15:36) also appears once.

11. S. Kent Brown, “Nephi’s Use of Lehi’s Record,” in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon: Insights You May Have Missed Before* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1991), <https://archive.bookofmormoncentral.org/content/nephis-use-lehis-record>.

Brown states that Nephi's abridgment of Lehi's record was engraved onto Nephi's large plates, not his small plates.<sup>12</sup>

In 1998, Brown updated this research in a second article.<sup>13</sup> His second article omits any suggestion that the abridgment is found on the large plates but offers no new theory about its location. Brown clearly doesn't, however, agree with the suggestions noted earlier<sup>14</sup> that the abridgment comprises all of 1 Nephi chapters 1–9 or 1–10. Brown doesn't see how the text of the Book of Mormon supports these suggestions. He says, "A close inspection of these and later chapters, however, indicates that these suggestions must be modified considerably since (a) Nephi includes important material in his opening chapters about himself and (b) both he and Jacob quote and paraphrase their father's words in later chapters."<sup>15</sup> In other words, Brown doesn't believe that 1 Nephi 10:1 divides Nephi's abridgment of Lehi's record from Nephi's own account, because (a) the text of 1 Nephi chapters 1–9 or 1–10 isn't limited to Lehi's story; it includes a substantial amount of Nephi's own story and (b) after these opening chapters, Lehi's words continue to play a significant role in Nephi's writings (and Jacob's writings).

Separately, Brown tries to correlate Nephi's small-plate content with his large-plate content. Appropriately, he sees 1 Nephi 19:1 as a summary of the initial large-plate content. To Brown, Nephi's term "the record of my father" (1 Nephi 19:1) "corresponds roughly to 1 Nephi [chapters] 1–10."<sup>16</sup> Brown doesn't further break down this perceived rough correspondence, and we should avoid mistaking it for a suggestion that he sees 1 Nephi chapters 1–10 as Nephi's abridgment of Lehi's record. Brown has already explained that he believes the context belies that suggestion.

### **Textual Analysis of the Meaning of 1 Nephi 10:1**

A careful analysis of the text of the Book of Mormon suggests a different way to read 1 Nephi 10:1 — one that may resolve the incongruities pointed out by Reynolds and Brown. Maybe Nephi didn't write this passage as a transition point between his abridgment of Lehi's record and his own account. Perhaps Nephi had begun his account of

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12. Ibid., 4.

13. S. Kent Brown, "Recovering the Missing Record of Lehi," in *From Jerusalem to Zarahemla: Literary and Historical Studies of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1998), 28-54.

14. See n4.

15. Brown, "Recovering the Missing Record," n10.

16. Brown, "Recovering the Missing Record," 29.

his proceedings, reign, and ministry much earlier in his record. Then, prior to this passage, Nephi paused this ongoing account to discuss an important side topic. Nephi's words in 1 Nephi 10:1 may simply indicate that he has ended his discussion of the side topic and is now proceeding (continuing) with the ongoing account of his life.

### **An Aside About Nephi's Two Sets of Plates**

In 1 Nephi chapter 8, Nephi's narrative describes how Lehi shared with his sons his vision of the tree of life and some further teachings. Then, at the beginning of 1 Nephi chapter 9, Nephi alludes to many more revelations that Lehi received and taught "which cannot be written upon these plates" (1 Nephi 9:1).<sup>17</sup> Having mentioned "these plates," Nephi then pauses his narrative for an aside (a lengthy editorial comment, perhaps similar to a sidebar in a modern publication) about "these plates." He begins his aside with these words: "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" (1 Nephi 9:2). Then, through the rest of 1 Nephi chapter 9, Nephi helps his readers understand more about the purpose and content of his two sets of plates (see 1 Nephi 9:2–6). Nephi ends this aside with the word *amen* (1 Nephi 9:6).

### **A Literary Structure for Resuming a Narrative After an Aside**

Nephi's words after this aside (in 1 Nephi 10:1–2) appear to form an interesting literary structure designed to resume the narrative paused for the aside. Book of Mormon writers repeatedly use this structure to resume narratives after they have paused them for asides. This structure has three distinct parts. The first part provides a title, of sorts, to reidentify the narrative being resumed. In this case, Nephi is resuming an account of his life and ministry<sup>18</sup> that was paused for the aside, "And now I Nephi proceed [continue] to give *an account* upon these plates *of my proceedings and my reign and ministry*. Wherefore to proceed

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17. Nephi's reference to these revelations in the context of his other plates suggests that he has indeed recorded these revelations, but that the record is on his large plates, not his small plates. Nephi later expressly states that he has written many of his father's prophecies and teachings in his other book (see 1 Nephi 10:15).

18. Nephi's use of the indefinite article (an) rather than the definite article (the) is very appropriate here, because Nephi had previously recorded on his large plates another, presumably more broad-based, account of his proceedings, reign, and ministry (see, for example, 1 Nephi 19:2–4). On these small plates, he is making "an account" of his life and ministry, but not "the" only account.

[continue] with mine account, I must speak somewhat of the things of my father and also of my brethren” (1 Nephi 10:1, emphasis added).

The second part of this structure is a brief (and somewhat repetitive) recap that restates the event described in the narrative just before the aside began. This recap reminds readers of what had happened in the narrative just before it was paused. Here, Nephi writes, “For behold, it came to pass that after my father had made an end of speaking the words of his dream and also of exhorting them to all diligence” (1 Nephi 10:2). This passage initially appears redundant. It briefly restates information Nephi had written just prior to the aside:

And it came to pass that after my father had spoken all the words of his dream or vision, which were many, he said unto us, because of these things which he saw in a vision, he exceedingly feared for Laman and Lemuel. Yea, he feared lest they should be cast off from the presence of the Lord. And he did exhort them then with all the feeling of a tender parent that they would hearken to his words, in that perhaps the Lord would be merciful to them and not cast them off. Yea, my father did preach unto them. And after that he had preached unto them and also prophesied unto them of many things, he bade them to keep the commandments of the Lord. And he did cease speaking unto them. (1 Nephi 8:36–38)

This reiteration serves a purpose. At the conclusion of the aside, it reorients the reader back to the event from which the narrative will now proceed — preparing the reader for the third part of this structure, which is simply the continuation of the narrative from that point as if it had not been interrupted for the aside. Here, Nephi continues his narrative describing further revelations that Lehi received and taught his children — prophecies about those who remained in Jerusalem (see 1 Nephi 10:2).

This resumptive structure provides context for Nephi’s words in 1 Nephi 10:1, clarifying that they are intended to continue an account interrupted for an aside. The context provided by this literary structure becomes even more clear with a review of its repeated use across the text of the Book of Mormon. We will now review three other places in the Book of Mormon where this same resumptive structure helps to reorient readers after other asides.

### **Mormon Resumes His Narrative After an Aside about the Lands of the Lamanites**

This same literary structure follows an aside written by Mormon in Alma chapter 22, where Mormon's narrative is about the mission of the sons of Mosiah to the Lamanites. In this narrative, Mormon mentions that "the king sent a proclamation throughout all the land" (Alma 22:27). Because he has mentioned "all the land," Mormon then pauses his narrative to provide his readers with a more complete description of the land (see Alma 22:27–34). After doing so, he transitions back to his narrative about these missionaries using the same three-part structure used earlier by Nephi.

First, Mormon reidentifies the narrative being resumed with something akin to a title, "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, emphasis added). He then gives a brief (and repetitive) recap of the event described in the narrative just before the aside, saying, "Behold, now it came to pass that the king of the Lamanites sent a proclamation among all his people" (Alma 23:1). And then he resumes the narrative by describing, for the first time, the content of the proclamation (see Alma 23:1–3).

### **Moroni Resumes His Narrative After Discussing Nephite History and Modern Witnesses**

Moroni uses this structure to resume his Jaredite narrative after a pause for a lengthy two-part aside found in Ether chapters 4 and 5. This aside comes after Moroni's narrative describes the Brother of Jared's visit with the Lord when the Lord touches the 16 stones to light the barges. Moroni tells us that after this visit, the Lord commands the Brother of Jared to "go down out of the mount from the presence of the Lord and write the things which he had seen" (Ether 4:1). Then, Moroni begins the first part of his aside, in which he explains the history of the Brother of Jared's words among the Nephites, including the fact that Moroni has engraved them onto plates but sealed them up to come forth in our future. This initial part of the aside includes a long direct quotation of the Lord's words to Moroni and ends with the word *amen* (see Ether 4:1–19). Then, Moroni immediately begins the second part of his aside, giving Joseph Smith specific instructions concerning the plates and three latter-day witnesses. This second part also ends with the word *amen* (see Ether 5:1–6). Then, Moroni's transition back to the Jaredite narrative uses the same three-part structure used previously by Nephi and Mormon.

First, Moroni explains that he is resuming the narrative he had interrupted with the two-part aside, reidentifying the narrative as follows, “And now I Moroni proceed [continue] to give *the record of Jared and his brother*” (Ether 6:1, emphasis added). He then gives a brief (and somewhat repetitive) recap of events described in the narrative just before the two-part aside, saying, “For it came to pass after that the Lord had prepared the stones which the brother of Jared had carried up into the mount” (Ether 6:2). And then, he actually continues the narrative with the words “the brother of Jared came down out of the mount; and he did put forth the stones into the vessels which were prepared, one in each end thereof. And behold, they did give light unto the vessels thereof” (Ether 6:2).

### **Moroni Resumes His Narrative After an Aside About Faith**

Moroni uses the same structure again to resume the same Jaredite narrative after his oft-quoted aside on faith in Ether chapter 12. This aside follows the description in his narrative of the great and marvelous prophecies of Ether, which the people didn’t believe, “Ether did prophesy great and marvelous things unto the people, which they did not believe because they saw them not” (Ether 12:5). Moroni then transitions to his aside, saying, “And now I Moroni would speak somewhat concerning these things” (Ether 12:6). His aside is a beautiful explanation of faith, of weakness, and of hope and charity. He ends his aside with the word *amen* (see Ether 12:6–41). Then he transitions back to the Jaredite narrative using the structure we’ve seen elsewhere.

First, he explains that he is resuming the narrative, which he reidentifies with the words, “And now I Moroni proceed [continue] to finish *my record concerning the destruction of the people of which I have been writing*” (Ether 13:1, emphasis added). Then, he gives a brief, repetitive recap of the event he had described in the narrative just before the aside, “For behold, they rejected all the words of Ether” (Ether 13:2). Then, he resumes the narrative, sharing the content of Ether’s prophecies (see Ether 13:2–12).

### **The Significance of This Literary Structure**

This resumptive structure doesn’t follow all Book of Mormon asides (see, for example, 3 Nephi 5:8–26 and 10:14–19). This structure does, however, appear often enough to tell us that when we see it, we have clearly found a place where the narrative was interrupted by an aside and is being continued.

This structure is particularly helpful in passages that use the verb *to proceed*, which, as explained earlier, has different meanings in different

contexts. This resumptive structure provides context that strongly suggests that, in these instances, the verb *to proceed* describes a continuation of a narrative that was paused for an aside (see 1 Nephi 10:1; Ether 6:1; and 13:1). Even without this unique structure, similar context can suggest a continuing or resuming narrative (see 3 Nephi 5:19; 26:12; and Ether 2:13). Note, however, that in a different context, the verb *to proceed* can describe the beginning of a new narrative (see, for example, Ether 1:1).

After Nephi pauses his ongoing account of his life to discuss his two sets of plates, he uses this resumptive structure to reorient his readers back to the point where he had paused his narrative, so he can continue again from that point. The words he uses within this resumptive structure include the phrases *proceed with* and *proceed to give*. In this clear context, the verb *to proceed* means *to continue*. Nephi is saying, in essence, “and now I Nephi [continue] to give an account upon these plates of my proceedings and my reign and ministry. Wherefore to [continue] with mine account, I must speak somewhat of the things of my father and also of my brethren” (1 Nephi 10:1). These words help us understand that Nephi is continuing an account that he began much earlier.

The textual evidence reviewed so far suggests that Nephi didn’t write 1 Nephi 10:1 as a transition point between his abridgment of Lehi’s record and his own account. Rather, it describes the resumption of an account of his life and ministry begun earlier.

### **Textual Analysis Identifying the Abridgment and Nephi’s Account**

We will now review Nephi’s words from the beginning of 1 Nephi in an effort to identify both Nephi’s abridgment of his father’s record and the transition point at which Nephi begins his account of his own life and ministry. An important key to this identification is the fact that Nephi writes some parts of the text in the first person and other parts in the third person. As we isolate the third-person text from the first-person text, it appears that the third-person text constitutes Nephi’s abridgment of Lehi’s record.

### **Nephi’s Initial Editorial Comment**

Nephi’s words in the first three verses of 1 Nephi are a colophon — an editorial comment identifying the author and his qualifications for

writing this record.<sup>19</sup> This colophon, like all Nephi's editorial comments, is written in the first person.

I Nephi having been born of goodly parents, therefore I was taught somewhat in all the learning of my father. And having seen many afflictions in the course of my days, nevertheless having been highly favored of the Lord in all my days, yea, having had a great knowledge of the goodness and the mysteries of God, therefore I make a record of my proceedings in my days. Yea, I make a record in the language of my father, which consists of the learning of the Jews and the language of the Egyptians. And I know that the record which I make to be true. And I make it with mine own hand, and I make it according to my knowledge. (1 Nephi 1:1–3)

Although these words mention that Nephi was born, was taught, saw afflictions, and was favored of the Lord, their primary purpose isn't really to tell his story. This isn't the beginning of Nephi's narrative. These words introduce us to Nephi as an author, to his qualifications to make this record, and to his reasons for making it. This colophon appears to identify Nephi as the seasoned veteran who authored the small-plate account, rather than as the young man in Lehi's household at the time the narrative begins. This introductory editorial comment is comparable to information we might find on the inside of the dust jacket of a modern hardback book.

Separating Nephi's editorial comments from his narrative helps us better understand the nature of his narrative. Like all editorial comments and asides Nephi adds later, this introductory colophon is written in the first person. In Nephi's editorial comments, he always speaks in the first person, often identifying himself by name and always using the pronouns *I* and *my*. Immediately after this introductory editorial comment, however, these first-person pronouns all but disappear from his writing until his next editorial comment. This is because the initial portion of the narrative, unlike his editorial comments, is written consistently in the third person.

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19. See Thomas W. Mackay, "Mormon as Editor: A Study in Colophons, Headers, and Source Indicators," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2, no. 2 (1993), <https://publications.mi.byu.edu/fullscreen/?pub=1379&index=7>. See also Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert; The World of the Jaredites; There Were Jaredites* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1988), 17; and John A. Tvedtnes, "Colophons in the Book of Mormon," in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1992), 13-17, <https://archive.bookofmormoncentral.org/node/150>.

### **Narrative Written From Lehi's Perspective**

Isolating Nephi's narrative from his comments also highlights that the initial narrative is written from a different perspective altogether from those comments. In the narrative, Nephi speaks in the third person and relates events of his father's life from his father's viewpoint. The narrative isn't about Nephi at all. The pronoun *my* is used only to repeatedly identify "my father Lehi." The narrative is filled with the pronouns *he*, *his*, and *him*, all of which describe his father.

This third-person narrative tells a story that doesn't belong to Nephi. It is written from Lehi's perspective and relates events he experienced when Nephi was not present. Each event is described as it happens to Lehi. For example, the account of Lehi's vision of the pillar of fire (see 1 Nephi 1:6) is described as it occurs. This isn't the account of how Nephi learned about this vision. We can assume that Lehi described this vision to Nephi and others, but this abbreviated account never tells us whether he did. It just describes the vision as it took place.

### **Another Editorial Comment**

So far, it would be hard to say whether Nephi is simply choosing to tell his father's story in the third person or whether he may be abridging his father's story from his father's own record. This third-person summary of events in Lehi's life continues until Nephi interjects another first-person editorial comment. Some of the language in this comment suggests that Nephi is in the process of abridging his father's record and that he will make an account of his own life afterwards.

And now I Nephi do not make a full account of the things which my father hath written, for he hath written many things which he saw in visions and in dreams. And he also hath written many things which he prophesied and spake unto his children, of which I shall not make a full account. But I shall make an account of my proceedings in my days. Behold, I make an abridgment of the record of my father upon plates which I have made with mine own hands. Wherefore after I have abridged the record of my father, then will I make an account of mine own life. (1 Nephi 1:16–17)

The first line of this comment suggests that Nephi may be taking this account from "the things which my father hath written." An abridgment is "a digest or shortened version of a longer text, treatise, etc., esp. produced by omitting the less important passages of the original; an

abstract, an epitome.”<sup>20</sup> Nephi tells us in this comment that he is not making a full account of his father’s writings, suggesting that there are some aspects of his father’s writings that need not be recounted here.

The fact that Nephi is already in the process of writing his abridgment is suggested by the present tense of a verb. Nephi says, “I *make* an abridgment.” The word *make* subtly reflects an ongoing effort. This subtle suggestion is corroborated by the third-person narrative that surrounds this comment. The future tense of two other verbs in this comment similarly indicates that Nephi hasn’t yet begun his account of his own life, but that account will follow this abridgment of his father’s record. With respect to the account of his own life, he says, “I shall make” and “then will I make.” Based on these words, we should expect to find Nephi’s first-person account of his own life, from his own perspective, after he ends this third person account, which is less than a full account of his father’s record and which he describes as “an abridgment of the record of my father.”

After writing this second editorial comment, Nephi transitions back into his abridgment of his father’s record with the words, “Therefore I would that ye should know that” (1 Nephi 1:18). After these transitional words, he resumes his third-person narrative, telling how Lehi prophesied of the coming Messiah and was rejected by the people in Jerusalem.

### **A Third Editorial Comment**

Nephi then interjects his third first-person editorial comment: “But behold, I Nephi will shew unto you that the tender mercies of the Lord is over all them whom he hath chosen because of their faith to make them mighty, even unto the power of deliverance” (1 Nephi 1:20). After this short comment, Nephi resumes his abridgment once more with the transitional words, “For behold, it came to pass that” (1 Nephi 2:1). We then learn more of Lehi’s story from Lehi’s point of view.

### **A Direct Quote**

Note that when Nephi’s abridged account contains a quote, the quoted words appear in their original form. For instance, the Lord tells Lehi, “Blessed art thou Lehi because of the things which thou hast done. And because thou hast been faithful and declared unto this people the things which I commanded thee, behold, they seek to take away thy life”

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20. See *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, “Abridgment,” September 2009. Oxford University Press, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/587?redirectedFrom=abridgment#eid>.

(1 Nephi 2:1). So, in this instance, the Lord, in the first person, speaks to Lehi in the second person.

### Consistent Perspective

Except for direct quotations, however, the narrative continues in the third person. It also continues to relate events from Lehi's perspective, and not Nephi's. For example, after the Lord commands him to "take his family and depart into the wilderness" (1 Nephi 2:2), the account tells us, from Lehi's perspective, that "he did travel in the wilderness with his family" (1 Nephi 2:5). Of course, Nephi was there, but because the source of this account is Lehi's record, Nephi doesn't use the word *we*. Nephi's abridgment of Lehi's record continues from Lehi's point of view as Lehi takes his family into the wilderness, endures the murmurings of Laman and Lemuel, speaks to them with power, and then dwells in a tent in the valley of Lemuel (see 1 Nephi 2:2–15). As before, the account is filled with the pronouns *he*, *him*, and *his*, all of which describe Lehi.

This initial third-person narrative, which continues through 1 Nephi 2:15, never mentions Nephi by name. It names Lehi four times, refers to him 14 times as "my father," and refers to him at least 75 times with the pronouns *he*, *him*, and *his*. Nephi's references to himself are limited to his editorial comments and transitional language. The narrative itself clearly tells Lehi's unique story from Lehi's personal point of view.<sup>21</sup>

### The Transition Point

Nephi's words in 1 Nephi 2:16 constitute the transition point between Nephi's abridgment of his father's record and Nephi's own account. At this point, Nephi begins to tell his own story. Now that his abridgment of Lehi's record has brought Lehi and his family out of Jerusalem and through the wilderness to dwell in the valley of Lemuel, Nephi is ready to fulfill his earlier promise to make an account "of my proceedings in my days" (1 Nephi 1:1 and 1:17). From this point forward, Nephi is the main character in his account and the narrative comes to us in the first person from Nephi's own perspective.<sup>22</sup> This account also begins

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21. The final event mentioned in the abridgment, that Lehi dwelt in a tent, can cover a long period. We review below the likelihood that Nephi began his ministry in the valley of Lemuel a while before Lehi actually concluded his record (while still dwelling in a tent in the valley of Lemuel).

22. The preface or introduction to 1 Nephi (prior to 1 Nephi 1:1) may also subtly suggest the division between Nephi's abridgment of Lehi's record and Nephi's own account. The initial lines of this introduction present a third-person summary of

with a brief colophon that identifies Nephi, not as the seasoned author of the small-plate record but as the young man whose account is now beginning. Then the first event Nephi records at the inception of his own personal account is the visit from the Lord that appears to mark the start of his ministry:

I Nephi being exceeding young, nevertheless being large in stature, and also having great desires to know of the mysteries of God, wherefore I cried unto the Lord. And behold, *he did visit me* and did soften my heart that I did believe all the words which had been spoken by my father. (1 Nephi 2:16, emphasis added)

### **Consistent Patterns and Features**

The word usage patterns employed by Nephi — writing his abridgment of another person’s record in the third person and writing his own record in the first person — are followed quite consistently throughout the Book of Mormon. Like Nephi, Mormon and Moroni consistently write their own editorial comments, asides about their own thoughts and actions, and personal accounts in the first person. Like Nephi, both Mormon and Moroni use the third person when they abridge the records of others. However, when any of them quotes something directly from another source (an existing record or a living person), the quote appears in its original form. These word usage patterns help us distinguish among abridged accounts, editorial comments, personal asides, personal accounts, and quoted materials throughout the Book of Mormon.

### **Lehi’s Continued Role in Nephi’s Narrative**

Lehi continues to play an important role in Nephi’s account long after Nephi ends his abridgment of his father’s record. However, after Nephi begins his own personal account, the story follows Nephi and not Lehi. It is told from Nephi’s perspective, not Lehi’s. There is a clear difference between the two accounts. In Nephi’s own account, Lehi’s revelations are described, not necessarily as they occur, but as Nephi becomes aware of them. For instance, the account of Lehi’s dream in which the Lord commands him to send Nephi and his brothers back to Jerusalem for the

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Lehi’s account. The balance of the introduction, also written in the third person (until its final first-person passage), shifts to an account about Nephi (and his brethren) with the words *Nephi taketh*. This shift occurs at the precise point where Nephi’s own account begins.

plates of brass comes to us through Nephi’s own account. This account doesn’t relate Lehi’s actual receipt of this dream. Rather, it tells how Lehi describes the dream previously received to Nephi: “And it came to pass that I Nephi returned from speaking with the Lord to the tent of my father. And it came to pass that he spake unto me, saying: Behold, I have dreamed a dream in the which the Lord hath commanded me that thou and thy brethren shall return to Jerusalem” (1 Nephi 3:1–2).

Similarly, the account of Lehi’s vision of the tree of life and Lehi’s further prophecies made in the valley of Lemuel (see 1 Nephi chapters 8–10) come to us through Nephi. He doesn’t describe how Lehi receives the vision or subsequent prophetic information, but rather how Nephi (and his brothers) learn about them. His account of this vision begins, “And it came to pass that while my father tarried in the wilderness, he spake unto us, saying: Behold, I have dreamed a dream, or in other words, I have seen a vision” (1 Nephi 8:2). By the time Lehi speaks to his sons, the dream has already taken place. Nephi wasn’t present when Lehi received the dream. Nephi tells us about the dream from his own experience — he learns about it as his father shares it.

Nephi’s account does describe some of Lehi’s actions right as they occur, but it appears that in each case, Nephi is present with Lehi as the event takes place. These events still come to us from Nephi’s perspective, but his perspective is very similar to that of Lehi. For example, Nephi describes Lehi’s review of the records on the brass plates as it occurs (see 1 Nephi 5:10–16). It appears that Nephi is with Lehi during this review. Nephi summarizes the experience as follows: “[T]hus far *I and my father* had . . . obtained the record which the Lord had commanded us and searched them and found that they were desirable” (1 Nephi 5:20–21, emphasis added).

Similarly, Nephi describes a prophecy received by Lehi as they search the brass plates. Nephi simply says that as Lehi studied the plates of brass, “he was filled with the Spirit and began to prophesy” (1 Nephi 5:17). Again, it appears likely that Nephi was there as Lehi spoke the words of the prophecy. Nephi uses the phrase “he said that” (1 Nephi 5:19) in his description.<sup>23</sup>

Nephi later mentions other prophecies that Lehi shared with his sons in the valley of Lemuel (see 1 Nephi 9:1–2, 10:15, and 19:1), and additional prophecies given by Lehi shortly before Lehi’s death (see 2 Nephi chapters 1–4).

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23. As explained below, it appears that Lehi kept his own record through the time when he reviewed the records on the brass plates and prophesied about his seed (see 1 Nephi 6:1). Perhaps Nephi’s account of these events also takes Lehi’s own record into account.

Nephi's account describes his own revelatory experiences from his own perspective. This includes, of course, the Lord's visit to Nephi, described earlier. It also includes the next recorded revelation that Nephi receives while grieved about Laman and Lemuel (see 1 Nephi 2:18–24). It then goes on to include many other revelations received by Nephi.

The cumulative textual evidence from all these provisions lends support to the proposition that Nephi's abridgment of Lehi's record begins in 1 Nephi 1:4 and ends in 1 Nephi 2:15 and that the balance of Nephi's small-plate record contains his account of his own ministry, supplemented by asides and by quotations from Lehi, Jacob, Isaiah, and other prophets.

### **Plausible Inferences Based on This Identification of the Abridgment**

This proposed identification of the text of Nephi's abridgment of Lehi's record and the point at which Nephi transitions to his own account provides an opportunity to consider Nephi's editorial intent for beginning his small-plate record with a relatively brief abridgment of his father's record before sharing his own account. It also allows us to explore the text for any further indications that Lehi may have ended his original contemporary account while the family lived in the valley of Lemuel and that Nephi may have begun his contemporary account at about the same time.

### **The Abridgment and Nephi's Account Focus on the Ministry**

As mentioned previously, Nephi eventually tells us that he made the small plates of Nephi, upon which he engraved this record, because he "received a commandment of the Lord" that this smaller record should be made "for the special purpose that there should be an account engraven of the ministry of my people" (1 Nephi 9:3). He later adds that this special record should contain, "the ministry and the prophecies — the more plain and precious parts of them" (1 Nephi 19:3).

It seems that to fulfill this commandment, Nephi chose to set the stage for the account of his own ministry by preceding it with an abridgment of his father's record, which describes the inception of Lehi's ministry, including "the more plain and precious parts of" several of Lehi's early prophecies. The abridgment appears to serve as the literary vehicle that introduces us to the unique, desolate world in which Nephi's own ministry begins. In addition, it highlights an important parallel between two ministries. Just as Lehi's ministry in Jerusalem begins after a vision in which he sees the Lord, Nephi's ministry begins with a visit

from the Lord. After this visit, Nephi immediately begins a ministry of service by teaching and praying for his brethren (see 1 Nephi 2:17–18) and humbly obeying the Lord’s commandments given through his father (see 1 Nephi 3:7). As Nephi continues the account of his own ministry, he is mindful of the Lord’s commandment and incorporates into his account other important teachings and prophecies of Lehi (and of Jacob) that are part of “the ministry of my people” (1 Nephi 9:3).

### **The Small Plate-Record May Suggest the Time Frame of Lehi’s Record**

It seems likely that Lehi’s record, which Nephi engraved onto the large plates, was initially written by Lehi on a perishable medium, such as parchment. It was likely transferred by Nephi onto the large plates for long-term preservation (see 1 Nephi 19:1–2 and Jacob 4:1–3). The Book of Mormon never specifically mentions Lehi’s initial, perishable record, but it seems reasonable to imply that Lehi made a contemporary account that Nephi eventually engraved onto the large plates. It also seems likely that Nephi made a similar contemporary account, which provided a basis for his writings on the large plates. Assuming then that these accounts existed, Nephi’s small-plate record appears to suggest a plausible timeline for the closing of Lehi’s contemporary account and for the inception of Nephi’s contemporary account.

### **Lehi’s Account Appears to End in the Valley of Lemuel**

While some students of the Book of Mormon may have assumed that Nephi’s term *the record of my father* describes a record covering virtually all of Lehi’s life, the text of Nephi’s abridgment (1 Nephi 1:4 to 2:15) doesn’t cover Lehi’s later years. It ends while he is living in the valley of Lemuel. Even so, Nephi doesn’t call his abridgment “an abridgment of *the first part of the record of my father*.” He calls it “an abridgment of the record of my father” (1 Nephi 1:17). Other Book of Mormon passages refer to “parts” of records (see 1 Nephi 6:1 and Ether 1:3), so when Nephi doesn’t do so here, it would appear that he is referring to his father’s entire record.

The word *abridgment* refers to a condensation of a written work.<sup>24</sup> Elsewhere in the Book of Mormon, the word *abridgment* indicates a summary of an entire record or set of records (see, for example, Words of Mormon 1:3, Moroni 1:1). Likewise, Nephi tells us (twice) that he

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24. See *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, “Abridgment,” September 2009. Oxford University Press, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/587?redirectedFrom=abridgment#eid>.

abridged an entire record — “the record of my father” (1 Nephi 1:17). The plain meaning of Nephi’s words suggests that he ended the abridgment where Lehi’s large-plate record ends — in the valley of Lemuel. The few other Book of Mormon passages that mention Lehi’s large-plate record lend support to the proposition that the time covered by the abridgment matches that of the large-plate record.<sup>25</sup>

The abridgment narrative appears to cover a period beginning in “the commencement of the first year of the reign of Zedekiah, king of Judah” (1 Nephi 1:4). However, the narrative also mentions that Lehi had “dwelt at Jerusalem in all his days” (1 Nephi 1:4). This latter phrase may suggest that Lehi’s record covered some events from his earlier days, but Lehi’s record clearly begins no later than the first year of Zedekiah’s reign.

The abridgment narrative ends with a reference to Lehi dwelling in a tent in the valley of Lemuel (see 1 Nephi 2:15). This passage allows for the possibility that Lehi continued adding to his ongoing account for a while in that valley. Although Nephi’s own small-plate account, which follows the abridgment, begins before Nephi and his brothers travel to Jerusalem for the brass plates, other passages suggest that Lehi kept his contemporary account until sometime after his sons returned with the brass plates.

Nephi tells us that when he and his brothers returned with the brass plates, Lehi searched these plates (see 1 Nephi 5:10), where he discovered “a genealogy of his fathers” (see 1 Nephi 5:14, 16). Nephi tells us that this genealogy became part of Lehi’s record (see 1 Nephi 6:1), so it appears that Lehi didn’t close his contemporary account until after he found this genealogy.

Nephi’s other brief mention of this genealogy appears to suggest that Lehi did, in fact, end his account at about this time with the genealogy as his final entry. As mentioned earlier, each of Nephi’s two short summaries of the early large-plate records begins with Lehi’s record (see 1 Nephi 19:1–2). Only the second summary mentions the genealogy. In it, Nephi lists the genealogy right after Lehi’s record (see 1 Nephi 19:2). This separate listing of the genealogy appears to support the idea that Lehi ended his contemporary account after his sons returned with the brass plates and that he added the genealogy — perhaps as an addendum — at the end of that account.

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25. Nephi’s account doesn’t tell us why Lehi may have ended this record at this time. One might speculate that a physical disability, such as poor eyesight or sore or unsteady hands, made it difficult for Lehi to continue to keep his record, or perhaps that the scarcity of recordkeeping materials in the wilderness convinced them to keep only one consolidated record.

## Nephi Recorded the Events That Follow Lehi's Record

Of course, Lehi wouldn't have closed his contemporary account before a new recordkeeper was in place. Nephi tells us, "I was taught somewhat in all the learning of my father" (1 Nephi 1:1). This teaching prepared him to "make a record in the language of my father" (1 Nephi 1:2). Nephi's first-person small-plate account indicates that he assumed a recordkeeping role (perhaps under Lehi's guidance) near the beginning of his ministry. His detailed account of the journey to obtain the brass plates (see 1 Nephi chapters 3 and 4) suggests that he may have first recorded its particulars shortly after they took place. Thus, it can be inferred that Nephi was keeping a contemporary account during or soon after this journey.

Other aspects of Nephi's two short summaries of the early large-plate records (see 1 Nephi 19:1–2) may further corroborate the time covered by Lehi's record by identifying events recorded onto the large plates by Nephi after he had added Lehi's record to those plates. Nothing in these summaries requires us to conclude that the abridged account omits any period included in Lehi's original record. While some of the language in these brief summaries is ambiguous, it can be read to suggest that Lehi's record, like the abridgment, ends while Lehi is in the valley of Lemuel.

In the first summary, Nephi tells us that the large plates contain "the record of my father and also our journeyings in the wilderness and the prophecies of my father. And also many of mine own prophecies" (1 Nephi 19:1). Then, after mentioning that he didn't know at the time that he would be making the small plates, he adds a second summary, stating that "the record of my father and the genealogy of his fathers and the more part of all our proceedings in the wilderness" (1 Nephi 19:2) are engraved upon the large plates.

Each summary begins with the term *the record of my father*. Nephi wrote these summaries having already completed his abridgment of this record, so by mentioning it, he alludes to the events already described in the abridgment. Therefore, it is plausible that each summary then mentions later events that Nephi added to the large plates after his father's record.

The second summary lists "the more part of all our proceedings in the wilderness" (1 Nephi 19:2). This term may recognize that Lehi's record had already covered a lesser part of their wilderness proceedings, so that those covered by this term were only "the more part" of their proceedings. The first summary mentions "our journeyings in the wilderness" (1 Nephi 19:1), a term that could include the journey to the valley of Lemuel, but it is possible the intended meaning of this term is similar to "the more part of all our proceedings in the wilderness." If so,

this term may refer only to journeyings subsequent to the journey to the valley of Lemuel already described in Lehi's record. These subsequent journeyings in the wilderness would include the two trips back to Jerusalem, the journey to the promised land, and, perhaps, the journey to the land of Nephi.

In addition to journeyings, the first summary mentions both Lehi's and Nephi's prophecies. Of course, Lehi's record had already covered not only their initial journey to the valley of Lemuel but also many of Lehi's prophecies. The fact that this summary then mentions further prophecies of Lehi suggests that Nephi later added more of Lehi's prophecies to the large-plate record. These likely included the prophecies Lehi made just before his death (see 2 Nephi chapters 1–4), long after Nephi's initial engravings on the large plates. More significantly, Nephi also added to the large plates many prophecies Lehi had made in the valley of Lemuel. Nephi specifically tells us, "I have written as many of them [Lehi's prophecies shared with his sons in the valley of Lemuel] as were expedient for me in mine other book [the large plates]" (1 Nephi 10:15).

Thus, it seems reasonable to infer that after Nephi engraved Lehi's record onto the large plates, he added his own account of continuing events, including the further journeyings in the wilderness, Lehi's further prophecies, and many of Nephi's own prophecies. All these continuing events are recounted by Nephi in his small-plate account after his abridgment of Lehi's record.

In review, it appears that Lehi kept the original, perishable record that Nephi transferred to the large plates as "the record of my father" until his sons brought the brass plates to the valley of Lemuel. It appears that Lehi closed this record at about that time, including with it the genealogy of his fathers. He then apparently relied on Nephi to chronicle (perhaps under Lehi's direction) "the more part of" their wilderness proceedings, apparently including journeys made by Lehi's sons and prophecies made by Lehi while Lehi lived in the valley of Lemuel. It may be reasonable to speculate that Lehi could have kept further records at some later time, but Nephi's small-plate account mentions Lehi's subsequent prophecies and teachings that were recorded by Nephi and never mentions any further records made by Lehi.

Lehi's record was the first record Nephi engraved onto his large plates. Nephi's abridgment and his summaries of the records that follow Lehi's record on the large plates appear to suggest that the abridgment covers the same time as the record Nephi calls "the record of my father."

## Conclusion

Nephi's term *the record of my father* appears to refer consistently to Lehi's record of events from no later than the first year of the reign of Zedekiah until Lehi was dwelling in a tent in the valley of Lemuel. The textual evidence reviewed herein demonstrates the possibility that Nephi's third-person abridgment of this record begins with 1 Nephi 1:4 and ends with 1 Nephi 2:15. This textual evidence suggests both Lehi's authorship (text written from his unique perspective) and Nephi's abridgment of this record (text written by Nephi in the third person and identified by Nephi as an abridgment). The abridgment sets the stage for Nephi's first-person narrative about his own ministry, which begins in 1 Nephi 2:16 with a description of a visit from the Lord. Nephi's account of his own ministry continues to the end of his record, but he interrupts it several times, including a pause in 1 Nephi chapter 9 for an aside about his two sets of plates.

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