The Structure of the Book of Mormon

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**Abstract:** This article discusses the plates of Mormon, source material, and the use made of the plates. It also explains the general structure of the Book of Mormon and how to identify different writers in the Book of Mormon.
The Structure

The Book of Mormon is a religious and secular history of three groups of people who migrated from the eastern hemisphere to the Americas: (1) the Jaredites, who in 2247 B.C. left the Tower of Babel; (2) the Nephites and the Lamanites, who in 600 B.C. left Jerusalem under the leadership of Lehi; and (3) the Mulekites, who left Jerusalem 588 B.C. The history of these peoples was translated by Joseph Smith from a set of gold plates prepared by Mormon and Moroni about 384 to 420 A.D.

The Plates of Mormon

Mormon became interested in records about 321 A.D., when he was ten years old. At that time the Prophet Ammaron came to him and said:

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; and ye shall engrave on the plates of Nephi all the things that ye have observed concerning this people.

Mormon followed instructions. In 345 A.D., he took the large plates of Nephi, undoubtedly a voluminous work by then, from the hill Shim and engraved thereon a history of his people. He kept these large plates of Nephi until 384 A.D., at which time he made his own record, the plates of Mormon.

Commenting on his reason for making these plates, Mormon wrote:

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.

This record, which Joseph Smith took from the Hill Cumorah in 1827, was eight inches long, six inches wide, and six inches thick. It comprised two independent records: the plates of Mormon, which he made with his own hands; and the small plates of Nephi, which he attached to his record. This combined volume of plates Joseph Smith took from the Hill Cumorah. Part of the record was sealed. The unsealed portion Joseph translated as the Book of Mormon.

Source Material

The history engraved on this combined record was derived from the personal observation of Mormon and Moroni, and from four independent sets of historical plates: (1) the brass plates, which Lehi brought from Jerusalem; (2) the small plates of Nephi, which Nephi made with his own hands and which Mormon attached to his plates; (3) the large plates of Nephi; and (4) the twenty-four gold plates.

There are no facts from which we can draw a valid conclusion concerning the size of these four records, except in the case of the small plates of Nephi, which were attached to the plates of Mormon. The plates of Mormon were eight inches long and six inches wide. Undoubtedly the small plates of Nephi were the same size, for descriptions of this record, which Joseph Smith had, never mention two different sizes of plates.

These four sets of plates used by Mormon and Moroni as source material are interesting. The brass plates were brought by Lehi from Jerusalem. They contained the five books of Moses, 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.10

10Hb., 6-6
12Words of Mormon 1:3-6; 1 Nephi 9:3; 19:1, 2
13Ether 13:14; 15:33
14Ibid. 13:14; 15:33
16Nephi 5:12-13

THE IMPROVEMENT ERA
of the BOOK OF MORMON

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KNOWING GENERAL STRUCTURE AIDS READING

Because of the manner in which Mormon and Moroni worked with these four records of two distinct civilizations, the record engraved on the plates of Mormon violated in two places a fundamental principle of composition. Two breaks in chronological sequence inhibit an understanding of the narrative.

The two violations are to be found in the Words of Mormon and the Book of Ether. Mormon, who wrote the Words of Mormon, lived nearly five hundred years after the original writers of the Book of Omni, and Mosiah, the original writer of the Book of Mosiah. He inserted the Words of Mormon between these two books to show the connection between the history on the small plates of Nephi and the history on the large plates of Nephi. Mormon’s Words of Mormon definitely show the connection between the Book of Omni and the Book of Mosiah, between the small plates of Nephi and the large plates of Nephi. This knowledge of why Mormon put the Words of Mormon between these two books aids to intelligent reading of the Book of Mormon.

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THE BOOK OF MORMON:

AN ACCOUNT WRITTEN BY THE HAND OF MORMON, UPON PLATES TAKEN FROM THE PLATES OF NEPHI.

THE BOOK OF MORMON

BY JOSEPH SMITH, JUNIOR, AUTHOR AND PROPRIETOR

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A MILE IN HER MOCCASINS

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mustn't be worried now so I want you
to keep this a secret for the present." She
paused. "It won't make any dif-
ference in your feeling toward her,
Doreen?"

"Oh, no, Mother! How could it?"

And suddenly, it was as though
Martha could see scales of selfishness
drop from Doreen's eyes—a lift of re-
sponsibility square her shoulders.

"I'm going to Claire," she said. "She
might need me."

At the door she turned and
looked at her mother. Then she came
swiftly and kissed her. "Thanks for
telling me," she said softly and left the
room.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK OF MORMON

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in the record of the Nephites and
Lamanites, we can read this latter part
of the Book of Mormon intelligently.
A good plan is to follow in reading this
part of the Book of Mormon to read
the Book of Mormon (a division of the
Book of Mormon) and then skip the
Book of Ether until the Book of Moroni
has been read.

Certainly this knowledge of how the
Book of Mormon violates the principle
of composition requiring that the
chronological order must be followed
when it has once been established as
the basis of composition can be used to
advantage by a reader of the Book of
Mormon.

IDENTIFYING WRITERS CLARIFIES
CONCEPTION OF BOOK

And now let us turn our attention to
the problem of determining who
wrote the various books of the Book
of Mormon, for a knowledge of these
facts is conducive to intelligent read-
ing. The problem is interrelated with
the structure of the book. Chapter
headings in the books of Mosiah, Alma,
Helaman, Third Nephi, and Fourth
Nephi tend to mislead the average
reader, for he assumes that the books
were written in their present form by
these characters, when as a matter of
fact, Mormon wrote all of this ma-
terial as an abridgment from the large
plates of Nephi.

In addition to writing these five
books, Mormon wrote the Words of
Mormon and the first seven chapters of
the Book of Mormon (a division of the
Book of Mormon), a total of three hun-
dred forty pages of the five hundred
twenty-two page book which bears his
name.

Moroni finished the Book of Mormon
(a division of the Book of Mormon),
writing chapters eight and nine; gave
The Structure of the Book of Mormon

us an abridgment of the Jaredite civilization, the Book of Ether; and wrote the Book of Moroni, a total of fifty-one pages.

The small plates of Nephi, which form the first one hundred thirty-two pages of our Book of Mormon, were written by nine independent writers, Nephi, Jacob, Enos, Jarom, Omni, Ammoron, Chemish, Abinadom, and Amaleki. Nephi wrote the first two books, First Nephi and Second Nephi. Jacob wrote the third book, the Book of Jacob. Enos contributed the fourth book, the Book of Enos. Jarom wrote the Book of Jarom. Omni, Ammoron, Chemish, Abinadom, and Amaleki wrote the three pages constituting the Book of Omni.

It is evident from this discussion of the writers that eleven men wrote our Book of Mormon. The bulk of the writing was done by four men: Nephi, one hundred seven pages; Jacob, eighteen pages; Mormon, three hundred forty pages; and Moroni, fifty-one pages.

There is one other problem. It is difficult in the five books abridged from the large plates of Nephi—Mosiah, Alma, Helaman, Third Nephi, and Fourth Nephi—to determine with precision where interpolations, personal comments by Mormon, begin and end. They are not many in number, but they do occur.

Unacquainted with our modern devices for handling such interpolations, Mormon worked with his abridgment of the large plates of Nephi in a manner very different from that which would have been adopted by a present-day scholar. His method is a little ambiguous unless the reader exercises great care. This problem would have been avoided by a modern scholar's use of footnotes for interpolated material. If Mormon had been familiar with our modern devices, he undoubtedly would have made the abridgment of the large plates of Nephi the basic text. He would have used quotation marks to indicate any direct borrowings from the original record, and, finally, would have used footnotes for any comments he desired to make. Such a practice would have given him a clearer method of composition.

A knowledge of the records Mormon and Moroni used as source material and a familiarity with their method of composition helps us to bridge certain difficult chasms which we must cross when we read the Book of Mormon. Structurally, the Book of Mormon is quite clear when we understand the facts of composition.

²III Nephi 5:9-26; 28:4-40; 29:1-9; 30:1-2

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