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The Structure of the Book of Mormon

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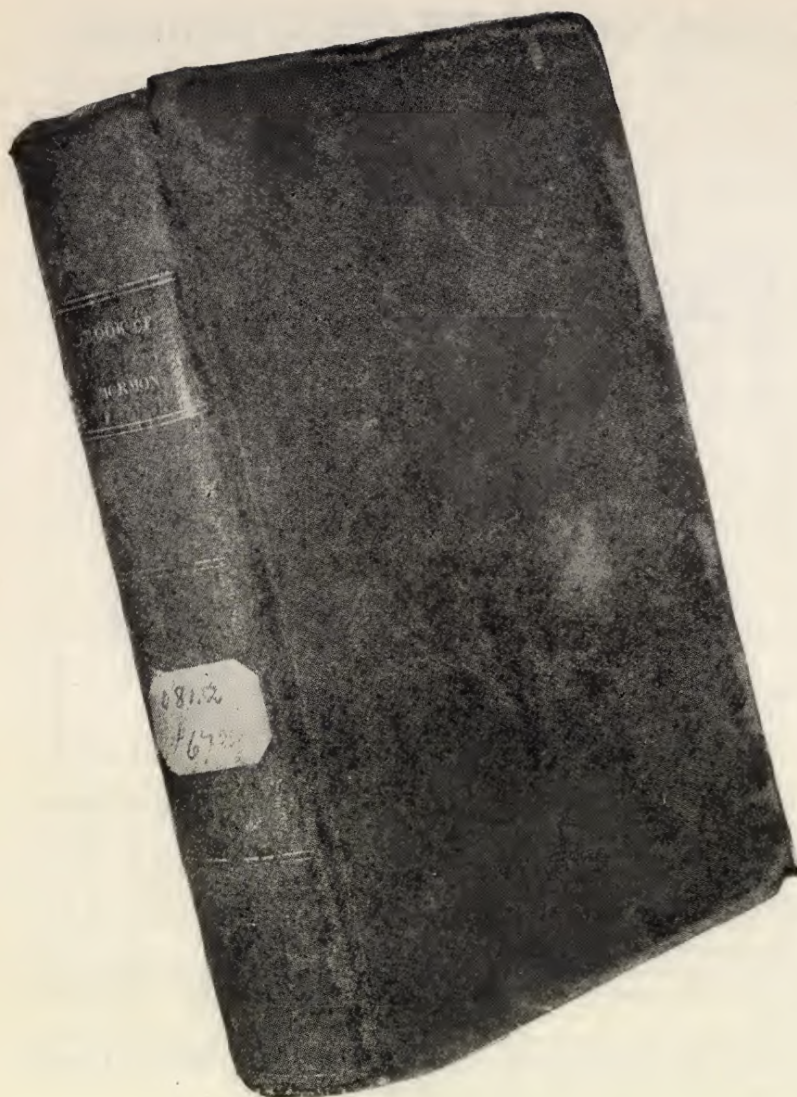
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Abstract: This article discusses the plates of Mormon, source material, and the use made of the plates. It also explains the general structure of the Book of Mormon and how to identify different writers in the Book of Mormon.

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;¹ (2) the Nephites and the Lamanites, who in 600 B.C. left Jerusalem under the leadership of Lehi;² and (3) the Mulekites, who left Jerusalem 588 B.C.³ 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.⁴

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

¹Brigham H. Roberts, *New Witnesses for God*, (Salt Lake City: *The Deseret News*, 1911), II:139.

²I Nephi 1:4; I Nephi 2:1-4; III Nephi 2:6-8

³Brigham H. Roberts, *New Witnesses for God*, II:163

⁴Mormon 1:1-4; 6:5-6; 8:5, 6

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.⁵

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.⁶ He kept these large plates of Nephi until 384 A.D., at which time he made his own record, the plates of Mormon.⁷

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

⁵*Ibid.*, 1:2-4

⁶*Ibid.*, 2:16-18

⁷*Ibid.*, 6:5, 6

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.⁸

This record, which Joseph Smith took from the Hill Cumorah in 1827, was eight inches long, six inches wide, and six inches thick.⁹ 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;¹⁰ (3) the large plates of Nephi; and (4) the twenty-four gold plates.¹¹

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.¹² 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.¹³

⁸*Ibid.*, 6:6

⁹Brigham H. Roberts, *Comprehensive History of the Church* (Salt Lake City: *The Deseret News*, 1930), I:93; J. M. Sjodahl, *An Introduction to the Study of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: *The Deseret News Press*, 1927), pp. 351-46.

¹⁰Words of Mormon 1:3-6; I Nephi 9:3; 19:1, 2

¹¹Ether 13:14; 15:33

¹²J. M. Sjodahl, *An Introduction to the Study of the Book of Mormon*, pp. 35-46

¹³I Nephi 5:12-13

of the BOOK OF MORMON

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Though Mormon and Moroni did not use the brass plates directly in the preparation of their record, the first Nephi made abundant use of them when he engraved the religious history of his people on the small plates of Nephi, the record which Mormon attached to his plates.¹⁴

The small plates of Nephi were made by the first Nephi, who wrote that the fulness of his intent was to persuade men "to come unto the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, and be saved."¹⁵

Nephi received specific instructions from the Lord to use the small plates of Nephi for a record of the ministry and the prophecies. This record was kept by nine prophets over a period approximately four hundred seventy years, or until about 130 B.C., when it was delivered in its completed form to King Benjamin.¹⁶

The large plates of Nephi gave an account of the secular and religious history of the Nephites over their entire period of history, approximately one thousand years, or from 600 B.C. to 420 A.D., the last recorded date in the Book of Mormon.¹⁷

The twenty-four gold plates were prepared by Ether, a Jaredite prophet. They give a history of the Jaredite civilization, which flourished in North America for over 1600 years. This record was discovered by the people of Limhi in the land of Desolation.¹⁸

USE MADE OF PLATES

Mormon abridged the entire history of the Nephites and Lamanites as it appeared on the large plates of Nephi. He engraved this history on the plates of Mormon in the reformed Egyptian language.¹⁹ When he had completed his abridgment of the large plates of Nephi down to the reign of King Benjamin, he searched among the records and found the small plates of Nephi.²⁰ Profoundly impressed with their message, he attached them to his record, the plates of Mormon.

Moroni took from the Hill Cumorah the twenty-four gold plates, which contained the history of the Jaredite civilization from 2247 B.C. to 600 B.C. These plates he abridged as the Book of Ether.

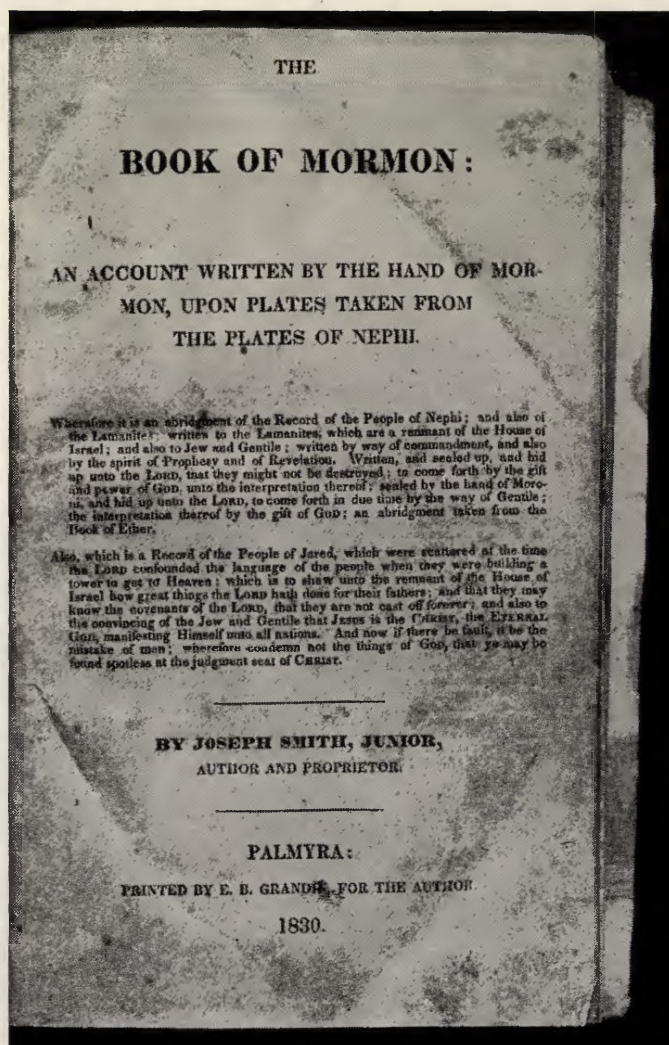
KNOWING GENERAL STRUCTURE AIDS READING

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.

(Continued on page 474)



¹⁴1 Nephi, chapters 12-24 inclusive

¹⁵1 Nephi 6:4

¹⁶Words of Mormon 1:10; Omni 1:30

¹⁷Moroni 10:1

¹⁸Mosiah 8:9; 21:27

¹⁹Mormon 9:32

²⁰Words of Mormon 1:3-6

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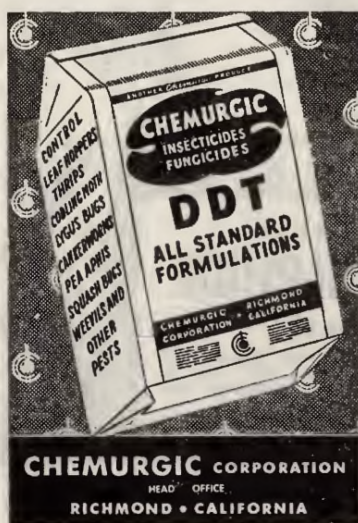
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A MILE IN HER MOCCASINS

(Concluded from page 473)

mustn't be worried now so I want you to keep this a secret for the present." She paused. "It won't make any difference 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 responsibility 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.

Martha went to the window and saw Doreen run across the yard with a pleasant wave toward Nachee. Then she sank into a chair, feeling quite spent. She leaned her dark head against the blue damask of the chair.

Jed would be glad. He'd understand. And it would be just like old times again, she thought, as a sweet fragrance wafted through the door from the hall.

Ellen was baking muffins. Martha realized, for the first time in months, she was really hungry.

She went toward the stairs. On the landing she glanced through the window and saw Nachee down in the yard. He looked up, a wise smile on his face, and saluted her with a wave of his hand.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK OF MORMON

(Continued from page 437)

Now let us consider the second violation of the time order or organization as it relates to the Book of Ether. Mormon engraved his abridgment of the large plates of Nephi on his plates of Mormon. After completing this abridgment, he wrote seven chapters of the Book of Mormon (a division of the Book of Mormon). Then he delivered his record to his son Moroni.

Moroni wrote two chapters in his father's Book of Mormon (a division of the Book of Mormon). Then he determined to abridge the twenty-four gold plates. These plates, as I have already pointed out, contained a history of another group of people separate and distinct from the Lamanites and Nephites. They flourished in North America long before Lehi left Jerusalem.

Moroni could not engrave this abridgment in the forepart of the record, where it belonged, because his father had already used that part of the record. Of necessity, he had to engrave his abridgment on the unused plates immediately following his father's Book of Mormon (a division of the Book of Mormon). After completing this abridgment of the twenty-four gold plates, which he headed the "Book of Ether," he decided to write his Book of Moroni.

This decision to create the Book of Moroni placed the Jaredite history, the Book of Ether, between his father's Book of Mormon (a division of the Book of Mormon) and his own Book of Moroni, both of which books had to do with the Nephites and Lamanites. That is how the Book of Ether came to occupy a place in our Book of Mormon, which chronologically it should not occupy.

When we understand the nature of the Book of Ether and its position with-

in the record of the Nephites and Lamanites, we can read this latter part of the Book of Mormon intelligently. A good plan to follow in reading this part of the Book of Mormon is 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 reading. 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 material 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 hundred 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, Ammaron, 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, Ammaron, 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.²¹ 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 practise 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.

²¹III Nephi 5:9-26; 28:24-40; 29:1-9; 30: 1,2



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