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The Formation of the Book of Mormon Plates

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Abstract: This article explains the different writings that comprise the plates given to Joseph Smith. They include: (1) Mormon's abridgment, (2) the small plates, (3) the plates (abridgment) of Mormon, and (4) the sealed plates.



THE FORMATION OF THE BOOK OF MORMON PLATES

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The fourth century A.D. was a century of crisis in ancient America. It was a century of conflict between the Nephites and Lamanites, two rival factions that had inhabited the western world for nearly a thousand years. During this tumultuous period a Nephite prophet named Mormon became custodian of a certain great record inscribed on sheets of metal that had been handed down by his ancestors from their beginnings as a nation. We refer to this second record as the large plates of Nephi.

At the end of the large plates of Nephi, Mormon engraved the history of his times, a history that turned out to be the tragic tale of his nation's downfall. When he was finished, the large plates of Nephi included the books of Lehi, Mosiah, Alma, Helaman, 3 Nephi, 4 Nephi, and Mormon. Altogether they spanned Nephite history from about 600 B.C. to 385 A.D.

The book of Lehi section of the plates deserves special consideration. In Joseph Smith's preface to the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon he explains the loss of the first 116 manuscript pages of his translation and identifies the lost part as an abridgment of the book of Lehi. In the Doctrine and Covenants, section 10, verse 41, we learn, in addition, that this missing portion extended to the reign of King Benjamin. It may then be said that the book of Lehi covered Nephite history from the time of Lehi, who left Jerusalem about 600 B.C., to the opening of the book of Mosiah, which, for practical purposes, was 130 B.C.

It is noteworthy that during the early part of Nephite history, which means during the book of Lehi period, the large plates of Nephi formed a political and civil history, "... an account of the reign of the kings, and the wars and contentions ... of the nation. (1 Nephi 9:4.) In time, however, the secular character

A condensation of the Story of the Formation of the Book of Mormon Plates, an illustrated booklet by the author. Available at Extension Publications, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, and all Church bookstores.

MORMON'S ABRIDGMENT

THE SMALL PLATES OF NEPHI

THE PLATES OF MORMON

THE SEALED PLATES

of the record was altered to include religious history also. The point we wish to stress is that, whereas the book of Lehi portion of the large plates of Nephi was mainly a secular history, the rest of the record was religious as well as secular. This fact assumes importance later in our story.

The Plates of Mormon—a Digest of the Large Plates of Nephi

At or near the close of his literary efforts on the large plates of Nephi, Mormon received the inspiration to write a small digest of the entire record. For this purpose he formed a separate metal volume. On these plates, which we call the Plates of Mormon, he carefully engraved, in his own words and style of writing, a summary of the entire history of his ancestors. He even summarized the history of his own generation that he had personally inscribed at the end of the large plates of Nephi. (Mormon 2:18; 5:9.)

In a later period Joseph Smith was to receive and translate the Plates of Mormon—the abridgment of the large plates of Nephi—but not the original large plates of Nephi.

The Book of Lehi and the Small Plates of Nephi

Mormon's purpose in writing a synopsis of his ancestors' great history was, in the words of his son Moroni, "to the convincing of the Jew and Gentile that JESUS is the CHRIST, the ETERNAL GOD, manifesting himself unto all nations." (Book of Mormon title page.) In view of such a lofty religious goal we are not surprised to find that his abridgment (that is, the part that we have in translated form) abounds in prophecies, missionary experiences, doctrinal discourses, and miraculous happenings. Even the fascinating stories of war, political upheaval, and such that he selected to condense and pass on to us carry some faith- (Continued on page 852)

PORTION EXTRACTED FOR PUBLICATION

THE WRITINGS
OF NINE MEN

MORMON'S APPENDAGE

THE WRITINGS
OF MORMON

THE WRITINGS
OF MORONI

TITLE PAGE: FROM THE WRITINGS OF MORONI

1 NEPHI	JACOB	JAROM
2 NEPHI	ENOS	OMNI

WORDS OF MORMON

BOOK OF MOSIAH

BOOK OF ALMA

BOOK OF HELAMAN

BOOK OF (3) NEPHI

BOOK OF (4) NEPHI

BOOK OF MORMON (CHAPTERS 1-7)

BOOK OF MORMON (CHAPTERS 8-9)

BOOK OF ETHER (MORONI'S ABRIDGMENT)

BOOK OF MORONI

TITLE PAGE (SUMMARY STATEMENT)

Today's Family

(Concluded from page 850)

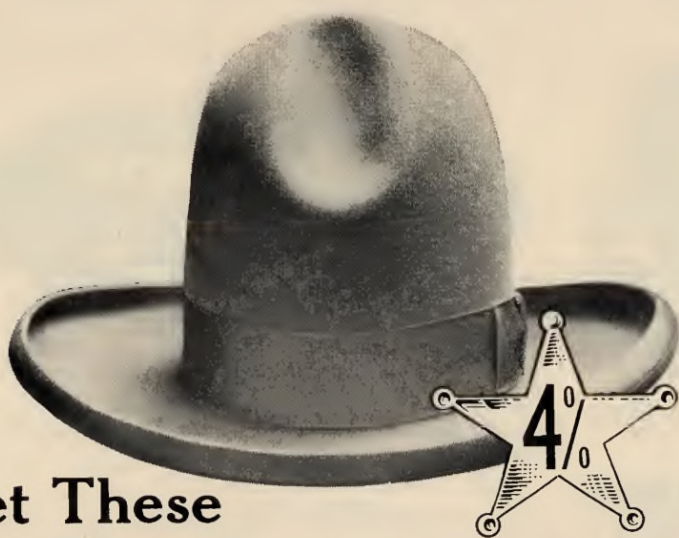
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TWENTIES: Marriage—children—budget—love.

FIFTIES: Grandchildren—garden—travel—love.

SIXTIES: Each other—dentists—pensions—love.

OLD AGE: Retirement—family—memories—love.



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The Formation of the Book of Mormon Plates

(Continued from page 796)

promoting lessons. Nor was it hard to draw such items from the combined secular and religious part of the large plates of Nephi, which means from the book of Mosiah to the end. It must have been considerably more difficult, however to glean illustrations from the book of Lehi portion of the plates in support of his objective; for, as we have already observed, the book of Lehi was almost exclusively a political and civil record. We can well appreciate his satisfaction, therefore, when, just as he was nearing the close of his abridgment of the book of Lehi he discovered the *small plates of Nephi* and learned that they formed a religious work of the book of Lehi period. The thing that pleased him about the plates, he says, was their "... prophecies of the coming of Christ; ..." (Words of Mormon V.4.) And no wonder. This was exactly the kind of evidence for the Messiahship of Jesus that he was seeking for his own record. What was he to do? Could he discard his abridgment of the book of Lehi and substitute the small plates of Nephi?

Before we consider what Mormon finally did with the volume that he found we should note that the small plates of Nephi, which had been kept by a private line of record keepers, extended from the time of Nephi to the early reign of King Benjamin. In contrast, the book of Lehi, which had been written by an entirely different line of record keepers, (Jarom, V. 14; Omni, V. 11), extended from the time of Nephi to the late reign of the same King Benjamin.

Mormon Adds a Tiny Historical Bridge to the Small Plates of Nephi

To learn what Mormon did with the small plates of Nephi we must now turn to an intriguing little section that he wrote late in life. The year was 385 A.D. and Mormon was seventy-four. It was then that he took the small plates of Nephi, that he had found earlier, and added a little appendage to the end of them, and entitled it, the Words of Mormon. (Verse 4.) The opening verse betrays the late period of his writing. "And now I, Mormon, being about

to deliver up the record which I have been making into the hands of my son Moroni, behold I have witnessed almost all the destruction of my people, the Nephites." (Verse 1.) Quite plainly the months or years of careful composing and tedious engraving of his abridgment were now at an end.

Interesting enough, after explaining in this appendage how he had earlier found the precious little record (verse 3), why he treasured it (verse 4), and why he now felt impressed to include it with his own metal book (verses 6-7), he proceeded, in a few short paragraphs, to give the high lights to King Benjamin's reign. There can be but one explanation for his adding this historical appendage to the ancient small plates of Nephi. It was necessary as a bridge between the point in the early lifetime of King Benjamin where the small plates of Nephi end and the point in the later lifetime of Benjamin where the book of Mosiah begins. It was necessary, that is, if the small plates of Nephi were to serve as a possible substitute for, or complete historical supplement to, the secular book of Lehi. Perhaps from Mormon's point of view, his action, then and there, made the book of Lehi the supplement and the small plates of Nephi the real history of the early period; for by integrating the small plates of Nephi with the book of Mosiah he now had a continuous record of the religious writings of his people from the days of the Prophet Nephi down to his own day. Nor did he rely upon his memory for the data to fill the gap between the two records. As he shifts from the explanatory part of his Words of Mormon to the history part, he announces, "And now I, Mormon, proceed to finish out my record, which I take from the plates of Nephi. . . ." (Verse 9.) We understand this simply to mean that he returned to his basic sourcebook, the large plates of Nephi, to obtain the information for the historical notes that comprise the little bridge that follows in verses 9-18. (Note especially verse 16.)

Moroni's Contribution to the Sacred Record

After Mormon had bridged the historical gap between the two records — and just before the Hill Cumorah massacre crushed the Nephite nation forever—Mormon de-

posited the large plates of Nephi in the Hill Cumorah and passed on to his son, Moroni, the plates of Mormon together with the small plates of Nephi. (Mormon 6:6.) Then for sixteen years the record is strangely silent. Suddenly, about 401 A.D., Moroni wrote a postscript to his father's account, lamenting his nation's downfall, his father's death, and his own intense loneliness. (Mormon 8:1-6.) Intermittently during the next twenty years he

made other contributions to the record. At length, when he ceased to write, about 421 A.D., he had made four distinct additions to the volume which were (1) certain reflections and prophecies that comprise chapters eight and nine of Mormon; (2) the book of Ether, a thumbnail sketch or abridgment of the record of a long extinct nation, called the Jaredites, whose ruins the Nephites had discovered about 121 B.C., (Ether 1:1-2; Mosiah 8:7-12);



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(3) the book of Moroni, a miscellany of epistles, exhortations, and other items pertaining to the discipline and doctrine of the Nephite Church; (4) a descriptive summary statement that modernly forms the title page of the translated volume.

The Sealed Plates

An air of mystery surrounds the final development in the history of the formation of the sacred record. Sometime during the thirty-six-year period that followed the Hill Cumorah battle, 385 A.D., Moroni added another group of plates to the

compilation. We call these the sealed plates. Moroni addressed specific instructions to the latter-day translator of the Book of Mormon not to attempt to translate this section. (Ether 5:1.) The contents of this record will be revealed when the world is spiritually prepared, Moroni affirmed; but that day still lies ahead.

When Moroni was finished with his literary labors he deposited the combined plates in the Hill Cumorah. The entire compilation comprised the small plates of Nephi, the plates of Mormon, and the sealed plates.

Joseph Smith Receives and Translates the Sacred Record

The reader will recall that when Mormon was ready to turn the plates over to his son Moroni, just before the Hill Cumorah battle, he was prompted to add a little historical bridge to the small plates of Nephi and include those plates intact with his own plates of Mormon. When Joseph Smith received the plates, Mormon's inspiration was remarkably verified, for the Prophet first translated Mormon's abridgment of the book of Lehi. Then his assistant, Martin Harris, lost the 116-page translation of this section. (Joseph Smith, *History of the Church*, Vol. 1, p. 56.) Although the Prophet was filled with despair at this apparent tragedy, we may suppose that his sorrow turned to joy when he learned that the sacred small plates of Nephi (with Mormon's appendage thereto) covered the same period of history as the more secular book of Lehi and was "more particular concerning the things" which the Lord intended should be brought to the knowledge of the human family in our generation. (D&C 10:41-52.) When the Prophet finished his translation of the small plates of Nephi, he returned to the plates of Mormon and translated the rest of Mormon's abridgement but stopped at the sealed plates, for he was not permitted to translate them.

Joseph Smith utilized Moroni's summary statement, that he found at the end of the plates, as the title page of the translated volume. He explains this action in his journal:

"I wish to mention here that the title-page of the Book of Mormon is a literal translation, taken from the very last leaf, on the left hand side of the collection or book of plates, which contained the record which has been translated, the language of the whole running the same as all Hebrew writing in general; and that said title-page is not by any means a modern composition, either of mine or of any other man who has lived or does live in this generation. (Joseph Smith, *History of the Church*, Vol. 1, p. 71.)

The finished translation, therefore, included in order, the title page, the small plates of Nephi, and all of the plates of Mormon except the book of Lehi.

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