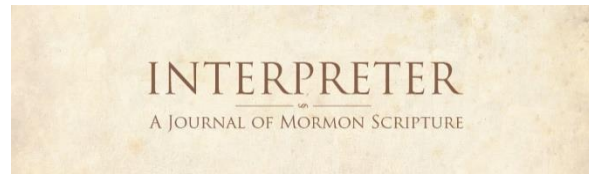




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On the Dating of Moroni 8-9

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Joseph M. Spencer

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ON THE DATING OF MORONI 8-9

Joseph M. Spencer

Abstract: Students of the Book of Mormon who have attempted to establish a rough (internal) date for the composition of Mormon's two letters in Moroni 8-9 have come to different and inconsistent conclusions. Nonetheless, there seems to be evidence enough from the text to arrive at reasonably certain conclusions as to when the letters are supposed to have originated. At the same time, the fact that the text never bothers to state the exact circumstances under which the letters were produced is theologically suggestive. What might be the interpretive and especially theological implications that follow from the establishment of rough dates for the letters? This essay argues from textual evidence that the reader should understand the two letters to have been written at rather different times: Moroni 8 in the years 345-50, and Moroni 9 in the years 375-80. It then draws interpretive and theological conclusions about the import of these dates: principally that Moroni's inclusion of the letters forces readers to recognize that Mormon's history is inventive and theologically motivated.

In the final book of the Book of Mormon, Moroni states that, having completed his work on the Jaredite records, he did not expect to contribute anything further to the Book of Mormon. But “hav[ing] not as yet perished,” he decided he might “write a few more things” that might prove to “be of worth unto ... the Lamanites” (Moroni 1:1-4). The result was an apparent hodgepodge of materials: an historical introduction of sorts (Moroni 1); a few bits of instruction regarding liturgical practices (Moroni 2-5); an outline of ecclesiastical order (Moroni 6); a sermon delivered by his father to whatever believers remained during the Nephites' final years (Moroni 7); two letters written to him by his father on substantially different themes (Moroni 8-9); and a series of final exhortations directed primarily to latter-day Lamanites (Moroni 10).

Although he gathered this material into a book, Moroni never sought to justify within the text of the book itself any of the items he included. Readers are left to decide the importance of each item themselves.

Most of what appears in Moroni's book requires little by way of justification. The details regarding liturgical practices and ecclesiastical order proved rather useful for Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery as they laid out the basic order of the Church in 1829–30; readers today find much in these same chapters to deepen their understanding of what it means to be part of Christ's church.¹ Latter-day saints generally find Mormon's sermon on the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity to be among the most doctrinally rich chapters in the Book of Mormon.² And of course, no serious reader of the Book of Mormon can overlook the practical and theological importance of Moroni 10, which contains, in addition to profound instruction on various questions, Moroni's justly famous promise and his final words of farewell.³ However, while readers stand to learn much from the two letters found in Moroni 8–9, Moroni's reasons for including them are less obvious than are those for the remainder of the book.

Similarly unknown is the context for each of the two letters. They were clearly written in the years leading up to the Nephites' eradication at the close of the fourth century, but neither of the letters is dated in the text. Attempts at deciding when they were written have yielded conflicting results. Nevertheless, it seems to me that another — hopefully more definitive — attempt at dating these two letters might be undertaken in the hope that establishing their historical settings might clarify both what they meant to Moroni and why he decided to include them in his

1 See Scott H. Faulring, "An Examination of the 1829 'Articles of the Church of Christ' in Relation to Section 20 of the Doctrine and Covenants," *BYU Studies* 43.4 (2004): 57–91; and Robert J. Woodford, "The Articles and Covenants of the Church of Christ and the Book of Mormon," in *Sperry Symposium Classics: The Doctrine and Covenants*, ed. Craig K. Manscill (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2004), 103–16.

2 See Larry E. Dahl, "Faith, Hope, and Charity," in *A Book of Mormon Treasury: Gospel Insights from General Authorities and Religious Educators* (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and BYU Religious Studies Center, 2003), 457–70; Jeffrey R. Holland, *Christ and the New Covenant: The Messianic Message of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997), 323–39.

3 See Mark D. Thomas, "Moroni: The Final Voice," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 12.1 (2003): 88–99; James E. Faulconer, "Sealings and Mercies: Moroni's Final Exhortations in Moroni 10," *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 22.1 (2013): 4–19.

book. In this paper I seek to fix as precisely as possible the historical contexts in which Mormon wrote the letters that appear in Moroni 8–9. I also provide a few guiding suggestions about the interpretive and theological implications that follow from these conclusions.

Mormon's Life in Outline

Since the two letters in question were produced by Mormon, the natural place to begin an investigation of their historical origins is with an outline of Mormon's life, reconstructed as much as possible from details in Mormon's autobiographical report in Mormon 1–7. In general terms, Mormon's life as recorded divides naturally into five periods, each (with the obvious exception of the last) characterized by a time of war that is then followed by an interval of peace:

1. Mormon's Youth. Mormon begins his own story when he was ten years old, apparently in the year 321 (see 4 Nephi 1:48–49; Mormon 1:2), at which time Ammaron approaches Mormon with the assignment later to seek out and add to the already-buried plates of Nephi (see Mormon 1:3).⁴ A year later, Mormon moves with his father from the Nephite north lands to the Nephite south lands just before a short-lived conflict breaks out between the Nephites and the Lamanites (see 1:6–8). The fighting ends after only a single battle, fought in the vicinity of Zarahemla (see 1:10–12).⁵ Four years of peace follow (see 1:12), characterized nonetheless by intense Nephite wickedness — wherein miracles cease and the three immortal disciples of Jesus disappear (see 1:13–14). Around the conclusion of these four years, Mormon is “visited of the Lord” (1:15) and thereafter seeks the opportunity to preach, but is forbidden (see 1:16).

2. The Loss of Zarahemla. Serious, sustained war breaks out in the year 326, and Mormon — only fifteen years old — is

4 It might be noted that all year assignments here aim just at following the Book of Mormon's internal chronology. I make no attempt to decide how these dates map onto actual history. For a good discussion of various approaches to Book of Mormon chronology, see David Rolph Seely, “Chronology, Book of Mormon,” in *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, ed. Dennis L. Largey (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 196–204.

5 For schematic maps showing the locations of all the military conflicts mentioned in Mormon 1–7, see John L. Sorenson, *Mormon's Map* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2000), 118–23.

appointed to lead the Nephite armies (see Mormon 2:1–2). Over the course of four years of sustained war, the Nephites are slowly but definitively driven from their settlements in and around Zarahemla, relocating themselves in the land of Joshua (on the west coast) securely enough to repel the Lamanite onslaught in the year 330 (see 2:4–9). However encouraging the victory at Joshua, the heavy losses preceding it (perhaps especially the devastating loss of Zarahemla itself) cause national depression, which Mormon briefly mistakes for the beginnings of a period of Nephite repentance (see 2:10–15). Fourteen years of at least relative peace then pass, about which Mormon says little to nothing. It seems clear, however, that these years would have seen Mormon marry and begin having children (at least his son Moroni). And in the year 334, Mormon fulfills the task set him by Ammaron.⁶

3. The Loss of the South Lands. Serious war begins anew in the year 345, when the Lamanites conquer the land of Joshua and the Nephites are driven entirely from the south lands into the north, apparently losing possession of a large number of cities in the north lands in the course of just a year (see Mormon 2:16, 20–21). Establishing a stronghold in the city of Shem, the Nephites repel the Lamanites the next year (see 2:22–25). This reversal then leads to a slow but consistent series of Nephite victories over the next four years — at the

6 Alan Miner speculates that these years would have provided time for Mormon to attend to “family, the ministry, and recordkeeping.” Because these fourteen years passed during Mormon’s young adulthood (he was twenty when the battle at Joshua took place, and he was thirty-four when the Lamanites finally drove the Nephites from Joshua), it does seem likely that Mormon married and had at least Moroni during these years. And because Mormon fulfilled Ammaron’s request during these years — apparently at the prescribed time, when Mormon was twenty-four in the year 334 (see Mormon 2:17–19) — it is more or less certain that some of Mormon’s time during these years was spent in recordkeeping. But there is no real textual evidence that Mormon had any appointment to the ministry or within whatever existed of the Nephite church during these years, as Miner speculates. It is clear from the text that Mormon was forbidden to preach during his youth (see Mormon 1:16), and it is clear from the text that he was sent to preach during the later period of peace beginning in the year 350 (see Mormon 3:1–3), but it is pure speculation at this point to assume that Mormon had ecclesiastical responsibilities during the years 330–44. See Alan C. Miner, “A Chronological Setting for the Epistles of Mormon to Moroni,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 3.2 (1994): 96.

end of which the Nephites entirely eject the Lamanites from the north lands, though they recapture none of their lost possessions in the south (see 2:25–28). An official treaty is established in the year 350 (see 2:28–29), and a full decade of peace ensues (see 3:1). Mormon receives a divine commission to preach to the Nephites during these years of peace, but he does so without any success (see 3:1–3).

4. War at the North-South Border. After ten years of peace, in the year 360, the Lamanite king issues an official declaration of war, and both nations begin preparations for conflict (see Mormon 3:4–6). Major battles occur in Desolation at the north-south border in 361 and 362 — both Nephite defensive victories (see 3:7–8). In response to the second of these, the Nephites “swear before the heavens that they would avenge themselves of the blood of their brethren which had been slain” (3:9). Mormon interprets this as an act “forbidden them” by “Jesus Christ” himself (3:14) and abdicates his position as leader of the Nephite armies (see 3:11, 16).⁷ For five years, battles occur in the vicinity of the border, both sides serving as aggressors at different times (see 4:1–15). In the year 367, the Nephites drive the Lamanites from the north lands again, and eight years’ respite from conflict follows (see 4:16). Mormon watches all these events as “an idle witness” (3:16).

5. The War of Nephite Eradication. War begins again in the year 375, “from [which] time forth did the Nephites gain no power over the Lamanites, but began to be swept off by them” (Mormon 4:18). Over the course of six years, the Nephites lose possession of numerous cities, driven increasingly into just a few strongholds (see 4:19–22; 5:3–7). After the first two major losses during these years, Mormon decides to retrieve “all the records which Ammaron had hid up unto the Lord” (4:23) and to return to his post as leader of the Nephite armies (see 5:1–2). In the year 380, Mormon successfully seeks reprieve

⁷ Mormon has apparent reference to 3 Nephi 12:33–37 in his objection to the Nephite oath. It is peculiar, however, that Mormon describes himself as having made an oath in Mormon 5:1. It would seem, then, that the Nephite oath was offered as a deliberate blasphemy with Jesus’s words explicitly in mind — or at least that Mormon interpreted it in this way.

from conflict long enough to gather his forces for a final battle at Cumorah (see 6:2–3). Four years of preparation ensue (see 6:4–5), during which Mormon also produces his abridgement of the plates of Nephi (see 6:6). Finally, in the year 384, the final battle occurs and the Nephites are destroyed (see 6:7–15). Mormon himself survives the battle but is hunted down and killed by a Lamanite thereafter (see 8:2–3). Moroni, of course, survives him and assumes responsibility for his father’s record (see 8:1).

These five periods of Mormon’s life might be summarized in a more plainly presented chronology:

Mormon’s Youth (321–25)⁸

321 — Commission from Ammaron

322 — Mormon moves to Zarahemla; a short-lived conflict breaks out

322–25 — Peace reigns, but alongside Nephite wickedness; miracles cease

325 — Mormon is visited of the Lord but is forbidden to preach

The Loss of Zarahemla (326–44)

326 — Serious war breaks out; Mormon becomes leader of the Nephite armies

327–30 — The Nephites are driven from the land of Zarahemla and relocate in Joshua

330–44 — National depression and false repentance; Mormon fulfills Ammaron’s commission

8 Sidney Sperry subtracts a year from all events appearing in this particular sequence in his own attempt at a chronology. This seems to be due to a misreading of 4 Nephi 1:48, which places Ammaron’s final actions — burying the record and then commissioning Mormon — only “when three hundred and twenty years had passed away,” that is, in the year 321. Sperry apparently takes the reference to three hundred and twenty years as placing Ammaron’s final actions in the year 320. See Sidney B. Sperry, *Book of Mormon Chronology: The Dating of Book of Mormon People and Events* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1970), 21.

The Loss of the South Lands (345-59)

345 — Joshua falls and the Nephites are driven into the north lands

346 — A reversal of military fortunes occurs at Shem

346-49 — The Nephites slowly recapture their lost lands in the north

350 — A treaty establishes peace, ceding all the south lands to the Lamanites

350-59 — An era of peace, during which Mormon is sent to preach, but unsuccessfully

War at the North-South Border (360-74)

360 — The Lamanites declare war and both nations prepare for conflict

361 — The Nephites win the first battle at Desolation

362 — The Nephites again defend Desolation but this time blasphemously swear vengeance; Mormon steps down from leadership of the armies

363-67 — A series of conflicts at the north-south border

367 — The Nephites succeed in driving the Lamanites from their lands

367-74 — The Lamanites cease their aggressions for a period

The War of Nephite Eradication (375-84)

375 — War begins again

375-79 — The Nephites lose a series of battles; Mormon retrieves the plates of Nephi and resumes leadership of the Nephite armies

380 — Losses force Mormon to seek reprieve so as to gather at Cumorah

380-84 — The Nephites gather at Cumorah for a final battle; Mormon writes his abridgement

384 — The final battle at Cumorah; Mormon's subsequent death

Such is the basic outline of Mormon's life. With this resource in hand, we can begin to narrow down — if not, in fact, determine with some confidence — when exactly Mormon wrote the two letters contained in Moroni 8–9.

Mormon's First Letter to Moroni (Moroni 8)

We will begin our examination with the first of Mormon's two extant letters to Moroni. It is best known among the Book of Mormon's readers for its discussion of "the baptism of ... little children" (Moroni 8:5). This focus provides a clue to the original historical setting of the letter, as we consider under what social conditions such a question might arise.⁹ However, even more helpful are the details contained in the letter that reference readily specifiable historical conditions.

The first point of consideration is that the letter was written to Moroni "soon after [his] calling to the ministry" (8:1). This helps us determine the *terminus a quo* for the letter. If Mormon was ten years old in the year 321, it is unlikely Moroni was born any earlier than about 325 — and more likely that he was not born until at least 330. Examining the timeline of Mormon's life strengthens this supposition. Mormon was appointed to lead the Nephite armies in 326, at age fifteen, and there is no respite in the war before 330, at which point the Nephites have relocated in semi-stability to the land of Joshua (Mormon 2:1–9). At that point in time, a fifteen-year break of sorts in the Nephite-Lamanite war occurs. While it seems improbable that Mormon would have married or had children between 325 and 330, the relatively peaceful years 330–44 would have been an opportune time for him to establish *some* kind of domestic life. From this, we can conclude with some certainty that Moroni was born no earlier than the year 330.

How young could Moroni have been when called to the ministry? The oft-repeated idea that ancient Israelite men began their public life

9 There were, for instance, rather determinate social conditions that led to the deep interest in this question in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries in New England. See, for instance, Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790–1865* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 60–104. One might argue for similar or parallel circumstances in an ancient American setting. Certainly, Brant Gardner has noted practices of infant baptism among post-conquest Mesoamerican peoples. See Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books), 6:386.

at age thirty cannot guide us,¹⁰ for Mormon began his own public life as leader of the Nephite armies at age fifteen. Moroni therefore might have been called to the ministry as early as his teenage years, which places the *terminus a quo* for the letter at about 345. The letter might, of course, have been written a good deal later than that, but from birth years, both actual and known or possible and reconstructed, it seems that Mormon’s first letter could have been written as early as, but no earlier than, the year 345.

Other details from the letter help us fix a date. The final verses of Moroni 8 spell out the basic state of the Nephite nation at the time of the letter’s production. Mormon writes of “the pride” of “the people of the Nephites” and claims that it “hath proven their destruction except they should repent” (8:27). This might seem to indicate that the letter was written quite close to the end — perhaps just before the final war of Nephite eradication — but the fact that Mormon holds out the possibility of repentance (“except they should repent”) suggests that the Nephites have not yet developed their wickedness to a point of irreversibility (as they eventually do). And though the second of Mormon’s two extant letters, obviously written near the end of Nephite history, *also* seems to hold out the possibility of repentance — “I know that they must perish except they repent and return unto him” (9:22) — it should be noted that despite this similarity in phrasing, there is a rather different spirit about the two letters. In the first letter, Mormon follows his “except they should repent” formula with a plea that Moroni “pray for them ... that repentance may come unto them” (8:28). In the second letter, however, Mormon precedes his “except they repent” formula with both a defense of his own failure to pray for Nephite repentance — “I cannot recommend them unto God lest he should smite me” (9:21) — and a description of his own prayer that just *Moroni* would fare well — “I pray unto God that he would spare thy life” (9:22). Thus, although both letters use “except

10 This idea that ancient Israelite men began their public life at age thirty is usually derived from several different biblical texts. Passages in Numbers 4 enumerate members of the house of Levi by counting just those “from thirty years old and upward until fifty years old” (Numbers 4:3, 23, 30, 35, 39, 43, 47), suggesting that Levites performed priestly service beginning only at the age of thirty. Two crucial Old Testament figures — Joseph and David — are also presented as coming into their own only at the age of thirty (see Genesis 41:46; 2 Samuel 5:4). Finally, according to Luke 3:23, “Jesus himself began to be about thirty years of age” when he was baptized and began his public ministry. It may be significant that all of these references fall within the scope of the Law of Moses, while Mormon and Moroni lived long after the Law’s fulfillment.

they (should) repent” formulas, only the first seems to hold forth any real hope, however limited, that repentance might occur. This suggests at least some temporal distance between the writing of the first letter and the final war of Nephite eradication. Mormon explicitly states that he returns to military service during the final war only once he “see[s] that the Lamanites [are] about to overthrow the land” (Mormon 4:23) — that is, once he knows that the end is imminent. It seems, then, that the first letter could not have been written any later than the beginning of the final war of eradication; its *terminus ad quem* seems to be the year 375.¹¹

Having determined that Mormon’s first letter to Moroni had to have been written between the years 345 and 375, we seek to narrow the timeline further. Another crucial detail is found in Mormon’s passing note that he might “go . . . out soon against the Lamanites” (Moroni 8:27). These words indicate that the letter was written during a time of conflict rather than a time of peace. This eliminates the whole decade between 350 and 360 (a time of peace established by treaty) and the eight years following the war at the north-south border (a time of peace established by decisive Nephite victory). Further, the fact that Mormon himself might need to go out against the Lamanites establishes that the conflict was one in which Mormon participated, as opposed to one he watched as an “idle witness” (Mormon 3:16), which excludes the years between 362 (when Mormon abdicated his position with the Nephite armies) and 375 (when he returned to their assistance). These details therefore narrowing the possibilities substantially, Mormon apparently wrote his letter to Moroni either between 345 and 350 or between 360 and 362.

Assuming this is correct, we turn to examining those two likely time periods for context. The years 345–50 are those during which

11 This is the least secure plank in the platform of my argument. Clearly, there is substantial development between the two letters, but one *might* make the argument that such development could happen over the course of the final war of Nephite eradication. If such an argument is to be constructed, however, it should be noted that the development must occur within just a five-year period, between the year 375 (when the final war begins) and the year 380 (when the final war is put on hiatus so that armies can gather for a final showdown at Cumorah). Further, given the evidence (to be reviewed next) that Mormon wrote his first letter at a time when he led his army in *offensive* (rather than merely *defensive*) battles, aggressively attempting to take cities captured by the Lamanites, one would have to argue for dating the first letter during the final wars by working against Mormon’s own description of the final war (“And from this time forth did the Nephites gain no power over the Lamanites,” he says in Mormon 4:18, “but began to be swept off by them even as a dew before the sun”).

the Nephites are driven from the land southward to Shem in the north lands, where they stage a major defensive victory before slowly reclaiming all their lost lands in the north. By the end of these years, the Nephites have succeeded in recapturing all of the north lands, and they establish a treaty with the Lamanites, dividing the land at the north-south border. During the years 360–62 the Nephites are again at war, but all their battles are fought at Desolation and always in defense against the onslaught of the Lamanites. This last detail is crucial, as Mormon says in the first letter that he might need to “go ... out soon against” his enemies (Moroni 8:27), language that is less indicative of defensive fighting than an offensive maneuver. Nephite standard strategy of defense was to remain within their strongholds as much as possible when defending themselves.¹² Holed up in the stronghold at Desolation, hoping to repel Lamanite aggressors who sought to take the city at the north-south border, Mormon would be unlikely to describe the necessity of conflict in terms of having to *go out against* his enemies. Therefore, we may reasonably rule out the years 360–62 as the period during which Mormon wrote his first letter. But the years 345–50 remain a possibility, since during those years Mormon led the Nephite armies in offensive battles to recapture their own lost cities in the north.

From all the evidence, we may with some certainty conclude that Mormon wrote his first letter during the campaign of 345–50, the years of struggle after the Nephites lost major possessions in the land northward and the land southward. It was apparently while Mormon led

12 The Book of Mormon seldom uses the language of “going out against” an enemy. It is, nonetheless, a relatively common biblical phrase, appearing some nineteen times in the King James Version of the Old Testament. Almost every instance of the phrase, crucially, makes perfectly clear that it indicates leaving cities or strongholds to stage an attack elsewhere (see Numbers 21:23, 33; Deuteronomy 20:1; 28:25; Joshua 8:14; Judges 20:14, 20, 28, 31; 1 Samuel 4:1; 2 Samuel 18:6; 1 Kings 8:44; 2 Kings 9:21; 1 Chronicles 14:8; 2 Chronicles 6:34; 14:10; 20:17; 22:7; 35:20). Similar in meaning is the language of “coming out against” an enemy, which appears eleven times in the King James Version of the Old Testament (see Numbers 20:18, 20; Deuteronomy 1:44; 2:32; 3:1; 28:7; 29:7; Joshua 8:5; Judges 9:33; 2 Kings 19:9; 2 Chronicles 14:9), as also in eight passages in the Book of Mormon in military contexts, always with the same implication of leaving cities or strongholds to engage in battle (see Alma 44:2; 52:19, 23; 58:15, 16, 18; 61:7). The only other instance in the Book of Mormon where “go,” “out,” and “against” are used together in a military setting is in Mormon’s description of the Nephites’ misguided aggressive attack *after* their successful defenses at Desolation (see Mormon 4:1: “the Nephites did go up with their armies to battle against the Lamanites, out of the land of Desolation”). It is clear that “go out against” indicates military aggression.

the Nephites armies, city by city, toward a recapture of all their north lands possessions that Moroni was called to the ministry and received written advice from his father regarding baptism of little children.

Mormon's Second Letter to Moroni (Moroni 9)

The dating of Mormon's second letter proves a good deal easier than that of the first. Two crucial details in the letter establish without ambiguity the *termini a quo* and *ad quem*. First, Mormon states toward the end of the letter that he has "sacred records" to "deliver up" to Moroni (Moroni 9:24). Mormon makes it clear in his autobiographical record that he retrieved these records — the *full* set of Nephite written records — no earlier than the beginning of the war of Nephite eradication, in or after the year 375. For it was only when Mormon saw "that the Lamanites were about to overthrow the land" that he "did go to the hill Shim, and did take up *all* the records which Ammaron had hid up unto the Lord" (Mormon 4:23, emphasis added) — and this after the first battles of the final war of eradication (see Mormon 4:16–22).¹³ This implies that Mormon's second letter could not have been written any earlier than the year 375, if not a year or two later. This is reinforced by the fact that the letter was written shortly after "a sore battle" (Moroni 9:2) which was lost to the Lamanites ("we did not conquer," says 9:2), and Mormon himself fought in no unsuccessful battles between that year and the year 375.

Mormon's autobiographical record makes clear that all Nephite-Lamanite battles, except for the apocalyptic final battle at Cumorah, occurred by the year 380 (see Mormon 5:6–7; 6:1–5). Consequently, Mormon could not have written shortly after "a sore battle" at any point after 380. Mormon expresses his hope in the second letter that he might "see [Moroni] soon" (Moroni 9:24), suggesting that the decision to gather at Cumorah, where Mormon and Moroni were together, had not yet been made at the time the second letter was written. From all these details, then, it appears that Mormon wrote his second letter between

13 One might actually suggest that Mormon refers, in Moroni 9:24, to sacred records *other* than those he himself produced (in the form of the Book of Mormon, that is) and eventually passed into Moroni's care. That is, one might suggest that Mormon has reference either to the records he retrieved at age twenty-four by Ammaron's instruction, but apparently only temporarily (see Mormon 2:17–19), or to some otherwise unknown record of Mormon's own, one distinct from the record we know he eventually passed to Moroni (in the form of the Book of Mormon). Neither of these seems terribly likely, however.

375 and 380, during the war-ridden years leading up to the final conflict at Cumorah.

An issue with dating these letters is that the heading which stands above the text of the second letter (“the second epistle of Mormon to his son Moroni”), combined with the opening lines of the second letter (“I write unto you again that ye may know that I am yet alive”), creates an impression that the two letters were written in relatively short succession. Indeed, in the best of the available literature the ready assumption is that the two letters were written within a relatively short time.¹⁴ If the dates derived here, placing the first letter between 345 and 350 and the second between 375 and 380, are to be believed, then some thirty years passed between the writing of the first letter and the writing of the second. From this we would have to conclude that Mormon’s first letter was written when Moroni was in his upper teens at the very latest, while Mormon’s second letter was written when Moroni was middle-aged, contradicting any assumption that the two letters were written within a relatively short span of time.

The question, though, is whether this last assumption is valid. The heading for the second letter, identifying Moroni 9 as “the second epistle of Mormon to his son Moroni,” could be interpreted to mean that Mormon wrote *only* two letters to Moroni. If so, then it would indeed seem more than a bit strange if those two letters were written three decades apart. But it is entirely possible that “the second epistle” references merely the second of the only two letters Moroni included in his record; there may have been many more sent from father to son that were, for whatever reason, not included in his record. The “again” and “yet” of the opening lines of Moroni 9 were not, then, subtle rhetorical gestures to Moroni 8 but rather to some other no-longer-extant letter.¹⁵

14 See, for instance, Miner, “A Chronological Setting for the Epistles of Mormon to Moroni,” 101: “Given the circumstances, the best we can assume is that both epistles (chapters 8 and 9) were written within a short time of each other, probably within less than a year.” Miner adds in a footnote, however: “Although less likely, the words ‘the second epistle’ might just refer to the order of these epistles in Moroni’s book and *not* to the fact that this ‘second epistle’ was the one that Mormon wrote ‘soon’ after the first.”

15 This is the argument of, for instance, Brant Gardner: “While it is possible that this statement [‘I write unto you again’ in Moroni 9:1] refers to the letter included as Moroni 8, it seems more likely to me that Moroni selected two of several letters to copy than that Mormon wrote only two to his son.” Gardner, *Second Witness*, 6:396.

There is no definitive evidence against the possibility that the two letters were written decades apart, rather than in relatively short succession.

For the sake of argument, supposing that there *is* merit in the idea that the letters were written within a short time, then one or the other of the two dates arrived at above would be in error. Either the first letter could not have been written in proximity to the final war of Nephite eradication beginning in the year 375, or the second letter could not have been written as early as the war which led to the treaty established in 350. Pursuing the first line of argument requires accepting that Mormon's talk of going "out ... against the Lamanites" (Moroni 8:27) actually implied defensive fighting. Pursuing the second line of argument presumes that the "sacred records" mentioned in the second letter (9:24) were *not* the gold plates Mormon eventually delivered to Moroni — plates that Mormon retrieved only after the beginning of the war of Nephite eradication. In following either of these two threads, one would have to provide explanation for the remarkable decline in the Nephite condition between the two letters; not only is there a contrast between Mormon's request in the first letter that Moroni "pray for" the Nephites (8:28) and his confession in the second letter that he cannot "recommend them unto God" (9:21), but there is an apparent deepening of Nephite depravity between the writing of the first and second letters.¹⁶ Thus, while one might pursue the possibility that Mormon's two extant letters were written in relative temporal proximity to one another, there are good reasons to think they were indeed written at rather different times and under rather different circumstances.

Giving proper consideration to all the above, it seems relatively safe to conclude that Mormon's first letter was indeed produced in the years 345-50, while his second letter was written in the years 375-80.

Interpretive Implications

The larger question remains, why should any of this matter? Moroni never draws his readers' attention to questions of dating, although he might have assumed they would be able to reconstruct it themselves — as I have attempted to do here. But what do we stand to gain from a

¹⁶ In the first letter, Mormon expresses his "fear lest the Spirit hath ceased striving" with the Nephites, since they seek "to put down all power and authority which cometh from God" (Moroni 8:28). But this seems a far cry from the utter depravity described in the second letter, where Mormon describes "a people ... without civilization" (9:13), one that leads him to ask, "How can we expect that God will stay his hand in judgment against us?" (9:14).

close investigation of Moroni 8–9’s original settings, apart from a more accurate reconstruction of history?

First, it is worth noting one major implication of the above findings, if they are in fact correct: Moroni seems to have been granted a public ministry *before* Mormon was granted such a ministry. The first letter was written shortly after Moroni’s initial call to the ministry, and if it was indeed written during the military campaign of 345–50, it would seem that Moroni was out preaching among the Nephites during a time when Mormon’s own mouth was divinely shut. Mormon was commanded to preach only in or after the year 350 (see Mormon 2:28–3:3).¹⁷ This situation is suggestive, indicating that Mormon’s “preacherly” relationship to the Nephites was anomalous. Mormon’s autobiographical writings give the impression that Nephite Christianity did not exist for most of his lifetime, and that his own brief efforts at preaching between 350 and 360 were the only Christian sermonizing the Nephites heard after the departure of the three Nephite disciples during Mormon’s youth (see 1:13–14). Of course, Mormon’s sermon in Moroni 7, addressed to “the peaceable followers of Christ” (Moroni 7:3), complicates Mormon’s portrayal of his time. But the fact that the data indicate that Moroni was serving in some kind of ecclesiastical or ministerial capacity in the mid-340s suggests an even more complicated historical setting for Mormon’s life than might be gleaned from Mormon’s own brief account.

While this might seem like just a further clarification of history, there lurks within it a set of larger interpretive implications. It gives us good reason to think that Mormon strongly — if not, in certain ways, misleadingly — shaped the narrative he produced regarding the time in

17 This of course assumes that Mormon was “forbidden” not only when he first “did endeavor to preach” about the year 326 (Mormon 1:16), but from that point until, as he reports, the Lord commanded him to “cry unto [the] people” after the year 350 (3:2). The text never explicitly states that the proscription on preaching was in effect during the whole of those twenty-five years, but it does seem to be the implication. If there *were* a time during those years when Mormon might have taken up some kind of public ministry, it would have to have been during the years 330–44, a time of relative peace while the Nephites held their position in the land of Joshua. Miner, “A Chronological Setting for the Epistles of Mormon to Moroni,” 99, assumes just this, but only on the grounds that Mormon *must* have held some kind of ecclesiastical position before Moroni. But it should be noted that, although Mormon reports during those very years the momentary possibility of national repentance, along with his temporary hopes that the Nephites “would again become a righteous people” (2:12), he never says anything about being involved in any direct attempt to steer the Nephites toward repentance. The tone of the text is one of impotence on Mormon’s part.

which he lived. More, it gives us some sense for *the way* in which Mormon shaped his own narrative. Grant Hardy has shown that Mormon was something of a literary artist, his accounts of Nephite history profoundly shaped by literary concerns that sometimes discernibly tampered with historical data.¹⁸ In Moroni 7–9, a sermon and two letters from Mormon that Mormon himself never intended to include in his book, we see some rather specific and substantial instances where Mormon’s communicative intentions may have clashed with what actually happened. The point here is in no way to malign Mormon, as if he should — or even could — have done anything other than what he did. The point is, rather, to note that Mormon’s narratives are unmistakably driven by *theological* concerns. It was for transparently theological reasons that Mormon portrayed his people as tragically beyond the pale — as if he never met a righteous soul or one with Christian commitment during the course of his days. We see this and begin to recognize the theological force of Mormon’s narrative; we begin to see that the record means to do more than just report history — it means to suggest something about the consequences of apocalyptic wickedness. We recognize that there is a purpose to Mormon’s story, and that purpose is more discernible when we can see how Mormon deliberately shaped his narrative.

Another theological implication follows immediately from this. Although Mormon himself apparently did not intend to include sources in his book that would alert readers to the discrepancy between his narrative and the actual archival traces,¹⁹ his son Moroni thought it best to insert these sources into his father’s book, slipping Moroni 7–9 into the thing before burying it for safekeeping. Moroni’s supplementary work on Mormon’s book thus forcefully and even consciously brings to the reader’s attention what otherwise would have to be pursued through suspicious and often speculative reading. That is, where Hardy discovers

18 See Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader’s Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 87–213.

19 This is a more accurate way of describing what is at stake here. In the preceding paragraph, I speak of the discrepancy between historical narrative and historical reality, but the latter is of course never retrievable (if it can even be experienced!). It is better to speak, therefore, of the discrepancy between historical narrative and archival traces — the former presumably at some *further* remove from actual events, or at least the result of further reflection and shaping. What is significant about Moroni’s inclusion of Moroni 7–9 in the record is that he provides readers with actual archival material, rather than with his own supposedly more accurate narrative. We are thus confronted with a conflict between narrative and sources, rather than with a conflict between two narratives.

Mormon's narratological intentions only by tracking subtle tensions or incongruities in Mormon's own narrative, effectively deploying the sleuthing skills of the literary critic, Moroni asks us to recognize, *without* developing any deeply suspicious interpretive approach, the clear discontinuity between historical sources and historical narrative. Moroni does the critic's work for her, right within the sacred volume, thereby suggesting that there need be no real conflict between a hermeneutics of belief and a hermeneutics of suspicion — at least for readers of the Book of Mormon.²⁰ With son (Moroni) supplementing father (Mormon), suspicion effectively gets folded *into* belief, and one is given to see that the discrepancy between sources and narrative may be necessary, if not in fact beneficent. The Book of Mormon in its final form may be the “most correct” of any book precisely in that it wears its constructedness right on its sleeve — and that is something worth reflecting on often and at length.²¹

Returning to the transparency of Mormon's theological motivations — transparency which results from the discrepancy between the narrative of Mormon 1–7 and the sources in Moroni 7–9 — it might be noted that the two letters in Moroni 8–9 provide a glimpse of the laboratory in which Mormon concocted his theological perspective. If, as the evidence reviewed here suggests, Mormon wrote the two letters with thirty years passing between them, then one can take the measure of Mormon's changing attitude with respect to Nephite depravity in the differences between them. Mormon likely did not develop his theological perspective all at once, or through some one-off divine communication. Rather, it seems that his deeply pessimistic interpretation of Nephite history in its final years resulted from a determinate set of events. Readers of the Book of Mormon would do well to recognize the tension between Mormon's self-description as being “without hope” (Mormon 5:2) and his sermonic adulation for those who obtain “a sufficient hope by which [they] can enter into the rest of the Lord” (Moroni 7:3). It was apparently only rather late in his life that Mormon developed his most despairing understanding of the events he was living through. But because he wrote

20 I borrow the language of these opposed hermeneutic positions from Paul Ricoeur. See Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 27.

21 I owe this final formulation to George Handley, who first suggested to me that Joseph Smith's statement that the Book of Mormon is “the most correct of any book” may have something to do with the fact that it exhibits a kind of self-conscious awareness of its constructed nature.

the narrative of the Book of Mormon only at that late point in his life, it colors his narrative in a crucial way. Mormon's theological perspective was born, in short, in the context described in Moroni 9, rather than in the contexts assumed in Moroni 7 and Moroni 8. The developments in Mormon's perspective are useful for understanding his approach to history.

Of course, much more work remains to be done to reconstruct all the implications of Mormon's two letters for a full understanding of his theological perspective. And a great deal more work remains to be done to draw out the ways in which that theological perspective is reflected in Mormon's narrative — both of his own life and the whole of Nephite history. What I hope to have accomplished here is to make such investigation possible by sifting the evidence for the dating of Mormon's two letters and discerning the basic theological implications of such historical reconstruction. By including archival documents in the Book of Mormon, Moroni essentially entreats us to do such work. This most curious of scriptural volumes requires that we see the conflicts between the archival record and the final form of historical narrative; in the light of those conflicts, we might begin to recognize the profoundly theological bearing of scripture. It remains to be seen what we might learn from increasingly better theological interpretations of the Book of Mormon.

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