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Mormon and the "Small Plates" of Nephi

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Abstract: Gives an explanation of the lost 116 pages and how the small plates of Nephi were substituted for these lost pages that had been translated from the large plates of Nephi.

MORMON AND THE "SMALL PLATES" OF NEPHI

Questions having been asked us involving the title page of the *Book of Mormon*, the manuscript history lost by Martin Harris, and the use of the "small plates" of Nephi, we are answering these queries in *The Instructor*, rather than merely sending separate answers to each questioner.

When Nephi, following the divine counsel to keep a record of his people, decided to write such a record, he made a set of "large plates", on which to make it. The understanding was that his literary successors should continue the history of the nation, presumably on these, or other, "large plates." And this was done. We do not know how many historians took part in the work during the thousand years of the Lehite nation. Mormon, it would seem, was the last of these historians.

Now, Mormon, while writing the concluding chapters of this long narrative, thought it would be a good idea to make an abridgment of the history of his people. No doubt he was directed in this thought by the Holy Spirit. This work he accomplished. As soon as he had completed it, he turned it over to his son, Moroni. Moroni, after accepting the work, made some additions of his own, including an abridgment of the Jaredite history (now known as the "Book of Ether").

All this was on metallic leaves, called golden plates, each of which was about seven by six inches, and about the thickness of ordinary tin.

While, however, Nephi the First was making his larger history of the nation, the idea occurred to him that he should make another history of his people, a history that would contain more religion than the other. So he made a set of small plates for the purpose. No doubt, he, too, was inspired to do this. It does not seem to have been the intention that this religious history should run the full length of the national life. Hence, when Nephi died, only a few of his literary successors set down anything on these "small plates." They were therefore soon full.

When Mormon ran upon these "small plates" he read them, and, being particularly pleased with their contents he included them with his abridgment handing all the plates to his son.

It was this complete story—Mormon's abridged history of the Lehtes, with Moroni's abridged history of the Jaredites, and the "small plates" of Nephi—that Moroni gave to Joseph Smith, fourteen centuries later, to be translated by him into English. Part of the entire book, however, was "sealed", so that the modern prophet did not read it.

On receiving this golden volume from Moroni, Joseph, with Martin Harris as his scribe, set to work on the translation. He began, of course, with Mormon's abridgment. When he had translated, and Martin had written, 116 pages of foolscap paper, Harris borrowed this manuscript, to show to his friends. He lost this manuscript, and since there was no carbon copy, Joseph Smith did not know what to do when he and Oliver Cowdery, on April 7, 1829, undertook the sacred task dropped so unceremoniously by Joseph and Martin. Ordinarily there would have been a re-translation of the part which had been rendered into English, but this, the Lord advised, was not to be done here. Instead, it was explained, the "small plates" of Nephi should be substituted, since this history covered the same period as the part of Mormon's abridgment which had been lost. This was done. When Joseph reached the point where he had left off, he continued with that abridgment. All this, of course, was done in accordance with instructions which the Prophet had received from the Lord, most likely through the Urim and Thummim.

The title page of the present English translation of the Nephite Record, the Prophet tells us, is the same as that on the gold plates—that is, the abridgment by Mormon. It is not the wording of any modern. Obviously it was written with the idea in mind of serving as the title page of the abridgment, which was wholly the work of the prophet Mormon. There was no particular need of altering that title when other matter was included—the "small plates" of Nephi and the abridgment of Jaredite history by Moroni. As a matter of fact, this is often done nowadays.

It is hoped that this brief explanation will serve to clear up any confusion of thought on this question, which may have arisen in the minds of the Gospel Doctrine class.

Mormon's Abridgment

116 pp. MS.

Small Plates of Nephi