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Author(s): John W. Welch

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The Father's Command to Keep Records
in the Small Plates of Nephi

John W. Welch
September, 1984

Among the descendants of Jacob were Enos, Jarom, Omni, Amaron, Chemish, Abinadom and Amaleki. Over several centuries these eight men wrote the last twenty-six pages of the Small Plates of Nephi. With the exception of Jacob (who wrote all but about seven of these pages), they do not appear eager to write, nor do they seem to have much to say. It is interesting, however, that they manifest a strong sense of duty about writing what little they do. This paper will show that the duty they felt was well-defined by a specific command given by Nephi to their father Jacob, and that all eight writers were meticulous in seeing that this duty was fulfilled. By understanding the commandment of Nephi which created this duty, a modern reader can discern better why these men wrote as they did.

The commandment of Nephi is recorded in Jacob 1:1-4. It reads as follows:

. . . [W]herefore, Nephi gave me, Jacob, a commandment concerning the small plates, upon which these things are engraven.

And he gave me, Jacob, a commandment that I should write upon these plates a few of the things which I considered to be most precious; that I should not touch, save it were lightly, concerning the history of this people which are called the people of Nephi.

For he said that the history of his people should be engraven upon his other plates, and that I should preserve these plates and hand them down unto my seed, from generation to generation.

And if there were preaching which was sacred, or revelation which was great, or prophesying, that I should engraven the heads of them upon these plates, and touch upon them as much as it were possible, for Christ's sake, and for the sake of our people.

These words create the following obligations:

(1) A record is to be kept on the Small Plates by way of commandment. Above all, some record must be kept. Nothing is said about what should happen to the record keepers in the event this commandment is not kept, but it is stated that the purpose for keeping this record is to benefit the people as a whole. Jacob 1:5 gives the motive behind the urgency and purpose for keeping these records, when it explains that "it truly had been made manifest unto us concerning our people, what things should happen to them." Failure to keep Nephi's commandment would thus associate with responsibility for failing to prevent that evil or apostacy from befalling the people.

(2) The record must be personally written. The commandment given to Jacob was that "I should write upon these plates." There is no indication that this obligation could be delegated to a scribe or a priest or any other person. This also imposes an obligation upon these record-keepers to gain and maintain personal literacy (cf. Mos. 1:2-4).

(3) The record must be preserved.

(4) The record must be handed down within the lineage of Jacob from generation to generation.

(5) It is not clear from Nephi's words to Jacob whether Jacob alone was supposed to write on the plates or whether subsequent generations were also expected to write. Jacob, however, clarifies and solidifies the tradition of extending these obligations to successive generations by specifically telling his son Enos "the things which my brother Nephi had commanded" and by having Enos promise "obedience unto the

commands." (Jac. 7:27) Likewise, Enos issues the command to his son Jarom (Jar. 1).

(6) The record should embrace only certain specific items: namely, (a) a few things which the writer "considered to be most precious, (b) sacred preaching, and (c) great revelation or prophesying. The record keeper was only expected to record these things "if there were" such things to be found in his lifetime. Even at that, he was only required to write "the heads" or main points of such few precious, sacred or great utterances.

(7) Moreover, the record was not to cover the history of the people of Nephi "save it were lightly." It goes without saying that the history of any other nations or tribes was to be even less a part of this record.

(8) Finally, the words recorded on this record were to be written "as much as it were possible for Christ's sake, and for the sake of our people."

When these requirements are laid side by side against the words left by Jacob and his record-keeping descendants, a noteworthy consistent pattern of conscious adherence to these guidelines appears. Consider the words of each of these writers in succession.

Jacob. Clearly Jacob consciously follows these guidelines as he writes. He makes his record by way of commandment: "I, Jacob, take it upon me to fulfil the commandment of my brother Nephi." (Jac. 1:8) He mentions and reissues the commands of Nephi in transmitting the plates to his son Enos, thus handing the plates down from generation to generation (7:27). After

touching lightly upon the history of his people (1:9-16; he also tells of the condition of his people briefly at the end of his book, 7:24-25), Jacob personally records a few things ("these plates are called the plates of Jacob . . . and I make an end" 3:14) that he considers most precious, particularly sacred preaching and great revelations or prophesying. He specifically states that he is only recording "a hundredth part of the proceedings of this people" and that the other items are recorded on the large plates (3:13, as Nephi required in 1:3). His record divides into three parts. First, by recording his temple sermon (1:17-3:11), Jacob satisfies the requirement of writing "sacred preaching." He preaches to them about chastity (2:5-9, 22-35), about wealth and social discrimination (2:11-21), and exhorts the people to obedience (3:1-11). Second, by writing what he does in chapters 4-6, he records "great revelation or prophesying." These chapters are about the prophets (4:4-5), confirming that there were "many revelations and the spirit of prophecy" among the Nephites (4:6-7; cf. 1:4 "if there were . . . revelation . . . or prophesying"); they speak of the necessity of revelation (4:8-9), about the need to "prophecy to the understanding of men" (4:13) and about why the Jews rejected the prophets (4:14). Jacob then records his own prophecy about the future of the Jews (4:15-18), and preserves the great prophecy of Zenos, which is both great and large (5:1-77). This prophecy describes the fruit of the tree representing Israel as "most precious" (5:61, 74), which was perhaps a description which especially pleased Jacob since he was instructed to write a few of the things which he

considered "most precious" (1:2). This section ends with Jacob interpreting Zenos' allegory and proclaiming "this is my prophecy" (6:1), urging the people not to reject "the words of the prophets." (6:8) Third, Jacob tells the story of Sherem, who came preaching (7:1) and led away many of the people (7:3, 7), but who is smitten by God and dies (7:20). Without much question, the reason for including this story of this preaching in the record was to record the impact which this case of divine judgment had upon the people: "And when the multitude had witnessed . . . they were astonished exceedingly . . . and the love of God was restored again among the people . . ." (7:21-23). This fulfills the need to record items "for the sake of our people," just as Jacob took seriously the obligation that if he did not preach to the people their sins would be upon him (1:19). Evidence can also be easily advanced to show that Jacob selected the words he wrote in order to satisfy the only remaining requirement that he write "as much as possible for Christ's sake." (1:4) For example, the atonement of Christ is praised (4:11-12), Christ is symbolized as the servant in the allegory of the olive tree (5:49-50, cf. Is. 52), the redemption and resurrection in Christ is emphasized (6:8-9), and the "doctrine of Christ" (i.e. that Christ will come) is defended by Jacob in his confrontation with Sherem (7:6, 11, 14, 19). In sum, Jacob strictly adheres to and complies with the commandment of Nephi in composing the Book of Jacob.

Enos. The Book of Enos also follows this format. Enos clearly writes by way of commandment (Jac. 7:27). He writes

personally in the first person (Enos 1, 11, 17, 19). He is conscious of the need to preserve the record and obtains from God an explicit promise that "God would preserve a record" even in the event that the Nephites were destroyed (13-17), and he hands the record down to his son Jarom with a commandment (Jarom 1). The content of his account also satisfies the requirement of only touching lightly on Nephite history, as he briefly contrasts the economic aspects of Lamanite and Nephite societies (Enos 20-21) and mentions wars between them (24), but otherwise says nothing of more than 80 years of history. Almost all of the book, on the other hand, records a precious account of Enos' "wrestle" before God and his prayers on behalf of himself, of his people and of the Lamanites (2-18), and explains how, after he had received a remission of his sins and obtained a covenant from God (5, 17), Enos "went about among the people of Nephi prophesying." (19). He also mentions that there were "many prophets" among them (22). Enos also tells how he would "preach and prophesy" and affirms that he had "declared [the truth which is in Christ] all [his] days." (26) Thus the content of the book embraces a few things which Enos considered most precious, namely his revelations, and tells of the sacred preaching and prophesying that occurred during his lifetime. More he does not say. What he does write reveals his concern for his people ("I began to feel a desire for the welfare of my brethren," Enos 9, 11), and as often as possible refers to the fact that he lived and preached for Christ's sake ("because of thy faith in Christ," Enos 8; "according to the truth which is in Christ," 26; "my Redeemer," "in him I shall rest," 27).

Jarom. The tradition is perpetuated explicitly by Jarom as well. He writes (Jar. 1) a "few words" (1, cf. Jac. 1:2) and writes "a little" (Jar. 2) expressly in order to keep the commandment of his father (Jar. 1). The fact that he personally wrote his record is also evidenced by his description of the large plates as "writings of the kings, or those which they caused to be written" (Jar. 14), implicitly distinguishing them from his own writings which he himself writes ("what more could I write," Jar. 2). He passes the plates on to his son Omni "that they may be kept according to the commandments of my fathers" (Jar. 15). He begins by explaining that he will not "write the things of my prophesying, nor my revelations," for he is satisfied with what has already been written (Jar. 2). He also affirms that "there are many among us who have many revelations" (Jar. 4), but does not elaborate further. Since he did not consider any of these revelations to be "great," or at least he did not consider them to be greater than what had already been written, he apparently understood the words of Nephi not to require him to write them onto the plates. History is mentioned briefly (Jar. 5-13), and this account is interspersed with references to the coming of prophets among the people of Nephi, prophesying their destruction (Jar. 10), and reporting on the earnest exhortations of the prophets, priests and teachers, who preached to the people (Jar. 11). Jarom's account of the deliverance of the Nephites from the Lamanites due to their obedience to God's commandments and due to their repentance (Jar. 9, 12) can certainly be understood as a writing intended "for the

sake of the people." Likewise, Jarom's references to the proper understanding of the "intent for which [the law of Moses] was given; persuading them to look forward unto the Messiah" (Jar. 11) show that things were done and written "for Christ's sake." Beyond this, Jarom is silent. Nevertheless, he too has written enough to comply with the commandments of Nephi, Jacob and Enos.

With Jarom, however, some changes already begin to appear. These differences also should be noted. First, Jarom says that he is keeping the commandment of his father Enos "that our genealogy may be kept" (Jar. 1). Keeping a genealogy may have been a by-product of this record-keeping tradition, but it was not mentioned by any of the earlier writers. Of course, as room on the plates became smaller, less could be written, but at a minimum a genealogy could be kept. Second, Jarom sees the purpose of this record as being written "for the intent of the benefit of our brethren the Lamanites" (Jar. 2). After the covenant which the Lord made with Enos that the record would survive any Nephite destruction for the benefit of the Lamanites (Enos 13, 16), it is understandable that this purpose would overshadow the previous purpose stated by Nephi and Jacob of benefiting "our people." These are subtle and understandable shifts.

Omni. With Omni, the writers begin to be very brief. Undoubtedly, the plates were almost filled. Indeed, Jarom had remarked that the plates were "small" (Jar. 14). One might wonder why Omni and his successors did not simply make more plates, and there may be several reasons why they did not: they

may have lost the technology; they may not have had any more ore, since what the Nephites originally found was probably surface metal (no mining is mentioned) and that supply would have been quickly exhausted. But more than that, they had a technical reason for not making more plate: Nephi's command to Jacob was for him to write "upon these plates" (Jac. 1:2). Those plates were unique: they had been made by the hand of Nephi, as Jacob himself emphasizes (Jac. 3:14). Adding to the collection was perhaps unthinkable.

Notwithstanding the lack of space, and in spite of the fact that Omni considered himself a wicked man (Omni 2), he still wrote something in an attempt to satisfy the requirements of his fathers' command. He kept the record and writes by way of commandment (Omni 1, 3), and passes the record on to his son (Omni 3). Although he does not write for the sake of his people, he states that he fought "to preserve my people" and, perhaps for the Christ's sake, acknowledges that he has not kept the statutes and commandments of the Lord (Omni 2). He touches lightly on history, mentioning vaguely some seasons of peace and others of war (Omni 3).

Amaron. Like his father, Amaron makes a minimal effort to comply with the command. He verifies that he will write a "few" things (Omni 4) and that he has "delivered" the book on (Omni 8). He makes no reference to revelations, preaching or prophesying in his lifetime, but reports the destruction of wicked Nephites as fulfillment of the prophecy given by Lehi that they would not prosper in the land if they did not keep the comandments (Omni 6).

Chemish. Chemish was Amaron's brother. Perhaps for this reason (not wanting to add two records from the same generation) he did not do more than witness the fact that his brother had fulfilled the commandments. Nevertheless, that which Chemish wrote still contains elements common to the command of Nephi and the words of the others who had gone before him, sufficient to show that he too was intent upon fulfilling these instructions:

Now I, Chemish, write what few things I write, in the same book with my brother; for behold I saw the last which he wrote, that he wrote it with his own hand; and he wrote it in the day that he delivered them unto me. And after this manner we keep the records, for it is according to the commandments of our fathers. And I make an end. (Omni 9).

Abinadom. Although Chemish did little more than fulfill the mechanical elements of the command of the fathers, his son Abinadom makes a conscious effort to keep the substantive elements of Nephi's formulaic command as well. Abinadom's words are:

Behold, I, Abinadom, am the son of Chemish. Behold, it came to pass that I saw much war and contention between my people, the Nephites, and the Lamanites; and I, with my own sword, have taken the lives of many of the Lamanites in defense of my brethren. And behold, the record of this people is engraven upon plates which is had by the kings, according to the generations; and I know of no revelations save that which has been written, neither prophecy; wherefore that which is sufficient is written. And I make an end. (Omni 10-11).

The words of Abinadom echo the instructions of Nephi in many respects. After referring very briefly to Nephite history and after mentioning the other plates, he avers that he is aware of no revelations or prophecy and thus, under Nephi's instructions, has nothing to say.

It is interesting that Abinadom says that the record of the kings was handled "according to the generations." This may reflect a subtle ambiguity in Nephi's words. At the beginning of Jacob 1:3, the "other plates" are mentioned, and at the end is the phrase "from generation to generation." In between are the words "that I [Jacob] should preserve these plates." The word "these" is ambiguous: its closest antecedent is indeed the "other plates," as Abinadom seems to have understood; the overall context of Jacob 1:2-4, on the other hand, surely intends "these" to refer to the Small Plates of Nephi (as, for example, Jac. 1:2 calls the small plates "these plates.")

Amaleki. The last person to write upon the Small Plates was Amaleki. Knowing that his brother had returned to the Land of Nephi and had been unheard from (Omni 30), and having no other posterity (Omni 25), Amaleki prepared to give the plates to King Benjamin. Quite possibly for this reason Amaleki wrote more than his predecessors, as he filled all the remaining space on the plates.

Amaleki's words first cover a little history ("I will speak unto you somewhat concerning Mosiah," Omni 12). He tells of the departure from the Land of Nephi and of Mosiah's arrival in the Land of Zarahemla (Omni 12-23), and he speaks briefly of Nephite relations with the Lamanites (Omni 24). He delivers the plates to Benjamin (Omni 25), which he justifies doing in lieu of handing them down from generation to generation (cf. also Words of Mormon 10). Next he "exhorts all men to come unto God, the Holy One of Israel, and believe in prophesying, and in revelation

. . ." (Omni 25). He speaks on behalf of the Lord from whom all which is good comes (Omni 25), and expresses his concern on behalf of the people and admonishes them that they might be saved (Omni 26). Thus, here too the command of the fathers appears to have been a controlling factor in determining the content and treatment of this record.

In conclusion, the textual evidence is persuasive that the command of Nephi was consciously followed by Jacob and his descendants as they wrote the books of Jacob, Enos, Jarom and Omni. Although these writers are most often thought of simply for their terseness and lack of substance, modern readers should not overlook the fact that their brevity was dictated in large part by the small size of the plates and by the specific limitations of Nephi's command. Modern readers should also not underrate the consistent and subtle way in which the record shows that this command was dutifully obeyed to the end of this line of Jacob's lineage.