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KnowWhy #74 - Why Do the Authors on the Small Plates Follow a Pattern?

Author(s): Book of Mormon Central Staff

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Abstract: Jacob's descendants wrote very little on the plates left to their care, and sometimes it is easy to see them as lazy or negligent. Few readers, however, have noticed that they diligently adhere to a pattern, satisfying criteria set out by Nephi when he passed the plates on to his brother Jacob. Studying this pattern gives new perspective and appreciation for these often neglected voices in the Book of Mormon.

Why Do the Authors on the Small Plates Follow a Pattern?

KnoWhy #74
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Ancient Record by James Fullmer

“And I, Jacob, saw that I must soon go down to my grave; wherefore, I said unto my son Enos: Take these plates. And I told him the things which my brother Nephi had commanded me, and he promised obedience unto the commands.”

Jacob 7:27

The Know

In 1984, John W. Welch observed that after Jacob some of the keepers of the small plates “do not appear eager to write, nor do they seem to have much to say.” While it is popular to see them as lazy or negligent, Welch continued, “It is interesting, however, that they manifest a strong sense of duty about writing what little they do.”¹ Jacob 1:1–4 documents the mandate Nephi gave to his brother Jacob, and Jacob states that he passed this same commandment on to his son Enos (Jacob 7:27).

Welch delineates seven obligations that can be found in Nephi’s instructions in Jacob 1:1–4:

1. A record is to be kept on the small plates by way of commandment (Jacob 1:1–2).
2. The record must be personally written (Jacob 1:2).
3. The record must be preserved (Jacob 1:3).

4. The record must *handed down* within the lineage of Jacob from generation to generation (Jacob 1:3).
5. The record should include: (a) a few things which the writer considered most precious; (b) sacred preaching; and (c) great revelation or prophesying (Jacob 1:4). Welch stressed the important caveat, “The record keeper was only expected to record these things ‘if there were’ such things to be found in his lifetime.”²
6. The record was only to *lightly* cover the history of the people of Nephi (Jacob 1:2).
7. The words on the record were meant, “as much as it were possible for Christ’s sake, and for the sake of our people” (Jacob 1:4).³

The writings of Jacob and each of his descendants can be expressly evaluated on these criteria (see chart).

Criteria	Jacob	Enos	Jarom	Omni	Amaron	Chemish	Abinadom	Amaleki
By way of commandment	Jacob 1:8	Jacob 7:27	Jarom 1:1	Omni 1:1	Omni 1:3	Omni 1:9	Omni 1:10–11	Omni 1:12
Personally Written	Jacob 3:14	Enos 1:1, 11, 17, 19	Jarom 1:1–2	Omni 1:1–3	Omni 1:4, 9	Omni 1:9	Omni 1:10	Omni 1:12
Preserved	Enos 1:18	Enos 1:13–17	Jarom 1:14	Omni 1:3	Omni 1:8	Omni 1:9	Omni 1:11	Omni 1:30
Handed Down	Jacob 7:27	Jarom 1:1	Jarom 1:15	Omni 1:3	Omni 1:8	Omni 1:10	Omni 1:12	Omni 1:25
Includes Few most precious things	Jacob 5:61, 74	Enos 1:2–8	Jarom 1:1					Omni 1:25
Has sacred preaching	Jacob 2–3	Enos 1:23, 26	Jarom 1:7, 11					Omni 1:13, 25
Contains revelation/prophesy	Jacob 4–6; esp. 4:4–14	Enos 1:19, 23, 26	Jarom 1:2, 4, 10		Omni 1:6		Omni 1:11	Omni 1:13, 25
Light on History	Jacob 1:9–16; 3:13	Enos 1:20–21	Jarom 1:5–13	Omni 1:3	Omni 1:5		Omni 1:10	Omni 1:12–29
Writing for the sake of Christ	Jacob 4:11–12; 6:8–9; 7:6, 11, 14, 19	Enos 1:8, 26–27	Jarom 1:11	Omni 1:2?				Omni 1:25–26
Writing for the sake of the people	Jacob 1:19; 7:21–23	Enos 1:9–11	Jarom 1:2, 12	Omni 1:2			Omni 1:10	Omni 1:26

While not every author satisfies every criterion, given the brevity of their writings they actually do an impressive job covering the basics of Nephi's directive. Each of these writers makes a point of writing in the first person: "I, Jarom" (Jarom 1:1), "I, Omni" (Omni 1:1), or "I, Amaron" (Omni 1:4), thus discharging the personal obligation Nephi gave to Jacob and his successors, as Jacob reported: "that I should write" (Jacob 1:2).⁴

Likewise, Chemish and others comment that they will write only a "few things" (Jacob 4:2; Jarom 1:1; Omni 1:4, 9, 22), as Nephi had also explicitly instructed ("few," Jacob 1:2).

Even when these authors know of no new revelations, they typically certify that "I know of no revelation save that which has been written, neither prophecy; wherefore, that which is sufficient is written" (Omni 1:11; see also Jarom 1:2; Omni 1:25).

In addition, a careful reading of the vocabulary used by multiple of the authors of the small plates reveals that even in their brief comments, they consciously "echo the instructions of Nephi in many respects."⁵ Welch concluded, "the textual evidence is persuasive that the command of Nephi was followed by Jacob and his descendants as they wrote the books of Jacob, Enos, Jarom, and Omni."⁶

The Why

Recognizing the faithful adherence of Jacob, Enos, Jarom, Omni, Amaron, Chemish, Abinadom and Amaleki to Nephi's instructions provides a different perspective on these often overlooked Book of Mormon authors. "Although these writers," explained Welch, "are most of-

ten 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."⁷

Using Nephi's command as a template, modern readers can appreciate these small entries for their scribal attention to duty and detail. Although Nephi's instructions to Jacob are soon forgotten by most people reading the Book of Mormon today, and probably passed just quickly through Joseph Smith's consciousness as he labored over the task of rendering the text into English, Nephi's mandate was not forgotten by Jacob and his seven successors.

Their diligent adherence to Nephi's instructions explains why these small books follow a particular pattern in a manner that is worthy of admiration: "Modern readers should 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."⁸ While the temptation is to breeze through these brief entries on the small plates, careful reading and thinking about these often neglected voices rewards patient readers.

Further Reading

John W. Welch, "The Father's Command to Keep Records in the Small Plates of Nephi," FARMS Preliminary Report (September 1984)

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Notes

1. John W. Welch, "The Father's Command to Keep Records in the Small Plates of Nephi," FARMS Preliminary Report (September 1984), 1.
2. Welch, "The Father's Command," 3.
3. See Welch, "The Father's Command," 2–3. Welch actually outlines 8 criteria, but his (5) is not clearly stated in Nephi's commission but seems implicit in (4), and therefore redundant. For these reasons, it has been omitted here.
4. While it is true that they could have personally written on the plates without writing in first person, the first person dec-

larations are the evidence available to readers today they wrote directly and personally on the plates.

5. Welch, "The Father's Command," 10.
6. Welch, "The Father's Command," 12.
7. Welch, "The Father's Command," 12.
8. Welch, "The Father's Command," 12, "also" silently omitted.