Mormon's Editorial Method and Meta-Message

Author(s): Brant Gardner
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Brant A. Gardner

Mormon was charged with the task of keeping the plates of Nephi when he was 10 years old. He did not receive the records until he was 24, but he spent the next 50 to 60 years of his life writing on them, thinking about them, and eventually writing a book that condensed what he understood to be their most essential message. We cannot know when Mormon changed from chronicler to author, but we can reconstruct a plausible timeline.

In the 345th year after the birth of the Savior, Mormon removed at least some of the plates of Nephi from the hill Shim (Morm. 2:16-17). Mormon doesn't tell us the extent of the plates he removed at this time, but it is improbable that they were the full set of the "plates of Nephi," although he explicitly tells us that these were the very plates on which other record-keepers had written (see Morm. 2:18). At this time, he records that "upon [these] plates of Nephi I did make a full account of all the wickedness and abominations." On these plates, Mormon is fulfilling his duties as national scribe. He has not yet begun what we know as the Book of Mormon.

We next see the full collection of plates in the 367th year[1] when Mormon was 46. At that time he again retrieves plates from the hill Shim because the land is being overrun by the Lamanites (Morm. 4:23). The plausible scenario, then, has Mormon writing as a chronicler or regular record-keeper for twenty-two years on the large plates of Nephi. He could not compose his own book without access to the complete records from Shim–and he apparently did not acquire them until the 367th year.

For the next thirteen years, I suggest that he read and digested them, possibly taking notes and certainly preparing an outline or rough draft. He then began writing the work we have as our Book of Mormon at least by 379 (Morm. 5:5,9), when he was 58 years old, and continuing through early 385. He died somewhere after early AD 385 and before AD 391, by which time Moroni was writing.

Mormon's Outline

Several clues in Mormon's text bear evidence that he had at least created a full outline of his work before he began the task of committing it to the plates. Perhaps the most obvious evidence is the chapter headnotes which were physically written on the plates prior to the chapters they synopsize. The extant portion of the original manuscript preserves synoptic headnotes for Helaman and 3 Nephi,[2] confirming that the 1830 edition's headnotes were part of the translation and were not added in the preparation of the Printer's manuscript when Joseph or Oliver could have created them from their reading of the original. As a representation of information from the plates, they indicate that Mormon wrote them prior to the chapters and therefore had to know the contents of the coming chapter before he began to write it.[3]

The majority of the headnotes are at the beginning of named books. In the small plates, they appear only at the beginning of 1 Nephi, 2 Nephi and Jacob. In Mormon's editing of the large plates, they appear at the beginning of every book but Mosiah. A headnote's absence there is understandable because the lost 116 pages apparently included at least the first chapter of Mosiah. I feel fairly safe in concluding that Mosiah would have had such a headnote, given Mormon's consistency in the remainder of the books he edited.

In contrast, there are no headnotes for Mormon, Ether, or Moroni–three books he did not edit. Mormon's consistency in adding these introductory headnotes to the books that he is editing suggests (and is corroborated by other types of internal evidence) that he had some clear plan of what he was going to include in each book he edited. When Mormon switches to his own record, it is no longer a part of the planned text and therefore does not have the synopsis in a headnote.

Although there is evidence for an outline, there is also evidence that Mormon did not simply copy a previously written text onto the plates. While he certainly copied the various sermons from his source material, in his own text he allowed himself to interact with the information he was writing. We often see Mormon divert from his outline on a tangent occasioned by thinking about the material he was writing. The evidence both for the asides and for the outline from which they diverged comes

in the way he returns to his task. In order to reset his narrative to the outline, Mormon repeated at least the idea, and often much of the language, of the last part of the outline before the departure.

I had noticed this process in the text well before I had a name to identify it, which (thanks to David Bokovoy) I now have. Bokovoy relates the technique as it is known from the Old Testament: "Repetitive resumption refers to an editor's return to an original narrative following a deliberate interlude. Old Testament writers accomplished this by repeating a key word or phrase that immediately preceded the textual interruption."[4]

One example from Mormon is found in Alma chapter 17. In verse 13, Mormon tells us that when the sons of Mosiah came to the "borders of the land of the Lamanites, that they separated themselves and departed one from another." Then Mormon diverts into a diatribe against the Lamanites and why the sons of Mosiah really needed to preach to them. When Mormon returns to his outlined narrative in verse 17, he says "Therefore they separated themselves one from another, and went forth among them. . ."

Also in Alma, we find a repetition that is much closer together:

> 56 And it came to pass that the curse was not taken off of Korihor; but he was cast out, **and went about from house to house begging for his food**.

> 57 Now the knowledge of what had happened unto Korihor was immediately published throughout all the land; yea, the proclamation was sent forth by the chief judge to all the people in the land, declaring unto those who had believed in the words of Korihor that they must speedily repent, lest the same judgments would come unto them. 58 And it came to pass that they were all convinced of the wickedness of Korihor; therefore they were all converted again unto the Lord; and this put an end to the iniquity after the manner of Korihor.

> **And Korihor did go about from house to house, begging food for his support.** (Alma 30:56 – 58)

I intentionally recut the verses so the process would be clearer. Mormon followed his outline, which requires that we understand that Korihor is begging for food. This is the textual idea that will move the narrative from the story of Korihor to the story of the Zoramites. Mormon then decides to cover the repentance which follows the cursing, which is apparently an aside written during the transcription/writing on the plates. In order to return to his planned narrative, Mormon repeats the

information about Korihor begging for his food, even though the original phrase wasn't that far away in the text.

Where the Old Testament editors used this method to return to an original narrative after a deliberate interruption, Mormon used the technique to return to his outline after a spontaneous interruption.

Mormon's Sources and the Construction of his Text

Book Names

How much of Mormon's sources are preserved in his outline and text? Although based on indirect evidence, we can make some tentative suggestions of what features came from the source plates and which are Mormon's own contributions. Mormon tells us that his main source is the "plates of Nephi." The most obvious feature of the Book of Mormon is the text's division into books carrying a man's name. It is those book names themselves that tell us that they were original to the plates and were not the result of Mormon's editing.

It doesn't seem very difficult or interesting to see why book names change in the Book of Mormon. Nephi writes the book of Nephi. Jacob writes Jacob. Enos writes Enos. The book names change when there is a new prophet, right? Yes and no. Yes when we are speaking of most of the books that were part of the small plates of Nephi. No for the Book of Mormon that Mormon actually conceived and edited.

Our Book of Mormon is wonderful but it isn't the book Mormon intended that we have. The material we have from Nephi to Words of Mormon were added to replace what we lost of Mormon's work. Joseph Smith indicated that the lost 116 pages comprised the book of Lehi.[5] Mormon's work, as originally conceived, would have been:

- Lehi
- Mosiah
- Alma
- Helaman
- Nephi (our 3 Nephi)[6]
- Nephi (our 4 Nephi)
- Mormon[7]

As with the holographic small plates, Mormon's book clearly still has names of people associated with the books, but they don't fit the pattern of name-of-author equals book-name. Many books contain the records of several important people:

- **Lehi:** Contains the record of Lehi, Nephi, and unknown rulers until the reign of Mosiah. This covers a period of nearly 400 years.
- **Mosiah:** Contains the record of Mosiah the first, Benjamin, Mosiah the second and Alma the Elder
- **Alma:** Alma the Younger and Helaman the Elder
- **Helaman:** Helaman the Younger and Nephi, son of Helaman the Younger

Clearly the book names do not change based on the writer or prophet associated with the book. On what principle do they change?

Important information comes from the transition between the book of Alma and the book of Helaman. The book of Alma contains the writings of Alma the Younger (but not his father) and Helaman. The book of Helaman starts with Helaman, son of Helaman. In Alma 63:11 we learn that the plates have been given to Helaman the Younger. In Helaman 2:2 we learn that Helaman the Younger is appointed to sit as chief judge. His father was not a sitting chief judge, although his grandfather (Alma the Younger) had been. Alma the Younger had relinquished the judge seat to devote his efforts to preaching the gospel. He had the records and took them with him. When his son, Helaman the Elder, received the plates, they were outside of the political line. When the new book begins with Helaman the Younger, it is a new book in the hands of a new lineage of sitting judges. This suggests the hypothesis that the change in book names is related to the shift in the ruling lines. Does the theory hold up?

The first book of the large plates was the book of Lehi. Nephi indicated that those plates contained "an account of the reign of the kings" (1 Nephi 9:4). After Nephi there were other kings who received the throne name of "Nephi" (Jacob 1:11), so we must suppose that the large plates contained the records of these "Nephies." Even though we don't have the 116 lost pages, we do know that the book of Lehi continued until the next named book, which is Mosiah. What happens between the book of Lehi and Mosiah? Omni 1:12-14 tells us that Mosiah flees the City of Nephi with the plates and becomes king in Zarahemla. He is a new king in a new place. He is the founder of a new dynasty and therefore begins a new book in his name.

The transition from the book of Mosiah to the book of Alma is another change in political lineage. The sons of Mosiah (son of Benjamin) refused the kingship and the monarchy is replaced by a system of judges. The book of Alma begins not with the first Alma, but with the first of the new line of rulers as Alma the Younger becomes the first chief judge. The political line doesn't last long as Alma the Younger gives up the chief judge seat and dedicates himself to preaching (Alma 5:15-17). He took the record with him. His son, Helaman the Elder, continues to write in his father's book.

The transition from the book of Alma to Helaman has already been noted as a change of political line as the records re-entered the hands of the sitting judge.

In the book of Helaman, the Gadianton robbers seize the government and the sitting Nephite chief judge, Nephi, the son of Helaman the Younger, flees and takes the record with him. As with Alma the Younger and Helaman the Elder, the record has moved out of the political line. By the time we arrive at 4 Nephi the record and the rulership have been reunited in the person of Nephi, son of Nephi. This is a change of both location and dynasty after the Gadianton usurpation and therefore represents a new book.

This leaves us with the shift from Helaman to 3 Nephi. The record is already out of the hands of ruling line and is kept by Nephi, son of Helaman. There is no indication that Nephi's position in the government changes at the beginning of this record. This book change is an exception to the rule of changing dynasties. However, this book does not come from the large plates of Nephi, but takes its name from a different record. Mormon indicates that he takes this account from a separate, personal record of Nephi, son of Helaman (3 Nephi 5:8-10). Therefore, it is not named according to the rules governing names on the plates of Nephi.

The book names change because they change in Mormon's source. When that source is the large plates of Nephi, which was the more political record, they change according to the possession of those plates by a newly seated ruler.

Chapter Divisions

Royal Skousen, a professor of linguistics and English language at Brigham Young University, studied the original dictated manuscript of the Book of Mormon and tells us: "Evidence suggests that as Joseph Smith was translating, he apparently saw some mark (or perhaps extra spacing) whenever a section ended, but was unable to see the text that followed. At such junctures, Joseph decided to refer to these endings as chapter breaks and told the scribe to write the word "chapter" at these places, but without specifying any number for the chapter since Joseph saw neither a number nor the word

'chapter.'"[8] Therefore, in the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon, the chapters represented Mormon's choices of where a break should occur in the text. We can examine those divisions to attempt to understand what textual events triggered a conceptual break in the Mormon's mind. Of course, one of the important caveats of researching Mormon's textual breaks is that we must return to the original 1830 chapters which represent those present on the plates. The 1879-1981 editions of the Book of Mormon follow new chapters assigned by Orson Pratt and do not represent Mormon's original construction.[9] Although elsewhere I have discussed the full set of reasons for changing chapters,[10] I would like to highlight one that tells us more than just a reason for changing chapters.

Mormon makes a new chapter at the beginning of a newly inserted sermon from the source plates, or when an inserted sermon ends.[11] Often, the text which ends the chapter will be marked with "Amen". This process creates situations where the logic of the 1830 chapter divisions differs from modern expectations. In order to break at the switch from inserted speech to narrative, Mormon finds that he must place concluding narrative material at the beginning of the next chapter, or (in the case of a text that begins a chapter) introductory narrative material at the end of the previous chapter. For example, Alma 7 ends with a sermon. As Alma 8 opens we find text that a modern reader would consider a conclusion to the previous chapter.

For the modern reader, there is nothing about a sermon that particularly dictates a chapter change. In fact, when Orson Pratt recut the chapters in 1879, he often recut along the lines of modern understanding so that these tag-on narratives were reassigned to what a modern reader would consider an ending or beginning.

When Mormon breaks the chapters at the sermon boundaries rather than the event boundaries, it tells us two things. First, that he considers the sermon unit to be more important than the narrative. Second, it tells us that he is quoting (presumably faithfully) from his sources rather than creating the sermons. A modern novelist would be inventing both the linking narratives and the included sermons. Such a writer would see only a minimal distinction between event and sermon. Both are part of the "history," and both are part of the same creative process.

Mormon's process was different. He created the linking narratives based on his source texts; but the sermons are direct quotations. In a very real sense, Mormon is shifting sources, which he also marks by changing chapters. Inserted quotations tend to open and close chapters because he must consult the plates for that material; he can write the narrative from memory, perhaps checking an event or two. The sermons come directly from the plates. The history comes from Mormon's understanding and interpretation of the plates.

Textual Flow Indicators

When Joseph Smith dictated the Book of Mormon he provided the words and indications for breaks between chapters and books. He did not provide any information for breaks between paragraphs and sentences. All of those important aspects of a modern text were added by John H. Gilbert, the compositor.[12] When Gilbert read the text he clearly fixed on two verbal markers to begin new paragraphs.

It doesn't take long looking through a facsimile of the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon to see that "and it came to pass" is visually even more prevalent than in our modern version.[13] We see "and it came to pass" (or a variant) at the beginning of 37 out of the 49 paragraphs in the 1830 edition's chapter 1 of 1 Nephi (comprising chapters 1-5 in our current edition). However, the reason that it so frequently appears at the beginning of paragraphs is the very reason it exists at all. Intuitively, Gilbert recognized "and it came to pass," and a companion, "and now," as two verbal markers that govern textual flow. In an original without the modern conventions of punctuation, those functions were filled by other parts of the text. In this case, two verbal phrases.

"And now" serves as a ligature in event lists or simply a tool to move the narrative from topic to topic. The companion phrase "and it came to pass" is related to movement in time rather than concept. Where "and now" marks movement of ideas, "and it came to pass" describes sequences. The distinction between conceptual movement and movement in time is the reason that "and it came to pass," a phrase that is used so often in the Book of Mormon, appears only thirteen times in 2 Nephi. Those thirteen occurrences are concentrated in chapters 4 and 5.

In contrast to its relatively sparse use in 2 Nephi, 1 Nephi uses the phrase 109 times.[14] This difference results from the different nature of 1 Nephi and 2 Nephi, with 1 Nephi being more historical in focus. The two chapters of 2 Nephi with high concentrations of "and it came to pass" are precisely those that contain the historical data. Nephi also uses the combined phrase "and now it came to pass" (1 Ne. 16:1; 17:19, 48; 22:1; 2 Ne. 1:1) to mark the combination of a major change in topic as well as a different time.

While it is possible that Joseph Smith invented these two structural markers to substitute for his missing punctuation, it would be rather unusual in a world that was well accustomed to punctuation in written texts. Perhaps Joseph Smith rather randomly inserted the phrases based on his familiarity with the Bible. Although I am certain that the specific forms come from the Bible, I find it most interesting that this isn't just a case of using words but rather correctly using the phrases for their

function of controlling textual flow. The same Joseph Smith who regularly confused the grammar of the biblical Jacobean language he imitated, used these two markers flawlessly.

This proposed system of verbal markers as punctuation has a historical precedent in the New World. The recent translation of Maya glyphic writing provides corroboration of a very similar paired set of verbal markers. Maya texts use these two verbs to create sense on their written monuments. As described in the glyph dictionary put together by Michael D. Coe and Mark Van Stone, we have direct parallels to the Book of Mormon's "and now" (or "and thus") and "and it came to pass."[15]

The Maya texts also use these verbs to indicate the flow of action. The glyph reading "it happens" corresponds in function to "and now" or "and thus" in the Book of Mormon text, with "it happened" being the functional equivalent of "and it came to pass." Of course, I am not suggesting that the Maya influenced the Book of Mormon writing or that the Book of Mormon influenced the Maya. It does, however, provide a solid comparative foundation indicating that in a text without punctuation, textual flow may be directed with verbal markers. The Book of Mormon employs a function that is known from the appropriate antiquity and region.

Mormon's Interaction with his Material

Apart from the structural information that tells us about how he created his masterwork, what evidence do we have that tells us what kind of historian he was? How faithful was Mormon to his sources? Gently laying aside the issue of his obvious inspiration, how careful was he when he related history?

The way Mormon treats inserted speeches suggests a great respect for them. The conceptual breaks after inserted sermons strongly suggests that they are copied from the plates, and we must assume that he intended to reproduce them faithfully. When Mormon is not quoting, but creating his own linking narrative, how faithful is he *then* to his sources? How much like a modern historian was he?

The answer is that he is hardly like a modern historian at all, but much more like the historians of antiquity in his relationship to his source material. Mormon's purposes were didactive, not reconstructive. He told a moral story, where the moral was more important that the facts. Mormon often manipulated his facts into the moral story he was telling, and at times (he or perhaps the original plate author) simply invented "history" when the story required it and neither he, nor the original plate author, could not have known it.

When Mormon tells the story of the people of Zeniff, he begins by quoting King Zeniff's entire record. Then, when he begins Noah's story, he switches from quotation to narration. I hypothesize that this was a necessary shift because the source material for Noah's reign could not have been as pejorative as Mormon painted Noah.

From the beginning, Noah is a nasty fellow. Mormon's descriptions of Noah are so effective that modern readers immediately dislike him. While Mormon certainly had reasons for his dislike, they came from his reading of the sources and do not reflect the attitude of the sources themselves. The court record of the sitting king Noah could not have been so negative. If we read between the lines of Mormon's description, it is easy to see that Noah presided over a period of economic growth and expansion. His people probably thought they were quite well off under Noah. They were probably not complaining, at least not much. It is Mormon who saw a larger picture and repainted his Noah to be rotten from the beginning of the story, even though Mormon's sources could not have said that directly. In this case, Mormon is interpreting history rather than staying faithful to his sources.

Mormon's manipulation of his material is also probable in the first book of Alma where we have the story of Nehor. As with Noah, Mormon makes sure that we do not like Nehor. Of course, again there is reason. However, as with Noah, some people were quite enamored with Nehor. Mormon never tells that part of the story.

Even more than Mormon's coloration of Nehor, however, is the fact that Mormon names an entire religious movement after him. The evidence indicates that the facets of the religion that Nehor preached were precisely those found in the court of Noah long before we see Nehor on the scene. Nehor was not the earliest practitioner nor even the most infamous. The text's very next story emphasizes the rift create by the Nehorite Amlici; clearly a much more serious social disruption.

I suggest that Mormon intentionally named that religion for a murderer because he wanted to clearly link it with an unsavory connotation. I strongly suspect that it was called by some other name in the source plates and that the identification of "order of the Nehors" is Mormon's label written long after the fact.

At times, Mormon must tell us "history" that no one could have known. For example, Mormon tells the story of Limhi's people escaping from the Lamanites and moving people and animals into the wilderness. Although they were pursued, Mosiah 22: 16 confidently tells us: "And after they had pursued the two days, they could no longer follow their tracks; therefore they were lost in the wilderness." Peering back through time to what can be known of this situation, it is likely that Limhi's

people would be aware that they were being followed for two days and that thereafter they were not. However, when Mormon tells us that it was because the Lamanites could no longer find their tracks, he is telling us something that his sources could not know. The Limhites would not have known whether or not their tracks were visible, and certainly wouldn't have known what was in the Lamanite mind when they cut off pursuit. It is equally likely that the Lamanites realized that it simply wasn't worth the effort, as the Lamanites were in possession of a fully functioning city into which they could easily move their own people and begin to be productive.

Similarly, early in the book of Alma the Nephites beat back an invasion by Lamanites which supported Amlici's internal rebellion. Mormon describes the aftermath of the battle:

> 36 And they fled before the Nephites towards the wilderness which was west and north, away beyond the borders of the land; and the Nephites did pursue them with their might, and did slay them.
>
> 37 Yea, they were met on every hand, and slain and driven, until they were scattered on the west, and on the north, until they had reached the wilderness, which was called Hermounts; and it was that part of the wilderness which was infested by wild and ravenous beasts.
>
> 38 And it came to pass that many died in the wilderness of their wounds, and were devoured by those beasts and also the vultures of the air; and their bones have been found, and have been heaped up on the earth. (Alma 2:36 – 38)

We can comfortably accept the historical information that the Nephites were victorious and drove the Lamanites out of their land. However, the final description is the interesting one. Mormon suggests that the Lamanites were lost in the wilderness and had been attached by wild animals. His evidence is that "their bones have been found." The fact that they found bones and not bodies is also probable history. However, that the bones were of those particular Lamanites is most likely an invention after the fact, a historical "just-so" story made to fit the available facts.

Does any of this mean that Mormon was less than a prophet? Absolutely not. What it means is that his understanding of his task was appropriately ancient. He wrote with the historical sensibilities of the ancient world, which necessarily saw all events as they fit into and supported their religious understanding.

Mormon's meta-message

Mormon's recasting of events into a moral history is the most important key to understanding why he thought that the text he wrote would convince "the Jew and the Gentile that Jesus is the [Messiah], the Eternal God." (Yes, I know I exchanged Messiah for Christ, but it important to Mormon's argument). While it is true that Mormon copied great sermons explicating the Messiah's doctrine, doctrine was not the reason he thought that his book would be convincing. Mormon did not write to convince us that the Messiah's doctrine is true, but rather that Jesus *is* the Messiah.

The best place to see how Mormon used his whole text to convince us that Jesus is the Messiah is in 4 Nephi. The book of 4 Nephi has become one of my favorite books because it is so absolutely unique in Mormon's work. I call it the "Seinfeld book," because it is a book about nothing. Every other book we have received from Mormon's hand was filled with important events and long speeches clarifying important gospel principles. 4 Nephi has none of this. Where Mormon's typical editorial method was to string together large quotations from his source material with a minimalist linking text, 4 Nephi has no identifiable quotations from his source plates. 4 Nephi is Mormon's intentional book about nothing. In the very absence of content, it reveals how Mormon expected that the entire structure of his opus would convince us that Jesus is the Messiah.

Mormon's use of his sources in 4 Nephi

Mormon begins 4 Nephi with historical description that has very little information.

> And it came to pass in the thirty and sixth year, the people were all converted unto the Lord, upon all the face of the land, both Nephites and Lamanites, and there were no contentions and disputations among them, and every man did deal justly one with another. (4 Ne. 1:2)

This verse says something very important, but notice how. Only two years after the Messiah's visit to the people assembled in Bountiful, "the people were all converted to the Lord." This conversion is so complete that it included both Nephites and Lamanites. It was so effective that there was no enemy against whom to have wars and even inside this new Nephite society there were "no contentions and disputations. . . and every man did deal justly one with another."

We would love to know how they did that. We would love to know what kinds of sermons were given to a people this righteous. Mormon tells us nothing. He gives us the gross outlines that are as historically satisfying as "they lived happily ever after."

Was it true that everyone was converted? We must take Mormon at his word, but must also understand that when Mormon indicated "all the land," that it must have been a significantly limited geography. This description of absolute unity and harmony in "all the land" is accomplished in only two years. Beginning with the surviving population of a single city, this new socio-political order had to spread from person to person from that center point to other locations. How far could this new understanding have traveled in two years? Without attempting to answer, it is sufficient to know that in two years it had to have been a limited area. Mormon gives us no indication of how limited it was. In fact, Mormon really doesn't care. In 4 Nephi it is the generalization that is important, not the historical fact.

This can be seen as Mormon moves to what appears to be more historical description of the new order in the very next verse:

> And they had all things common among them; therefore there were not rich and poor, bond and free, but they were all made free, and partakers of the heavenly gift. (4 Ne. 1:3)

Mormon reprises information from the end of 3 Nephi, where he had noted: "And they [the twelve] taught, and did minister one to another; and they had all things common among them, every man dealing justly, one with another" (3 Ne. 26:19). The similarity of language suggests intentional repetition. It provides reassurance that cultural values continued but provides no other new information. It is certainly information, but structural repetition serves notice that it is empty information. It links the new order with its cause, the appearance of the Messiah, but it says nothing new.

Now we examine another place where Mormon appears to give us details that are really more empty information:

> And they were married, and given in marriage, and were blessed according to the multitude of the promises which the Lord had made unto them. (4 Ne. 1:11)

Nephites had been marrying and being given in marriage since the beginning of their society. There was nothing unusual in marriage. In fact, Mormon puts the statement here precisely because it is normal–a continuation of normal life during these pseudo-millennialistic years.

The next verse continues this display of empty information:

And they did not walk any more after the performances and ordinances of the law of Moses; but they did walk after the commandments which they had received from their Lord and their God, continuing in fasting and prayer, and in meeting together oft both to pray and to hear the word of the Lord. (4 Ne. 1:12)

Like the passage about marriage, these verses are nearly non-information. Mormon has already recorded Jesus's explanation that he had fulfilled the law of Moses (3 Ne. 9:17, 15:4-6) and that Nephite religious observances now came from his gospel (3 Ne. 15:9-10). Thus, this passage is not only repetitious but inconsequential. It tells us nothing new. This event is not specific to the time period, reinforcing the hypothesis that, in 4 Nephi, Mormon is only marking empty time; the few events he mentions are non-specific. Structure, not episodes, carries the message.

Mormon's use of time in 4 Nephi

Mormon even structures time in 4 Nephi to communicate his message rather than to relate history. In the following two verses we have obvious time, and obviously little else:

And thus did the thirty and eighth year pass away, and also the thirty and ninth, and forty and first, and the forty and second, yea, even until forty and nine years had passed away, and also the fifty and first, and the fifty and second; yea, and even until fifty and nine years had passed away. (4 Ne. 1:6)

And it came to pass that the seventy and first year passed away, and also the seventy and second year, yea, and in fine, till the seventy and ninth year had passed away; yea, even an hundred years had passed away, and the disciples of Jesus, whom he had chosen, had all gone to the paradise of God, save it were the three who should tarry; and there were other disciples ordained in their stead; and also many of that generation had passed away. (4 Ne. 1:14)

In each verse Mormon has repeated a series of years where nothing happens. Even with the information tagged on to the end of verse 14, the only information is that everyone connected to the appearance of the Messiah has died save the three disciples. As with the earlier statements, this is empty information. Nevertheless, what is interesting isn't the empty information but the empty years. Mormon has had marked empty years before, but never so many in sequence. What is most fascinating is that these sets of empty years repeat the very same sequence of non-information.

- 41, 42, 49
- 51, 52, 59

14

- 71, 72, 79

This repeating pattern occurs 3 times in 4 Nephi and never anywhere else in the Book of Mormon. The triple repetition confirms that it is not random and not associated with Mormon's source text. Mormon is telling us something. Actually, he is telling us nothing. Intentionally and markedly.

I hypothesize that he names years for which there are no events to signal that these empty years are placeholders in a pattern. He has moved from "real time" into "symbolic time," or from history into story. The repetition of seven-year gaps (42-49, 52-59) suggests that he is deliberately using the spacing symbolically, likely to mark a "week of years."

In addition to this overt marking of time, Mormon divides his entire 4 Nephi "history" into four blocks of approximately one hundred years. Although events constrain that pattern, he molds that history into his pattern. Four hundred years is a very significant number in the Mesoamerican calendar. Just as we accumulate years into decades and centuries, the Mesoamericans accumulated their years into larger groupings. One of the most important was a grouping of four hundred years, known as a *baktun*. Because Mesoamerica based its mathematics and calendar on twenty as the basic unit (rather than our system of ten), the salient division of the *baktun* that Mormon would be using was the culturally significant four, not the modern preference for one hundred. He would not have had a collective unit of years that equaled one hundred but would have spoken of the fourth part of a *baktun*.

Mormon summarized the first one hundred years in verses 1-13 and the second in verses 14-21. Verse 22 begins precisely with the two hundredth year. Mormon does not deal with specific history in these first two hundred years, so the correspondences are close. Nothing datable happens in the first two hundred years. Each of the hundred-year sections is treated as a block, and the "events" are generic. In fact, the "events" of the second hundred years nearly repeat the "events" of the idyllic first hundred years. It is important to Mormon that the effects of the Messiah's visit last for a complete two hundred years. No degeneration occurs until the 201st year (v. 22).

It is the very anomaly of this book about nothing that tells us that Mormon had an important purpose for it. Rather, there is little purpose in this book except to highlight his overall purpose, which is to "convince… the Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the [Messiah], the Eternal God." (Title Page).

When we look as how Mormon has handled time in his overall text, we find the following:

- The book of Lehi covered about four hundred years of Nephite history.

- The book of Mosiah covers about a hundred years, a drastic slowing of narrative time.
- The book of Alma covers even less time–about thirty-five years–while Helaman covers approximately forty-eight years.
- The next book, 3 Nephi, describes the Messiah's coming, and covers about thirty-five years with 57 percent of its fifty-six pages detailing two days of Christ's visit.
- Then the book of 4 Nephi speeds through four hundred years in forty-nine verses.

Mormon structurally uses time to emphasize the important part of his text. After the Messiah's visitation, Mormon greatly accelerates the narrative pace, using summary, overview, and generalization much more extensively. The next time he provides details corresponding to those in his other books is in his eponymous book. All of 4 Nephi is simply a placeholder between the appearance of the Messiah and Mormon's own story.

In my opinion, the contrast between 4 Nephi and Mormon's entire pre-4 Nephi text is the strongest evidence of Mormon's editorial intention: to declare the pattern of history that led to the Messiah's climactic appearance. Mormon was the Messiah's apostle–his witness. As an apostolic witness, he describes not just his people's history leading to the appearance of the Messiah, but the pattern that history shows precedes his appearance. Mormon's conception of history was cyclical. His historical consciousness assumed that what went before predicted what will come.

Mormon recorded the events that led to the Messiah's visit and obviously recorded that most important occasion. After the Messiah's first visit, preparation for his second coming begins. Mormon, however, need not spell it out in detail. He simply reports that the pattern is repeating itself. Before the Messiah came to Bountiful, the faithful struggled between righteousness and nearly universal apostasy. Mormon witnessed his own people struggling with righteousness and leaving faith for worldliness. Before the Messiah came to Bountiful, the Gadiantons had destroyed the government of the Nephites and they (as a people) were not more. Mormon was witnessing the Gadianton supported Lamanites destroy the Nephite government and people. Before the Messiah came to Bountiful, there were terrible wars with the Nephites. Mormon lived to see the end of the most terrible of all wars, one that destroyed almost all he loved.

Mormon's book ends with an apparent pessimism. There is apostasy. There are Gadianton combinations. There is war and his people are destroyed. Nevertheless, this isn't Mormon's message. His message is the cycle of history. He told us that story to prepare us for the new one. The pattern shows great darkness before the glorious light. Mormon highlighted the pattern, and highlighted the occurrence of part of the pattern. He did so that we too might know that the pattern will end with the

appearance of the Messiah. As assuredly has history proved that he came, Mormon expected that is explication of the patterned history will prove that he assuredly will come. That was Mormon's optimistic message. That is how he expected to convince us that Jesus, the Messiah who came, is the Eternal God, the Messiah who will come.

Notes

[1] The years are based on my calculations of the correlation of Nephite years to the modern calendar. See Brant A. Gardner *Second Witness Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon,* 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007) 1: 188-189.

[2] Royal Skousen, editor, *The Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon*, (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2001), Vol. 1, 487, 512, based on my examination of the text.

[3] The best confirmation that the headnotes really did precede the chapter comes in Nephi's writings, not Mormon's. Nephi's headnote for our 2 Nephi covers material only up to our chapter 5. The rest of the material contained in 2 Nephi is not represented in the headnote and my analysis is that it is after that chapter that Nephi begins a more stream-of-consciousness approach to the plates, leaving behind the outline that he used to create his text.

[4] David E. Bokovoy, "Repetitive Resumption in the Book of Mormon," *Insights: A Window on the Ancient World* 27, no. 1 (2007): 2.

[5] *Book of Mormon* (reprint 1830, Independence, Missouri: Herald Heritage Reprint, 1970), 1.

[6] Mormon certainly would not have named this "3 Nephi" simply because our books of 1 and 2 Nephi were not included. What we have as the third book of Nephi would have been the first to appear in Mormon's text. The evidence from the 1830 edition tells us that none of the Nephis were identified by a number. In Mormon's work, they are identified by genealogy: "The book of Nephi, the son of Nephi which was the son of Helaman," and "The book of Nephi, which is the son of Nephi, one of the disciples of Jesus Christ."

[7] The book of Moroni is clearly an addition to Mormon's record. Moroni finishes his father's work by completing the book of Mormon. His pseudonymous book is his own addition and not one his father conceived.

[8] Royal Skousen, "Critical Methodology and the Text of the Book of Mormon," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 6, no. 1 (1994): 137.

[9] Pratt used very different criteria in assigning his chapters. In cases where the text followed scriptures from the King James Version of the Bible, Pratt attempted to construct chapter and verse designations that followed that scripture as it appeared in the King James Version. While Pratt usually left chapter

ending in the places Mormon had created them, there are cases where Pratt pulled in material from the next chapter and made the break later. For this reason the analysis in this book is based solely on the chapter breaks as found in the 1830 edition.

[10] Gardner, *Second Witness*, 3:95-98.

[11] In the following set of data, the indication of the chapter break is given by listing the two chapters between which the break has occurred. In each example there will be two sets of numbers. The first two numbers are from the 1830 edition, and the numbers in parentheses are the modern chapter breaks that correspond to the original divisions (following the excellent chart found in Mackay, "Mormon as Editor," 104ñ109). Mosiah 1/2 (3/4); Mosiah 2/3 (4/5); Mosiah 3/4 (5/6); Mosiah 6/7 (10/11); Mosiah 8/9 (16/17); Alma 2/3 (4/5); Alma 3/4 (5/6); Alma 4/5 (6/7); Alma 5/6 (7/8); Alma 6/7 (8/9); Alma 8/9 (11/12); Alma 14/15 (26/27); Alma 15/16 (29/30); Alma 19/20 (42/43); Alma 26/27 (58/59); Helaman 2/3 (6/7); 3 Nephi 2/3 (5/6); 3 Nephi 4/5 (10/11) [End of Mormon's interjection, resuming the account]; 3 Nephi 11/12 (26:5/26:6); 3 Nephi 12/13 (27:22/27:23); Mormon 3/4 (7/8) [shift between Mormon's testimony, closed with Amen, and the return to narrative]; Ether 1/2 (4/5); Ether 2/3 (5/6); Ether 3/4 (8/9) [Moroni's interjection closes 3, narrative returns in 4]; Moroni 1/2 (1/2); Moroni 6/7 (6/7); Moroni 9/10 (9/10).

[12] Royal Skousen, "Book of Mormon Editions 1830-1981," Encyclopedia of Mormonism, edited by Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1992), 1:175.

[13] Over time, some of the "and it came to pass" phrases have been removed from our modern text.

[14] I tallied these occurrences using the search function of GospeLink 2001, CD-ROM (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000).

[15] Michael D. Coe and Mark Van Stone, Reading the Maya Glyphs (London: Thames & Hudson, 2001), 33.