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Author(s): Thomas W. Mackay

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Thomas W. Mackay

Mormon has a providential philosophy of history that greatly influences his selection and interpretation of individuals, events, and society. In composing his monumental summary of Nephite history, Mormon has left, as it were, "DNA fingerprints" that portray his own attitude toward life, toward the consequences of men's faith or disobedience, toward God's blessings or punishment, toward prophecy and its fulfillment, and toward the recurrence of debilitating and destructive social forces. As a prophet, he places his focus more on matters of righteousness than on material manifestations of achievement.

Nowhere does Mormon state this attitude more poignantly or more extensively than in the twelfth chapter of Helaman. He begins:

And thus we can behold how false, and also the unsteadiness of the hearts of the children of men; yea, we can see that the Lord in his great infinite goodness doth bless and prosper those who put their trust in him. Yea, and we may see at the very time when he doth prosper his people, yea, in the increase of their fields, their flocks and their herds, and in gold, and in silver, and in all manner of precious things of every kind and art; sparing their lives, and delivering them out of the hands of their enemies; softening the hearts of

Thomas W. Mackay is professor of Classical and Medieval Studies at Brigham Young University.

their enemies that they should not declare wars against them; yea, and in fine, doing all things for the welfare and happiness of his people; yea, then is the time that they do harden their hearts, and do forget the Lord their God, and do trample under their feet the Holy One—yea, and this because of their ease, and their exceedingly great prosperity. And thus we see that except the Lord doth chasten his people with many afflictions, yea, except he doth visit them with death and with terror, and with famine and with all manner of pestilence, they will not remember him. (Hel 12:1–3)

The inconsistency of mortals to obey God brings natural disasters, wars, etc., while repentance and obedience produce his intervention for their benefit and prosperity. However, failure to acknowledge the divine source of blessings often leads to pride and ultimately to retribution. Referring to the human proclivity to sin rather than to obey, to be lifted up in pride rather than to pay heed to God's counsels, Mormon exclaims: "O how great is the nothingness of the children of men; yea, even they are less than the dust of the earth" (Hel 12:7). With the reference to dust, Mormon echoes Isaiah, Lehi, and king Benjamin, observing that the dust of the earth, as the rest of creation, obeys the voice of God (vv 8–19), while humanity tends to be rebellious, incurring God's condemnation and punishment unless they repent (vv 22–26). He concludes with a scriptural quotation from a non-biblical source: "fulfilling the words which say: They that have done good shall have everlasting life; and they that have done evil shall have everlasting damnation" (v 26; compare John 5:29).

Helaman chapter 12 is situated in the midst of Mormon's description of the growth and strangling power of the robber bands and secret combinations—Gadianton, Inc., directly inspired by Satan (see 3 Nephi 6:27–30). It has the tone of despair, of utter agony, when from his vantage point of about AD 380–384 he conveys to modern readers the anguish he experienced in recounting the origin and development of one of the major forces leading to the dissolution of Nephite civilization. This perspective intensifies as Mormon records the ministry and prophecies of Samuel the Lamanite (Hel 13:1–16:8). For as

Samuel called the Nephites to repentance, he prophetically looked to a time when the Nephites would fall into disobedience, and their iniquity would result in the extinction of the people through robber bands and internal dissention, with the Lamanites merely supplying the final deathblow. So Mormon is constrained to exclaim the words preserved in Helaman 12 as he reviews the many records and surveys his contemporary society. Prophecy has been fulfilled. While earlier prophets—namely Lehi, Nephi, Alma₂, and Samuel—had seen these days, Mormon was required to live through them.

Since Mormon wants to call attention to fulfilled prophecies as part of his historical record—his reason for including certain types of events—he preserves in his abridgement the record of Samuel that the Lord had promised and enjoined upon Nephi (3 Nephi 23:6–13). The account of Samuel is appended to the book of Helaman, where it fits historically, but it appears to have been placed there by Nephi long after the fact.¹ When Mormon includes the material on Samuel, he gives a brief heading (before chapter 7 and again before 13), as he had done for such records as those of Alma₁ and Alma₂.² This slight disjuncture may suggest the haste that propelled Mormon's abridgement of the many records before him. Likewise similar seams in the summary, paraphrase, and quotation style he employs point in all likelihood to the exigencies of time and circumstances as well as to his respect for his historical sources. The end was drawing near.

When Mormon compiled his Nephite history, several thoughts converged to motivate and to direct him. As a young lad, he had been commissioned by a prophet, Ammaron, to

¹ This is a broad interpretation of 3 Nephi 23:6–13. Narrowly viewed in the context of this chapter, it would refer only to noting the historical fulfillment of an prophesied event a few days previous. Other than this chapter, there is no such record in Mormon's abridgement, and so generally it is thought that the Lord referred to recording the prophecies of Samuel. As a Lamanite, his records might not have been included in the Nephite records made by descendants of Nephi.

² The header before Mosiah 23 is for the narrative on the followers of Alma₁ in Mosiah 23 and 24. For Alma₂, note the headers before Alma 1, 5, 7, 9, 36, 38, 39.

continue the sacred record on the (large) plates of Nephi (Mormon 1:2–5). Ammaron's instructions were that when Mormon was twenty-four years old he was to engrave his observations of the people on the plates of Nephi, but he was to leave the other records untouched. In the year AD 345, when Mormon was 34 years old, he and the Nephites fled from the Lamanites toward Jashon, a city

near the land where Ammaron had deposited the records unto the Lord, that they might not be destroyed. And behold I have gone according to the word of Ammaron, and taken the plates of Nephi, and did make a record according to the words of Ammaron. And upon the plates of Nephi I did make a full account of all the wickedness and abominations; but upon these plates I did forbear to make a full account of their wickedness and abominations. (Mormon 2:17–18)

The wording suggests that Mormon not only had fulfilled his commitment to Ammaron but had already begun engraving his abridgement onto what we may call the plates of Mormon (see 3 Nephi 5:10–12; see also Hardy and Parsons 1:200), the plates Joseph Smith translated to give us our account comprising the book of Mosiah until the end of the Book of Mormon, with Moroni engraving the last two books.

From AD 362 to 375, Mormon refused to be the general of the Nephite forces; he was nevertheless an observer of the deterioration and dissolution of their civilization. Then in AD 375, "I, Mormon, seeing that the Lamanites were about to overthrow the land, therefore I did go to the hill Shim, and did take up all the records which Ammaron had hid up unto the Lord" (Mormon 4:23). Presumably it was while examining this large trove of documents and records that Mormon discovered the small plates of Nephi, for in his small historical and literary "bridge" called the Words of Mormon we have this statement probably composed not long before the final great extermination in AD 384:

And now I, Mormon, being about to deliver up the record which I have been making into the hands of my son Moroni, behold I have

witnessed almost all the destruction of my people, the Nephites.
(WofM 1:1)

He had previously clarified his identity, his sources, his purpose, and his inspiration for editing the account on the plates of Mormon, perhaps because he was uncertain whether he would live to complete such an extensive work (see 3 Nephi 5:8–20; Hel 3:13–16).

Despite the horrendous pressure and stress Mormon must have endured as he abridged the Nephite history, we perceive a unifying view pervading his writings. It is also clear in his selection of passages for direct and full quotation or for summary. King Noah fits into the pattern and lesson of history as a striking contrast to king Benjamin and Mosiah. Both Alma₁ and Alma₂ provide notable examples of patience, faith, obedience, and of how to deal with opposition. Moroni, Lehi, and Teancum, as well as the sons of Helaman, and also Gidgiddoni in the book of 3 Nephi are examples of military might blessed by God. In visiting the Nephites, the resurrected Lord himself made mention of the fulfillment of prophecies uttered by Samuel the Lamanite noting that such prophecies (and their fulfillment) should be entered into the record. The appearance of the Lord and subsequent changes in society brought about heavenly blessings because of the following tranquility and obedience of the people. Later, dissensions divided them, and the blessings of the Lord were withdrawn, just as had been prophesied. In the death-throes of civilization, the Nephites were plagued by robber bands and confused in their own actions—losing buried treasures and not understanding the moral and eternal implications of their deeds. But those are the very circumstances Samuel had foreseen and prophesied, and they were a repetition to the same kind of self-destructive forces that had exterminated the Jaredites. Moreover, Mormon applies those same principles to the days when his record (the Book of Mormon) would be read and known. Everything is measured in terms of righteousness and charity, not physical achievements or material

prosperity, and even the historical account has a moral and didactic value for its readers.

Thus, when it comes to analyzing the history of the inhabitants of the Americas from 600 BC to AD 400, we find ourselves in a very advantageous position because of Mormon's summary account; however, that same narrative also leaves us in a rather disadvantageous position. This paradox is created by having Mormon's selection of people, circumstances, events, and social results, and yet at the same time being limited to his perspective on those people and circumstances. While other historians delight in seeking to explain events and to produce new approaches to evidence, Mormon's interpretation is providential. Lacking the enormous array of information at Mormon's disposal, we cannot create substantially new and differing interpretations from evidence he omitted because of his attitude and approach, though we can redeploy his evidence (see Hardy; Bushman "Lamanite"). Certainly we can at least come to appreciate his attitude and approach, his inspired philosophy of history, so as to understand more completely his message.

Mormon's Approach to History

For Mormon, historical analysis and writing have a moral and didactic value. This stance presupposes certain notions:

1. Mormon knows that the Book of Mormon will be preserved, translated, and finally read by people living centuries later in the same lands in which he lived in (we broadly interpret "lands" to be the Americas as a whole, not merely a specific geographical segment corresponding to a modern political entity or nation).

2. Mormon trusts in the existence, honesty, and truthfulness of God.

3. Hence, whether God says something directly to him or indirectly through some prophet, irrespective of when that prophet lived, Mormon believes that statement to be accurate

and true. If it is a prophecy, it will be fulfilled in the course of human events (see 3 Nephi 23:6–13). Such events or motivating causes are major framing structures that determine what Mormon writes in his history and how he views the interactions of people.

4. Divine intervention in human affairs occurs in response to the faithfulness of people—their obedience or disobedience to God and his commandments. Such intervention might be manifest through natural disasters, the actions of people (wars, etc.), or a general state of mind, a societal health.

5. The opposing force, the devil, seeks to subvert all that is good, all that comes from the divine source. He reinstated among the Nephites the secret oaths and combinations that had perverted and destroyed the Jaredites. But God makes clear Satan's efforts through prophecy and through interpretation by a prophet.

6. A prophet can ascertain truth regarding divine intervention and human motivations both directly from God and indirectly by heeding previous prophecies of the future and seeking their fulfillment.

7. There is a pattern to human events that reflects the divine hand of God repeating the same lessons to various generations. This tendency for repetition is all the more acute for the similarity between Nephite society of the third and fourth centuries AD and people living in the Americas in the nineteenth to twenty-first centuries. Moreover, Mormon had seen our days from God's perspective.

8. Writing his abridged narrative at the end of the Nephite civilization, Mormon retrospectively emphasizes the destructive factors and warns his future audience against falling prey to those same forces. Since there is a general cyclical pattern of repetition in human history, and since he knows the future, Mormon's words are direct and of great value.

9. Therefore, Mormon has a structure and purpose to writing history, as well as a deep confidence in the accuracy of his observations (and prophecies) and their value for us, his

audience. Because of his prophetic vision and his absolute certainty in the imminent demise of Nephite civilization, Mormon addresses his audience of today almost as though we were his contemporaries, supposing that we can still respond to the instructions rejected by fourth-century Nephites.

In these matters Mormon differs from modern secular historians. Composing history with a focus on visible achievements distorts assessments because the underlying value system or approach is materialistic and often ignores or minimizes spiritual and religious values. For Mormon, it is obedience to God's commandments and respect for his prophets that matters most. When the people are righteous, blessings follow—though not necessarily immediately.³ Frequently there is a time-lag factor between the righteousness or wickedness of a people and the increases or decreases in economic and material manifestations of God's intervention or blessings. Nor does prosperity act as a reliable indicator of righteousness. Prosperity in and of itself is not a valid measure of society, because it may be the result of wickedness *or* of righteousness. Worldly success *may* occur, but the most important results of righteousness are evident in the hearts and minds of people—their attitudes, responses, and motivations (see Alma 1).

Just as there are fruits of righteous living, there are also tell-tale marks which attend wickedness. Mormon specifies several: pride, the rejection of prophets, lack of miracles due to wickedness or lack of faith, the hiding of treasures, secret combinations and robber bands, bureaucratic government, oppressive taxation, social and economic distinctions and classes,

³ Benjamin at Mosiah 2:24 says that when people obey God, "he doth immediately bless you. . . ." Limhi in Mosiah 7:29–31 quotes some Brass Plates Old Testament passages: "For behold, the Lord hath said: I will not succor my people in the day of their transgression; but I will hedge up their ways that they prosper not; and their doings shall be as a stumbling block before them. And again, he saith: If my people shall sow filthiness they shall reap the chaff thereof in the whirlwind; and the effect thereof is poison. And again he saith: If my people shall sow filthiness they shall reap the east wind, which bringeth immediate destruction." Thus, too, Mormon: ". . . we can see that the Lord in his great infinite goodness doth bless and prosper those who put their trust in him" (Hel 12:1). Joseph Smith (*HC* 5:390) observed that due to their disposition, "God visited them immediately" in ancient America.

open defiance of the doctrines and prophecies of the scriptures, dissention, contention, aggressive and offensive war, boasting of one's own strength or knowledge, anger and the lust for blood or power, the frantic sorrowing of the damned—but not unto repentance, witchcraft and sorcery (under any name), greed, immorality, and reliance on the native wit and intelligence of man.

What, then, was Mormon's view of history? What type of evidence was important to him? What was the eminent factor, from his view-point, in historical causation? What was the nature of his evidence? How does he use it? What do the structure and content of the abridgement convey to the reader? Mormon overtly states his inspired view in chapter 12 of Helaman. As a prophet as well as a man of action, Mormon perceived history from the larger perspective of the eternities. He was clearly in the prophetic tradition. His was not a world-view restricted by a mechanistic notion of causation. Rather, the events of human history demonstrated God's justice and his ultimate control of the affairs of men. Providential causation, in direct fulfillment of prophecy, is the hall-mark of Mormon's portrayal of history. Thus his primary concern is righteousness, for if man, by his behavior, sets himself at the cross-currents to the cosmos, then he will heap upon himself divine retribution. Such a perspective stands in stark contrast to that taken by most modern historians. Their concern is with the more physical and tangible products of a culture.

As expressed in Helaman 12, Mormon's view of history is one of a cycle or repeated pattern that is characterized progressively by repentance, righteousness, prosperity, pride, and greed. That severe condition is followed by a degeneration into such serious manifestations of wickedness as immorality, war, and secret combinations. Then some give heed to prophets and repent, while others are either destroyed or cut off from the true and righteous people who, by following the prophetic tradition, are greatly blessed—until they once more degenerate into evil ways. This perspective taken by Mormon, and his incessant

concern for underlying motivation, whether righteous or iniquitous, singles him out as operating within the framework of the prophetic, not the uninspired natural man. Interestingly, the spiritual indicators, the very indicators of civilization that are of greatest value to the prophet-historian, are disregarded by modern historians, who instead pay attention to the scientifically measurable, tangibly perceptible aspects of a people. But this produces the very time-lag effect I mentioned, whereby to a prophet a particular people is already in a moral decline before its “zenith”—as interpreted by an uninspired secular historian.

This divergence in understanding and historical perspective is very clearly illustrated in Mormon’s description of king Noah in Mosiah 11. King Noah’s activities are presented as the futile attempts by the “natural man” to develop a paternalistic government and to stimulate the external manifestations of a vibrant civilization. Lacking a prophet’s insight and knowledge, a modern historical researcher might mutilate this evidence in a quest for a more “objective” or “scientific” conclusion—a more realistic assessment of king Noah wherein he is given credit for short-term results. In so doing he would greatly err in Mormon’s eyes. The difficulty lies in the fundamental approach to history: are the most important facets those discernable in physical culture, GNP, and all the trappings of natural man, or rather, are they to be found in the righteousness of the people? In his interpretation of Nephite history and in his prophetic vision, Mormon is unrelentingly consistent as a prophet-historian, viewing the question of righteousness as *the* question to consider and minimizing accomplishments and “progress” or “growth” in material culture in comparison with obedience. And retrospectively he seeks to bring out the origin, nature, and development of the forces that led to Nephite annihilation.

Hence, the essential difference between Mormon and contemporary historians hinges primarily on the question of revelation—taking a providential perspective on mankind. Mormon’s overriding concern is with the righteousness of the people, not the physical display of their civilization. If there are

prophecies, the information can be trusted, for it comes from an infallible, omniscient source—God. Likewise, statements by prophets validate Mormon’s point of view. For example, when the righteous are slain by the wicked, judgment comes against the wicked and the righteous do not lose their reward. So stated Captain Moroni, a military leader whom Mormon extols (Alma 48:11–13, 17) and whose name he gave to his son, but his statement only echoes the words of Alma to Amulek (Alma 14:11) which in turn reflect an utterance of the dying Abinadi (Mosiah 17:10).

Whether the people have an elaborate government is also of interest, for while king Benjamin and king Mosiah keep things simple, king Noah and others develop a great bureaucracy. In Alma 11, Helaman 1–2, 6–9, and 3 Nephi 6–8, we perceive the complex workings of leaders, lawyers, and judges perverting society for their own gain and advantage. When the people “began to be distinguished by ranks, according to their riches and their chances for learning” (3 Nephi 6:12), then pride, oppression, and contention became a way of life. Mormon always gives preference to a society in which everyone has an equal opportunity for salvation and in which there is no greed, contention, class and social rank, no unwieldy bureaucracy, and no secret combinations (see 4 Nephi 1:2–28). The essence of society is peace and civilization, but these are destroyed by war and contention (see Alma 51:22). Prosperity in and of itself is not a valid measure of society, because it may be the result of wickedness or of righteousness.

Though extensively explained in Helaman 12, perhaps the most succinct summary of Mormon’s point of view, is related at Alma 50:18–22:

And they did prosper exceedingly, and they became exceedingly rich; yea, and they did multiply and wax strong in the land. And thus we see how merciful and just are all the dealings of the Lord, to the fulfilling of all his words unto the children of men; yea, we can behold that his words are verified, even at this time, which he spake unto Lehi, saying:

Blessed art thou and thy children; and they shall be blessed, inasmuch as they shall keep my commandments they shall prosper in the land. But remember, inasmuch as they will not keep my commandments they shall be cut off from the presence of the Lord.

And we see that these promises have been verified to the people of Nephi; for it has been their quarrelings and their contentions, yea, their murderings, and their plunderings, their idolatry, their whoredoms, and their abominations, which were among themselves, which brought upon them their wars and their destructions. And those who were faithful in keeping the commandments of the Lord were delivered at all times, whilst thousands of their wicked brethren have been consigned to bondage, or to perish by the sword, or to dwindle in unbelief, and mingle with the Lamanites.

Thus God has given a promise, and that promise will unfailingly be upheld, provided the children of men abide by the conditions of the promise. In this, God is just; it is iniquity that brings upon men divine retribution as well as all the social evils which Mormon is wont to deplore. Again, that divine voice stated “it is because of their iniquity and abominations that they are fallen” (3 Nephi 9:2).

When Alma, in speaking his final thoughts to his son Helaman, prophesies concerning the ultimate destruction of the Nephites, asserting that “because of iniquity, this prophecy shall be fulfilled” (Alma 45:14; compare 37:29–31), Mormon knows it to be true both because it is a prophecy by a man of God and because he himself was an eyewitness to the fulfillment. Furthermore, since Mormon’s sources are other prophets, he has no doubt as to the veracity of his work:

I do make my record from the accounts which have been given by those who were before me, until the commencement of my day; And then I do make a record of the things which I have seen with mine own eyes. And I know the record which I make to be a just and a true record. (3 Nephi 5:16–18)

Composition of the Book of Mormon

Mormon received a divine mandate to complete his work for the benefit of future generations (see 3 Nephi 5:14–15 and

Mormon 6:6). Hence, under inspiration he added the small plates of Nephi (W of M 1:7–8). But he felt constrained by God to omit other matters that he wanted to add—such as more of the words of Christ in 3 Nephi (3 Nephi 26:6–12, 18), or the names of the three Nephite disciples who had visited him (3 Nephi 28:25–26), or more information about the Gadianton bands and their oaths (see Hel 2:8; Alma 37:21–32).

How could Mormon best convey his message to his audience? Only by generously quoting and paraphrasing the records he was abridging about Zeniff, Noah, Abinadi, and Alma₁, about the people Anti-Nephi-Lehi, about their young men—the sons of Helaman, about Moroni, and about others, especially the visit of Christ. Also, he singles out personal efforts to serve others; he further points to dissension, rebellion, defection, collusion, lust for power (as Amalickiah), and misguided devotion to the false traditions of the fathers as major causes of war and conflict (Bushman “Lamanites”).

Therefore, in his historical account, Mormon provides a mosaic of people and social circumstances, of events and natural disasters, of cities and armies in conflict. His selection, arrangement, and interpretation of such diverse subjects reinforces his own providential philosophy of history. For instance, as we learn in Mormon 7:4, Mormon has very strong feelings about war (Mackay 8:238–39): it should be avoided; if it is forced, it should only be a defensive effort; God can and will direct defensive actions if sought; death in defending liberty, family, and nation is noble; death for the righteous is no cause for mourning (even when women and children died while being persecuted for religion as in Alma 14:8–13). To Mormon, these were truly laudable and daring deeds (as were those of Lehi and especially Teancum in the later chapters of Alma) done to precipitate a rapid conclusion and to preserve, if possible, lives; people can become hardened in evil and in military action—to the point of rejecting the Spirit.

Frequently Mormon lets his sources state his own sentiments; occasionally he inserts pointed editorial comments.

Richard Bushman has well observed this phenomenon and its result in his book on the beginnings of Mormonism:

By any standard the Book of Mormon is a narrative of unusual complexity. Scores of characters like Ether and Moroni, Jared and the brother of Jared, move through the story. . . . Intricate and shattering events are compressed into a few sentences. Migration, war, and intrigue alternate with prophecy, sermon, and conversion. Mormon, as warrior, historian, and prophet himself, interwove political and military events with the history of salvation.

Besides the intricacy of plot, the narrative perspective is complicated. The first six books are pure source material, written by the original prophets and untouched by later editors. But then with only a slight introduction, Mormon takes up the story himself. In his narrative, derived from the available source materials, he quotes other prophets and sometimes quotes them quoting still others. . . . Mormon moves in and out of the narrative, pointing up a crucial conclusion or addressing readers with a sermon of his own. Almost always two minds are present and sometimes three, all kept account of in the flow of words. (*Joseph Smith* 119)

Sometimes Mormon includes a succinct statement of summary of the cause and effect of the condition described in his narrative. Of the followers of Amalickiah he says:

Now these dissenters, having the same instruction and the same information of the Nephites, yea, having been instructed in the same knowledge of the Lord, nevertheless, it is strange to relate, not long after their dissensions they became more hardened and impenitent, and more wild, wicked and ferocious than the Lamanites—drinking in with the traditions of the Lamanites; giving way to indolence, and all manner of lasciviousness; yea, entirely forgetting the Lord their God. (*Alma* 47:36)

At other times he draws the moral lesson in an openly didactic statement, frequently emphasizing it with “and thus we see.” Of the Amalekites and Amulonites he says:

And thus we can plainly discern, that after a people have been once enlightened by the Spirit of God, and have had great knowledge of things pertaining to righteousness, and then have fallen away into sin and transgression, they become more hardened, and thus their state becomes worse than though they had never known these things. (*Alma* 24:30)

After a fierce battle precipitated by the Lamanites resenting Nephite protection of the people of Ammon, Mormon observes that

many thousands are mourning for the loss of their kindred, because they have reason to fear, according to the promises of the Lord, that they are consigned to a state of endless wo. While many thousands of others truly mourn for the loss of their kindred, yet they rejoice and exult in the hope, and even know, according to the promises of the Lord, that they are raised to dwell at the right hand of God, in a state of never-ending happiness. And thus we see how great the inequality of man is because of sin and transgression, and the power of the devil, which comes by the cunning plans which he hath devised to ensnare the hearts of men. And thus we see the great call of diligence of men to labor in the vineyards of the Lord; and thus we see the great reason of sorrow, and also of rejoicing—sorrow because of death and destruction among men, and joy because of the light of Christ unto life. (Alma 28:11–14)

And Mormon's final statement at the conclusion of the Korihor account is:

And thus we see the end of him who perverteth the ways of the Lord; and thus we see that the devil will not support his children at the last day, but doth speedily drag them down to hell. (Alma 30:60)

Hence, Mormon intertwines his narrative with his philosophy of history, his sense of divine responsibility to his audience, and his method of abridgement. What he values most or what he wishes to illustrate deserves extensive coverage—as Alma₂, Moroni, the sons of Helaman, or the resurrected Christ; other matters can be quickly passed by. But little features indicate a progressive treatment of materials instead of a full synthesis prior to abridging: Mormon quotes extensively or summarizes, and he leaves certain matters as virtually unabsorbed intrusions. For example, the last four chapters of Helaman recount Samuel the Lamanite's teachings and the response of the people, material apparently not originally included in the record Nephi had kept (3 Nephi 23:9–13), as I have noted above. Another example is the historical flashback to Zeniff's resettling in the land of Nephi, followed by Noah,

Abinadi, Alma, and Limhi (Mosiah 8–24), until all the faithful survivors are reunited under Mosiah (Mosiah 25:1–13). Also, the missionary adventures of the sons of Mosiah and their associates in Alma 17–26 are another historical insertion at the point they became known to Alma, who was keeping the records. As editor and historian, Mormon carefully indicates the sources he quotes and paraphrases. In this manner he is able to preserve many important observations and experiences of individuals that reinforce and support his providential perspective on Nephite history.

One salient feature of Mormon's account is to focus on significant leaders, both good and bad. The emphasis, of course, is on the good example. Yet because of his awareness of his future audience and of their own social problems as parallel to his own age, he stresses the negative effect of secret combinations and of lusting for power, wealth, and adulation. His didactic approach to warn his readers of typical cycles or patterns in human behavior—in response to divine or evil forces—directs his historical analysis and summary.

Individuals, righteous and evil, play a large role in the narrative. Nevertheless, the wicked influence of individual apostates and leaders like Noah, Amlici, Nehor, Korihor, and Amalickiah pales in comparison to the social havoc wrought by the Gadianton robbers. So the prophet and historian notes at Mormon 1:18 and 2:8, 28 the persistent presence of the Gadianton bands, answering his comment in Helaman 1–2, when the practice of a secret combination was introduced among the Nephites.⁴ For Mormon observes:

and more of this Gadianton shall be spoken hereafter. . . . And behold, in the end of this book ye shall see that this Gadianton did prove the overthrow, yea, almost the entire destruction of the people of Nephi. Behold I do not mean the end of the book of Helaman, but I

⁴ See also Alma 37:27–32 (about the secret combinations among the Jaredites), Helaman 6:16–32, and 4 Nephi 1:42, 46; also Nibley 378–99. Curiously, simultaneously in the Roman world of the third, fourth and fifth centuries, robber bands were a feature of the crumbling of the Empire, the disintegration of social fabric. For the Jaredites, see Ether 8:13–26.

mean the end of the book of Nephi, from which I have taken all the account which I have written. (Hel 2:12–14)

Again, in Helaman 6, Mormon points to Satan as the direct and immediate instigator of the secret oaths and combinations:

But behold, Satan did stir up the hearts of the more part of the Nephites, insomuch that they did unite with those bands of robbers, and did enter into their covenants and their oaths. . . . Now behold, it is these secret oaths and covenants which Alma commanded his son should not go forth unto the world, lest they should be a means of bringing down the people unto destruction. Now behold, those secret oaths and covenants did not come forth unto Gadianton from the records which were delivered unto Helaman; but behold, they were put into the heart of Gadianton by that same being who did entice our first parents to partake of the forbidden fruit. (vv 21, 25–26)

Thus we comprehend how Mormon had clearly seen from prophecy and from the social ills of his own lifetime the nature and origin of the destructive forces among the Nephites, and he knows that Satan is the ultimate source. This perspective is later echoed by his son Moroni, who laments that “they [secret combinations] have caused the destruction of this people of whom I am now speaking [the Jaredite civilization], and also the destruction of the people of Nephi” (Ether 8:21).

Mormon learned how to evaluate society from experience, from abridging the Nephite records, and from heavenly visitants. So he based his historical judgment on the righteousness of the people, not on manifestations of military, political, economic, or cultural success. We discover this interpretation of history everywhere in Mormon’s writings. His concluding message, recorded in Mormon 7, is poignant and direct. It reflects the maturity of his development as prophet-historian and offers his conclusion to the whole matter: the spiritual and cultural lessons future generations should learn from the disintegration of a once flourishing civilization. These lessons are precisely the recurring major motifs of the lengthy account of Nephite history that today bears Mormon’s name.

Hence, throughout Mormon's abridgement of Nephite history we perceive his unifying editorial view, his philosophy, as expressed concisely in Helaman 12—providential history conveying a sense of how we will ultimately be judged. This perspective pervades Mormon's writings, and it is also clear in passages that he chooses for direct and full quotation. His intellectual fingerprints are on all he has written.

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