



BOOK OF MORMON CENTRAL
<http://bookofmormoncentral.com/>



Religious Studies Center
<https://rsc.byu.edu/>

The Small Plates of Nephi and the Words of Mormon

Author(s): Eldin Ricks

Source: *The Book of Mormon: Jacob Through Words of Mormon, To Learn With Joy*

Editor(s): Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate, Jr.

Published: Provo, UT; Religious Studies Center, 1990

Page(s): 209-219



The Religious Studies Center is collaborating with Book of Mormon Central to preserve and extend access to scholarly research on the Book of Mormon. Items are archived by the permission of the Religious Studies Center.

<https://rsc.byu.edu/>

The Small Plates of Nephi and the Words of Mormon

12

Eldin Ricks

Although the title of this paper is, “The Small Plates of Nephi and the Words of Mormon,” it could just as properly be called, “The Large Plates of Nephi, the Plates of Mormon, the Small Plates of Nephi, and the Words of Mormon.” The reason for this more extended title is that we need to know something of the several records that Mormon was working with before we can make much sense of his “Words of Mormon” appendage to the small plates of Nephi.

The Large Plates of Nephi

Let us turn the clock back to the fourth century AD in ancient America. It was an era of conflict between the Nephites and Lamanites, two rival factions that had lived in the Western world for nearly a thousand years. During this tumultuous period, a Nephite prophet named Mormon became custodian of a great record, engraved on sheets of metal, that had been handed down by his ancestors from their beginnings as a nation (Mormon 1:1-4; 2:17-18; 6:6). We refer to this record as the large plates of Nephi. Mormon explains the circumstances surrounding his appointment to add the history of his generation to the large plates of Nephi as follows:

Eldin Ricks is emeritus professor of Ancient Scripture at Brigham Young University.

And about the time that Ammaron hid up the records unto the Lord, he came unto me, (I being about ten years of age, and I began to be learned somewhat after the manner of the learning of my people) and Ammaron said unto me: I perceive that thou art a sober child, and art quick to observe; Therefore, when ye are about twenty and four years old I would that ye should remember the things that ye have observed concerning this people; and when ye are of that age go to the land Antum, unto a hill which shall be called Shim; and there have I deposited unto the Lord all the sacred engravings concerning this people. And behold, ye shall take the plates of Nephi unto yourself, and the remainder shall ye leave in the place where they are; and ye shall engrave on the plates of Nephi all the things that ye have observed concerning this people (Mormon 1:2-4).

In due time Mormon did as he was instructed. He obtained the large plates of Nephi from their repository in the hill Shim and engraved on them the history of his times. That history turned out to be the tragic tale of the fall of his nation. Imbedded in his story is the brief but important revelation from God that the survival of his nation—and, by extension, the survival of the human family in our day of nuclear weapons—depended on more than military preparation. The following lesson comes out of the decade preceding AD 360: “And it came to pass that the Lamanites did not come to battle again until ten years more had passed away. And behold, I had employed my people, the Nephites, in preparing their lands and their arms against the time of battle. And it came to pass that the Lord did say unto me: Cry unto this people—Repent ye, and come unto me, and be ye baptized, and build up again my church, and ye shall be spared” (Mormon 3:1-2).

Just before the final battle, when Mormon finished his important literary mission, the large plates of Nephi included the books of Lehi, Mosiah, Alma, Helaman, 3 Nephi, 4 Nephi, and Mormon, and spanned Nephite history from about 600 BC to AD 385.

The book of Lehi section of the plates deserves special consideration here. In his preface to the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith explains the loss of the first 116 manuscript pages of his translation and identifies the lost part as

an abridgment of the book of Lehi. In addition, we learn in the Doctrine and Covenants that this missing portion extended to the reign of king Benjamin (D&C 10:41). It may then be said that the book of Lehi covered Nephite history from the time Lehi left Jerusalem (about 600 BC) to the opening of the book of Mosiah (approximately 130 BC). Since Lehi himself lived but a fraction of this vast period (Lehi's death is mentioned in 2 Nephi 4:12), the book of Lehi—like the books of Omni, Alma, Helaman, and 4 Nephi—was necessarily the product of several successive historians. The book of Lehi title evidently originated with Lehi's journal, or sacred personal record, that Nephi transcribed at the beginning of his large plates of Nephi (1 Nephi 19:1).

The large plates of Nephi underwent certain changes as they were passed down through a long line of historians. In their first stage they were an overall civil and religious record kept by the prophet-king Nephi. In their second stage, which lasted for several hundred years, they were strictly a civil record. In their third stage, which began near the opening of the book of Mosiah, they were restored to their original composite civil and religious character and remained so until Mormon's day.

To elaborate a little on the foregoing, Nephi included both civil and religious matters on the large plates until thirty years following his departure from Jerusalem. At that point the Lord, very probably in anticipation of the separation of the roles of kings and prophets that followed the death of Nephi, commanded Nephi to limit the large plates of Nephi to "an account of the reign of the kings, and the wars and contentions" (1 Nephi 9:4; see also Jacob 1:1-9, 18-19). He also commanded him to make the small plates of Nephi for a sacred history that would be kept by a line of record keepers apart from the kings. When we get to the book of Mosiah, however, prophets are again serving in the kingly office. Not surprisingly, the large plates of Nephi again contain both civil and religious matters, while the small plates of Nephi are discontinued.

The Plates of Mormon—A Digest of the Large Plates of Nephi

At or near the close of his literary efforts on the large plates of Nephi, Mormon was inspired to write a small digest of the moral and spiritual contributions of that entire record. It would be a selection of the best that nearly a thousand years of Nephite history had to offer, directed mainly to the descendants of the survivors of the Lamanite-Nephite wars. It would illustrate the principle, “Righteousness exalteth a nation: but sin is a reproach to any people” (Prov 14:34). It would also include an account of the most important event in all of Nephite history, the personal visitation of the resurrected Christ among them (3 Nephi 11-28). Writing this digest of the large plates of Nephi was a monumental task and very likely took Mormon years to complete. To accomplish it he first formed a separate metal volume. I judge that he did so in some degree of secrecy as he employed no craftsmen to make it, but constructed it, he says, “with mine own hands” (3 Nephi 5:11). On these plates, which we call the plates of Mormon, he carefully engraved, in his own words and style of writing, a summary of the entire history of his ancestors. He even summarized the history of his own generation which he had personally inscribed at the end of the large plates of Nephi (Mormon 2:18 and 5:9).¹ In the course of composing his book-by-book digest, he paused at one point to make the following explanation to the reader:

And it hath become expedient that I, according to the will of God, that the prayers of those who have gone hence, who were the holy ones, should be fulfilled according to their faith, should make a record of these things which have been done—Yea, a small record of that which hath taken place from the time that Lehi left Jerusalem, even down until the present time. Therefore I do make my record from the accounts

¹ Mormon’s abridgment of his own history apparently comprises Mormon chapters 1-5. Chapters 6 and 7, which contain an account of the fateful outcome of the hill Cumorah battle, were written after the large plates of Nephi were buried (Mormon 6:6) and, hence, strictly speaking, could not have been part of the abridgment. For convenience, however, in the diagram presented herein, we represent Mormon’s abridgment of his own history as embracing all of chapters 1-7, which mark the conclusion of his writings.

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. . . . I am Mormon, and a pure descendant of Lehi . . . (3 Nephi 5:14-17, 20).

In a later period Joseph Smith was to receive and translate the plates of Mormon—the abridgment of the large plates of Nephi—but not the original large plates of Nephi. This fact should be kept clearly in mind as we proceed.

The Small Plates of Nephi

One day while Mormon was working on his digest, he discovered a little volume of the prophetic writings of his early forefathers in his library of ancient records (WofM 1:3). An examination of its contents revealed that it had been started by the same prophet Nephi who began the large plates of Nephi. Because of its brevity we call it the small plates of Nephi. About one-third of our published Book of Mormon is a translation of the small plates of Nephi. It is important, therefore, that we know something about that sacred work.

Soon after the arrival of the original colony from Jerusalem, which was somewhere around 590 BC, the young prophet Nephi was commanded by the Lord to prepare a record for the history of his people. This record was the large plates of Nephi that we have been discussing. Then, about twenty years later, the Lord commanded him to prepare the small plates of Nephi as an exclusively religious record.

And thirty years had passed away from the time we left Jerusalem. And I, Nephi, had kept the records upon my plates, which I had made, of my people thus far [the large plates of Nephi]. And it came to pass that the Lord God said unto me: Make other plates; and thou shalt engraven many things upon them which are good in my sight, for the profit of thy people. Wherefore, I, Nephi, to be obedient to the commandments of the Lord, went and made these plates upon which I have engraven these things. And I engraved that which is pleasing unto God. And if my people are pleased with the things of God they will be pleased with mine engravings which are upon these plates. And if my people desire

to know the more particular part of the history of my people they must search mine other plates (2 Nephi 5:28-33).

The sacred record that we know of as the small plates of Nephi is indebted to a yet earlier volume that the colony of Lehi brought from Jerusalem in 600 BC. This previous work, known as the brass plates of Laban, probably set the pattern for the Nephite practice of preserving their most precious writings on metal plates. It also appears to have influenced the language of some of these works (Mosiah 1:4; compare 1 Nephi 1:2 and Mormon 9:32-33). About one-third of the small plates of Nephi is directly or indirectly related to the brass plates of Laban. About one-fourth is quoted from that record verbatim.

The small plates of Nephi served the Lord's purpose as a repository of religious writings during an age in which the Nephite kings, who were custodians of the large plates of Nephi, were not qualified, I suspect, to cope with the writing of sacred history. By the time of king Benjamin, however, prophet-kings again occupied the throne. It was at this juncture that Amaleki concluded the small plates of Nephi and turned them over to king Benjamin for safekeeping. Thereafter, sacred and secular writings alike were entered on the large plates of Nephi as had been the case at the beginning of Nephite history.

The Book of Lehi and the Small Plates of Nephi

Mormon's purpose in culling out for us the moral and spiritual treasures of his ancestors' great history was, in the words of his son Moroni, "to the convincing of the Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the Christ, the Eternal God, manifesting himself unto all nations" (title page). In view of this lofty religious goal, it is no surprise to find that the abridgment of the large plates of Nephi that he inscribed on the plates of Mormon abounds in prophecies of Christ, missionary experiences, doctrinal discourses, and miracles. Even the fascinating stories of war and political change that he selected to condense and pass on to us carry faith-

promoting lessons. It was probably not hard for Mormon to draw religious elements from the combined secular and religious part of the large plates of Nephi, meaning from the book of Mosiah to the end of that record. It must have been considerably more difficult, however, to glean such material from the book of Lehi part, for, as we have already observed, the book of Lehi was almost exclusively a political and civil record. So we can understand his joy when, just as he came to the reign of king Benjamin near the close of his digest of the book of Lehi, he discovered the small plates of Nephi in his repository of ancient records and learned that they formed a religious work covering almost all of the book of Lehi period (WofM 1:3-4). The thing that pleased him especially about the small plates, he says, was their “prophecies of the coming of Christ” (WofM 1:4). And no wonder, for that was exactly the kind of evidence for the messiahship of Jesus that he was seeking for his own record. What was he to do? Could he discard his abridgment of the book of Lehi and substitute the small plates of Nephi?

Before we consider what Mormon finally did with the volume that he found, we should note that the small plates of Nephi had been kept by a private line of record keepers and extended from the time of Nephi to the early reign of king Benjamin. In contrast, the book of Lehi had been written by an entirely different line of record keepers (see Jarom 1:4, Omni 1:11), and extended from the time of Nephi to the late reign of the same king Benjamin.²

Mormon Adds the Words of Mormon to the Ancient Small Plates of Nephi

To learn what Mormon did with the small plates of Nephi, we turn to an intriguing little section that he wrote late in life. The

² That the book of Lehi ended in the late reign of king Benjamin is based on the assumption that it closed at the point where the next book, the book of Mosiah, begins. The book of Mosiah begins shortly before Benjamin’s retirement from the throne (Mosiah 1:9; 2:30).

year appears to have been AD 385, at which time Mormon was 74 (Mormon was born about AD 311; see Mormon 2:2). It was then that he took the already ancient small plates of Nephi, which had been discontinued as a record over five hundred years before, and added a little historical appendage to them.³ The opening verse identifies the late period of his writing: “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” (v 1). Quite clearly the months or years of careful composing and engraving were at an end when he inscribed these lines.

Interestingly enough, after explaining how he found the small plates of Nephi during an early period of his abridgment work (v 3), why he treasured them (v 4), and how he felt impressed to include them with his own metal book (vv 6-7), he proceeds in a few short paragraphs to give the highlights of king Benjamin’s life.

As he shifts from the explanatory portion of the Words of Mormon to the historical portion, he announces, “And now I, Mormon, proceed to finish out my record, which I take from the plates of Nephi . . .” (v 9). We understand this statement simply to mean that he returned to the large plates of Nephi, his basic source book, to obtain the information for the historical addition to the small plates of Nephi that comprise verses 9-18.

As we probe further into the abbreviated historical notes that Mormon added to the small plates of Nephi, we see that they carry the reader from the point in the early lifetime of king Benjamin where the small plates of Nephi end to the point late in Benjamin’s

³ Notwithstanding the fact that Amaleki, the last writer of the small plates of Nephi, closed the volume with the words, “. . . and these plates are full. And I make an end of my speaking” (Omni 1:30), we are still obliged to conclude that Mormon, more than five centuries later, actually added the Words of Mormon to the small plates of Nephi. Whether he did so on a kind of cover sheet, which may have been employed to protect the sacred engravings from getting scratched or damaged, or whether he simply inserted an extra leaf, or found and utilized a little unused space at the end of the record, there can be little question but that he added the Words of Mormon to the original small plates of Nephi. This interpretation seems to be confirmed by his statement, “Wherefore, I chose these things [the small plates of Nephi] to finish my record upon them . . .” (WofM 1:5).

lifetime where the book of Mosiah begins. Mormon's appendage leads one smoothly and directly into his abridgment of the book of Mosiah.

The fact that Mormon extended the small plates of Nephi to the book of Mosiah is more significant than appears on the surface. The greater significance becomes apparent when we recall that the small plates of Nephi formed a religious record of early Nephites and that Mormon's abridgment of the large plates of Nephi—from the book of Mosiah to the end—formed a religious record of later Nephites. The few lines of history that Mormon added to the small plates of Nephi thus served to combine two great religious records into one. In Mormon's eyes, incidentally, his digest of the secular book of Lehi must now have seemed a supplement to the composite religious record.

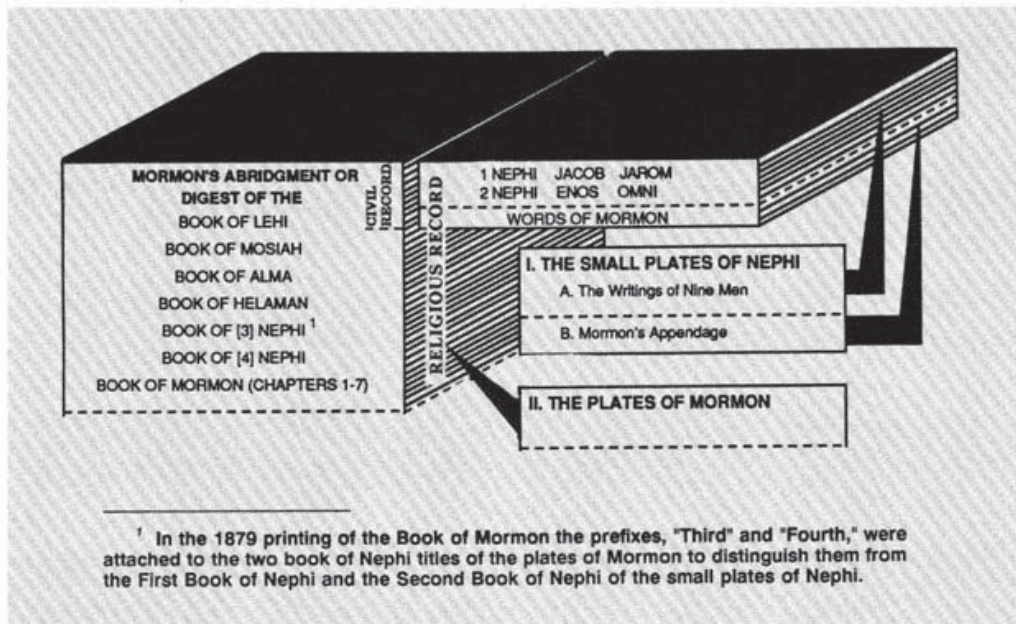
Reflections

There is much more to the story of the Book of Mormon than we have thus far considered. Most of the continued story has to do with experiences of Mormon's son, Moroni, who succeeded his father as prophet-custodian of the sacred record. Indeed, my topic, "The Small Plates of Nephi and the Words of Mormon," is only the first part of the entire tale. We conclude this first part by shifting attention abruptly to the emergence of the Book of Mormon in the nineteenth century.

Mormon's inspiration to include the small plates of Nephi with his own plates and even to extend that record to the opening of the book of Mosiah was remarkably verified in Joseph Smith's day. This is what happened. The Prophet first translated Mormon's abridgment of the book of Lehi, which work proceeded very slowly but afforded him valuable translating experience. Then his assistant, Martin Harris, lost the 116 page translation of this section (*History of the Church* 1:56). Although at first the Prophet was filled with despair, we may suppose that his despair turned to joy when he learned that: (a) the small plates of Nephi, with the appended

Words of Mormon, covered precisely the same period of history that the book of Lehi did and (b) the small plates of Nephi formed a superior tool for “convincing the Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the Christ.”

Afterward the Lord revealed to Joseph Smith that the small plates of Nephi were “more particular concerning the things” (D&C 10:40) that we should have. It is my humble opinion that from the foundation of the world it had been so.



BIBLIOGRAPHY

Cannon, George Q. *Young People's History of Joseph Smith*. Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1914.

History of the Church. 7 vols. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1980.

Journal of Discourses. 26 vols. 1854-86.

Pratt, Orson. "Remarkable Visions." Liverpool: Franklin D. Richards, 1851. Reprinted in *Orson Pratt: Writings of an Apostle*. Vol 2 of Mormon Collectors Series. Salt Lake City: Mormon Heritage, 1976.

Ricks, Eldin. "Story of the Formation of the Book of Mormon Plates: An Analysis of the Sources and Structure of the Sacred Record." Bound with *Book of Mormon Wide Margin Edition*. Provo, UT: Mountain West, 1987.