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Mormon as an Abridger of Ancient Records

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Chapter 2

MORMON AS AN ABRIDGER OF ANCIENT RECORDS¹

Having been commanded of the Lord that I should not suffer the records which had been handed down by our fathers, which were sacred, to fall into the hands of the Lamanites, (for the Lamanites would destroy them) therefore I made this record out of the plates of Nephi, and hid up in the hill Cumorah all the records which had been entrusted to me by the hand of the Lord, save it were these few plates which I gave unto my son Moroni. (Mormon 6:6)

The source of the Book of Mormon has been long disputed. Its defenders generally accept Joseph Smith's testimony that, "through the gift and power of God," he was enabled to translate an ancient document into English. There is, in fact, internal evidence that the prophet was working from an extant text. This evidence includes examples of dittography (for example, the repetition of "work" in Mosiah 10:5). Dittography is common in copying extant texts, but is not typical in speech. Nevertheless, dittographs in the Book of Mormon could conceivably be attributed to the necessity for Joseph Smith to repeat some portions of the text to a scribe (usually Oliver Cowdery) who has had difficulty keeping up with the dictation. Consequently, we simply note here the existence of dittographs without discussing examples in detail. Instead, we shall concentrate our efforts on an examination of more complex issues such as flash-backs and previews.

¹ Portions of this article have previously appeared elsewhere.

MORMON'S PROMISES

*MORMON'S PROMISES*²

Anyone can make a promise to return to a particular subject and give further details. But memory limitations make it much easier to fulfill such a promise in writing than in speech. As an abridger of the Nephite records, Mormon makes several important promises which are later fulfilled. Here are examples:

In Mosiah 21:35, Mormon, speaking of Limhi's people, promised that "an account of their baptism shall be given hereafter." He kept that promise in Mosiah 25:17-18.

In Mosiah 28:9, 19-20, Mormon promised to tell the story of the mission of the sons of Mosiah. It is not until Alma 17-25, however, that we find the account.

In Alma 35:13, Mormon promised to give an account of the Nephite-Lamanite war which began in the eighteenth year, but since he proposed to first copy Alma's admonitions to his sons (Alma 36-42), he deferred the story of the war until Alma 43:3, where he introduced the topic by the words "And now I return to an account of the wars."

In Mosiah 28:11-19, Mormon promised to tell the story of the Jaredites, whose record had been translated by King Mosiah. The press of war with the Lamanites made it impossible for him to complete the work, however, so Moroni, his son and scribal successor, was left to give us the account known as the Book of Ether.

In 3 Nephi 18:36-37, Mormon wrote how Jesus had given the twelve disciples "power to give the Holy Ghost. And I will show unto you hereafter that this record is true." In 3 Nephi 19:13, he told how the Holy Ghost fell on the twelve after their baptism, and in 4 Nephi 1:1, he wrote that those baptized by the twelve "did also receive the Holy Ghost." But it was Moroni who

² This subject was discussed in the author's article "Mormon's Editorial Promises," in John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (eds.), *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret and FARMS, 1991).

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quoted Christ's actual words to the twelve (left out by Mormon in 3 Nephi 18): "ye shall have power that to him upon whom ye shall lay your hands, ye shall give the Holy Ghost" (Moroni 2:2), then adding, "and on as many as they laid their hands, fell the Holy Ghost" (Moroni 2:3).

In Words of Mormon 1:2, Mormon expressed the hope that his son Moroni would write "concerning Christ." In compliance, Moroni interjected much about Christ into his account of the Jaredites in the Book of Ether (see especially Ether 3:17-20; 12:7, 16-22, 38-41) and included his testimony of Christ in other places as well (Mormon 9:1f; Moroni 2; 6:3-4; 7:16f; 10:30f).

In Helaman 2:12-14, Mormon promised to speak more of Gadianton and his band "hereafter." The problems caused by the "robbers" are detailed in Helaman 6; 3 Nephi 1:27-29; 2:11-18; 3:1-4:29; 4 Nephi 1:42-44; Mormon 1:18.

Mormon's comments in Helaman 2:12-14 are particularly interesting, for they show how the historian worked. In verse 13, he wrote, "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." He clarified what he meant by adding, "Behold I do not mean the end of the book of Helaman, but I mean the end of the book of Nephi, from which I have taken all the account which I have written."

Mormon's meaning is uncertain. Perhaps he had reference to the large plates of Nephi, kept by Helaman and other Nephite scribes. However, at no other time are the large plates called the "book" of Nephi (see 4 Nephi 1:21).

In Helaman 2, we read of the "secret acts of murder and of robbery" (verse 4). If the history recorded in this chapter was really a "secret plan" (verse 8), how is it that it was so readily known that there even existed a secret society? That there were murderers could not be doubted, for the crimes had indeed been committed. But contemporary Nephites could have known nothing of the secret pacts until, at some future time, there should be a confession or other evidence. The discovery of the Gadianton band is related

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beginning in Helaman 6, where we read of the arrest of some of the robbers.

If Helaman 6 comprises part of the record made by Nephi, son of Helaman, then it could be from the book of this Nephi that Mormon took his information for the account of the “secret band” in Helaman 2. As an historian, he had access to documents post-dating the events themselves, documents that could elucidate the hitherto unknown aspects of those historical events. No doubt Helaman’s record made mention of the murders, but without knowing about the organization of the Gadianton band. This information, being supplied by documents written at a later time, was added in its proper historical sequence by Mormon, during the abridgement process. It may be, however, that Helaman 6 is part of the record kept not by Nephi, but by his brother Lehi, as suggested by Sidney Sperry. If so, then the “book of Nephi” to which Mormon referred is perhaps the one known to us as 3 Nephi, where we also read much about the secret band.

BAPTISM, CHILDREN & THE HOLY GHOST

Similar in nature to Mormon’s promises is the follow-through on Jesus’ promise to give the Holy Ghost. In 3 Nephi 11:35-38, the Savior instructed the people to “become as a little child, and be baptized,” after which they would be baptized “with fire and with the Holy Ghost.” When, at length, the twelve disciples were baptized, they were filled with the Holy Ghost and encircled about by fire, while angels descended to minister to them (3 Nephi 19:9-14). These same heavenly manifestations were present the previous day, when Jesus blessed the children, who were likewise encircled by fire as angels descended from heaven to minister to them (3 Nephi 17:21-24).

It seems likely that the events accompanying the blessing of the children were deliberately designed to impress upon the Nephites the importance of following Jesus’ admonition to become as a child. Seeing that baptism of adults produced the same results,

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they could better understand his meaning. Despite the consistency behind these events, Mormon does not expressly bring our attention to them, as one might expect had the book been written to prove a point to its readers. Rather, he merely recorded the stories as he found them in the ancient records.

THE FULFILLMENT OF PROPHECY

Similar in nature to Mormon's promises are prophecies which are later fulfilled in the Book of Mormon. One of the more complex prophecies was that of Abinadi. Speaking out in the city of Lehi-Nephi, he told of how the Lamanites would bring the people into bondage, smiting them on the cheek, driving and slaying them (Mosiah 12:2). He noted that "the life of king Noah shall be valued even as a garment in a hot furnace" (Mosiah 12:3). The people would "have burdens lashed upon their backs; and they shall be driven before like a dumb ass" and be subject to pestilence and famine (Mosiah 12:4-7).

Appearing before king Noah and his priests, Abinadi told them, "what you do with me, after this, shall be as a type and a shadow of things which are to come" (Mosiah 13:10). He subsequently was more clear, telling them, "Behold, even as ye have done unto me . . . thy seed shall cause that many shall suffer the pains that I do suffer, even the pains of death by fire; and this because they believe in the salvation of their God" (Mosiah 17:15).

Further, the prophet stated, "ye shall be smitten on every hand, and shall be driven and scattered to and fro, even as a wild flock is driven by wild and ferocious beasts. And in that day ye shall be hunted, and ye shall be taken by the hand of your enemies, and then ye shall suffer, as I suffer, the pains of death by fire" (Mosiah 17:17-18).

Subsequent events vindicated Abinadi's words. The Lamanites attacked, slaying some and driving others before them into the wilderness (Mosiah 19:6-19). Some of the Nephites, angry at Noah, burned him to death, while his priests escaped by fleeing

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(Mosiah 19:20-21). After another brief battle (Mosiah 20), the Lamanites began to persecute the Nephites by “smit[ing] them on their cheeks, and exercis[ing] authority over them . . . put[ting] heavy burdens upon their backs, and driv[ing] them as they would a dumb ass,” thus fulfilling the word of the Lord (Mosiah 21:2-4; see also verses 13-15).

In a later era, after the priests of Noah (called Amulonites) had joined with the Lamanites, they burned to death many of the Lamanites who had been converted by the sons of Mosiah, “because of their belief” (Alma 25:5-7). Non-believing Lamanites, angered at such atrocious acts against their brethren, began hunting down the Amulonites, consigning them to the flames, all in fulfillment of the words of Abinadi (Alma 25:8-12).

It is difficult to imagine that Joseph Smith, were he the author of the Book of Mormon, could have kept all of the details of the prophecy in mind sufficiently to record the fulfillment of each of these details. The evidence, rather, points to the author’s reliance on a written text for such information. We thus have evidence that Mormon referred to the record of Limhi’s people for his information.

CHANGE IN PERSON

If we presume that Mormon had access to ancient records, it seems likely that he would sometimes selectively rewrite the stories in his possession, while, at other times, he would paraphrase or abridge them. In some cases, he might wish to quote extracts from the texts. In all but complete rewrites, evidence for Mormon’s hand might be reflected in the switch between first- and third-person accounts.

An example of this phenomenon can be found in Alma 56:52. This passage mentions Helaman by name and speaks of him in third person, despite the fact that it is in the middle of a letter (Alma 56-58) written by Helaman in which all other references to him are in first person. It is likely that Mormon, when including

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the letter in his account, simply slipped into the role of historian and, in retrospection, employed third person this one time.

We find another example in Alma 9-15, which tells the story of the mission of Alma and Amulek to Ammonihah. The preface situated before chapter 9 was evidently written by Mormon to indicate from which part of the Book of Alma he was abridging. It notes that what follows comprises “the words of Alma and also the words of Amulek,” and that it is “according to the record of Alma.”

The first part of the account comprises a direct extract from Alma’s record, for he writes in first person (Alma 9:1, 7, 31-33). It is difficult, however, to know at which point Mormon began abridging in his own words. For example, it is not clear whether “this book” in Alma 9:34 refers to Alma’s original record or to Mormon’s abridgement. In any event, Amulek’s words are introduced by another preface (Alma 10:1) and his speech is contained in Alma 10:2-11, followed by an historical explanation of what ensued, including further dialogue between Amulek and Zeezrom.

It seems certain that Mormon’s abridgment has already resumed sometime before Alma 10:31 (see also Alma 11:20; 12:1ff), where Alma is mentioned, but no longer in first person. This might indicate that Mormon’s abridgment begins again with Alma 9:34 or 10:1. If so, the words “this book” in Alma 9:34 could refer to the abridgment (see Alma 11:46 and cf. 13:31).

THE NEPHITE ANNALS

Most of Mormon’s abridgement (Mosiah through Mormon) gives precise years for the various events, even when they are “flashbacks.” Such precision implies that the records which Mormon possessed were very precise on chronology. It is likely that the historical records he consulted were in the form of annals.

Sometimes, Mormon listed years without recording any events for them. Thus, in 4 Nephi 1:6, he wrote, “And thus did

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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.” Note also 4 Nephi 1:14: “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.”

Such rambling seems to be a waste of precious space on the plates. Mormon’s run-down of dates in these verses is probably intended to record the years of the annals he consulted, even though he did not feel to write the history of each.

THE THREE NEPHITES

One of the evidences for Mormon’s reliance on extant annals is found in the story of the three Nephite disciples who had been promised by Christ that they would not die. In order to illustrate the effects of this translation, Mormon wrote:

And they were cast into prison by them who did not belong to the church. And the prisons could not hold them, for they were rent in twain. And they were cast down into the earth; but they did smite the earth with the word of God, insomuch that by his power they were delivered out of the depths of the earth; and therefore they could not dig pits sufficient to hold them. And thrice they were cast into a furnace and received no harm. And twice they were cast into a den of wild beasts; and behold they did play with the beasts as a child with a suckling lamb, and received no harm. (3 Nephi 28:19-22)

In 4 Nephi, Mormon told a similar story. After recounting the success of the Church, he wrote of the beginning of apostasy,

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then of “another church which . . . did persecute the true church of Christ” (4 Nephi 1:23-29). Then follows a description of that false church’s acts toward the three Nephites, which events are said to have occurred between 210 (verse 27) and 230 years (verse 35) after the birth of Christ:

Therefore they did exercise power and authority over the disciples of Jesus who did tarry with them, and they did cast them into prison; but by the power of the word of God, which was in them, the prisons were rent in twain, and they went forth doing mighty miracles among them. And they did cast them into furnaces of fire, and they came forth receiving no harm. And they also cast them into dens of wild beasts, and they did play with the wild beasts even as a child with a lamb; and they did come forth from among them, receiving no harm” (4 Nephi 1:30-33)

To the casual reader, it may appear that these tortures were inflicted upon the three Nephites soon after Christ’s appearance in 3 Nephi 27-28 and were repeated nearly two centuries later. But the similarity between the two passages is such that we may suggest that Mormon was referring to a single written source in both cases. It is likely that the persecutions suffered by the three disciples were inflicted by the false church of the third century A.D. How, then, do we explain the fact that they are listed in 3 Nephi 28?

We cannot know in what year the events recorded in 3 Nephi 27-28 took place. They occurred “as the disciples of Jesus were journeying and were preaching” (3 Nephi 27:1). It was evidently after this visit from Christ that the disciples were able to convert the people (3 Nephi 28:23) and establish the era of peace described in the first part of 4 Nephi.

It would appear that the recitation of the trials of the three disciples found in 3 Nephi 28 was included merely to illustrate the benefits of their translation. Thus, verses 19-22 are not presented in

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their proper chronological order. Why, then, did Mormon list them here and repeat them in 4 Nephi? The answer is found in 3 Nephi 28:24, where we read that Mormon intended to stop writing for a time. Indeed, the two chapters that immediately follow this statement comprise exhortations that appear to be closing remarks addressed to a later generation.

In fact, Mormon cut short his abridgement at 3 Nephi 26:12, turning to some matters he had “been commanded” to write, which comprise a synopsis of the preaching and miracles performed by Jesus’ disciples, his visit and the promise to the three, followed by concluding exhortations. It was probably the press of time that prompted Mormon to add his comments on the power that preserved the three disciples from death.

When, at length, Mormon returned to the abridgement and wrote 4 Nephi, he cut the story short. Centuries became but a few lines of text. But this time, at least, he included the story of the afflictions of the three disciples in its proper historical context.

It is the historian’s perspective and access to written records that made it possible for Mormon to refer to the same event in two different parts of his work. These same factors made it possible for him to provide a measure of consistency to the text of his abridgement.

INTERNAL CONSISTENCY

In recent years, LDS scholars have been struck by some aspects of internal consistency in the Book of Mormon. Lengthy phrases and lists found in early parts of the book are repeated verbatim or nearly verbatim in later sections. For Joseph Smith to have remembered these long after he first dictated them to his scribe is an unreasonable expectation. It would have been much easier for Mormon to have quoted from earlier, written texts in his possession. Consequently, such passages can be seen as evidence that Joseph, too, worked from an extant text.

Ross Christensen was the first person to point out (1975)

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that the lineage groups descended from Lehi were named several times in the same order in the Book of Mormon: Nephites, Jacobites, Josephites, Zoramites, Lamanites, Lemuelites, Ishmaelites. The first such listing was made by Jacob on the small plates (Jacob 1:13). The others were made nearly 1,000 years later in Mormon's abridgement (4 Nephi 1:37-38; Mormon 1:8). (The lineages comprising the Lamanite confederacy are also listed separately in Alma 47:35 and Mormon 1:8.) Lehi addressed his descendants and those of Ishmael in the same order near the close of his life (2 Nephi 1-4).³

A FARMS Update from 1987⁴ noted several further instances of textual consistency in the Book of Mormon:

- Some 21 consecutive words from the account of Lehi's dream (1 Nephi 1:8) quoted verbatim by Alma and attributed to Lehi (Alma 36:22).
- Samuel the Lamanite (Helaman 14:12) included, in his warning to the people of Zarahemla, some 20 consecutive words found in an earlier speech by King Benjamin (Mosiah 3:8).
- Precise details of destructions which would take place at the crucifixion of the Savior had been given by the ancient prophet Zenos (1 Nephi 19:11-12). Each of the cataclysmic events he listed was included in the account of these destructions given in 3 Nephi 8:6-23.
- A list of five prohibited crimes (murder, plunder, theft, adultery and "any manner of wickedness") was laid down

³ The topic of the lineage groups was discussed in a 1987 FARMS Update republished as "Seven Tribes: An Aspect of Lehi's Legacy," in John W. Welch, ed., *Reexploring the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret and FARMS, 1992).

⁴ "Textual Consistency," FARMS Update, October 1987, reprinted in John W. Welch, ed., *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*.

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by King Benjamin (Mosiah 2:13) and reappears in seven subsequent passages (Mosiah 29:36; Alma 23:3; 30:10; Helaman 3:13; 6:23; 7:21; Ether 8:16).

Another series of items often repeated in the Book of Mormon is introduced in 1 Nephi 2:4, where we read that Lehi left the land of his inheritance, his gold, his silver and his precious things. When his sons later returned to the land of their inheritance, they went to retrieve the gold, silver and “all manner of riches” to use in purchasing the brass plates from Laban (1 Ne. 3:16). The three items of wealth are found listed in the same order in several other passages, with the words “precious things” alternating with “riches” and “precious metals/ores” (1 Ne. 3:24; Mosiah 2:12; 19:5; Hel. 6:9). They are sometimes listed in combination with other material possessions, such as ziff, copper, brass, iron, steel, flocks, herds, fatlings, grains, wood, silk, scarlets, fine-twined linen and precious clothing (1 Ne. 13:7; 18:25; 2 Ne. 5:15; Jacob 2:12; Mosiah 11:3; Alma 1:29; Alma 4:6). Gold and silver are always listed together in that order and, in all but three instances, are followed by “precious things” or a variant thereof. Such consistency bespeaks formulaic lists and/or reliance on earlier written records.⁵

MORMON'S INTERRUPTIONS

At several points in the history, Mormon interrupted his account to give some background material which he evidently felt was necessary to enable his audience to understand the story. It seems reasonable to assume that the conditions he explained were no longer extant in his day, leading him to add details available to him from other records, if not by revelation.

For example, we can attribute to Mormon the interjection regarding the Nephite monetary system in Alma 11:1-19. It would

⁵ See the discussion in John A. Tvedtnes, “Word Groups in the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 6/2 (Fall 1997)

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have made little sense for Alma to interrupt his story to talk about money. But to Mormon, who lived many hundreds of years later, it was perfectly logical to interject with an explanation of the amounts of money that would be mentioned in the story to follow. We must recall that Mormon lived after the era of peace and united order following the visit of Jesus, and that the monetary system (if any) used in his day would probably have differed from that of Alma's day, hence necessitating an explanation. The digression is immediately followed (in Alma 11:20) by a recapitulation of the information given in Alma 10:32, just before the interjected material.

Another interruption at Alma 22:27b-35 inserts a geographical note, made either by Alma or, more likely, Mormon. Note how the story begun in Alma 22:27a continues in Alma 23:1, the two verses giving the same information, in order to show a return to an interrupted subject. This appears to be a literary device used by Mormon in the same way we use footnotes or parenthesis.

COLOPHONS

Another common feature in Mormon's abridgement is the use of colophons. These include text titles, prefaces, summaries and conclusions. Except for Mosiah (a special case that cannot be discussed here), Mormon wrote a preface for each of the books he abridged. In addition, he wrote prefaces to extracted material incorporated into the text of his abridgement. The latter are particularly helpful in seeing how Mormon prepared his materials.⁶

⁶ For brief discussions of the subject, see John A. Tvedtnes, "Colophons in the Book of Mormon," *Insights: An Ancient Window* (Provo: FARMS, 1990), No. 3, reprinted in John W. Welch, *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*. A more in-depth study is found in John A. Tvedtnes, "Colophons in the Book of Mormon," in John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (eds.), *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret and FARMS, 1991).

CONCLUSION

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Several factors lend support to the idea that an ancient editor, working with various historical and religious texts, produced an abridgement known as the Book of Mormon. All of these factors demonstrate a consistency that can best be explained by postulating that the author of the book had immediate access to earlier records to which he could refer. Because Joseph Smith had no access to such materials, this retrospective nature of the Book of Mormon is the best evidence that Mormon was its author.