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Section 4: Making Mormon's Book

It is enticing to think that if we had the book of Lehi, we might more easily discern Mormon's agenda in compiling what we know today as the Book of Mormon. Perhaps he gave some indication of why he selected certain types of information to include or exclude. He probably did not. As an ancient writer, Mormon would have assumed his readers would understand that he was constructing his text and pay attention to what he did to learn the meta-lessons he wanted to teach. We modern readers are not that audience, and we approach the Book of Mormon much as we approach the Bible. It contains lessons to teach us spiritual things as we read it according to what we expect to find in it. There is nothing wrong with that; such an approach is literally what Nephi suggested when he said he likened the scriptures to what his people needed to hear (even if the original text pointed to a different people and different circumstances).

This book is an examination of Mormon's writing, not Mormon's reading. Therefore, the question is what Mormon intended. The beginning of Mormon's Book of Mormon was the lost book of Lehi. I have suggested some of the things probably there and some things that likely were not (see Part 1, "The Problem of the Lost Pages"). What we can reconstruct for the book of Lehi covers much of the story as we have it in the book of 1 Nephi. From the viewpoint of the beginnings of the Nephite peoples, we are not missing anything very significant and perhaps have even more detail that Nephi gave us.

Between the Nephite beginnings and the time we begin to read Mormon's edited work in the book of Mosiah, somewhat over three hundred years have passed. What might we have missed by missing the part of the book that covered that period? Again, I suggest we are missing very little. The small plates don't record much of what happened during those years, save for conflicts with the Lamanites. Based on the way Mormon treats war (see Part 1, "Mormon Writing about War"), he would have mentioned the conflicts but not given many details.

What great sermons might we have missed? That, of course, is impossible to know. The probable answer, however, is that we are probably missing very little. From the evidence of what Mormon extracted from the large plates, he did not have access to sermons from that account unless they were given by kings, and probably for political purposes. Thus we have Benjamin's great sermon that certainly has religious content but which had an overarching political purpose (see the section "Mosiah chapter I (1-3)").

Mormon wants his readers to better understand God and the gospel, but to provide significant religious content, he is required to use alternative sources (the personal records of Alma₂ and Nephi₃). If Mormon did not have access to similar external sources, there would have been little to include.

Finally, how much text would he use to cover the time from Nephi₁'s death to the time of Mosiah₁? I speculate that he would not have used much space at all. Mormon's themes about the destruction of the Nephites were clearly on his mind, and they begin in force only after the merger of the Nephites with the people of Zarahemla. Therefore, for Mormon's purposes, there wasn't a lot happening of interest until Mosiah₁ was commanded to take some of the people and flee to a new land.