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Chapter 17: Book of 4 Nephi

The book of 4 Nephi returns to the structure typical of the large plate records. In the first verse we have: “And it came to pass that the thirty and fourth year passed away, and also the thirty and fifth, and behold the disciples of Jesus had formed a church of Christ in all the lands round about” (4 Nephi 1:1). There are more years per verse than in any other book — 29 years are specifically mentioned.³⁵⁴ Time races through 4 Nephi — often with empty years (4 Nephi 1:6, 14).

Mormon does tell us there is a book of Nephi on the large plates: “And it came to pass that Amos died also, (and it was an hundred and ninety and four years from the coming of Christ) and his son Amos kept the record in his stead; and he also kept it upon the plates of Nephi; and it was also written in the book of Nephi, which is this book” (4 Nephi 1:21). There are two records indicated, the “plates of Nephi,” and “the book of Nephi, which is this book.” The structure of the large plates continues after the re-formation of the people of Nephi after Christ’s appearance. There is a “plates of Nephi,” meaning the overall record. Recorded on those plates and as part of the larger record-keeping tradition is a specific book named for Nephi. As I have noted, I believe this was the large plate record of Nephi₃, who became ruler of the people after Christ’s visit. I also suggest that the people were renamed “the people of Nephi” specifically to provide continuation.

Mormon manipulates time in 4 Nephi as he transforms his large plate source into his desired summation of the time between Christ’s appearance and Mormon’s own eponymous book. Where Mormon has previously shown a tendency to follow five-year markers if there were no other reasons for dividing chapters, there is only one chapter in 4 Nephi. In the first 100 years, Mormon only marks a five-year period one time, the thirty-fifth year. That happens in the very first verse. From that point to the 100-year mark, there are no listed years which can be fit into multiples

354. The years listed are: 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 41, 42, 49, 51, 52, 59, 71, 72, 79, 100, 110, 194, 200, 201, 230, 231, 244, 250, 260, 300, 305, 320.

of five years. Mormon notes the years 39 and 41 but skips the 40th year. He marks years 49 and 51 but not 50. There is no 60, 78, 80, nor 90.

This changes dramatically after the 100-year mark. After the year 100, ten of the 14 listed years are divisible by five. I suggest that given the empty years and the repeating pattern of empty years, that Mormon is using the years to divide a spiritual history from the developing recorded history.

The 100th year is an important benchmark in the Nephite spiritual history:

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.³⁵⁵

And it came to pass that there was no contention in the land, because of the love of God which did dwell in the hearts of the people. (4 Nephi 1:14–15)

The disciples who had known Christ are all gone by the 100th year. Nevertheless, righteousness continues. Then, in the 200th year:

And it came to pass that two hundred years had passed away; and the second generation had all passed away save it were a few.

And now I, Mormon, would that ye should know that the people had multiplied, insomuch that they were spread upon all the face of the land, and that they had become exceedingly rich, because of their prosperity in Christ.

And now, in this two hundred and first year there began to be among them those who were lifted up in pride, such as the wearing of costly apparel, and all manner of fine pearls, and of the fine things of the world.

And from that time forth they did have their goods and their substance no more common among them.

355. Mormon appears to have all the disciples, save the three who chose to tarry, die in the 100th year. It is not beyond Yahweh's miracles to have all of them survive that long and die in the same year. However, it is equally probable, and given the nature of what Mormon is doing in 4 Nephi, even more likely that this is meant to show the miraculous and not to represent history.

And they began to be divided into classes; and they began to build up churches unto themselves to get gain, and began to deny the true church of Christ. (4 Nephi 1:22–26)

This “I, Mormon” insertion does not follow the typical “I, Mormon” pattern. We have Mormon’s author-voice, but nothing about the plates or his writing process. I suggest this is because he is barely consulting the source material. The book of 4 Nephi is what Mormon wants his readers to understand of a long period, and he is paying much less attention to history than he has in any other book. Thus he didn’t need to speak of what he is doing while writing because the entirety of the book is due to his specific desire to set up his own history.

In 3 Nephi, Mormon speaks briefly of the lives of the disciples after Christ’s departure:

But this much I know, according to the record which hath been given — they did go forth upon the face of the land, and did minister unto all the people, uniting as many to the church as would believe in their preaching; baptizing them, and as many as were baptized did receive the Holy Ghost.

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 were they 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.

And it came to pass that thus they did go forth among all the people of Nephi, and did preach the gospel of Christ unto all people upon the face of the land; and they were converted unto the Lord, and were united unto the church of Christ, and thus the people of that generation were blessed, according to the word of Jesus. (3 Nephi 28:18–23)

In 3 Nephi, these verses appear to apply to all the disciples, and their preaching sets the stage for the generally righteous Nephites we see early in 4 Nephi.

Then, in 4 Nephi, *after* all the disciples save the three have died:

And again, there was another church which denied the Christ; and they did persecute the true church of Christ, because of their humility and their belief in Christ; and they did despise them because of the many miracles which were wrought among them.

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.

Nevertheless, and notwithstanding all these miracles, the people did harden their hearts, and did seek to kill them, even as the Jews at Jerusalem sought to kill Jesus, according to his word.

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.

Nevertheless, the people did harden their hearts, for they were led by many priests and false prophets to build up many churches, and to do all manner of iniquity. And they did smite upon the people of Jesus; but the people of Jesus did not smite again. And thus they did dwindle in unbelief and wickedness, from year to year, even until two hundred and thirty years had passed away.

And now it came to pass in this year, yea, in the two hundred and thirty and first year, there was a great division among the people. (4 Nephi 1:29–35)

The italicized phrases indicate the repeated events, which repeat in the same order. This suggests that Mormon took the events from a record but that he is using them for his own interests. It also highlights that the events listed for the end of 3 Nephi were not included in the record from which he took 3 Nephi, as they occurred long after Nephi₃ had died.

The critical turning point is the year 200 (4 Nephi 1:22). Whereas righteousness had prevailed until that time, the Nephites immediately begin to fall away at this important half-baktun, 200-year period.

It is difficult to fit some of the history of 4 Nephi into a reasonable historical framework. The text covers nearly 300 years but mentions only four recordkeepers. One of them, Ammaron, is the previous

recordkeeper's brother, not his son. That gives each of the named people a remarkably long life. It is made much longer if the Nephi of 4 Nephi is Nephi₃, as I have suggested.

Nephi₃'s death comes in the year 110, which would be incredibly long.³⁵⁶ However, it isn't much longer than the other disciples who die after the year 100 (4 Nephi 1:14). The timing continues to be problematic when Nephi₃'s son Amos₁ keeps the record for 84 years.³⁵⁷ If we use Mormon's age when he took of the task of record-keeping at 24 (Mormon 1:3), then Amos₁ was aged, indeed. His son Amos₂ kept the records 111 years before he died and gave them to Ammaron (in the 305th year, 4 Nephi 1:47).³⁵⁸ In contrast to the longevity of Amos₁ and Amos₂, Ammaron kept them for only 15 years. It appears Mormon wrote the history to correlate the remarkable time of righteousness with extended lives. Mormon is fitting people into a pattern rather than worrying about the confines of secular history.

It is possible part of Mormon's manipulation deals with the four centuries from the birth of Christ. Mormon lists four record-keepers, symbolically one for each of the centuries, although he does not line them up so precisely. Since the numbers do not appear to reflect a historical reality, a conceptual combination of the number of recordkeepers and the specific years assigned to them may have all worked to Mormon's designs for the book of Nephi, who is the son of Nephi — one of the disciples of Jesus Christ.

Another possible manipulation of years occurs with the 231st year:

And now it came to pass in this year, yea, in the two hundred and thirty and first year, there was a great division among the people.

And it came to pass that in this year there arose a people who were called the Nephites, and they were true believers in Christ; and

356. One hundred ten years would be $5*20+2*5$. This number fits into the five-year pattern. The ability of the year to fit into the mathematical system may or may not be significant but given the artificiality of the use of years in 4 Nephi, I consider it more likely than not.

357. Eighty-four years is possibly an artificial number. Understanding that Mesoamerican used a base 20 mathematical system, and that the number 4 was considered the number of perfection, 84 years might be seen as $4*20+4$. That number would suggest that there is more happening with the years than a precise recording of the recordkeeper's lives.

358. Mormon doesn't give the elapsed time of 111 years but rather the year in which the event occurred. That was in the year 305. That number, in Mayan terms, would be one and a half katuns plus a hotun.

among them there were those who were called by the Lamanites
— Jacobites, and Josephites, and Zoramites; (4 Nephi 1:35–36)

This is precisely 200 years after a similar dissolution of the Nephite people: “And it came to pass in the thirty and first year that they were divided into tribes, every man according to his family, kindred and friends” (3 Nephi 7:14). Having precisely 200 years between the two breakdowns into tribes is too coincidental to not have been specifically manipulated.

The book of 4 Nephi ends with Ammaron’s hiding the records. This is the event that will lead Ammaron to seek Mormon, the story which begins Mormon’s eponymous book.