



2011

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### BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Sorenson, John L. (2011) "Mormon's Sources," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*: Vol. 20 : No. 2 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol20/iss2/2>

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**Title** Mormon's Sources

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**Reference** *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 20/2 (2011): 2-15.

**ISSN** 1948-7487 (print), 2167-7565 (online)

**Abstract** How Mormon compiled Nephite records into the book that bears his name has never been carefully studied. This paper makes an attempt to understand that process as it details the limitations Mormon faced and the sources he would have used. Mormon's framework depended primarily on the larger plates of Nephi, but this paper demonstrates that Mormon appears to have supplemented those plates with other sources from the Nephite archive of records. The restrictions of the plates of Nephi and the nature of the additional sources are discussed and evaluated.







JOHN L. SORENSON

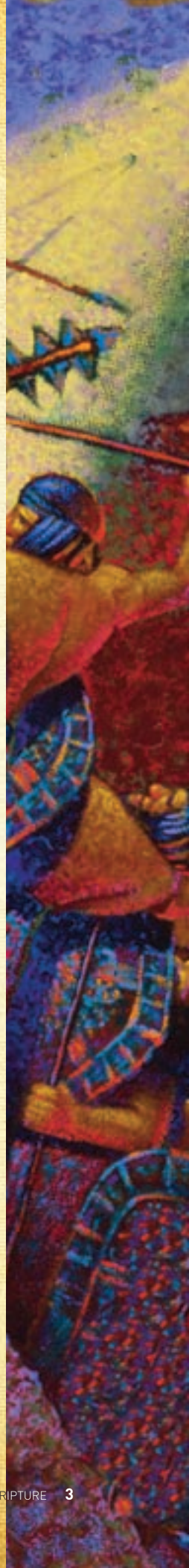
# MORMON'S SOURCES

*Faced with the daunting task of abridging the Nephite records, Mormon supplemented the basic source of “the [larger] plates” with other sacred records.*

When Mormon saw that his Nephite people were about to be exterminated, around AD 380, he set out to “write a small abridgment” (Mormon 5:9) of the tribe’s records. This project began at the last location where the Nephites camped before they finally gathered to the land of Cumorah. The subsistence conditions the Nephites were enduring could not have been anything but harsh; the people were refugees many times over, with uncertain sources of food, clothing, and shelter. Mormon’s writing activity probably extended into the four-year period of preparation for the final battle agreed to by the Lamanite commander, but in any case the abridged history was completed and the archive was buried in the hill Cumorah well before the final conflict (Mormon 6:6).

Consider some of the limitations Mormon faced in realizing his aim.

1. The size of his new record would have to be severely restricted. The account was to be passed on to his son Moroni, who alone would survive the Nephite genocide, and the book had to be portable enough that Moroni could carry it to a safe location.
2. The physical product must be prepared to endure for centuries, and the only suitable technology available at that time called for inscribing a record on thin metal sheets compiled in book form.
3. Of the possible writing systems Mormon could use, only one was concise enough to allow the prepared history to fit on the planned artifact. That was the modified Egyptian script with which the ancient plates of brass brought from the land of Israel, as well as later Nephite sacred records, were inscribed.
4. He must severely discipline his editorial hand so as to construct a narrative of practical length that was faithful to the facts of history related in the archive of records he was summarizing and that would be phrased in a manner he considered appropriate.
5. The work schedule was short. Mormon may have thought he would have only a year to do the writing; it turned out that he had little more than three. He may not have had time even to read through all the archival records in his



hands, and there surely would be no time for stylistic fine-tuning or reediting of his account.

Given all these constraints, how did Mormon choose what information to include and what—we can suppose reluctantly—to omit? He tells us that he depended primarily on the writings on “the [large] plates of Nephi” to formulate his narrative. But they were a large record covering more than six hundred years. He still had many decisions to make.

The fundamental format of the plates of Nephi was that of annals. Annals are yearly summaries of salient events. This format is clearly reflected at many points in the Book of Mormon, for example in Helaman 6:15: “And it came to pass that in the sixty and sixth year of the reign of the judges, behold, Cezoram was murdered by an unknown hand as he sat upon the judgment-seat. And it came to pass that in the same year, that his son, who had been appointed by the people in his stead, was also murdered. And thus ended the sixty and sixth year.” That is how Mormon chose to summarize the record for that year.

Generally these annalistic entries were succinct. As an example, Mormon’s record for the twenty-six years documented in Helaman, chapters 2 through 6, averages fewer than seven verses per year. The contents of 4 Nephi are still more compact; the highlights of 285 years are there covered in only forty-nine verses. Mormon apparently considered that short version of the history to include all he wished, or needed, to say concerning the period.

Yet at many points he goes into considerable detail about obscure events and circumstances. A prime example is the account of the assassination of the Lamanite rebel leader Lehonti and of the

Lamanite king, as told in Alma 47. It is unreasonable to think that those anomalous scenes were ever recorded in such detail in the official Nephite annals. We are not given as much as a hint of anyone who was an eyewitness of those events and who might have relayed the story to a Nephite record keeper.

This discussion is concerned with where Mormon obtained the information he included in the Book of Mormon. Except for his own short eyewitness entries, he obviously relied heavily on the archival record. What other written sources did he call on? How factually limited were those sources, and on what basis did he choose materials from them for inclusion in his record?

No doubt some will consider this a minor matter of questionable value. I do not. It seems to me that any light that analysis sheds on the Book of Mormon is to the good. If we discover that the materials used to construct the story were chosen or construed in particular ways by its sources and the compiler, the reader deserves to be made aware of that fact. Mormon implies as much by his (or Moroni’s) writing a detailed title page that acknowledges that human factors inevitably intruded into the project. If analysis shows that other influences were at work in the compiling and editing process of which even they were not fully aware, our understanding of the Book of Mormon could be increased by taking those factors into account.

This study also contributes to the persistent question of the authorship of the scripture. When analysis shows the multisource nature of the information in the book, our assurance is confirmed that it was written anciently using the words of a variety of persons and not by any person in the nineteenth century. Mormon’s primary source is obvious: the

### FROM THE EDITOR:

Expanding in a major way on his past research, John L. Sorenson gave the second biennial Book of Mormon lecture sponsored by the Laura F. Willes Center for Book of Mormon Research on 8 September 2011 in the Assembly Hall of the Gordon B. Hinckley Center on the BYU campus. He entitled his lecture “Mormon’s Sources.” Dr. Sorenson again demonstrates his careful attention to detail and his ability to synthesize large amounts of data into a coherent theory. In this case, he presents his explanation of the various sources that Mormon used to compose his abridgment of the Nephite record. As with all good theories, this one explains some Book of Mormon anomalies.



larger plates of Nephi. We will review the nature of that record and then look at other apparent sources. Finally we will examine a sample section of the Book of Mormon that sheds further light on our questions.

### The (Larger) Plates of Nephi

Mormon reported, “I made this record out of the plates of Nephi” (Mormon 6:6). The “plates of Nephi” in this sense have often been called by Latter-day Saint writers “the large plates of Nephi,” although the scripture itself never uses that exact phrase (only, at Jacob 3:13, “the larger plates”). The plates on which this master record was written were crafted by Nephi<sup>1</sup>, not long after arriving in the American promised land (1 Nephi 19:1), around eleven or twelve years after his group’s departure from Jerusalem. On them he began to engrave a “record of my people,” including that of his father’s migrant party and their “journeyings in the [Arabian] wilderness.” Nephi likely drew this account from records on papyrus that he and his father had kept before this set of metal plates was made. On the plates he began to make “a full account” of the history of his people, specifically meaning to track such topics as “the reign of the kings, and the wars and contentions” of the people he and his successors ruled (1 Nephi 9:2-4). No doubt he was the originator of the annals format that became the norm for the record on these plates.

Subsequently he commanded the Nephite rulers who succeeded him that the history should continue to be recorded “according to the writings of the kings, or those which they caused to be written” (Jarom 1:14) from generation to generation on his plates (Words of Mormon 1:10-11). After kings no longer ruled the Nephites, care of the historical record was shifted to a line of religious leaders (Mosiah 28:20).

Nephi could not have anticipated how many metal plates this secular history would eventually require, so blank sheets of hammered metal must have been added periodically to his original set to accommodate the writings of later generations of historians; but the name of the record, “the plates of Nephi,” was retained for the enlarged set in honor of the founder of the tradition.

There is reason to believe that when successive portions of the master record were added, they were labeled “the book of so-and-so” even though they were integral parts of “the plates of Nephi.” While

named after the principal individual who began each section, they sometimes also included records kept by that person’s descendants (e.g., Alma 63:17, “the account of Alma, and Helaman his son, and also Shiblon, who was his son”). It seems reasonable that each of the component books represented a number of metal plates manufactured at the onset of the named scribe’s tenure; these would have been filled up by him and his descendants, after which a new major writer would craft new plates and begin another installment of the ongoing historical record.

Just because a source record existed, that does not mean the writings could be understood in a straightforward manner. The Book of Mormon text reports at several points the difficulty the scribes had in making their statements clear.

We cannot be certain that individual writers on the key record did not use materials beyond the annals format in their entries. At least in one place we learn that a lengthy record was entered on the plates. “The more part of the things which he [Christ] taught the people” of Nephi were recorded on “the plates of Nephi” (3 Nephi 26:7), although Mormon reported that he was commanded not to include them in *his* record. And given the great detail provided about events for certain years, Mormon clearly exercised his own discretion about what he chose to incorporate in his record; nevertheless, the consistency and dominance of the annals format is apparent throughout his record from Mosiah 1 to Mormon 7.

Just because a source record existed, that does not mean the writings could be understood in a straightforward manner. The Book of Mormon text reports at several points the difficulty the scribes had in making their statements clear (Jacob 4:1; Ether 12:23-25, 40; Mormon 9:33). We may suppose that a similar difficulty was equally felt by all the writers. So when Mormon examined the older writings, he would have faced some problems with those “imperfections.” These obscurities were more than just a matter of the “awkwardness of our hands” that Moroni noted at Ether 12:24. That phrase *might* refer merely to the technical problem of making proper marks on



Papyrus Collection / Institut für Altertumskunde / University of Cologne.

This example of Egyptian hieratic script is from the Saite period (664–525 bc), which is roughly contemporary with Lehi. The text is from Book of the Dead chapter 17. P. Köln 10207, sheet 4.

the unforgiving metal. But he went on to describe the problem beyond that, saying, “we behold our weakness, and stumble because of the placing of our words” (Ether 12:25). Moroni implies that the writing system of the Jaredites, which he considered superior to that of the Nephites, accounted for the greater clarity of that earlier record (as suggested by Ether 12:23–24). Thus it appears that the script system the Nephite writers were using contributed to the lack of clarity.

Since Mormon continued with the same writing system with which Nephi began the record, his writing would have suffered the same disadvantages. He said, “there are many things which, according to

our language, we are not able to write” at all (3 Nephi 5:18). “Our language” in this sense obviously refers to their writing system, not to their spoken tongue.

Moroni further tells us that these linguistic difficulties would not have occurred had they used Hebrew script, an alphabetic system, to keep their record; in that case there would have been “no imperfection” (Mormon 9:33). (However, he further explained that using Hebrew writing as their primary medium was precluded because that would have required many more metal sheets to accommodate the same record.) The “imperfections” the Nephite scribes reported seem clearly to have resulted from

the particular writing system they were using to keep their sacred records.

The “characters” used for writing were called by Nephite historians “reformed Egyptian” (Mormon 9:32). This label for their writing system need not imply that the tongue or spoken language they wrote in was Egyptian. What Nephi initially said of the script used for their sacred records was that it consisted of “the learning [and surely the speech]<sup>1</sup> of the Jews and the language [script] of the Egyptians” (1 Nephi 1:2). We know that Egyptian glyphs were occasionally used in ancient Palestine to write the sounds of Hebrew words.<sup>2</sup> Initially, at least, Nephi began his record by writing in this “language of my father” (1 Nephi 1:2), apparently using glyphic signs to represent the Hebrew tongue; yet by the end of the record Moroni said, “none other people knoweth our language” (Mormon 9:34). That may mean that the system of writing they used for their sacred and historical records could convey more than one spoken language.

Based on the sample of characters published as “the Anthon Transcript,”<sup>3</sup> which purports to be a copy of characters from the plates Joseph Smith translated, it is apparent that they were not modeled directly on Egyptian hieroglyphs. They look more like signs of hieratic Egyptian, a parallel sign system related to the hieroglyphs and used by the Egyptians when they employed brush and ink.

Some scholars have inferred that Lehi’s knowledge of Egyptian writing was learned from a contemporary source and probably for a utilitarian purpose, perhaps to engage in trade with that country.<sup>4</sup> If that were the case, he would have learned the demotic form of Egyptian writing, a popularized cursive form of hieratic that was in routine use in Egypt in his day. But there is no indication in the text that this was what he had learned. Instead we infer from Mosiah 1:2-5 that Lehi’s primary reason for learning to use this script was to be able to read the record inscribed on the plates of brass. Having been taught the system, “he could read these engravings, and teach them to his children, that thereby they could teach them to their children” (Mosiah 1:4).

I have argued elsewhere that this manner of writing probably was introduced into northern Israel in connection with the settlement there of the tribes of Manasseh and Ephraim, those descended from Joseph, that “virtual Egyptian” whose first-person

writings appear on the brass plates.<sup>5</sup> From that source Lehi quoted his ancestor’s words at some length as part of his last testament to his son Joseph (2 Nephi 3:4-22). Nephi too emphasized Joseph’s importance as a principal ancestor of Lehi’s people (2 Nephi 4:1-2). The Nephite system of writing with Egyptian characters seems to have been derived from a version of the hieratic script that came into use to write the Hebrew tongue beginning no later than the time of the original Joseph. (One possibility, pointed out

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by John Gee, is that the sign system used may have been the little-known one labeled by modern scholars “abnormal hieratic,” a “reformed” cursive style developed between ca. 1550 and 1100 BC, the time when the Israelites lived in Egypt.)<sup>6</sup> Presumably Lehi learned to read the esoteric script on the brass plates as part of his cultural heritage from the tribe of Manasseh to which he belonged (Alma 10:3), not for contemporary utilitarian purposes.

Both the hieroglyphic and hieratic systems were more concise than the alphabetic Hebrew script. At the same time they were inherently more ambiguous because a large majority of the characters they used represented whole, complex morphemes or words (called logograms by linguists) rather than sounds spelled out to form words as in an alphabet. (There were, however, phonetic elements in the Egyptian scripts.) The meaning of each logogram had to be memorized. Moreover, some of them had multiple meanings, and Egyptian writing was notorious for its use of wordplay. Gee goes so far as to say that these sources of ambiguity meant that “sometimes even the Egyptians themselves could not read their own writing correctly.”<sup>7</sup> The sense intended by a particular piece of writing had to be clarified—as



far as possible—by adding qualifying characters or by the context.

It is reasonable that this ambiguity was involved in the problem of “the placing of our words” spoken of by Moroni. Mastery of the meaning of records kept in any Egyptian script required extensive memorizing, but a particular passage might remain problematic. The need for extensive memorization by Nephite writers is implied by Mosiah 1:2, where we are told that King Benjamin’s sons were “taught in *all* the language [used on the plates of brass] . . . that thereby they might become men of understanding.” Evidently, full mastery of the Nephite script

An even more serious problem for an accurate history would have been the fact that the Nephite annal keepers at tribal headquarters lacked, as far as we can tell, any reliable social apparatus for obtaining information about events taking place outside the capital.

system required that the meanings of hundreds of characters had to be committed to memory, along with a knowledge of their symbolic, geographical, and mythological backgrounds and contexts (compare Enos 1:1 and Mosiah 9:1).

This situation may relate to Nephi’s explanation that the scriptures on the plates of brass “were hard for many of my people to understand; for they know not concerning the manner of prophesying among the Jews” (2 Nephi 25:1), which they could only approach by means of the brass plates record. Nephi knew how to read and interpret that material from his experience living at Judahite Jerusalem in an advantaged household where he studied such matters while growing up. The necessity of a major time investment in order to become thoroughly familiar with the abstruse matters that framed this, or perhaps any, Nephite writing system is confirmed in 3 Nephi 6:12, where we are told that among the Nephites only the rich could achieve extensive learning, presumably because of the greater leisure at their disposal to master the writing system.

Failure to read a text with complete clarity might have something to do with a point made by Grant Hardy. Nephi<sub>2</sub>, he noted, exclaimed centuries later, “Oh, that I could have had my days in the days when my father Nephi first came out of the land of Jerusalem . . . ; then were his people easy to be entreated, firm to keep the commandments of God, and slow to be led to do iniquity” (Helaman 7:7). But of course that was not true. Hardy comments, “It is hard not to smile at his misplaced nostalgia. Either he has been reading a very different version of early Nephite history or he hasn’t been paying attention.”<sup>8</sup> Possibly Nephi was confused by the difficulty of reading the old text clearly.

The ambiguities involved in the use of Egyptian characters for expressing the Hebrew language and Israelite culture appear to have been among the problems Mormon and his son encountered in reading the old plates and composing a clear historical record. An additional cause of “imperfections” the Nephite writer reported could have been that since hieratic Egyptian was mainly used to write cursively, its use to engrave a record on the medium of metal plates could mean that minor slips of an engraver’s hand without an effective “eraser” at hand to make corrections could result in misreadings of the characters.<sup>9</sup>

An even more serious problem for an accurate history would have been the fact that the Nephite annal keepers at tribal headquarters lacked, as far as we can tell, any reliable social apparatus for obtaining information about events taking place outside the capital. Their accounts could well have omitted information we would like to have seen included. There is no indication that such an institution as a system of messengers was in use. Nor was there any “press” they could consult, so they must have had to rely to a considerable extent on casual reports (and no doubt rumors) about salient events conveyed to them by merchants or itinerant travelers. A glimpse of the problem this ad hoc reporting system imposed on Nephite scribes is seen in the case of Helaman<sub>2</sub>’s report in Alma 56 to 58 of events that had taken place in his sector of the war against the Lamanites. His lengthy letter was the only news commander Moroni received of matters on that front in approximately four years. When Helaman periodically pled in messages to authorities in Zarahemla for more

men and supplies to reinforce his beleaguered forces, what he said was never communicated to the chief commander, stationed on another front. Probably neither did his reports ever reach whoever was in charge of the annals at that time. At least the larger plates of Nephi seem not to have included any record of Helaman's operations. If such loose handling of the report of a vital military action was the case, it is even more likely that communications of lesser urgency would have been treated offhandedly.

### Other Sources

Supplementary documents were used at certain points in creating Mormon's narrative. As noted previously, accounts prepared by earlier writers existed in the Nephite library under their own names, either as "books" that were part of the comprehensive larger plates of Nephi's record or as stand-alone documents. Mormon sometimes referred to these sources. He noted at one point his dependence upon "[Alma's] own record" (Alma 5:2; chapter 7, heading; 35:16).



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Contemporary with Lehi, this bronze tablet from the reign of Pharaoh Necho (610–595 bc) bears Necho's name and, in the hieroglyphs of the inscription, wishes him a long life. Äfig 2000.3.



He also phrased his account utilizing “the records of Helaman” and “of his sons” (Helaman, heading), and we also read of the “record of Nephi<sub>[3]</sub>” (3 Nephi 5:10).

These references leave unclear whether the records referred to were on physically separate sets of plates or whether they were merely sections in the expanding plates of Nephi. (The second option appears likely in the case of 4 Nephi, where verse 19 says that Nephi kept this “last record” “upon the plates of Nephi.”)

Sometimes Mormon also depended on other original writings that appear to be behind or beyond the annals, some of which he did not distinctly

- Alma’s first-person preaching at Zarahemla, Gideon, and Melek quoted in Alma 5, 7, and 8;
- the story of Alma’s and Amulek’s experiences at Ammonihah in Alma 9 through 14;
- the detailed account of the ministry of the sons of Mosiah and their companions among the Lamanites in the land of Nephi and thereabouts, given to us in Alma 17 through 27;
- Alma’s discourses to his sons Helaman, Shiblon, and Corianton (“according to his own record,” Alma 35:16) in Alma 36 through 42;
- Moroni’s translation and abstract of Ether’s history of the Jaredites, prepared and appended by Moroni as the book of Ether; and
- Moroni’s excerpts from the writings of his father, Moroni 7 through 9.

At times Mormon’s sources provide mysteriously detailed information. We are left to infer that he had the advantage of writings by unacknowledged participants whose records are very unlikely to have found a place on the plates of Nephi. Obvious examples are the stories, as noted above, of the assassination of both the Lamanite rebel leader Lehonti and the Lamanite king, and related events (Alma 47). A particularly strange point of interest is the experience of the Nephite multitude with the risen Savior as recorded in 3 Nephi 19. As his disciples were rapt in prayer to him, he made statements to them (vv. 35–36) that, presumably, they did not consciously perceive, yet the account records his words. How were they documented?

At yet other times Mormon appears to make historical inferences on the basis of quite general information. An instance is the sweeping assertion in 3 Nephi 5:1 that “there was not a living soul among all the people of the Nephites who did doubt in the least the words of all the holy prophets who had spoken.” Also the assertion at 3 Nephi 6:27–28 about the power and procedures of the secret groups of lawyers and high priests is not likely to have been based on information from directly knowledgeable informants. Moreover, Mormon could only have guessed that Jacob<sub>3</sub>, “seeing that their enemies were more numerous than they, he being the king of the band, therefore he commanded his people that they should take their flight into the northernmost part of the land, and there build up unto themselves a



The only suitable technology available at the time of Mormon to create a lasting record called for inscribing on thin metal sheets.

identify. Some cases where information from supplementary records were seemingly of this sort include

- the text of King Benjamin’s great discourse, Mosiah 2:9 through chapter 5;
- the record on the plates of Zeniff with the account found in Mosiah 9 through 22;

kingdom, until they were joined by dissenters . . . and they become sufficiently strong to contend with the tribes of the people” (3 Nephi 7:12). It is safe to suppose that no one would have left such a record in the Nephite archive.

Even in those cases where we can identify written sources for what Mormon wrote, the question remains how the original scribes obtained *their* information and how reliable *their* “facts” were. In many cases, obviously, they reported what they personally had observed. That mode of reporting is especially visible in the book of Omni from the smaller plates, where only a barely discernible thread of history shows through. But the important elements of history are rarely so clearly discernible that an eyewitness can assess their significance.

A serious historiographic issue would have arisen in the keeping of the tribal history as the Nephite population grew and society became more varied and more urbanized. The primary historians dwelt in the city of Zarahemla or some other major center. Did they have access to systematic, reliable reports of events taking place at a distance? They give no indication that they did. It is obvious that whatever they learned about events away from their own bailiwick must have been restricted. Moreover, that which was recorded in the annals on the large plates of Nephi must always have included a filtering, subjective interpretation by the scribes of what was deemed important to record.

When we read Ammon’s résumé to his brothers of the conditions attending their decision to minister among the Lamanites, we learn that when they announced their intention to the people at Zarahemla, the populace greeted their proposal with scorn and with a recommendation that the Nephites should instead launch an attack to destroy those incorrigible Lamanite cousins (Alma 26:23–25). But of this information Mormon’s edited version (Mosiah 28:1–8) gives us no hint. Meanwhile, as noted previously, the campaign by Helaman’s young warriors and allied forces against Lamanite armies in the Manti-to-Antiparah sector remained completely unknown even to chief commander Moroni for at least four years (Alma 56:1, 7; 59:1–2). In addition, when the boy Mormon journeyed from his land-northward home to Zarahemla for the first time, he was shocked to discover that “the whole face of the

land had become covered with buildings, and the people were as numerous almost, as it were the sand of the sea” (Mormon 1:7). Obviously, conditions in one land were not well known even in other places not far away. And when Alma’s son Corianton resettled in the land northward, only a modest distance from Zarahemla, he was abruptly dropped from the narrative as though he had gone to another planet (Alma 63:10–11). Clearly, factual reports of events and situations beyond the capital were in many cases lacking, so Mormon’s history must be seen as a minimal record at best. That is, at *his* best.

A minor kind of mistake is of the sort that every historian and writer encounters at times. Whether they come from a poor memory or errors caused by errant hands (the equivalent of modern “typos”), no writer can avoid a certain number of “slips of the stylus.” They may be among the “faults” alluded to by Moroni on the title page of the Book of Mormon that

The key sacred records were kept on metal to ensure their permanence; accounts kept on any more perishable substance would, they assumed, become unreadable over time.

are “the mistakes of men.” They include the erroneous report of the capture of the city of Nephiah (Alma 51:26; contrast 59:5), and a mistake where the same event is said in one passage to have taken place in the twenty-sixth year of the judges (Alma 56:9) and in another in the twenty-eighth year (Alma 53:22–23).<sup>10</sup> Such flaws show the human side of the historian’s task, although they need not cause us any serious problem in reading the account.

### The Record Mormon Wrote

The key sacred records were kept on metal to ensure their permanence; accounts kept on any more perishable substance would, they assumed, become unreadable over time (Jacob 4:2). The use of copies of the scriptures on paper for everyday use is implied by the burning of those in the possession of Alma’s converts at Ammonihah (Alma 14:8; compare Mosiah 2:8; 29:4; and Alma 63:12). Metal plates were



not easy to manufacture (Mormon 8:5) and engrave, so they were in limited supply.

Drawing on the varied written materials available to him, Mormon composed his history “according to the knowledge and the understanding which God” had given him (Words of Mormon 1:9). Divine assistance was sometimes direct and specific, as in the case where the Lord instructed him not to include a lengthier treatment of the teachings of Jesus to the Nephites, but no indication is given that additional historical information was revealed to him.

The process of his becoming a historian had its beginning when Mormon was ten years old and living in the Nephite land northward. He was approached at that time by Ammaron, the last previous custodian of the Nephite archive. Amid growing unrighteousness among his people, that old man had buried up all the records in his possession (4 Nephi 1:48). He charged youthful Mormon that when he reached the age of twenty-four, he should go to the designated records cache and recover from it the (larger) plates of Nephi. Moroni was told to add to the Nephite annals “all the things that ye have observed concerning this people” (Mormon 1:4) over the fourteen-year interval. In time Mormon became chief captain over the Nephite armies and was able to do as he was instructed by Ammaron (Mormon 2:17).

Mormon’s editing activity was carried out under limitations of time and conditions that were at best highly inconvenient for writing a history.

Mormon gave the following explanation of how he proceeded with his writing project:

After I had made an abridgment from the plates of Nephi, down to the reign of . . . king Benjamin, . . . I searched among the records which had been delivered into my hands, and I found . . . plates [unquestionably among other sets of plates], which contained this small account of the prophets, from Jacob down to the reign of this king Benjamin, and also many of the words of Nephi. . . . [However, the] remainder of my record I shall take from the [larger] plates of Nephi . . . which had been handed down by the kings, from generation to generation. . . . And they were handed down from king Benjamin, from generation to generation until they have fallen into my hands. (Words of Mormon 1:3, 5, 10–11)

Mormon said several times that his abridgment could not treat more than a fraction of the historical material found on the large plates of Nephi (Words of Mormon 1:5; Jacob 3:13–14; 4:1; 3 Nephi 5:8; 26:6). How, then, did he make his selection of materials among the records he set out to abridge? His primary criterion comes through repeatedly in his book. The aim was to ensure that his readers, especially the future inhabitants of the American promised land and particularly Lehi’s descendants, grasp the significance for them of the promise and prophecy given to father Lehi: “Inasmuch as ye will keep my commandments ye shall prosper in the land” (Jarom 1:9). Actually, it is Amaron’s *negative* version of Lehi’s dictum to which Mormon gives prime attention: “Inasmuch as ye will *not* keep my commandments ye shall *not* prosper in the land” (Omni 1:6). Even the long sections on warfare emphasize that theme; overwhelmingly, Mormon’s writings depict the Nephites poised on the edge of destruction due to their failure to meet the condition of Lehi’s law of survival. He uses little of his narrative to describe people’s happiness and prosperity. Details of the society in the era of peace following the appearance of Christ among them might interest us, but that was not the point he wanted to underline in his history.

His lessons draw the contrast between good and evil dramatically. His characters emphasize the opposites of obedience and virtue on the one hand versus stubborn villainy on the other. His scoundrels are thoroughly evil and deserve their fates; his heroes are praiseworthy in almost all respects. Sometimes the contrasts are almost over the top. The bad guys inhabiting the city of Ammonihah are wiped out *to a man* by a Lamanite army, while the virtuous young warriors under Helaman *all* survive their key battle. Characters in the gray zone of morality are barely noted. Mormon wanted to leave no question in the minds of his readers that good is capital-G Good, and Bad is its polar opposite (note Mormon’s own words on the contrast in Moroni 7:5–19).

How objectively factual were the reports by the original scribes? In many cases, obviously, they put down what they had directly observed, but our experience tells us that different people see the same event or situation in quite different ways. Mormon himself certainly colored some of his reporting with personal interpretation. This stance is often signaled

by use of a phrase like “and thus we see” (for instance, in Helaman 3:23-31; 4:11-15, 20-26).<sup>11</sup>

### A Sample of Sources

To examine an actual portion of the text displays the complexity of Mormon’s use of ultimate and intermediate sources more clearly than a general discussion. Table 1 lays out twenty-seven factual assertions from Helaman 1 through 3 with my suggestions of the sources Mormon relied on for each.

My interpretation in this table of possible sources may, of course, be in error. It might be that some of the record keepers wrote much more detail on the large plates about certain incidents than seems generally to have been the case, although there is no direct evidence for such exceptionalism, and we still could not explain how the factual information reached the annalist. It seems to me more likely that where lengthy, specific details are included in the narrative, Mormon must have supplemented the primary record by seeking out further facts from one detailed source or another in his archive. I suspect that in some cases his personal curiosity was so piqued that he was motivated to search out “the rest of the story.”

### Summary

1. Mormon’s editing activity was carried out under limitations of time and conditions that were at best highly inconvenient for writing a history.
2. He was forced to rely on the official archive of his people for his data. The basic source for his narrative was “the [larger] plates of Nephi.”
3. These plates were an open-ended master historical record consisting of successive entries engraved by official scribes on metal plates. Major subdivisions consisted of “books” named after primary record keepers that were added throughout Nephite history.
4. Apparently all the Nephite historical documents in Mormon’s possession were written in a script derived from Egyptian hieratic. The nature of this system was such that scribes encountered difficulty in expressing clearly some information and perhaps in reading earlier records with complete assurance.
5. The fundamental format of the master record was annals—yearly summaries of the most salient events known to the record keepers at the chief Nephite centers.
6. The ultimate sources and authors of information processed into this annals format are unspecified; the relevant facts seem to have been assembled by the annalists only in an unsystematic and probably subjective manner.
7. Some of Mormon’s material beyond that in the annals likely came from extended writings of the early primary record keepers that they interlaced with their annal entries.
8. Still other records or documents were also kept in varying detail, at times on different metal plates; a large number were accumulated in the Nephite record collection that Mormon possessed. (Lamanites only occasionally kept written records but had no archive that was mentioned by Nephite scribes.)
9. Rarely, short periods of history were written up by the scribes from their personal recollections, possibly with the aid of records kept on perishable materials.
10. Mormon (and Moroni) supplemented his record from the annals by adding material from other documents found in the archive.
11. Mormon acted as far more than an editor in compiling his account; he included comments that interpreted the significance of his materials and filled in gaps in his data with observations about general social and historical situations and trends as he understood them.
12. At no point is there reason to think that Mormon “manufactured” any history. All indications are that what he wrote was fundamentally based on documentary sources available to him.
13. At a few points we are unable to identify the sources for the pieces of information he used.

It is clear that the creation of the Book of Mormon was a complicated business. Consider the

In some ways his inspired accomplishment in producing the Book of Mormon was just as surprising and admirable as Joseph Smith’s later achievement in translating the record in such short order.



Reference	Year of the Judges	Content	Writer	Source
Helaman heading	{AD 375?}	Summary of Helaman	Mormon	Self
1:9–10	40	Judge assassinated	Mormon	A servant?
1:11–12	40	Kishkumen cabal	Mormon	Informant?
1:14–15	41	Lamanites armed	Mormon	Annals
1:16–17	41	Lamanite leaders	Mormon	Prisoner informant?
1:18–21	41	Conquests	Mormon	Annals
1:22	41	Coriantumr's objective	Mormon	Inference?
1:23–24	41	Coriantumr heads to Bountiful	Mormon	Annals
1:25–33	41	Moronihah intercepts	Mormon	Moronihah record?
2:1–2	42	Contention; succession; Helaman seated	Mormon	Annals
2:3–9	42	Kishkumen slain	Mormon	Servant informant?
2:10–12	42	Plotters escape	Mormon	Annals
2:12–14	{AD 375?}	Record ahead	Mormon	Self
3:1	43	Year summary	Helaman	Annals
3:2	44 45	Year summaries	Helaman	Annals
3:3–4	46	Dissent; migration to land northward	Helaman	Annals
3:5–13	46	Timber; cement; shipping	Helaman	Annals
3:14–16	{AD 375?}	Records; Nephites mix with Lamanites	Mormon	Self
3:17–18	46	Year summary	Helaman	Annals
3:19	47 48	Year summaries	Helaman	Annals
3:20–22	48	Helaman a just judge; two sons grow	Helaman	Helaman memoir?
3:23	49	Peace, except scattered Gadiantons	Helaman	Annals
3:24–31	49	Peace; church grows	Helaman	Annals
3:32	49 50	Year summaries	Helaman	Annals
3:33–35	51	Pride; persecution	Helaman	Annals
3:36	52	Pride; wealth	Helaman	Annals
3:37	53	New just judge	Helaman	Annals

Table 1. Helaman 1–3, analysis of sources

pressure of time on Mormon through the steps he had to follow

- to manufacture the plates he would use,
- to read through the larger set of plates,
- to conceptualize the structure of his volume,
- to decide what core information he would include,
- to seek out supplementary data from the archive on events of particular concern,
- to compose the text in the light of the interpretive framework he had decided to impose on the contents, and
- to engrave the account on the plates.

The combination of all those tasks was a daunting feat, especially given the “field” conditions in which he had to work and his competing duties in commanding his forces as they prepared for the final battle. That he did not find occasion to clarify exactly how he proceeded in his editing or “abridgment” is not surprising.

In some ways his inspired accomplishment in producing the Book of Mormon was just as surprising and admirable as Joseph Smith’s later achievement in translating the record in such short order. And

Mormon did not seem to use a sacred implement like the “interpreters” in his creation task!

Mormon and Moroni present their “brief” record to their future readers as a unique kind of interpretative history. They conferred it on the ages to come not as a historian’s history but as a powerful moral message intended to school readers in the lessons the two men had learned in long, arduous service to their people and to their God. They used the best sources they had available in the most efficacious way they knew how. The labor and dedication their work displays have been for our gain and for that of their descendants.

They have my profound thanks. ■



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## NOTES

1. Compare Kerry Muhlestein, “Insights Available as We Approach the Original Text,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 15/1 (2006): 63–64.
2. John A. Tvedtnes and Stephen D. Ricks, “Jewish and Other Semitic Texts Written in Egyptian Characters,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 5/2 (1996): 156–63; and John A. Tvedtnes, “Linguistic Implications of the Tel-Arad Ostraca,” *Newsletter and Proceedings of the Society for Early Historic Archaeology* 127 (1971).
3. B. H. Roberts, *New Witnesses for God* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1909), 2:72.
4. John S. Thompson, “Lehi and Egypt,” in *Glimpses of Lehi’s Jerusalem*, ed. John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann H. Seely (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2004), 259–76.
5. John L. Sorenson, “The ‘Brass Plates’ and Biblical Scholarship,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 10/4 (1977): 31–39.
6. John Gee, “Two Notes on Egyptian Script,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 5/1 (1996): 162–76.
7. John Gee, “Egyptian Society during the Twenty-Sixth Dynasty,” in Welch, Seely, and Seely, *Glimpses of Lehi’s Jerusalem*, 282.
8. Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader’s Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 292 n. 34.
9. Compare Mary Lee Treat, “No Erasers,” in *Recent Book of Mormon Developments: Articles from the Zarahemla Record* (Independence, MO: Zarahemla Research Foundation, 1984), 1:54; and Dennis Heater, “More ‘No Erasers’ in the Book of Mormon,” in *Recent Book of Mormon Developments: Articles from the Zarahemla Record* (Independence, MO: Zarahemla Research Foundation, 1992), 2:197–200.
10. See John L. Sorenson, “The Significance of the Chronological Discrepancy between Alma 53:22 and Alma 56:9,” FARMS Paper SOR-90b (Provo, UT, 1990).
11. George A. Horton Jr., “And Thus We See,” in *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, ed. Dennis L. Largey (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 57–59.