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Two Authors: Two Approaches in the Book of Mormon

Brant A. Gardner

THE TWO BOOK OF MORMON AUTHORS from whom we have the largest amount of text are Nephi and Mormon. Nephi established the Nephite tradition of keeping records, which Mormon used as his source material for his work nearly a thousand years later. While both similarly wrote to promote what Nephi called the ministry (1 Nephi 9:3), each differed in the way he constructed his narrative about that ministry.

Nephi's historical framework is thickly interwoven with his declaration of the incarnation of the Messiah (which Joseph Smith translated as Christ). He records that his father "saw One descending out of the midst of heaven. . . . And he also saw twelve others following him" (1 Nephi 1:9–10). When Lehi first related his dream of the tree of life, his explanation led him to declare "a prophet would the Lord God raise up among the Jews—even a Messiah, or, in other words, a Savior of the world" (1 Nephi 10:4). Nephi's personal experience with his father's dream and subsequent expansion also led directly to a discussion of the Messiah, but in Nephi's case the account more explicitly identified that it would be the premortal Jehovah who would descend to become the Messiah.¹ The teaching emphasis of Nephi's ministry was the atoning

1. Nephi's argument for the Eternal God becoming Christ is explicit in his discussion of the meaning of his father's tree of life vision. See 1 Nephi 11. For a discussion of Nephi's understanding of the Messiah as God, see Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 1:214–22.

mission of the Messiah, the premortal Jehovah who would condescend to come to earth.

For Mormon, the title page explicitly declares his intent: “to the convincing of the Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the Christ, the Eternal God, manifesting himself unto all nations.” Perhaps reflecting Nephi’s and Mormon’s temporal existence before and after Christ’s earthly ministry, Nephi’s theme declaring that Jehovah (the Eternal God) would manifest himself as Jesus (the Messiah) was reversed in Mormon’s work. Mormon declared that Jesus is the (Messiah), the Eternal God. Nephi emphasized the coming of the atoning Messiah while Mormon emphasized the risen Messiah’s appearance and teaching in Bountiful.

Other subtle differences hide behind the two prophets’ similarities. Each structured his account according to books named after an important individual. Nephi began the tradition by naming his two books “the book of Nephi.”² That set the precedent for the tradition concerning the small plates. Each book was named for its author until the book of Omni, which contained multiple writers. The tradition that Mormon employed on the large plates also associated books with names, suggesting that Nephi initiated that custom. However, rather than naming each book for its author, Mormon appears to have named the records in the large plates according to dynastic changes.³ Nephi might have begun both traditions, but the two separate records developed independently. The small plates became associated with the person inheriting the task of keeping the record, while the large plates, the record of the kings (see 1 Nephi 9:4), used the founder of the dynasty as the collective name for all events pertaining to that dynasty.

Both Nephi and Mormon used other sources as they created their accounts. Mormon drew on the material on the large plates, and Nephi declared: “After I have abridged the record of my father then will I make

2. Our modern designation of 1 and 2 Nephi was added to the manuscript and was not part of the original dictation.

3. Brant A. Gardner, “Mormon’s Editorial Method and Meta-Message,” *FARMS Review* 21/1 (2009): 87–90.

an account of mine own life” (1 Nephi 1:17).⁴ Nephi also quotes from the brass plates. The manner in which they utilized their sources differs.

Nephi must have consulted his father’s record at a number of points, but when it is clear that he is referencing that source, the majority of the text is Nephi’s summary, with small quotations used for emphasis. For example, in 1 Nephi 1:5–15 Nephi relates his father’s vision of God and of the descending Messiah. Of the eleven verses describing that event, only two contain a quotation from his father. In the remainder of the verses, Nephi narrates his father’s story.⁵

Mormon interacts differently with his source texts, inserting large quotations that are linked with his explanatory texts, or narrations of the events, which transition to the next quotation. A block of text similar in length to the passage in 1 Nephi appears in Mosiah 1:1–14. This passage as prepared by Mormon has ten verses of direct quotation and four of Mormon’s text. The first two verses set up the quotation, and in verses 8 and 9 Mormon appears to move from the first quotation to the second by bridging over text he intentionally skipped in the source record.

Nephi’s use of the brass plates differs from the way he used his father’s record. Whereas he references his father’s record and quotes a little from it, Nephi quotes extensively from the brass plates. The extensive direct quotations from Isaiah are ample demonstration that Nephi did not hesitate to copy from another source when it fit his purposes. For Nephi, those purposes were doctrinal explication. Nephi presents large chunks of text (very large in 2 Nephi) and then uses those texts to provide themes for his doctrinal exposition.⁶

4. For a discussion of Lehi’s record, see S. Kent Brown, “Recovering the Missing Record of Lehi,” in *From Jerusalem to Zarahemla: Literary and Historical Studies of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1998), 28–54.

5. That Nephi could have quoted more from his father is evident: “He [Lehi] did exclaim many things unto the Lord; such as . . .” (1 Nephi 1:14). Nephi selected only certain statements from the clearly more detailed information on his father’s record and restates them more often than quotes them.

6. Although Nephi’s text following the quoted Isaiah chapters is often called his commentary on those chapters, Nephi uses Isaiah as a foundation for a more complex

In contrast, Mormon clearly does not hesitate to quote from his sources, but he does not directly quote scripture (the brass plates). The sermons he records may themselves quote scripture, but Mormon himself does not, nor does he comment on scripture. Mormon comments on the quotations from his source text, the collection of large plates. Mormon is the historian/editor who links together the quoted texts in such a way as to demonstrate his larger purpose, but his theological points are made through intermediaries who deal with the scriptures rather than direct citation. We do not see much of Mormon as theologian until Moroni 7 and 8; in these chapters Mormon's son Moroni includes two letters Mormon wrote that Mormon had never intended to be part of his masterwork.

Lastly, the relationship of both authors to a preconceived outline or concept is similar, but with a complication. First Nephi is very clearly a planned text and was written after Nephi had already created the dynastic record. In 2 Nephi 5:28, he declares that he is writing thirty years after they had left Jerusalem. He certainly had the time to prepare what he would write in this second set of plates. Careful examination of the way Nephi constructed his text shows intricate planning at least during the creation of his first book on the small plates.⁷ Mormon certainly worked from at least an outline. The headnotes he wrote describe the information to come in that book. At times he deviates from his outline and then returns to it.⁸

The difference comes in how well both men adhered to their outline. Mormon's conception of his book drove the writing and his selections

discussion rather than an explication as we expect from a commentary. Nephi reworks the themes he first described in his vision of the tree of life with Isaiah as the source rather than his father's dream. The analysis of the way Isaiah is used as a new foundation for those themes is found throughout the commentary on 2 Nephi 25–30 as found in Gardner, *Second Witness*, 2:324–431.

7. I looked at the construction of Nephi's text in a series of blog posts entitled "Musings on the Making of Mormon's Book," posted separately and periodically at www.mormoninterpreter.com.

8. Brant A. Gardner, "Mormon's Editorial Method and Meta-Message," *FARMS Review* 21/1 (2009): 84–87.

from first to last. His foresight even led him to instruct Moroni how to complete the writing Mormon was unable to finish after Cumorah (Mormon 8:1).

For Nephi, we have the structurally complex book we call 2 Nephi. Even a cursory reading of 2 Nephi shows it to be quite different from 1 Nephi. Although chapters 1–5 appear to follow the model established in 1 Nephi, chapter 6 abruptly changes into something entirely different. Nephi, who had rarely quoted from another source to this point, quotes a sermon from his brother Jacob. There is no transition from the more historical information at the end of chapter 5. In fact, the end of chapter 5 has a tone of finality:

And I, Nephi, had kept the records upon my plates, which I had made, of my people thus far.

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.

And it sufficeth me to say that forty years had passed away, and we had already had wars and contentions with our brethren. (2 Nephi 5:29–34)

The addition of the Isaiah chapters is also awkward. Where Mormon displays a consistent control of his purpose from beginning to end, Nephi's purpose is clear at the beginning but fades to obscurity in 2 Nephi. Nephi certainly continues to write important and inspiring things, but the clear focus of his textual mission fades, and perhaps even changes, after 2 Nephi, chapter 5.

The two great writers of the Book of Mormon were quite different in their approaches to their similar task. Above and beyond the importance of what they wrote for our spiritual welfare, we can see in their writings glimpses into the personalities and intentions of the two men who stand at the beginning and the end of the Book of Mormon.

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