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**Abstract** Gardner examines the timeline and process that Mormon plausibly underwent when he compiled and added to the Book of Mormon. Mormon's message is the cycle of history—the Messiah will come again.

## MORMON'S EDITORIAL METHOD AND META-MESSAGE

Brant A. Gardner

Mormon was charged with the task of keeping the plates of Nephi when he was ten years old. He did not receive the records until he was twenty-four, but he spent the next fifty to sixty years of his life writing on them, thinking about them, and eventually writing a book that condensed what he understood to be their most essential message. We cannot know when Mormon changed from chronicler to author, but we can reconstruct a plausible time line.

In the 345th year after the birth of the Savior, Mormon removed at least some of the plates of Nephi from the hill Shim (Mormon 2:16–17). He doesn't tell us the extent of the plates he removed at this time, but it is improbable that they were the full set of the "plates of Nephi," although he explicitly tells us that these were the very plates on which other record keepers had written (v. 18). At this time, he records that "upon [these] plates of Nephi I did make a full account of all the wickedness and abominations." It is on these plates that Mormon will fulfill his duties as national scribe. He has not yet begun what we know as the Book of Mormon.

We next see the full collection of plates in the 367th year,<sup>1</sup> when Mormon was forty-six. At that time he again retrieves plates from

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This paper was originally presented at the Tenth Annual Mormon Apologetics Conference, sponsored by the Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research (FAIR), held in Sandy, Utah, on 7–8 August 2008.

1. The years are based on my calculations of the correlation of Nephite years to the modern calendar. See Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual*

the hill Shim because the land is being overrun by the Lamanites (Mormon 4:23). A plausible scenario, then, has Mormon writing as a chronicler or regular record keeper for twenty-two years on the large plates of Nephi. He could not compose his own book without access to the complete records from Shim—and he apparently did not acquire them until the 367th year.

For the next thirteen years, Mormon probably read and digested those records, possibly taking notes and certainly preparing an outline or rough draft. He then began writing the work we have as our Book of Mormon at least by AD 379 (Mormon 5:5, 9), when he was fifty-eight years old, and continued through early AD 385. He died sometime after that date and before AD 391, by which time Moroni was writing.

### Mormon's Outline

Several clues in Mormon's text bear evidence that he had at least created a full outline of his work before he began the task of committing his abridgment to the plates. Perhaps the most obvious evidence is the chapter headnotes. The extant portion of the original manuscript preserves synoptic headnotes for Helaman and 3 Nephi,<sup>2</sup> confirming that the 1830 edition's headnotes were part of the translation and were not added in the preparation of the printer's manuscript, when Joseph Smith or Oliver Cowdery could have created them from their reading of the original. As a representation of information from the plates, the headnotes indicate that Mormon wrote them before he wrote the chapters and therefore had to know the contents of each coming chapter before he began to write it.<sup>3</sup>

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*Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 1:188–89.

2. Based on my examination of the original manuscript as reproduced in Royal Skousen, ed., *The Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon: Typographical Facsimile of the Extant Text* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2001), 1:487, 512.

3. The best confirmation that the headnotes preceded the chapters in sequence of composition comes in Nephi's writings, not Mormon's. Nephi's headnote for 2 Nephi covers material only up to chapter 5 (in our current edition), at which point Nephi begins

The majority of the headnotes are at the beginning of named books. In the small plates, they appear only at the beginning of 1 Nephi, 2 Nephi, and Jacob. In Mormon's editing of the large plates, they appear at the beginning of every book but Mosiah. A headnote's absence there is understandable because the lost 116 pages apparently included at least the first chapter of Mosiah. I feel fairly safe in concluding that the book of Mosiah would have had such a headnote, given Mormon's consistency in the remainder of the books he edited.

In contrast, there are no headnotes for Mormon, Ether (the current headnote is a modern addition and is not present in the 1830 edition), or Moroni—three books that Mormon did not edit. His consistency in adding headnotes to the books he edited suggests that he had some clear plan of what he was going to include in each book he edited.<sup>4</sup> When Mormon switched to his own record, it was no longer a part of the planned text and therefore does not have a synoptic headnote.

Although there is evidence for an outline, there is also evidence that Mormon did not simply copy a previously written text onto the plates. While he certainly copied the various sermons from his source material, in his own text he allowed himself to interact with the information he was writing. We often see Mormon depart from his outline on a tangent occasioned by thinking about the material he was writing. The evidence both for the asides and for the outline from which they diverged comes in the way he returns to his task. In order to reset his narrative to the outline, Mormon repeated at least the idea, and often much of the language, of the last part of the outline before the departure.

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a more stream-of-consciousness approach to the plates, leaving behind the outline that he used to create his text.

4. In Mosiah 28:19, Mormon tells us that "this account shall be written hereafter," clearly indicating that he planned to add that material at a later time. A similar foreshadowing occurs in Helaman 2:13–14: "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. 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." Thus in the book of Helaman, Mormon discusses material that would come in the next book (3 Nephi). In addition, the data on repetitive resumption (discussed in the following paragraphs) suggests that Mormon's return to the planned material is *de facto* evidence that a planned structure existed.

I had noticed this process in the text well before I had a name to identify it, which (thanks to David Bokovoy) I now have. Bokovoy relates the technique as it is known from the Old Testament: “Repetitive resumption refers to an editor’s return to an original narrative following a deliberate interlude. Old Testament writers accomplished this by repeating a key word or phrase that immediately preceded the textual interruption.”<sup>5</sup>

One example is found in Alma 17:13, where Mormon tells us that when the sons of Mosiah came to the “borders of the land of the Lamanites, . . . they separated themselves and departed one from another.” Then Mormon diverts to a diatribe against the Lamanites and why the sons of Mosiah really needed to preach to them. When Mormon returns to his outlined narrative in verse 17, he writes, “Therefore they separated themselves one from another, and went forth among them.”

Also in Alma, we find a repetition that is much closer to the initial idea:

And it came to pass that the curse was not taken off of Korihor; but he was cast out, **and went about from house to house begging for his food.** Now the knowledge of what had happened unto Korihor was immediately published throughout all the land; yea, the proclamation was sent forth by the chief judge to all the people in the land, declaring unto those who had believed in the words of Korihor that they must speedily repent, lest the same judgments would come unto them. And it came to pass that they were all convinced of the wickedness of Korihor; therefore they were all converted again unto the Lord; and this put an end to the iniquity after the manner of Korihor. **And Korihor did go about from house to house, begging food for his support.** (Alma 30:56–58, emphasis added)<sup>6</sup>

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5. David E. Bokovoy, “Repetitive Resumption in the Book of Mormon,” *Insights* 27/1 (2007): 2.

6. That the text shows examples of repetitive resumption is clear, but less clear may be whether Mormon created the textual interruptions or whether they existed in the text from which he took his account. Of course, without the original text, there can be no

This passage suggests to me that Mormon first followed his outline, which required the point that Korihor was begging for food. This is the textual idea that will move the narrative from the story of Korihor to the story of the Zoramites. Mormon then decided to cover the repentance following the cursing—apparently an aside he inserted during his writing on the plates. In order to return to his planned narrative, Mormon repeated the information about Korihor begging for his food, even though the original phrase wasn't that far away in the text.

Whereas the Old Testament editors used repetitive resumption to return to an original narrative after a deliberate interruption, Mormon seems to have used this device to return to his outline after a spontaneous interruption.

## Mormon's Sources and the Construction of His Text

### *Book Names*

How much of Mormon's sources is preserved in his outline and text? We can tentatively suggest, based on indirect evidence, what features came from the source plates and which of them are Mormon's own contributions. Mormon tells us that his main source is the "plates of Nephi." The most obvious feature of the Book of Mormon is the text's division into books carrying a man's name. These book names indicate they were original to the plates and were not the result of Mormon's editing.

Our Book of Mormon is not the book that Mormon intended we have. The material from Nephi to Words of Mormon was added to replace what was lost of Mormon's work. Joseph Smith indicated that the lost 116 pages of dictated manuscript comprised the book of Lehi.<sup>7</sup> Mormon's work, as originally conceived, would have followed this

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positive answer. However, the occasions where we see repetitive resumption are summary statements, and the interjections are in Mormon's voice. The literary context suggests that this is Mormon's redaction of the original material, his interjection, and then his return to his planned text, which is still summarized from the large plates rather than copied from them.

7. Book of Mormon (1830; repr., Independence, MO: Herald Publishing House, 1970), 1.

order of books: Lehi, Mosiah, Alma, Helaman, Nephi (our 3 Nephi),<sup>8</sup> Nephi (our 4 Nephi), and Mormon.<sup>9</sup>

As with the holographic small plates (1 Nephi–Omni), Mormon’s abridgment continues to associate the names of people with individual books, though not according to the pattern of naming books by the principal author. Many books contain the records of several important people:

- The Book of Lehi: Contained the record of Lehi, Nephi, and unknown rulers until the reign of Mosiah—altogether covering a period of nearly four hundred years.
- The Book of Mosiah: Contains the record of Mosiah the first, Benjamin, Mosiah the second, and Alma the Elder.
- The Book of Alma: Contains the record of Alma the Younger and Helaman the Elder.
- The Book of Helaman: Contains the record of Helaman the Younger and Nephi, son of Helaman the Younger.

Clearly the book names do not change based on the writers or prophets associated with them. On what principle do they change?

Important information comes from the transition between the book of Alma and the book of Helaman. The book of Alma contains the writings of Alma the Younger (but not his father) and Helaman. The book of Helaman starts with Helaman, son of Helaman. In Alma

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8. Because our books of 1 and 2 Nephi were not included in his original compilation, Mormon certainly would not have named this book “3 Nephi.” Rather, what we now have as the third book of Nephi would have been the first to appear in Mormon’s text. The evidence from the 1830 edition tells us that 1 Nephi, 2 Nephi, 3 Nephi, and 4 Nephi were not originally identified by numbers. In Mormon’s work, 1 and 2 Nephi were simply titled “The Book of Nephi.” The same title applied to 3 and 4 Nephi, but those books were further identified by genealogy (with capitalization regularized): “The Book of Nephi the Son of Nephi Which Was the Son of Helaman . . .” and “The Book of Nephi Which Is the Son of Nephi One of the Disciples of Jesus Christ.” See Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon, Part One: Title Page, Witness Statements, 1 Nephi–2 Nephi 10* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2004), 42; see also the renderings of book names in Skousen’s facsimiles of the original and printer’s manuscripts.

9. The book of Moroni is clearly an addition to Mormon’s record. Moroni finishes his father’s work by completing the book of Mormon. He then added his own abridgment of the writings of Ether and concluded with his pseudonymous book, neither of which his father had conceived.



63:11 we learn that the plates have been given to Helaman the Younger. In Helaman 2:2 we learn that he is appointed to sit as chief judge. His father was not a sitting chief judge, although his grandfather (Alma the Younger) had been. Alma the Younger, who had relinquished the judgment seat to devote his efforts to preaching the gospel, had the records and took them with him. When his son, Helaman the Elder, received the plates, both father and son were outside the political line. When the new book begins with Helaman the Younger, it is a new book in the hands of a new lineage of sitting judges. This suggests the hypothesis that the change in book names is related to the shift in the ruling lines. Does the theory hold up?

The first book of the large plates was the book of Lehi. Nephi indicated that those plates contained “an account of the reign of the kings” (1 Nephi 9:4). After Nephi there were other kings who received the throne name of “Nephi” (Jacob 1:11), so we must suppose that the large plates contained the records of these “Nephites.” Even though we don’t have the 116 lost pages, we know that the book of Lehi continued until the next named book, the book of Mosiah. What happens between the book of Lehi and the book of Mosiah? Omni 1:12–14 tells us that Mosiah the first flees the city of Nephi with the plates and becomes king in Zarahemla. He is a new king in a new place. He is the founder of a new dynasty and therefore begins a new book in his name.

The transition from the book of Mosiah to the book of Alma is another change in political lineage. The sons of Mosiah the second (son of Benjamin) refused the kingship, and the monarchy was replaced by a system of judges. The book of Alma begins not with Alma the Elder but with the first person in a new line of rulers: Alma the Younger, the first chief judge. The political line doesn’t last long, for Alma the Younger gives up the judgment seat and dedicates himself to preaching (Alma 4:15–17). He takes the record with him. His son, Helaman the Elder, continues to write in his father’s book. The transition from the book of Alma to the book of Helaman has already been noted as reflecting a change of political line when the records reentered the hands of the sitting judge.

In the book of Helaman, the Gadianton robbers seize the government, and the sitting Nephite chief judge—Nephi, the son of Helaman the Younger—flees and takes the record with him. As with Alma the Younger and Helaman the Elder, the record has moved outside the political line. By the time we arrive at 4 Nephi, the record and the rulership have been reunited in the person of Nephi, son of Nephi. This is a change of both location and dynasty after the Gadianton usurpation and therefore represents a new book.

What about the shift from Helaman to 3 Nephi? The record is already out of the hands of the ruling line and is kept by Nephi, son of Helaman. There is no indication that Nephi's position in the government changes at the beginning of this record. The naming of this book is an exception to the rule of changing dynasties. However, this book does not come from the large plates of Nephi but takes its name from a different record. Mormon indicates that he takes this account from a separate, personal record of Nephi, son of Helaman (3 Nephi 5:8–10). Therefore, this third book of Nephi is not named according to the rules governing book names on the plates of Nephi.

In sum, the book names appear to match Mormon's sources. When a book's source was the large plates of Nephi—the more political record—it was named after the newly seated ruler who possessed those plates.

### *Chapter Divisions*

Royal Skousen, a professor of linguistics and English language at Brigham Young University who has sought to establish the original English-language text of the Book of Mormon as far as it is discoverable, made this observation: "Evidence suggests that as Joseph Smith was translating, he apparently saw some mark (or perhaps extra spacing) whenever a section ended, but was unable to see the text that followed. At such junctures, Joseph decided to refer to these endings as chapter breaks and told the scribe to write the word 'chapter' at these places, but without specifying any number for the chapter since Joseph saw neither a number nor the word 'chapter.'"<sup>10</sup> Therefore, in

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10. Royal Skousen, "Critical Methodology and the Text of the Book of Mormon," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 6/1 (1994): 137.

the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon, the chapters represented Mormon's choices of where a break should occur in the text. We can examine those divisions in an attempt to understand what textual events triggered a conceptual break in Mormon's mind. To do this we turn to the 1830 edition, where chapter divisions represent those present on the plates. The 1879–1981 editions of the Book of Mormon follow new chapter divisions assigned by Orson Pratt and do not represent Mormon's original construction.<sup>11</sup> Although elsewhere I have discussed the full set of reasons behind Pratt's method,<sup>12</sup> I would like to highlight one that is particularly instructive.

Mormon made a new chapter at the beginning of a newly inserted sermon from the source plates or when an inserted sermon ended.<sup>13</sup> Often, the text that ends the chapter will be marked with *Amen*. This process creates situations where the logic of the 1830 chapter divisions differs from modern expectations. In order to break at the switch from inserted speech to narrative, Mormon placed concluding narrative material at the beginning of the next chapter or (in the case of text beginning a chapter) introductory narrative material at the end of the

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11. Pratt used very different criteria in assigning his chapter breaks. In cases where the text followed scriptures from the King James Version of the Bible, he attempted to construct chapter and verse designations that followed that format. While Pratt usually left chapter endings in the places Mormon had created them, there are cases where Pratt pulled in material from the next chapter and made the break later. For this reason the analysis here is based solely on the chapter breaks as found in the 1830 edition.

12. Gardner, *Second Witness*, 3:95–98.

13. In the following set of data, the original chapter breaks are indicated by listing the two chapters between which the break occurred. In each example there are two sets of numbers—the first set referring to the 1830 edition and the second set (in parentheses) referring to the modern chapter breaks that correspond to the original divisions (following the excellent chart found in Thomas W. Mackay, “Mormon as Editor: A Study in Colophons, Headers, and Source Indicators,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2/2 [1993]: 104–9).

Mosiah 1/2 (3/4); Mosiah 2/3 (4/5); Mosiah 3/4 (5/6); Mosiah 6/7 (10/11); Mosiah 8/9 (16/17); Alma 2/3 (4/5); Alma 3/4 (5/6); Alma 4/5 (6/7); Alma 5/6 (7/8); Alma 6/7 (8/9); Alma 8/9 (11/12); Alma 14/15 (26/27); Alma 15/16 (29/30); Alma 19/20 (42/43); Alma 26/27 (58/59); Helaman 2/3 (6/7); 3 Nephi 2/3 (5/6); 3 Nephi 4/5 (10/11) [end of Mormon's interjection, resuming the account]; 3 Nephi 11/12 (26:5/26:6); 3 Nephi 12/13 (27:22/27:23); Mormon 3/4 (7/8) [shift between Mormon's testimony, closed with *Amen*, and return to the narrative]; Ether 1/2 (4/5); Ether 2/3 (5/6); Ether 3/4 (8/9) [Moroni's interjection closes chapter 3, narrative returns in chapter 4]; Moroni 1/2 (1/2); Moroni 6/7 (6/7); Moroni 9/10 (9/10).

previous chapter. For example, Alma 7 ends with a sermon, but Alma 8 opens with text that a modern reader would consider a conclusion to the previous chapter.

For the modern reader, there is nothing about a sermon that particularly dictates a chapter change. In fact, when Orson Pratt recut the chapters in 1879, he often did so that these tag-on narratives were reassigned to what a modern reader would consider an ending or beginning.

Mormon's breaking of chapters at sermon boundaries rather than event boundaries tells us two things: first, that he considers the sermon unit to be more important than the narrative; second, that he is quoting (presumably faithfully) from his sources rather than creating the sermons. A modern novelist would be inventing both the linking narratives and the included sermons. Such a writer would see only a minimal distinction between event and sermon. Both are part of the "history," and both are part of the same creative process.

Mormon's process was different. He created the linking narratives based on his source texts, but the sermons are direct quotations. In a very real sense, Mormon was shifting sources, which he marked by changing chapters. Inserted quotations tend to open and close chapters because he had to consult the plates for that material; he could write the narrative from memory, perhaps checking an event or two. The sermons come directly from the plates. The history comes from Mormon's understanding and interpretation of the plates.

### *Textual Flow Indicators*

When Joseph Smith dictated the Book of Mormon, he provided the words and indications for breaks between chapters and books. He did not provide any information for breaks between paragraphs and sentences. All of those important aspects of a modern text were added by John H. Gilbert, the compositor.<sup>14</sup> When Gilbert read the text, he clearly fixed on two verbal markers to begin new paragraphs: *and it came to pass* and *and now*.

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14. Royal Skousen, "Book of Mormon Editions 1830–1981," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1:175.

It doesn't take long looking through a facsimile of the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon to see that *and it came to pass* is visually even more prevalent than in our modern version.<sup>15</sup> We see *and it came to pass* (or a variant) at the beginning of thirty-seven out of the forty-nine paragraphs in the 1830 edition's chapter 1 of 1 Nephi (comprising chapters 1–5 in our current edition). However, the reason that it so frequently appears at the beginning of paragraphs is the very reason it exists at all. Intuitively, Gilbert recognized *and it came to pass* and a companion, *and now*, as two verbal markers that govern textual flow. In an original without the modern conventions of punctuation or paragraphing, those functions were filled by other parts of the text—in this case, two verbal phrases.

*And now* serves as a ligature in event lists or simply as a tool to move the narrative from topic to topic. The companion phrase *and it came to pass* is related to movement in time rather than concept. Whereas *and now* marks movement of ideas, *and it came to pass* describes sequences. The distinction between conceptual movement and movement in time is the reason that *and it came to pass*—a phrase frequently used in the Book of Mormon—appears only thirteen times in 2 Nephi and is concentrated in chapters 4 and 5.

In contrast to its relatively sparse use in 2 Nephi, the phrase is used in 1 Nephi 109 times.<sup>16</sup> This difference results from the different nature of 1 Nephi and 2 Nephi, with 1 Nephi being more historical in focus. The two chapters of 2 Nephi with high concentrations of *and it came to pass* are precisely those that contain the historical data. Nephi also uses the combined phrase *and now it came to pass* (1 Nephi 16:1; 17:19, 48; 22:1; 2 Nephi 1:1) to mark the combination of a major change in topic as well as a different time.

While it is possible that Joseph Smith invented these two structural markers to substitute for the missing paragraphing, they are rather unusual in a modern world well accustomed to paragraphing in

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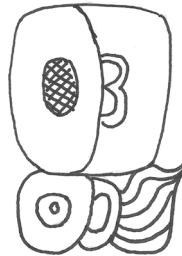
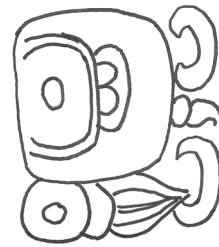
15. Over time, some of the *and it came to pass* phrases have been removed from our modern text.

16. I tallied these occurrences using the search function of *GospelLink 2001*, CD-ROM (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000).

written texts. Did Joseph Smith randomly insert the phrases based on his familiarity with the Bible? Although I am certain that those phrases come from the Bible, I find it most interesting that they are not used randomly but are employed skillfully to control textual flow. The same Joseph Smith whose translation of the Book of Mormon regularly confused the grammar of the biblical Jacobean language used these two markers flawlessly.

This proposed system of verbal markers as paragraphing has a historical precedent in the New World. The recent translation of Maya glyphic writing provides corroboration of a very similar paired set of verbal markers. Maya texts use these two verbs to create sense on their written monuments. As described in the glyph dictionary put together by Michael D. Coe and Mark Van Stone, we have direct parallels to the Book of Mormon's *and now* (or *and thus*) and *and it came to pass*.<sup>17</sup>

The Maya texts also use these verbs to indicate the flow of action. The glyph reading *it happens* corresponds in function to *and now* or *and thus* in the Book of Mormon text, with *it happened* being the functional equivalent of *and it came to pass*. Of course, I am not suggesting that the Maya influenced the Book of Mormon writing or that the Book of Mormon influenced the Maya. It does, however, provide a solid comparative foundation indicating that, in a text without paragraphing, textual flow may be directed with verbal markers. The Book of Mormon employs a function that is known from the appropriate antiquity and region.



Maya glyphs that can be read as “and it came to pass” (top) and “and now” (bottom).

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17. Michael D. Coe and Mark Van Stone, *Reading the Maya Glyphs* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2001), 33.

*Mormon's Interaction with His Material*

Apart from the structural information that suggests how Mormon created his masterwork, what evidence sheds light on what kind of historian he was? How faithful was Mormon to his sources? Gently laying aside the issue of his obvious inspiration, how careful was he when he related history?

The way Mormon treats inserted speeches suggests a great respect for them. The conceptual breaks after inserted sermons strongly suggest that they are copied from the plates, and we must assume that he intended to reproduce them faithfully. When Mormon is not quoting, but creating his own linking narrative, how faithful is he *then* to his sources? How much like a modern historian was he?

The answer is that he is hardly like a modern historian at all, but much more like the historians of antiquity in his relationship to his source material. Mormon's purposes were didactic, not reconstructive. He told a moral story in which the moral was more important than the facts.<sup>18</sup> There are cases where Mormon's narrative appears to fill in probable gaps in the historical record. It cannot be determined whether this information comes from the original plates or from Mormon himself.

When Mormon tells the story of the people of Zeniff, he begins by quoting King Zeniff's entire record. Then, when he begins Noah's story, he switches from quotation to narration. I hypothesize that this was a necessary shift because the source material for Noah's reign could not have been as pejorative as Mormon painted Noah.

From the beginning, Noah is a nasty fellow. Mormon's descriptions of Noah are so effective that modern readers immediately dislike him. While Mormon certainly had reasons for his dislike, they came from his reading of the sources and almost certainly do not reflect the attitude of the sources themselves. The court record of the sitting king Noah could not have been so negative. If we read between the lines of Mormon's description, it is easy to see that Noah presided over a period of economic growth and expansion. His people probably thought they

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18. For a related discussion, see David B. Honey and Daniel C. Peterson, "Advocacy and Inquiry in Mormon Historiography," *BYU Studies* 31/2 (Spring 1991): 139–79.

were quite well off under Noah. They were probably not complaining, at least not much. It is Mormon who read between the lines of his sources and saw a larger picture. Mormon's Noah is the one that he understood, not the one that would have been described (and undoubtedly praised) in his own official record. While Mormon used the large plate tradition as his source, he did not simply copy and condense it. He interpreted his material according to his overarching goal.

This method of prophetic interpretation is evident in the first book of Alma, where we have the story of Nehor. As with Noah, Mormon makes sure that we do not like Nehor. Of course, Mormon has good reason to portray Nehor this way. However, as with Noah, some people were quite enamored with Nehor. Mormon never presents a Nehor that would allow us to be as enamored with him as were many Nephites.

Even more than Mormon's coloration of Nehor, however, is the fact that Mormon names an entire religious movement after him. The evidence indicates that the facets of the religion that Nehor preached were precisely those found in the court of Noah long before we see Nehor on the scene.<sup>19</sup> Nehor was not the earliest practitioner nor even the most infamous.<sup>20</sup> The text's very next story emphasizes the rift created by the Nehorite Amlici, clearly a much more serious social disruption.<sup>21</sup>

I suggest that Mormon intentionally named that religion for a murderer because he wanted to clearly link it with an unsavory connotation. I strongly suspect that it was called by some other name in the source plates and that the identification of *order of the Nehors* is Mormon's label written long after the fact.<sup>22</sup>

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19. See Gardner, *Second Witness*, 4:41–51.

20. Alma 1:12 indicates that Nehor represents the first time priestcraft “has been introduced among this people.” The information on the earlier form of Nehorism is found in King Noah's court, which is in the land of Nephi, not the land of Zarahemla. Even though Noah's people were considered Nephites, they were not part of the people of Zarahemla at that time.

21. Nehor begins the introduction of “priestcraft” among the people of Zarahemla, but Mormon lists no specific reaction to his trial and execution. The story of Amlici, however, erupts into armed rebellion (Alma 2).

22. Two lines of reasoning see the application of the name *Nehor* as a convention rather than an original name for the religion. The first is that the general Nehorite religion is



At times, Mormon must tell us “history” that no one could have known. For example, he recounts the story of Limhi’s people escaping from the Lamanites and moving people and animals into the wilderness. Mosiah 22:16 confidently reports, “And after [the Lamanites] had pursued them two days, they could no longer follow their tracks; therefore they were lost in the wilderness.” Limhi’s people likely were aware they were being followed for two days. However, when Mormon tells us that the Lamanites gave up pursuit because they lost the tracks, it is highly unlikely that his sources could have known this. Fleeing for their lives with women and children, the Limhites could hardly afford to spend time examining why they were no longer being pursued. That they were not being pursued would have been sufficient. Even if they had known their tracks were not visible, they would not have known what was in the Lamanite mind that caused them to stop pursuit. The only possibility of knowing such a thing would be the happenstance that a well-hidden scout overheard both the command to return and the explanation of the lost tracks. A more likely explanation is that the Lamanites gave up pursuit because they realized that it simply wasn’t worth the effort; after all, they were in possession of a fully functioning city into which they could easily move their own people and begin to be productive.

Similarly, early in the book of Alma the Nephites beat back an invasion by Lamanites that supported Amlici’s internal rebellion. Mormon describes the aftermath of the battle:

And they fled before the Nephites towards the wilderness which was west and north, away beyond the borders of the land; and the Nephites did pursue them with their might,

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the common method of Nephite apostasy, both before and after Nehor. With the earliest “Nehorite” religion being manifest in King Noah’s court at both an earlier time and a different location, Nehor could not have been the originator of this particular set of religious beliefs. His name was clearly added later. The second suggestion flows from an analysis Gordon Thomasson made about the possible nature of names in the Book of Mormon. He sees many of them as metonymy, where the name is intended to represent certain ideas above and beyond simply naming the person. See Gordon C. Thomasson “What’s in a Name? Book of Mormon Language, Names, and [Metonymic] Naming,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 3/1 (1994): 1–27. See also Gardner, *Second Witness*, 4:41–51.

and did slay them. Yea, they were met on every hand, and slain and driven, until they were scattered on the west, and on the north, until they had reached the wilderness, which was called Hermounts; and it was that part of the wilderness which was infested by wild and ravenous beasts. And it came to pass that many died in the wilderness of their wounds, and were devoured by those beasts and also the vultures of the air; and their bones have been found, and have been heaped up on the earth. (Alma 2:36–38)

We can comfortably accept the historical information that the Nephites were victorious and drove the Lamanites out of their land. However, the final description is the interesting one. Mormon suggests that the Lamanites were lost in the wilderness and had been attacked by wild animals. His evidence is that “their bones have been found.” The fact that bones and not bodies were found is also probable history. However, that the bones were of those particular Lamanites is most likely simply a satisfying end to the story. The text tells us that there were bones, which means that they were discovered later (though the text does not tell us how much later). Even if there were artifacts in addition to the bones that pointed to Lamanites, there is no obvious reason to connect those Lamanites to this particular event.<sup>23</sup>

Could any of this mean that Mormon was less than a prophet? Absolutely not. Rather, if correct, my analysis suggests that his understanding of his task was appropriately ancient. He wrote with the historical sensibilities of the ancient world, which necessarily saw all events as they fit into and supported their religious understanding.

### *Mormon's Meta-message*

Mormon's recasting of events into a moral history is the most important key to understanding why he thought the text he wrote would convince “the Jew and the Gentile that Jesus is the [Messiah], the Eternal God” (Book of Mormon title page). While it is true that

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23. The only way that the Nephites could have been certain that these were the very Lamanites they pursued was to happen upon the bloody scene soon after it occurred. However, the very specific mention of bones suggests that they were discovered much later, diminishing the ability to connect the bones with this incident.

Mormon copied great sermons explicating the Messiah's doctrine, doctrine was not the reason he thought his book would be convincing. Mormon did not write to convince us that the Messiah's doctrine is true, but rather that Jesus *is* the Messiah.

The best place to see how Mormon used his whole text to convince us that Jesus is the Messiah is in 4 Nephi, one of my favorite books because it is so absolutely unique in Mormon's work. I call it the "Seinfeld book" because it is a book about nothing. Every other book we have received from Mormon's hand was filled with important events and long speeches clarifying important gospel principles. 4 Nephi has none of this. Where Mormon's typical editorial method was to string together large quotations from his source material with a minimalist linking text, 4 Nephi has no identifiable quotations from his source plates. 4 Nephi is Mormon's intentional book about nothing. In the very absence of content, it reveals that Mormon expected the entire structure of his opus to convince us that Jesus is the Messiah.

*Mormon's Use of His Sources in 4 Nephi*

Mormon begins 4 Nephi with historical description that has very little information:

And it came to pass in the thirty and sixth year, the people were all converted unto the Lord, upon all the face of the land, both Nephites and Lamanites, and there were no contentions and disputations among them, and every man did deal justly one with another. (4 Nephi 1:2)

This verse says something very important, but notice how. Only two years after the Messiah's visit to the people assembled in Bountiful, "the people were all converted unto the Lord." This conversion was so complete that it included both Nephites and Lamanites. It was so effective that there was no enemy with whom to have wars, and even inside this new Nephite society there were "no contentions and disputations, . . . and every man did deal justly one with another."

We would love to know how they did that. We would love to know what kinds of sermons were given to a people this righteous. Mormon

tells us nothing. He gives us the outlines that are as historically satisfying as “they lived happily ever after.”

Was it true that everyone was converted? We may take Mormon at his word, but we should also understand that “all the face of the land” must refer to a significantly limited geography. This is because this absolute unity and harmony was accomplished in only two years. Beginning with the surviving population of a single city, this new sociopolitical order had to spread from person to person to other locations. How far could this new understanding have traveled in two years? Without attempting to answer, I suspect that this mass conversion was confined to a limited geographic area. Mormon gives us no indication of how limited it was—in 4 Nephi it is the generalization that is important, not the historical fact.

This emphasis can be seen as Mormon moves to what appears to be more historical description of the new order in the very next verse:

And they had all things common among them; therefore there were not rich and poor, bond and free, but they were all made free, and partakers of the heavenly gift. (4 Nephi 1:3)

Mormon reprises information from the end of 3 Nephi, where he had noted, “And they [the twelve disciples] taught, and did minister one to another; and they had all things common among them, every man dealing justly, one with another” (3 Nephi 26:19). The similarity of language suggests intentional repetition. It provides reassurance that cultural values continued, but it offers no other new information. While it is certainly information, structural repetition serves notice that it is empty information. It links the new order with its cause, the appearance of the Messiah, but it says nothing new.

Now we examine another place where Mormon appears to give us details that are really more empty information:

And they were married, and given in marriage, and were blessed according to the multitude of the promises which the Lord had made unto them. (4 Nephi 1:11)

Nephites had been marrying and being given in marriage since the beginning of their society. There was nothing unusual in marriage. In fact, Mormon puts the statement here precisely because it is normal—a continuation of normal life during these pseudo-millennialistic years.

The next verse continues this display of empty information:

And they did not walk any more after the performances and ordinances of the law of Moses; but they did walk after the commandments which they had received from their Lord and their God, continuing in fasting and prayer, and in meeting together oft both to pray and to hear the word of the Lord.  
(4 Nephi 1:12)

Like the passage about marriage, these verses are nearly noninformation. Mormon has already recorded Jesus's explanation that he had fulfilled the law of Moses (3 Nephi 9:17; 15:4–6) and that Nephite religious observances now came from his gospel (3 Nephi 15:9–10). Thus this passage is not only repetitious but inconsequential. It tells us nothing new. This event is not specific to the time period, reinforcing the hypothesis that, in 4 Nephi, Mormon is only marking empty time; the few events he mentions are nonspecific. Structure, not episodes, carries the message.

#### *Mormon's Use of Time in 4 Nephi*

Mormon even structures time in 4 Nephi to communicate his message rather than to relate history. In the following two verses we have time references and little else:

And thus did 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. (4 Nephi 1:6)

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, 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. (4 Nephi 1:14)

In each verse Mormon has repeated a series of years where nothing happens. Even with the information tagged on to the end of verse 14, the only information is that everyone connected to the appearance of the Messiah has died save the three disciples. As with the earlier statements, this is empty information. Nevertheless, what is interesting isn't the empty information but the empty years. Mormon has marked empty years before, but never so many in sequence. What is most fascinating is that these sets of empty years repeat the very same numerical sequence of noninformation.

41 51 71

42 52 72

49 59 79

This repeating pattern occurs three times in 4 Nephi and never anywhere else in the Book of Mormon. The triple repetition confirms that it is not random and not associated with Mormon's source text. Mormon is telling us something. Actually, he is telling us nothing. Intentionally and markedly.

I hypothesize that he names years for which there are no events to signal that these empty years are placeholders in a pattern. He has moved from "real time" into "symbolic time," or from history into story. The repetition of seven-year gaps (42–49, 52–59, 72–79) suggests that he is deliberately using the spacing symbolically, likely to mark a "week of years."

In addition to this overt marking of time, Mormon divides his entire 4 Nephi "history" into four blocks of approximately one hundred years. Although events constrain that pattern, he molds that history into his pattern. Four hundred years is a very significant number in the Mesoamerican calendar. Just as we accumulate years into

decades and centuries, the Mesoamericans accumulated their years into larger groupings. One of the most important was a grouping of four hundred years, known as a *baktun*. Because Mesoamerica based its mathematics and calendar on twenty as the basic unit (rather than our system of ten), the salient division of the *baktun* that Mormon would be using was the culturally significant four hundred, not the modern preference for one hundred. He would not have had a collective unit of years that equaled one hundred but would have spoken of the fourth part of a *baktun*.

Mormon summarizes the first one hundred years in verses 1–13 and the second in verses 14–21. Verse 22 begins precisely with the two hundredth year. Mormon does not deal with specific history in these first two hundred years, so the correspondences are close. Nothing datable happens in the first two hundred years. Each of the hundred-year sections is treated as a block, and the “events” are generic. In fact, the “events” of the second hundred years nearly repeat the “events” of the idyllic first hundred years. It is important to Mormon that the effects of the Messiah’s visit last for a complete two hundred years. No degeneration occurs until the 201st year (v. 22).

The anomalous character of this book about nothing tells us that Mormon had an important purpose for it—to highlight his overall purpose in abridging the sacred records entrusted to him: to “[con- vince] . . . the Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the [Messiah], the Eternal God” (Book of Mormon title page).

When we look at how Mormon has handled time in his overall text, we find the following:

- The book of Lehi covered about four hundred years of Nephite history.
- The book of Mosiah covers about a hundred years, a drastic slowing of narrative time.
- The book of Alma covers even less time—about thirty-five years—while the book of Helaman covers approximately forty-eight years.

- The next book, 3 Nephi, describes the Messiah's coming and covers about thirty-five years with 57 percent of its fifty-six pages detailing two days of Christ's visit.
- Then the book of 4 Nephi speeds through four hundred years in forty-nine verses.

Mormon structurally uses time to emphasize the important part of his text. After the Messiah's visitation, Mormon greatly accelerates the narrative pace, using summary, overview, and generalization much more extensively. The next time he provides details corresponding to those in his other books is in his eponymous book. All of 4 Nephi is simply a placeholder between the appearance of the Messiah and Mormon's own story.

In my opinion, the contrast between 4 Nephi and Mormon's entire pre-4 Nephi text is the strongest evidence of Mormon's editorial intention: to declare the pattern of history that led to the Messiah's climactic appearance at Bountiful. Mormon was the Messiah's apostle—his witness—and as such he described not just his people's history that culminated in the Messiah's appearance but also the *pattern* of history that preceded that remarkable event. Mormon's conception of history was cyclical; he understood that after the Messiah's first visit, preparation for the second coming was under way. Mormon's historical consciousness assumed that what went before predicted what will come. Thus, while Mormon recorded the events leading to the Messiah's visit and then recorded that most important occasion, he did not need to spell out in detail all that followed. Rather, he simply reported that the pattern was repeating. For example, before the Messiah appeared at Bountiful, the faithful struggled between righteousness and nearly universal apostasy; a few centuries later Mormon witnessed his own people struggling with righteousness and forsaking faith for worldliness. Before the Messiah's appearance, the Gadiantons destroyed the Nephite government and the Nephites, as a people, were no more; later Mormon witnessed the Gadianton-supported Lamanites destroy the Nephite government and people. Before the Messiah's appearance, the Lamanites engaged in terrible wars with the Nephites; similarly,



Mormon lived to see the end of the most terrible of all wars, one that destroyed almost all he loved.

Mormon's book ends with apparent pessimism: there is apostasy, there are Gadianton combinations, there is war, and Mormon's own people have been destroyed. Nevertheless, this isn't his meta-message. His message is the cycle of history. Mormon told us that story to prepare us for the new one. The pattern highlighted by his editorial method shows great darkness before the glorious light. He did so that we too might know that the pattern will end with the appearance of the Messiah. As assuredly as history proved that the Messiah came, Mormon expected his explication of the patterned history to prove that the Messiah assuredly will come again. This is Mormon's optimistic message. This is how he expected to convince us that Jesus, the Messiah who came, is the Eternal God, the Messiah who will come.

