

The Book of Lehi and the Plates of Lehi

“And upon the plates which I made I did engraven the record of my father.” (1 Nephi 19:1)

In the preface to the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith wrote that the lost 116 pages included his translation of “the Book of Lehi, which was an account abridged from the plates of Lehi, by the hand of Mormon.” However, in Doctrine and Covenants 10:44, the Lord told Joseph that the lost pages contained “an abridgment of the account of Nephi.” Some critics have argued that these statements are contradictory and therefore somehow provide evidence that Joseph Smith was not a prophet. However, a more careful reading of the Book of Mormon demonstrates that this criticism is invalid.

The description of the lost pages as “an abridgment of the account of Nephi” is clearly accurate. Nephi wrote that he made his large plates so that he could “engraven upon them the record of [his] people” (1 Nephi 19:1). The phrase *account of Nephi* acknowledges Nephi as the principal author and copyist of this portion of the large plates, as well as the maker of those plates. This account of Nephi was later abridged by Mormon, whose abridgment was translated by Joseph Smith; the translation was ultimately lost.

At first, the reference to “the plates of Lehi” appears to be in error. However, although he may not have personally engraved his record upon Nephi’s large plates, Lehi was in a very real sense the first author of those plates. Nephi gave the following description of the contents of the large plates: “And upon the plates which I made I did engraven the record of my father, and also our journeyings in the wilderness, and the prophecies of my father; and also many of mine own prophecies have I engraven upon them” (1 Nephi 19:1). First on Nephi’s list is the record of his father. In contrast to the small plates, on which Nephi made an abridgment of the record of his father (see 1 Nephi 1:17), the large plates apparently contained the full record of Lehi.¹ Nephi probably copied his father’s record onto the large plates of Nephi in the same way that he later copied the Isaiah chapters from the brass plates onto the small plates of Nephi.²

If the large plates of Nephi began with Lehi’s record, this portion of the large plates could accurately be called the plates of Lehi. In fact, Lehi’s son Jacob confirmed such a practice when he wrote: “These plates are called the plates of Jacob, and they were made by the hand of Nephi” (Jacob 3:14). In other words, although Nephi made the small plates of Nephi, the portion of the small plates that contained the record of Jacob was referred to as the “plates of Jacob.” In the same way, although Nephi made the large plates of Nephi and wrote on them, the portion of the large plates upon which he copied the record of Lehi was referred to as the “plates of Lehi.” Therefore, Mormon’s abridgment of Lehi’s record found on the large plates could accurately be described as an account abridged from the plates of Lehi, by the hand of Mormon.

According to the preface to the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon, Mormon gave the title “the Book of Lehi” to his abridgment of the plates of Lehi. This action is consistent with Mormon’s practice throughout his abridgment of the large plates, in which he frequently grouped multiple authors together in a single book and then named the book after the first author. For example, although the death of Helaman is recorded near the beginning of the book of Helaman (see 3:37), and Helaman’s sons Nephi and Lehi were therefore the source of the majority of Mormon’s abridgment,³ the book still bears Helaman’s name. Similarly, because Nephi’s large plates began with his father Lehi’s record, it should not surprise us that Mormon entitled his abridgment of this portion of the large plates “the Book of Lehi.”⁴

In conclusion, the terms *Book of Lehi*, *plates of Lehi*, and *account of Nephi* are distinct phrases with distinct meanings.⁵ As usual, both Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon demonstrate complete internal consistency in their use of these different terms.

Research by David E. Sloan, originally published in the Journal of Book of Mormon Studies 6/2 (1997): 269–72.

Notes

1. See S. Kent Brown, “Nephi’s Use of Lehi’s Record,” in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1991), 3—5. Either way, Lehi’s record would have come to us in abridged form. The translation of the small plates includes Nephi’s abridgment of Lehi’s record. The lost pages contained Mormon’s abridgment of that record.

2. The fact that Nephi copied his father’s record onto metal plates suggests that Lehi’s record was written on perishable material rather than on more durable plates. See Brown, “Nephi’s Use of Lehi’s Record,” 5. Nephi’s brother Jacob wrote: “Whatsoever things we write upon anything save it be upon plates must perish and vanish away” (Jacob 4:2).

3. Although Helaman’s eldest son, Nephi, was probably the custodian of the Nephite records (see Helaman 3:37), ultimately passing them on to his own son Nephi (see 3 Nephi 1:2), Helaman’s son Lehi also apparently participated in the writing of the records. The preface to the book of Helaman records that the abridgment is an account which is “according to the records of Helaman” and is “also according to the records of his sons” (see also Helaman 16:25).

4. Another example of this practice is found in the book of Omni, in which Omni’s son Amaron wrote: “And now I, Amaron, write the things whatsoever I write, which are few, in the book of my father” (Omni 1:4).

5. In addition to Lehi’s record, the book of Lehi may have included some or all of Mormon’s abridgment of Nephi’s writings on the large plates. At the same time, in addition to the personal record of Nephi, the term *account of Nephi* may include Lehi’s record that Nephi copied onto the large plates.