

When Did Nephi Write the Small Plates?

“And it came to pass that the Lord God said unto me: Make other plates.” (2 Nephi 5:30)

In reading 1 and 2 Nephi, few people stop to think when Nephi actually wrote the account of his family’s flight from Jerusalem and journey across the sea to a land of promise. Knowing when Nephi began to write the small plates (beginning with the account we now have in 1 Nephi) clarifies the purposes that stand behind that record and influenced its final form and content.

Nephi’s first set of plates were his large plates, fashioned after his arrival in the New World (1 Nephi 19:1–2). On these plates he recorded the book of Lehi and the secular affairs of his people.

Nephi made the small plates even later, after he had left the land of first inheritance and moved to the land of Nephi. The Lord instructed Nephi to make these plates so he could “engraven many things . . . which are good in my sight, for the profit of thy people” (2 Nephi 5:30). Thus the small plates should be understood as having been written after the death of Lehi, after the separation of Nephi from his brothers Laman and Lemuel, after the small Nephite party knew of the life-threatening animosity of the Lamanites against them, after Nephi knew that he would eventually accept the role of king, and after the temple of Nephi had been constructed.

We tend to read 1 Nephi as if it were a daily journal, but it is a reminiscent, retrospective account and a purposeful revision of the earlier book of Lehi and the other words previously recorded on the large plates. This matter of timing was important enough to Nephi that he stated three times in 1 Nephi that he was writing the small plates somewhat late in his life.

As early as in 1 Nephi 6:1, Nephi openly acknowledged that the small plates were being written after he knew what the book of Lehi contained. The book of Lehi would have been finished after Lehi and Nephi arrived in the New World.

In 1 Nephi 9, Nephi distinguished his small plates from the large plates, “upon which I make a full account of the history of my people” (verse 2), and explained that he had already been commanded to make the small plates so they might contain “an account engraven of the ministry of my people” (verse 3). From this we can confirm that Nephi began writing the small plates after the large plates were well under way—after the reign of kings was established, after Nephi received the Lord’s commandment mentioned in 2 Nephi 5:30, and after he had a distinct group of people whom he could call (five times in this short chapter) “my people.”

In 1 Nephi 19, Nephi was again self-conscious of the difference between his large plates and his small plates. Immediately after Lehi’s party arrived in the New World, the group found ore out of which Nephi was able to make the large plates (1 Nephi 18:25–19:1). Once again he explained on his small plates that the large plates already contained material that was reported “more particularly” (1 Nephi 19:1–2). Again he affirmed that the small plates were being written by way of commandment, specifically “for the instruction of my people” and also for other purposes known to the Lord (verse 3).

These overt disclosures invite us to ask how the timing of Nephi’s writing influenced the final form of the first parts of the Book of Mormon. How happy biblical scholars would be to know the time and place when the book of Exodus or the Gospel of Matthew took their final forms, for then they could probe the nature of those texts more

certainly. In the case of Nephi's writings, because we know when, where, and why he wrote what he did, we can confidently turn our attention to pursue intriguing interpretive questions and to extract meaning from the lessons he left behind.

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