

# Mormon as Editor

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The Book of Mormon, to the dismay of critics and believers alike, is a very complex book. This complexity disturbs critics because it makes it hard for them to believe that anyone in the nineteenth century could have written the book. This complexity also taxes the patience of Latter-day Saints who may be looking for simple, straightforward answers. But the Book of Mormon is neither simple nor straightforward. It presents itself as a translation of an ancient record. Furthermore, much of it is an abridgment of numerous sources compiled and edited by the prophet-historian Mormon.

The Book of Mormon is not like the Congressional Record—it does not try to include everything. Again and again, Mormon reminded us that he had to drastically condense his sources. “This book cannot contain even a hundredth part of what was done among so many people,” he wrote, “but behold there are records which do contain all the proceedings of this people” (3 Nephi 5:8-9). Thus Mormon’s concern over what to leave out must have been as great as his anxiety over what to include. On every page, he was making choices, and his decisions tell us a great deal about him—what he valued, what he believed, what he thought his readers ought to know. As we read the Book of Mormon, we must constantly ask, “Why is this story or detail included? What is being left out? Why do the events take this form or sequence?”

We can learn much about Mormon’s priorities and purposes when we identify patterns in the type of details he chose to delete or include. For instance, his editing may be responsible for some of the more puzzling features of the Book of Mormon, such as its fascination with war (Mormon himself was a general) and its lack of attention to the law of Moses (Mormon, as a Christian, may have thought the space could be better used on other, more Christian topics).

Mormon’s choices are most revealing when the message of his editing seems to contradict the facts that he recorded. Mormon’s honesty as a historian sometimes forced him to include facts that did not exactly support the message he was trying to convey. This tension is frequent in the Book of Mormon as Mormon tried to make spiritual sense of historical events. For me at least, this tension is evidence that Mormon was an actual person, since we all face similar difficulties in making sense of our own lives.

In studying Mormon’s editing, we are not striking out in an entirely new direction. Biblical scholars have had long experience with similar ancient edited texts in the Old and New Testaments. By looking at how they have approached the Bible as an edited text, we can gain insights into how we might study the Book of Mormon and what we might discover. In addition, if this type of analysis works on the Book of Mormon, that would be strong evidence that it too is a genuinely ancient text.

## **Biblical Editing**

To consider the effect that editors had on the Bible, we must first determine what sources biblical editors used. This is difficult because, unlike the Book of Mormon, the Bible does not always admit its extensive editing. In any case the sources have long been lost. Nevertheless, by reading carefully and observing contexts, repetitions, sudden shifts in style and ideology, and passages where things do not fit together smoothly, we can make educated guesses about the original sources. In short, they look for rough spots in the text, or “seams” that do not quite fit together. Some examples might help to make this clear.

The original Greek in Philippians 2:5-11 is quite poetic, but the surrounding material is not. Most scholars are convinced that Paul was there quoting an early Christian hymn. In John 14:31, after two chapters of farewell discourse, Jesus said to his disciples, "Arise, let us go hence." But instead of leaving, he continued speaking for two more chapters. Perhaps the best explanation for this puzzling remark is that John used two separate accounts of Jesus' last discourse. When he combined them into one narrative, he did not quite smooth out this seam.

Another example in the Old Testament shows even more details that do not fit together smoothly. In the familiar story of David and Goliath, David was introduced as a "stripling" or a "youth" (1 Samuel 17:33, 56) whom his father had sent to the battlefield with provisions for his three older brothers (17:17-20). He was outfitted with Saul's armor (17:38-39), but instead chose to face Goliath with only his sling. Yet earlier in 1 Samuel, another version of the situation seems to exist. There David was first described to Saul as "a mighty valiant man, and a man of war" (1 Samuel 16:18), whom Saul summoned and made his armor-bearer (16:19-21). This was presumably why he was at the battlefield. (Notice that the story seems to start all over again at 17:12.)

In 17:15 someone appears to have tried to harmonize the two accounts by having David return home after serving Saul. But this runs counter to Saul's request in 16:22, which implies a more permanent arrangement. The explanation doesn't explain why in 17:55-58 Saul had no idea who David was when he saw him go against Goliath. One simple explanation of the discrepancies is that the author-editor combined at least two different accounts. The story reads fairly smoothly if we take out 17:12-31, 41, 50, and 55-58. In fact, the Septuagint, a translation of the Old Testament into Greek made about 200 B.C. (this was the Bible used by early Christians), omits these very verses, and there is evidence that they may have been added later.

In some cases when we find evidence that an editor was using multiple sources, we can compare the edited version with an original source. Then we can look for patterns that reveal the purposes behind the editor's choices. The New Testament is an excellent place to attempt this type of analysis, since it often contains multiple accounts of the same event, as in the Gospels. Similarities in the original Greek wording and in the sequence of events make it virtually certain that at least some of the Gospel writers knew the work of others. The most accepted hypothesis is that Luke and Matthew both had read Mark and Q, a collection of Jesus' sayings that is now lost.

We see how this works in the story of Jesus walking on the water. Mark reported: "When they saw him walking upon the sea, they supposed it had been a spirit, and cried out: for they all saw him, and were troubled. And immediately he talked with them, and saith unto them, Be of good cheer: it is I; be not afraid. And he went up unto them into the ship; and the wind ceased: and they were sore amazed in themselves beyond measure, and wondered. For they considered not the miracle of the loaves: for their heart was hardened" (Mark 6:49-52).

Matthew, however, added the episode of Peter walking on the water and changed the ending: "When the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were troubled, saying, It is a spirit; and they cried out for fear. But straightway Jesus spake unto them, saying, Be of good cheer; it is I; be not afraid. [Here follows the story of Peter]. And when they were come into the ship, the wind ceased. Then they that were in the ship came and worshipped him, saying, Of a truth thou art the Son of God" (Matthew 14:26-27, 32-33).

Why would Matthew make these changes? We can surmise that he might have felt that Mark's account omitted some important features and that it put the apostles in a bad light. Thus Matthew concluded his version with the apostles' recognition of Jesus' divinity rather than with their lack of understanding. This type of editorial change occurs throughout Matthew's gospel. He consistently changed verses where Mark had left the apostles misunderstanding or doubting to show that the apostles really did have faith (compare Mark 8:17-21 with

Matthew 16:8-12; Mark 9:30-32 with Matthew 17:22-23). This editorial pattern is an important clue to understanding the purpose of Matthew's gospel. It may even be evidence that he wrote his book at a time when the apostles' authority was being questioned.

This approach to reading scripture—looking for contradictions and passages that do not fit together smoothly—may be unfamiliar to many Latter-day Saints. But it is important if we wish to know the relationship between the text and the events it relates and the men who wrote and edited it. Understanding their purposes in editing may be as important as understanding the events they described and the teachings they recorded.

I believe that the Book of Mormon is capable of being studied as a historical record. This necessarily involves looking at its more human aspects—including the personal and sometimes awkward choices of its human editor. (This kind of analysis, though, does provide evidence that Mormon was indeed a historical figure and a primary author of the Book of Mormon, which is, after all, Mormon's book.) Understanding the book as a historical record can help us in understanding its divine messages and inspiration.

## **Mormon's Editing**

Unlike most of the biblical text, the Book of Mormon text readily acknowledges editing, and we are told quite a bit about the sources used. We can often see where primary sources are worked into Mormon's abridgment. We can also assume that, for nearly any passage, Mormon had much more information than he included. On the other hand, distinguishing Mormon's paraphrases from the original words of authors like Mosiah or Alma is virtually impossible. Perhaps the greatest difficulty is that we have Mormon's record only in translation. Important patterns are often clear only in the original languages. Nevertheless, careful reading and thinking can still give us some idea of how the Book of Mormon was put together. Like biblical scholars, we must rely on the observation of subtle contradictions and details that do not quite fit.

In looking at editing in the Book of Mormon, we will be primarily concerned with trying to determine the biases and purposes behind Mormon's editorial choices. I believe that two major tendencies are evident: he interpreted political events in spiritual terms, and he highlighted the distinction between the obedient and the disobedient. We see both of these in Mosiah 25.

After complex plot twists in which one group after another was lost in the wilderness, the peoples of Alma, Limhi, and Mosiah were finally all reunited in Zarahemla. Mormon reported: "Alma did speak unto them, when they were assembled together in large bodies, and he went from one body to another, preaching unto the people repentance and faith on the Lord. And he did exhort the people of Limhi and his brethren, all those that had been delivered out of bondage, that they should remember that it was the Lord that did deliver them" (Mosiah 25:15-16).

Two assumptions about this passage seem reasonable: Limhi and his brethren made up one of these large bodies of people, and Mormon had access to records of Alma's words to each of these groups. Mormon mentioned general preachings of repentance and faith, but the only specific instruction he recounted was the exhortation to Limhi's people to remember that the Lord was responsible for their deliverance. Why is this detail so important that it alone received attention when so much else was left out?

This editorial choice is especially puzzling when we recall that Limhi's people had freed themselves by getting their Lamanite guards drunk (see Mosiah 22). We even know the name of the man who concocted the scheme—Gideon. We also remember the conference in which Ammon and Limhi "began to consult with the people how they should deliver themselves out of bondage" (22:1). Their liberation seemed to be the result of sheer cunning—chapter

twenty-two does not mention God once. And yet in chapter twenty-five, Mormon's editing stressed that, despite appearances, God delivered Limhi's people just as much as he did Alma's people (who had made a miraculous escape, recorded in Mosiah 24:16-25).

Of course this is precisely the point behind Mormon's editing—no matter what we may think about our own resourcefulness, decisiveness, and timing, God is still in charge. Mormon tended to interpret political and historical events in spiritual terms, and this inclination is evident in his editing as well as in his direct "thus we see" comments.

But there is more to Mosiah 25. A few verses earlier Mormon explained how the people had gathered together to hear readings of the records of Zeniff and Alma. He describes their reaction as follows:

[7] Now, when Mosiah had made an end of reading the records, his people who tarried in the land were struck with wonder and amazement. [8] For they knew not what to think; for when they beheld those that had been delivered out of bondage they were filled with exceedingly great joy. [9] And again, when they thought of their brethren who had been slain by the Lamanites they were filled with sorrow, and even shed many tears of sorrow. [10] And again, when they thought of the immediate goodness of God, and his power in delivering Alma and his brethren out of the hands of the Lamanites and of bondage, they did raise their voices and give thanks to God. [11] And again, when they thought upon the Lamanites, who were their brethren, of their sinful and polluted state, they were filled with pain and anguish for the welfare of their souls.

If one tries to imagine this scene, the importance of Mormon's editing becomes obvious. The people were undoubtedly moved by what they had heard. Yet are we to suppose that the people in unison thought of each of these things in turn, with one voice weeping and then praising as if on cue? (Remember that this behavior was described as occurring after the reading had finished.) Or is it more probable that some shed tears while others rejoiced, each reflecting individually on the great events that had been recounted?

The reactions of crowds are difficult to describe. Here, though Mormon apparently took a few liberties with the actual event, he established a vivid sense of the emotions that the people must have felt. Perhaps more importantly, Mormon's account is itself moving. Note how it shifts back and forth from joy in verse eight to sorrow in verse nine, to praise in verse ten, and back to pain and anguish in verse eleven. In each case, the pains of the disobedient contrast sharply and immediately with the joys of the obedient. The exposition of God's justice is clear, simple, and concise, and it owes its striking form to Mormon's editorial hand.

This type of editing is characteristic of the entire Book of Mormon. For example, Jacob described his editorial technique as follows: "Now the people which were not Lamanites were Nephites; nevertheless, they were called Nephites, Jacobites, Josephites, Zoramites, Lamanites, Lemuelites, and Ishmaelites. But I, Jacob, shall not hereafter distinguish them by these names, but I shall call them Lamanites that seek to destroy the people of Nephi, and those who are friendly to Nephi I shall call Nephites, or the people of Nephi, according to the reigns of the kings" (Jacob 1:13-14). Jacob informed us that his society was actually much more complex than it might appear. For the purposes of this record, however, he would drastically simplify the situation. Mormon continued this editorial style (see Alma 47:35, Mormon 1:8-9). But why? Why not give us the whole story?

The answer in part lies in Mormon's purpose, which was not to give an exact historical account of ancient Nephite culture, but rather to turn our hearts to God. One of the ways the Book of Mormon does this is by emphasizing that those who follow God are blessed, while those who reject him suffer. This theme was introduced in the book's

second chapter when the Lord said to Nephi, “Inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments, ye shall prosper, and shall be led to a land of promise. . . . Inasmuch as thy brethren shall rebel against thee, they shall be cut off from the presence of the Lord” (1 Nephi 2:20-21). The idea is repeated frequently throughout the Book of Mormon, and Nephi, Mormon, and others gave concrete examples to reinforce this theme.

The problem, however, is that life is more complicated than this. We all know of instances in which good people suffer while the evil go unpunished. And most people are neither entirely righteous nor wholly wicked. Yet because the principle of God’s justice is ultimately true, Mormon helped us out in the Book of Mormon by simplifying stories so that we can clearly see the results of good and bad behavior. Thanks to Mormon’s careful editing, there is no question as to who is righteous and who is wicked, and that the bad things that happen are truly terrible, while the good things are wondrous indeed.

We seem to have clear evidence in Mosiah 25 of Mormon’s editing and the intentions that lay behind it, but the analysis of one chapter does not constitute conclusive proof. As we found in biblical scholarship, if we can identify clear patterns of editing, our arguments will be much stronger. Therefore, let us turn to another chapter—Alma 16, which tells of the destruction of Ammonihah, is another instance. Again, Mormon simplified to make moral lessons easier to identify and offered spiritual interpretations for political events.

The preceding chapters of Alma (8-15) recorded the story of Alma and Amulek’s mission to Ammonihah, recounting their sermons and telling how, despite limited success, they were eventually rejected and thrown into prison. Then, in an act of terrible brutality, the people of Ammonihah drove Alma’s male converts from the city and burned to death their wives and children. Finally Alma and Amulek were miraculously delivered from prison. Alma 16 begins as follows:

[1] And it came to pass in the eleventh year of the reign of the judges over the people of Nephi, on the fifth day of the second month, there having been much peace in the land of Zarahemla, there having been no wars nor contentions for a certain number of years, even until the fifth day of the second month in the eleventh year, there was a cry of war heard throughout the land. [2] For behold, the armies of the Lamanites had come in upon the wilderness side, into the borders of the land, even into the city of Ammonihah, and began to slay the people and destroy the city. [3] And now it came to pass, before the Nephites could raise a sufficient army to drive them out of the land, they had destroyed the people who were in the city of Ammonihah, and also some around the borders of Noah, and taken others captive into the wilderness.

Mormon continued his tale by telling how the Nephite armies, with the help of the prophetic high priest Alma, defeated the Lamanites and rescued the captives. Then Mormon made the moral of his story absolutely clear. His editorial summary stressed that “there was not one soul of them had been lost that were taken captive,” while “the people of Ammonihah were destroyed; yea, every living soul of the Ammonihahites was destroyed . . . and the carcasses were mangled by dogs and wild beasts of the wilderness” (16:8-10—remember, the bad things that happen are truly terrible, while the good things are wondrous indeed). Thus this chapter offers a striking illustration of God’s justice, by which the righteous are saved while the wicked are punished.

But something is wrong with this picture. The innocent bystanders are all rescued, and the wicked Ammonihahites are all destroyed, but there is a third group not mentioned at all in Mormon’s summary. These are the people “around the borders of Noah,” some of whom were also killed in the Lamanite raid. What exactly had happened to

them? Why did some die and some escape? We do not know, for they dropped entirely out of Mormon's account and were never referred to again.

Mormon obviously had some information about them (thus he mentioned them in verse three), but he chose not to elaborate upon their fate. He edited them out. Why? I believe the answer is that these people did not fit into the pattern of "the righteous prosper, the wicked suffer." They complicated the moral message of his history. This is not to say that Mormon's message is false. The principle of God's justice is, in an ultimate sense, true, but the facts of day-to-day history do not always illustrate this principle adequately.

The purpose of the Book of Mormon makes the spiritual meaning of history much more important than any specific set of facts. Mormon was willing to simplify or streamline the facts to emphasize transcendent spiritual realities. He did not want too many complicated details to distract us from simple, vitally important truths. This type of editorial bias is complicated, for it involves the careful balancing of moral interpretation and historical accuracy. It was important to Mormon that his spiritual principles were manifested in actual events—the Book of Mormon is not a work of abstract theology, and Mormon did not make up stories to illustrate his principles. This editorial bias seems to be a constant in Mormon's editing. And it is all the more impressive for not being explicit.

Alma 16 also provides an example of interpreting a political event in spiritual terms. The first verse is remarkable for Mormon's insistence that this Lamanite raid was absolutely unexpected and unprovoked, "there having been much peace in the land of Zarahemla, there having been no wars nor contentions for a certain number of years." Given the juxtaposition of this event with the gross wickedness of the people of Ammonihah in the preceding chapters, the meaning is clear. An act of God destroyed the Ammonihahites in retribution for their arrogance, brutality, and rejection of his prophets.

Mormon reinforced this reading by framing the destruction within a prophecy. His editorial summary included the observation, "Their great city [was destroyed], which they said God could not destroy, because of its greatness. But behold, in one day it was left desolate" (16:9-10). Here Mormon was referring to an exchange that took place at the story's beginning. There the people of Ammonihah had rejected Alma's message with the words, "We will not believe thy words if thou shouldst prophesy that this great city should be destroyed in one day." Mormon there commented, "Now they knew not that God could do such marvelous works, for they were a hard-hearted and a stiffnecked people" (Alma 9:4-5; see also the predictions at Alma 9:18; 10:23). Clearly, Ammonihah's destruction was a marvelous work of God manifesting his divine power and justice.

However, Alma 25:2 alerts us to another possibility. Just as multiple versions of the same story make it difficult to miss the editing in Matthew and Mark, so also Mormon's editorial biases become obvious when we consider a second account of the city's destruction. It turns out that the city of Ammonihah was not destroyed as if by lightning from heaven. There was a natural series of causes and effects that led to the Lamanite raid. This series of events was begun by Ammon and his brethren, the great Nephite missionaries to the Lamanites.

Alma 17 begins a flashback that takes us back some fourteen years by relating the missionary adventures of the sons of Mosiah (Ammon and his brethren). These men, after years of afflictions and miracles, eventually enjoyed great success. They converted thousands of the Lamanites, who took the name Anti-Nephi-Lehies and entered into a close relationship with the Nephites. Other Lamanites, incited by Nephite dissenters, were furious and took up arms against their former comrades. The pacifist Anti-Nephi-Lehies chose to die rather than fight, and more than one thousand were killed.

Now Alma 25:

[1] Those Lamanites were more angry because they had slain their brethren; therefore they swore vengeance upon the Nephites; and they did no more attempt to slay the people of Anti-Nephi-Lehi at that time. [2] But they took their armies and went over into the borders of the land of Zarahemla, and fell upon the people who were in the land of Ammonihah and destroyed them. [3] And after that, they had many battles with the Nephites, in the which they were driven and slain.

Here the flashback parallels the main narrative, but it does not entirely catch up until Alma 27:16, which continues the story from 17:5 and unites the two narratives. Such flashbacks and multiple accounts are complex editorial maneuvers, but Mormon handled them fairly smoothly. Nevertheless, there are still evidences of extensive editing. For example, the “many battles” of 25:3 and 27:1 do not quite correspond to the account in 16:6-9, where the Lamanites were driven back after one great battle. Again I believe that Mormon was intent in chapter sixteen on not unduly complicating his narrative with unnecessary details that might distract the reader from more important spiritual truths.

Mormon included in the Book of Mormon two separate narrative strands that both included an account of Ammonihah’s destruction. However, the explanation given in each version is quite different. One is spiritual (due to God’s justice) and one political (due to Lamanite aggressions in the aftermath of Anti-Nephi-Lehi troubles). Yet significantly, Mormon did not see any contradiction between the two; it was simply a matter of different perspectives. Apparently God’s will is sometimes manifest through ordinary historical means.

One last reference will complete our discussion of Alma 16. In Alma 49, Mormon returned to the destruction of Ammonihah once more when several years later the Lamanites came again to attack Ammonihah, now rebuilt. Mormon resumed his spiritual mode of interpretation when he reported their motives: “Because the Lamanites had destroyed it once because of the iniquity of the people, they supposed that it would again become an easy prey for them” (v. 3). Yet the venture was unsuccessful, and the disappointed Lamanite armies moved on to the city of Noah (home of our edited-out unfortunates). However, in this passage Mormon offered a military explanation of the Nephites’ earlier losses there: “The city of Noah had hitherto been the weakest part of the land” (v. 15). Apparently Mormon did know more about the slaughtered people of Noah, but what he knew he did not mention in chapter sixteen because it did not fit in with the moral theme of that account.

## **Conclusions**

Mormon was, as he himself stated, a purposeful editor. His hand can be seen throughout the Book of Mormon. He wove together complex narratives full of multiple strands, flashbacks, and interpretive comments. But perhaps even more impressive are the many places where he covertly interpreted his history through his choices of what to include, what to omit, and how to arrange his account so that it best fulfilled its objective of bringing souls to God. I have identified two aspects of his editing—simplification to highlight moral themes, and spiritual interpretation of political events. There are undoubtedly many more to be found, but these two techniques are significant in the Book of Mormon, and also in our larger Latter-day Saint culture.

Our lives are often complicated jumbles of good and bad, fortune and failure; and religion helps us make sense of them. We have adopted not only the doctrines taught directly in the Book of Mormon, but also Mormon’s narrative style. In any testimony meeting, we encounter highly edited stories that pick out significant events and find spiritual meaning in situations that outsiders might regard as coincidental or commonplace. We tell stories of overcoming adversity, of gaining understanding, and of serving others.

Through these narratives, we affirm that those who follow God are blessed, while those who reject him suffer. Thoughtful members may struggle with the contradictions between actual and ideal history, but Mormon has provided a model for making greater spiritual truths discernable. A close reading of the Book of Mormon should include a careful analysis of Mormon's editing, for editing was the way he shaped his history to make it the bearer of God's word.