

Colophons in the Book of Mormon

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1 Nephi 1:1 "I, Nephi"

From the day the Book of Mormon was published in 1830, some readers have been struck by its distinctive modes of expression. Many of the oddities thought at first to be signs of ignorance or awkwardness turn out on closer inspection to be traces of ancient authenticity. "Colophons" in the Book of Mormon illustrate this.

Several of the books in the Book of Mormon begin or end with a statement by the author certifying that he is the author of his work. Often he tells what is to come in the following pages or explains or marks the end of what has just been said. For example, the book of Enos begins, "*I, Enos, . . . will tell you of the wrestle which I had before God*" (Enos 1:1-2); and the book of Mormon begins, "*I, Mormon, make a record of the things which I have both seen and heard*" (Mormon 1:1). Similarly, the book of Jacob ends, "*I, Jacob, . . . make an end of my writing*" (Jacob 7:27). Dozens of editorial entries like these are found in the Book of Mormon. What purposes do they serve?

Statements like these are known in ancient documents as colophons, and as Hugh Nibley pointed out several years ago, they appear in several Egyptian documents.¹ For example, the Bremer-Rhind papyrus opens with a colophon that gives the date, the titles of the author, genealogical information about his parents, and a curse upon anyone who might tamper with the document (in other words, an avowal that the record is true). These textual elements functioned in antiquity somewhat like a copyright or seal of approval.

In addition to the points made by Nibley, research has further examined what these colophons tell us about how the Book of Mormon was assembled. The fact that these colophons have been handled differently in modern printings has obscured their original nature.

Nephi, of course, set the pattern for the Book of Mormon. All we have from him in the books of 1 Nephi and 2 Nephi was written near the same time, some thirty years after he left Jerusalem (see 2 Nephi 5:28-33). He might have kept some sort of journal through the years and during his travels, but his words as he carefully phrased them on his plates form a single, planned work, through which he felt the need to guide the reader's steps.

And how does he guide the reader?

At the start of 1 Nephi, a heading that is not marked with verse numbers begins, "An account of Lehi and his wife Sariah, and his four sons," and ends, "I, Nephi, wrote this record."

In 1 Nephi 1:1-3, Nephi affirms that he has made the record and that it is true. "I, Nephi, . . . make a record of my proceedings in my days. . . . And I know that the record which I make is true; and I make it with mine own hand; and I make it according to my knowledge."

Then in 1 Nephi 9, Nephi gives a discussion (the entire chapter) about what chapters 1-8 have been about, plus a statement of what will follow next. The *amen* at the end of this chapter signals that he has finished his editorial aside.

In 1 Nephi 14 he again summarizes and again concludes with *amen*: “I bear record that I saw the things which my father saw, and the angel of the Lord did make them known unto me. And now I make an end of speaking concerning the things which I saw while I was carried away in the spirit. . . . And thus it is. Amen” (1 Nephi 14:29-30).

Many other similar editorial comments by Nephi could be mentioned (for example, 1 Nephi 15:36). They serve as markers and natural divisions in the text. In a way, they take the place of paragraphs, punctuation, and other modern writing devices not used in antiquity.

Readers of the Book of Mormon will find these natural markers throughout the book. Many Book of Mormon writers, including Mormon, followed Nephi’s lead. Mormon provided prefaces for each of the books he abridged (except Mosiah, for which the Words of Mormon is an expanded prologue). In addition, he wrote introductions to chunks of original material that he incorporated unchanged into his ongoing abridgment of the plates of Nephi. Among the most obvious such spots are his comments preceding the record of the Zeniff colony (before Mosiah 9) and before Alma’s account, which starts with Mosiah 23. Finally, Mormon lets the reader know, at Mosiah 29:47, that the book of Mosiah is done and that the orientation of the record is shifting.

The book of Alma begins with a sixty-eight-word preface and ends with a summary in the last verse. In between are other guides provided by Mormon. At the beginning of Alma 5, a preface starts, “The words which Alma . . . delivered,” and concludes at Alma 6:8 with an editorial guideline complete with *amen*. A preface before Alma 17 starts the mission record of the sons of Mosiah (extending through chapter 26). Bracketing statements for the record of Shiblon are in Alma 63:1 and 11.

We can discern that, in some cases, sections of ancient documents in Mormon’s possession were entered verbatim. Zeniff, for example, wrote in the first person, and Mormon incorporated his record intact. Helaman 7-12 has a formal title: “The prophecy of Nephi, the son of Helaman.” At least a part of Helaman 13-15, headed “The prophecy of Samuel, the Lamanite, to the Nephites,” is quoted from a document rather than paraphrased by Mormon. Meanwhile, the colophon at the beginning of 3 Nephi, which introduces what follows as the “Book of Nephi,” provides genealogical information given nowhere else.

These colophons are not consistently presented or clearly identified in modern printed editions of the Book of Mormon, but readers can watch for them and see how they act as guides through this compilation of records that have been drawn together from many authors and from various plates and records. This feature of the text shows not only the remarkable complexity of the Book of Mormon, but also the great efforts made by its writers and editors to make the record as clear as possible.

This July 1990 Update was based on research by John A. Tvedtnes. The topic is discussed at greater length in John A. Tvedtnes, “Colophons in the Book of Mormon,” in John Sorenson and Melvin Thorne, eds., Rediscovering the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1991), 32-37.

Footnotes

1. *Lehi in the Desert*, in *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1988), 5:17-19.