

Why Nephi Wrote the Small Plates: Serving Practical Needs

“And thou shalt engraven many things upon them which are good in my sight.” (2 Nephi 5:30)

Nephi wrote his small plates soon after important events such as Lehi’s death, Nephi’s separation from his rebellious brothers, and the establishment of the reign of kings (see chapter 11). Recognizing when he wrote, we can better appreciate not only Nephi’s stated reasons for writing the small plates but also subtle underlying motivations behind his inspired selection and treatment of this material.

We can assume that Nephi wrote his second account (the small plates) for many good reasons and from a particular vantage point. Although the large plates contained the prophecies of Lehi and Nephi (see 1 Nephi 19:1), that earlier record nevertheless must have been insufficient in certain respects, thus warranting the construction of an entirely new set of plates and the rewriting of the basic story. What was missing with the large plates? Why did the Lord direct Nephi to make the small plates, and what additional purposes guided Nephi in that undertaking?

We can begin to answer these questions by noting several characteristics of the small plates. Six practical features yield important clues about the new contributions added by the small plates.

1. *Stated purposes.* The small plates of Nephi feature several overt statements of purpose. The Lord may have needed Nephi to state his purposes more directly than before. Nephi says the small plates were written for the “instruction” and “profit” of his people (1 Nephi 19:3; 2 Nephi 5:30). The record thus served two purposes: to record Nephi’s ministry among his people and to help others (such as Jacob and Joseph) to teach the people faith in God (see 1 Nephi 1:20; 6:4).

2. *A small, manageable document.* Nephi may have wanted to secure a record smaller than the presumably cumbersome large plates. A smaller record could be hidden more readily and carried more easily by a priest. If the large plates contained longer text that rambled, Nephi may have seen a need to make the small plates version concise and thus more manageable and useful.

3. *A clear, plain text.* Compared with the large plates, the small plates contained words that were “plain and precious” (1 Nephi 19:3). With hindsight, Nephi could see the end from the beginning, so his account could be clearer, plainer, and focused on information deemed more precious than the earlier material.

4. *A polished, organized presentation.* The writing on the small plates was carefully crafted. Several people have suggested various ways in which Nephi employed chiasmic and other literary features in presenting his story. It would seem that these literary refinements were introduced into the text as the materials on the large plates were revised.

5. *A specific audience.* The small plates are directed explicitly to a specific audience: Nephi’s own people (see 1 Nephi 19:3; 2 Nephi 5:30). While modern readers are the beneficiaries of Nephi’s attentions, his immediate concern was chiefly with the survival of his own small group as they precariously forged their way into yet another wilderness, hoping to withstand the attacks of their enemies that were sure to follow.

6. *A second witness.* The small plates comprised a second witness to the information contained in the large plates. It was common practice in the ancient world for important documents to be prepared in duplicate to safeguard against loss or alteration and to satisfy the spirit of the Mosaic law of witnesses.

These and several other characteristics shed light on our understanding of the precious small plates. Their characteristics mesh thoroughly with the known circumstances in which they were written.

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