

Colophons in the Book of Mormon

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In the heading before chapter 1 of 1 Nephi, we find Nephi's outline of his record. It begins, "An account of Lehi and his wife Sariah, and his four sons," and ends, "This is according to the account of Nephi; or in other words, I, Nephi, wrote this record." Sometimes these signposts appear before a section to tell us what is to come. Other times, they appear at the end to explain, recap, or mark the end of what has been said. For lack of a better word, I call them colophons, though technically colophons are notes or guidelines after a text.

Nephi set the pattern. He wrote his own titles, prefaces, summaries, and conclusions. All of 1 Nephi 9 consists of Nephi's statement about what he had been recording in the previous eight chapters and what he intended yet to write. Note too the subtle signal of his editorial guiding hand in the "amen" ending the chapter. In 1 Nephi 14 he summarized the preceding chapters and again concluded with "Amen." Other clear-cut examples are in 15:36 and in 22:31, which ends the book of 1 Nephi.

We understand from 2 Nephi 5:28-33 that Nephi began writing the small plates account—what was to become 1 Nephi through Omni—some thirty years after Lehi and Nephi left Jerusalem. Having a clear plan in mind when he began as to what to include on the small plates, Nephi could begin his book with the colophon that sounds like a table of contents.

In his editorial labors, Mormon followed Nephi's lead,¹ providing prefaces for the books he abridged. In addition, he wrote introductions to pieces of original material he put into the ongoing abridgment he was making of the Nephite story. Mormon's statements are helpful in seeing how he went about preparing his materials.

The Words of Mormon

The Words of Mormon, though only about two pages, comprises a distinct book. It is chiefly—at least verses one through nine—a long editorial comment on how Mormon handled the records. The remaining nine verses simply provide a word bridge needed to carry the history down to the time of King Benjamin. From Mormon's account in that book, we know that he made it after abridging the history on the large plates to King Benjamin's reign. The book itself in its entirety thus acts as a colophon.

Mosiah

The lack of a preface for the book of Mosiah in the present Book of Mormon is probably because the text takes up the Mosiah account some time after its original beginning. The original manuscript of the Book of Mormon, written in Oliver Cowdery's hand, has no title for the Book of Mosiah. It was inked in later, prior to sending it to the printer for typesetting. The first part of Mormon's abridgment of Mosiah's record, including the colophon, was evidently on the 116 pages lost by Martin Harris.

After the Nephite colonies of Alma and Limhi came to the land of Zarahemla, King Mosiah II put directly into his record the writings of these two small groups (see Mosiah 25:5). He started in 9:1 with a first-person account by Zeniff. But before chapter 9, there is a preface, presumably Mormon's, beginning, "The Record of Zeniff—An account of his people. . . ." At Mosiah 10:22, Zeniff marked the end of his words with an editorial comment and the typical "Amen."

Mosiah 23 and 24 tell about Alma's colony. Mormon introduced them with this preface: "An account of Alma and the people of the Lord, who were driven into the wilderness by the people of king Noah." Finally Mormon signaled us at Mosiah 29:47 that all of what he calls the book of Mosiah had come to an end.

Alma

The book of Alma begins with a preface and ends with a summary statement in the last verse. In between there are a number of subdivisions set off by editorial statements. Mormon divided his abridgment of the book of Alma into (1) the record of Alma, which ends at 44:24 with "And thus ended the record of Alma"; (2) the record of Helaman, which is introduced by a preface between chapters 44 and 45 and which ends with an editorial statement in the last verse of chapter 62; and (3) the record of Shiblon, which is marked by statements at its beginning in 63:1 and its end at 63:11.

Mormon further subdivided his abridgment of Alma's own record in the book of Alma. A preface at the beginning of Alma 5 informs us that what follows consists of "The words which Alma . . . delivered." At 6:8, Mormon closed this extract from Alma's record with an editorial statement complete with "Amen." Alma 7 is a similar extract marked with colophons at its beginning and end. Note that current LDS editions of the Book of Mormon place the beginning prefaces for chapters 5 and 7 before the chapter numbers, as at Mosiah 23. Note also that, though the type is the same, Mormon's editorial words are distinct from those of the chapter summaries, which Orson Pratt first added in 1879.

The story of the mission of Alma and Amulek in the city of Ammonihah in Alma 9-15 also begins with a preface. Much, though not all, of the record is in the first person, as in the case of Zeniff's story. Inside this section, a preface that appears in 10:1 also introduces Amulek's speech and his dialogue with Zeezrom. The end of Amulek's contribution, Mormon marked by a statement at 11:46: "And thus ended the words of Amulek, or this is all that I [Mormon] have written." The next two chapters consist of Alma's words, after which Mormon noted, "And Alma spake many more words unto the people, which are not written in this book" (13:31). "This book" evidently refers to Mormon's own abridgment. The editorial summary for the tenth year, at 15:19, seems to end the entry begun by the preface to chapter nine.

A preface before the start of Alma 17 introduces the missionary record of the sons of Mosiah. This part seems to me to extend only to chapter twenty (although the editors of the 1920 LDS edition supposed that the record referred to in the preface went all the way to the end of chapter twenty-eight). Note another preface before chapter twenty-one, which tells of "the preaching of Aaron, and Muloki, and their brethren, to the Lamanites." Chapter twenty-six begins with still another preface, this one contained within the first verse. Notice also the editorial words in Alma 28:8-9, which speaks of two accounts in the previous eleven chapters.

Finally, Mormon put in parts of Alma's teachings to his sons. Each of the three segments has its own preface (see text immediately before chapters thirty-six, thirty-eight, and thirty-nine). The first two end with the words, "My son, farewell," while the last, which concludes the set, ends with the word "Amen."

We see from the number of these colophons that the book of Alma demanded a great amount of editorial judgement from Mormon. He gave us what he considered gems and highlights when he might have included much more from the supply of material handed down to him from Alma's time.

Helaman

The book of Helaman begins with a lengthy preface stating that it is a record of Helaman (II), who was son of Helaman (I), and of the sons of Helaman (II). The same statement is found in Helaman 16:25. In 3:37, Mormon noted the passing of Helaman II, whom his son Nephi succeeded as judge.

A preface before chapter seven tells us that Nephi wrote the chapters of the book of Helaman after that point. Helaman 7-12 has a formal title, “The prophecy of Nephi, the son of Helaman,” as well as a preface mentioning the prophecy of Samuel, which begins with chapter thirteen. The preface leads me to think that this material was an extract from a separate record in Mormon’s possession. Clearly a number of men had a significant hand in producing the book of Helaman. What is not clear is why the “books” were not divided up and labeled some other way, for example, turning the single book we know as Helaman into “Helaman II,” “Nephi, son of Helaman,” and “Lehi, son of Helaman.”

3 and 4 Nephi

A preface at the beginning of the “Book of Nephi” (i.e., 3 Nephi) provides a brief genealogical sketch going back to Lehi and including information nowhere else mentioned. Mormon also inserted some editorial comments in 3 Nephi 6:8-26, apparently triggered by his inability to include much of what had transpired in the past twenty-five years. He commented on the nature of his record-keeping and identified himself. The insert ends with the characteristic “Amen.” Chapters eight through eleven, detailing the days of darkness, are also set off by colophons. Mormon began in 8:1-2 by commenting on calendar dating and the author of the material he was abridging. He ended in 10:19 with the words “Therefore for this time I make an end of my sayings.”

Chapters eleven through twenty-six cover Jesus’ two public visits to the New World (Mormon also recorded a private visit to the twelve disciples in chapters twenty-seven and twenty-eight). A preface before chapter eleven reports, “Jesus Christ did show himself unto the people of Nephi.” Mormon ended the section with the lengthy passage in 26:6-21, where he commented on his records, summarized Christ’s visits, and described the results of those visits.

Fourth Nephi begins with a long title “An account of the people of Nephi, according to his record.” Mormon concluded it with the words “And thus is the end of the record of Ammaron,” signaling that the book had come to its end.

Prefaces and Summaries

Knowing the details of all these editorial comments is not necessary for readers primarily concerned with reading the text for its spiritual value. They do have value, however, in a number of other ways. For students of historical documents and ancient literary forms, they provide valuable clues to the process of writing and compiling the record. Furthermore, the large number of these statements in such intricate relations both with each other and in the overall structure of the book teach us something else. They make it obvious that they came from ancient writers, not from Joseph Smith.

Considering the way Joseph dictated the book to scribes, for the most part in a matter of weeks without revising what he had dictated, we should realize that he could not himself have come up with this complicated set of prefaces and summaries. It is unlikely that he would go to the trouble to insert anything like them (they are not required to move the story along). It is also most unlikely that, while dictating, he could keep in mind what he had promised in the prefaces and then remember to close off so many sections neatly with summaries. Much more

believable are the claims in the Book of Mormon itself that the record was done by ancient writers working with written materials over long periods of time.

Footnotes

1. Mormon did not, of course, pick up this idea from the small plates, of whose existence he was ignorant when he began his abridgment. He perhaps followed the pattern set by Nephi in his large plates.