

Mormon and Moroni as Authors and Abridgers

Roger R. Keller

Mormon 5:9 "Therefore I write a small abridgment."

The Book of Mormon is a composite work, compiled from several archaic records that were abridged ultimately by Mormon or his son Moroni. Generally speaking, Mormon edited the materials from Mosiah to 4 Nephi, which he took from the Large Plates of Nephi, and Moroni abridged the record of Ether, which itself was a condensation of the history and records of the Jaredites.

In addition to abridging the records of others, Mormon and Moroni each wrote books and other parts of the Book of Mormon as original authors. For example, Mormon wrote Helaman 12, Mormon 1-7, Moroni 7-9, and the Words of Mormon. Moroni wrote Mormon 8-9, Ether 12, and Moroni 1-6 and 10.

Recent research by Dr. Roger R. Keller has taken a closer look at the works of Mormon and Moroni to analyze these writers as authors and abridgers, comparing their techniques and identifying unique and distinctive characteristics in the editorial styles of each. Keller has created a series of computer data bases, dividing the texts of the Book of Mormon by author, so far as that can reasonably be determined. He has then run computer separations on these files to determine vocabulary frequencies and distributions. His initial findings indicate the following:

1. When Mormon is acting as an abridger, he interacts extensively with the underlying documents he is abridging. It is usually possible (although not always) to distinguish Mormon's own words and comments from the words that he draws from the materials he is condensing. As one reads along in many sections of the Book of Mormon abridged by Mormon, one often senses that a subtle shift has taken place as a smooth, almost imperceptible transition has occurred from the underlying historical narrative to Mormon's commentary on that narrative. By carefully backtracking, one can discern, however, where the transition was made.

Moroni, on the other hand, interacts far less extensively with the text he is abridging. Moroni is usually careful about marking the beginning and ending of the comments that he has inserted into the abridged record. For example, his comments in Ether 3:17-20, 4:1-6:1, 8:18-26, and 12:6-13:1 are readily distinguishable from the abridged portions in the book of Ether. His frequent use of the phrase "I, Moroni" in Ether 1:1, 3:17, 5:1, 6:1, 8:20, 8:26, 9:1, 12:6, 12:29, 12:38, and 13:1 makes it easy to tell what Moroni has written and what he has abridged. Indeed, the seams in the underlying record are often visible in the abridged works of Moroni.¹ This seems to indicate that Moroni was less aggressive than Mormon as an abridger, perhaps because the fugitive Moroni's task was limited to completing the record of his father. Thus he may have felt less liberty than Mormon in molding, shaping, and interacting with the texts he was editing.

2. A thorough statistical examination of vocabulary gives considerable evidence that the original writings of Mormon and Moroni are distinguishable from each other. For example, the widely spaced sections of Mormon's own writings manifest an affinity for certain words, such as *baptism*, *hope*, *love*, and *wickedness*. On the other hand, the various, scattered writings of Moroni have another set of prevalent words in common, including *blood*,

destruction, suffer, faith, miracles, and power. Furthermore, the vocabulary of the record of Ether separates noticeably from all other portions of the Book of Mormon, Keller finds.

Another significant difference is found in the use of the well-known but characteristic expression “and thus we see that. . . .” Mormon used it over twenty times to insert moral conclusions in the sections he wrote or abridged (i.e., Alma 12:21; 24:19; 28:13; 30:60; 46:8; 50:19; Helaman 3:28; 6:34-36; 12:3). Moroni used the phrase only once (see Ether 14:25).

3. Furthermore, if one examines the words that are of importance to Mormon or to Moroni when they are writing as authors, and then examines the relative frequency of these words in the abridged portions of their records, some interesting observations can be made. Words prevalent in the writings of Mormon himself are usually of less importance in the edited texts. However, should a word important to Mormon appear in the underlying materials, this tends to increase Mormon’s usage of that word as he comments on the matter, especially in the books of Mosiah and Alma. The situation appears to be quite different with Moroni; he seems to be uninfluenced in this way by the material he is editing.

Further research will be required to fully analyze and digest the large amount of raw data and useful charts generated by Keller in this regard. Other interesting comparisons can also be drawn to the rules or outlines (*hypogrammois*) that are mentioned in the Abridger’s preface of 2 Maccabees² to be followed in making an abridgment. Already, however, one can begin to appreciate the individual differences between Mormon and Moroni, both as authors and as abridgers.

Based on research by Roger R. Keller, April 1988.

Footnotes

1. See also John W. Welch, “Preliminary Comments on the Sources behind the Book of Ether” (Provo: F.A.R.M.S., 1986).

2. Abridger’s preface in 2 Maccabees 2:19-32, esp. 28; noted by Gordon C. Thomasson.