The Secular as Sacred: The Historiography of the Title Page

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The title page of the Book of Mormon acts as a historiographical introduction to the editorial guidelines followed by Mormon in his work of compilation and redaction. These guidelines defined what was important for Mormon to incorporate in his historical record and included the themes of genealogy, covenants, and the teaching and testifying of Christ.
The Secular as Sacred:  
The Historiography of the Title Page  

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Abstract: The Title Page of the Book of Mormon acts as an historiographical introduction to the editorial guidelines followed by Mormon in his work of compilation and redaction. These guidelines defined what was important for Mormon to incorporate in his historical record, and include the themes of genealogy, covenants, and the teaching and testifying of Christ.  

Nevertheless, I do not write anything upon plates save it be that I think it be sacred.  

(1 Nephi 19:6)  

The overall aim of the authors of the Book of Mormon is set forth most clearly in the concise envoi that paradoxically prefaces the modern translations of the work.1 Written by Moroni, the last

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1 The fact that the Title Page actually functioned as a postface or envoi is clear because of its position at the end of the plates “taken,” according to Joseph Smith, “from the very last leaf,” HC 1:71. For the sources for the Title Page, see the references at The Book of Mormon Critical Text, 3 vols., 2nd ed. (Provo: F.A.R.M.S., 1984–86), 1:1, n. 1. For details on the historical background of the composition of the Title Page, see Sidney B. Sperry, “The Story of the Writing of the Title Page to the Book of Mormon,” in A Book of Mormon Treasury: Selections from the Pages of the Improvement Era (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1959), 122–26, later expanded as Chapter One to Sperry’s Our Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Stevens and Wallis, 1948), 1–8. Extended commentaries on the
historian of the Nephites, this postface-turned-preamble proclaims the sacred aim of the work and surveys its prominent themes with masterful conciseness. Most of the sacred subjects and historical themes in the Book of Mormon can be traced to this short document that serves as both introduction and summary.

The Title Page commences by crediting the Book of Mormon to the prophet/historian Mormon: it is “an account written by the hand of Mormon upon plates taken from the plates of Nephi. Wherefore it is an abridgment of the record of the people of Nephi, and also of the Lamanites.” We learn that the work is a condensation of many historical records written upon plates that originally had been fashioned by the first Nephite historian, Nephi. The fact that the work has been edited out of various other records leads us to conclude that the redactor, Mormon, must have been guided by certain editorial principles by which he decided which records were important to copy, excerpt, or summarize and which data were judged either essential, superfluous, or unnecessary to include. Several editorial guidelines may be construed


Daniel H. Ludlow posits that Mormon actually wrote the first part of the Title Page; Moroni’s contribution would then start with the words “Sealed by the hand of Moroni . . .”; see Ludlow’s “The Title Page,” in *The Book of Mormon: First Nephi, The Doctrinal Foundation*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate, Jr. (Provo: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1988), 19–33, esp. pp. 29–31. This interpretation seems to be a more satisfactory explanation for some of the repetition in wording of the Title Page than the accepted view of Sidney B. Sperry, who argued that Moroni wrote the entire Title Page at different times. See Sperry, “The Story of the Writing of the Title Page,” 123–24.

I have developed a methodology for examining postfaces appended to Chinese historical accounts to isolate the assumptions and aims of the historians; this approach is necessitated because of the reticence of the historians to include personal comments and judgments on the events they treat that reveal their personal biases, aims, and assumptions. This methodology is discussed in David B. Honey, “History and Historiography on the Sixteen States: Some T’ang Topoi on the Nomads,” *Journal of Asian History* 24 (1990): 161–217. Of course, since the Nephite historians often comment on their motivations and purposes, this approach is less important for examining Nephite historiography; nevertheless, the Title Page forms a convenient point of departure for our discussion.
from the second paragraph (of the modern English translation) of this document.

The first few guidelines concern questions of history. Since one purpose of the Book of Mormon "is to show unto the remnant of the house of Israel what great things the Lord hath done for their fathers," we can safely conclude that matters of genealogy which showed the lineage of the house of Israel must have been important to include so that the remnant of this house would know their identity. This was one reason the brass plates were of such importance, as Nephi records:

And it came to pass that my father, Lehi, also found upon the plates of brass a genealogy of his fathers; wherefore he knew that he was a descendant of Joseph. . . . And thus my father, Lehi, did discover the genealogy of his fathers. (1 Nephi 5:14, 16)

The fact that detailed genealogies as such are not found in those parts of the Book of Mormon that pertain to the family of Lehi, i.e., the Nephites and Lamanites, is due to the loss in the early stages of translation of that part of the Book of Mormon which contained them. Enough genealogical information was included to establish lineages, especially among the prophet/historians who were careful to cite their parentage to support the authority of their office and to help justify their historical accounts. And, of course, the Nephites themselves had access to

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4 There is a short genealogical list at Ether I of the pedigree of Ether, the historian of the Jaredites. This source is, however, not related to the Nephite records.

5 At one point Nephi refers the reader to Lehi's account for his own genealogy: "And now I, Nephi, do not give the genealogy of my fathers in this part of my record; neither at any time shall I give it after upon these plates which I am writing; for it is given in the record which has been kept by my father; wherefore, I do not write it in this work. For it sufficeth me to say that we are descendants of Joseph" (1 Nephi 6:1–2).

6 Part of the formal structure of Nephite historiography was a formulaic statement concerning the conferring of the historical records from one historian/father to another historian/son or brother. For now, it is sufficient to note that one reason to maintain the historical records was to preserve genealogical information (cf. Omni 1:1).
all their historical records, including genealogies, so that even after a thousand years of Nephite history Mormon could claim confidently that he was a "pure descendant of Lehi" (Mormon 5:20).

Also important were such historical events involving the ancestors of the house of Israel that manifested the influence of the Lord. This is shown in the same scriptures quoted above, for after Nephi identified Lehi as a descendant of Joseph, he immediately cites the importance of Joseph in manifesting the influence of the Lord by further stating that he was "even that Joseph who was the son of Jacob, who was sold into Egypt, and who was preserved by the hand of the Lord, that he might preserve his father, Jacob, and all his household from perishing with famine. And they were also led out of captivity and out of the land of Egypt, by that same God who had preserved them" (1 Nephi 5:14-15).

The next guideline defines just which type of events best portray the influence of the Lord: those events are most crucial for inclusion, whether from past Hebrew or contemporary Nephite history, that lead to "the convincing of the Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the Christ, the Eternal God, manifesting himself unto all nations." This guideline drawn from the Title Page was stated explicitly by Mormon when he described the coming forth of the record in the latter days. The accounts of the wars between the Lamanites and Nephites, among other historical narratives, shall go unto the unbelieving of the Jews; and for this intent shall they go—that they may be persuaded that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God; that the Father may bring about, through his most Beloved, his great and eternal purpose, in restoring the Jews, or all the house of Israel, to the land of their inheritance, which the Lord their God hath given them, unto the fulfilling of his covenant. (Mormon 5:14)

Hence ancient and contemporary testimonies of Christ—his appearance, attributes, his veneration and worship, how he may best be served, his influence and historical illustrations of his influence, and the like—are the main historical data for inclusion in Mormon's abridgment and Moroni's supplementary writings.
From the technical point of view of historical causation, then, we may conclude the following: the Book of Mormon teaches us that the Lord sees history as the record of how his people have responded to his invitation to follow his pattern for living. History has a practical application as the lessons of the past provide inspirational examples of the Lord's working his will among the children of men. As defined by Baruch Halpern, history ultimately "is a stage on which the god works out his authorial intentions; so few events defy analysis as products of both divine and of human motivation."7 Recording and analyzing historical events as the product of Christ's divine motivation, then, is the burden of the Book of Mormon historian.

The didactic function of the Book of Mormon to teach and testify of Christ is succinctly summarized by Robert J. Millet, who states, "True to its central theme, and with Christocentric consistency, the Nephite prophets talk of him, preach of him, prophesy of him, and rejoice in him, that all of us might know to what source we may look for a remission of our sins."8 This central theme has been recently underscored by the addition in 1982 of the phrase "Another Testament of Jesus Christ" to the name of the Book of Mormon.9 This theme pervades the Book of Mormon, as evinced by the use of nearly 100 different titles of the Savior found throughout the work;10 indeed, Susan Easton Black has calculated that a reference to Christ in some form or another is mentioned once every 1.7 verses, an average of one reference every two sentences.11 Even when not directly mentioned, many

9 This new subtitle is, of course, the point of departure for Millet's essay.
11 Susan Easton Black, Finding Christ through the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987), 10-34.
elements and events in the Book of Mormon typify Christ.\textsuperscript{12} The selection of data that taught or testified of Christ, then, was the single most influential guideline that Mormon followed in his editorial work.

Also guiding Mormon in his task of selection and recording was the intent to include sufficient factual information regarding the specific covenants that had been contracted between the Lord and his people. This information allowed each generation to know of the existence of these covenants and the actual processes by which the covenants were reconfirmed or canceled, thus insuring that “they are not cast off forever.” We may surmise that included under this rubric were not just facts and phrases of covenant language but also historical examples illustrating the efficacy and permanence of such covenants, such as the promises made to the Lamanites cited from Mormon 5:14 above. Indeed, detailed descriptions of covenants and the covenant-making ceremony, together with reconfirmations of the existence of such covenants, form an important part of the Book of Mormon.\textsuperscript{13}

Examining the Book of Mormon from the point of view of what Mormon considered important and even essential to include leaves us no other conclusion than that it is a work devoted to teaching and testifying of Christ, as exemplified by the Christ-centered themes of the nine chapters written by Nephi to conclude his account immediately following the Isaiah excerpts. It is only with Jacob, successor historian and younger brother to Nephi, that we encounter an extended passage on a motivation for writing history which seems more in line with what normally motivates historians:


But whatsoever things we write upon anything save it be upon plates must perish and vanish away; but we can write a few words upon plates, which will give our children, and also our beloved brethren, a small degree of knowledge concerning us, or concerning their fathers—Now in this thing we do rejoice; and we labor diligently to engraven these words upon plates, hoping that our beloved brethren and our children will receive them with thankful hearts, and look upon them that they may learn with joy and not with sorrow, neither with contempt, concerning their first parents. (Jacob 4:2–3)

Here the motivation for writing contemporary history is to preserve a knowledge of a generation for its posterity along with a plea for understanding and, we may assume, sympathy. The preservation of historical data and an attempt at self-definition through interpreting this data are motivations that sit well with the modern mind. But Jacob departs from this mundane motivation by explaining just what it is that he desires the younger generation to know about him and his contemporaries: “For, for this intent have we written these things, that they may know that we knew of Christ, and we had a hope of his glory many hundred years before his coming; and not only we ourselves had a hope of his glory, but also all the holy prophets which were before us” (Jacob 4:4).

What, we may ask, does an obviously religious work centered on Jesus Christ have to do with history as we generally understand it, with its concern for facts and the narration of generally mundane matters? The answer lies in the historical paradigm initially selected by the Book of Mormon authors to follow, a paradigm or approach to the use of history that is as honorable as and more ancient than the question-asking and puzzle-solving disciplines of modern scientific historiography, but one with a different aim and methodology. This paradigm is that of “exemplar historiography.”

The purpose of this paradigm is to advocate a particular point or to teach a lesson. “The function of this type of history,” according to Traian Stoianovich, “is to select the relevant example (paradeigma, exemplum), in the didactic sense of being illustrative
of what the society, through the historian, desires to inculcate and what it wants to warn against.”

From early on in classical antiquity this function of history determined the content and application of historical works, and was the earliest full-fledged historical form of the ancient Greeks, Hebrews, Arabs, and Chinese. Many cultures even today still utilize this historical form when the aim of their education is behavioral motivation, not points of abstract knowledge.

The use of secular history for the exemplar historiographer, then, is in the initial selection of data according to a predetermined framework with the intent of supporting specific historical interpretations or lessons. In a religious or moral work (as opposed to political propaganda), this editorial task involves the selection of secular data to illustrate sacred principles. The epigraph that opens this essay—"Nevertheless, I do not write anything upon plates save it be that I think it to be sacred" (1 Nephi 19:6)—confirms the sacred application of secular data notwithstanding Nephi's division of labor between large plates and small (see 1 Nephi 9:2-4; Jacob 1:1-3). This selection can leave out aspects of an event or personality that are irrelevant to the interpretation or lesson to be drawn from history to avoid distracting the reader or diluting the impact of the message.


15 For an overview of the development of the exemplar paradigm of historiography and how its use in the church today differs from the other historical forms, see David B. Honey and Daniel C. Peterson, “Advocacy and Inquiry in Mormon Historiography,” BYU Studies 31/2 (Spring 1991): 139–79.

16 On this point see Alfred E. Krause, “Historical Selectivity: Prophecy, Prerogative or Typological Imperative,” in Israel’s Apostasy and Restoration: Essays in Honor of Roland K. Harrison, ed. Avraham Gileadi (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988), 175–212; and John B. Gabel and Charles B. Wheeler,
Given the guiding assumptions and governing methodology of exemplar historiography as it was harnessed to sacred history in the Book of Mormon, we can appreciate how well the Nephite historians fulfilled their historiographical tasks by how well they talked, rejoiced, preached, prophesied, and wrote of Christ (see 2 Nephi 25:26). From this perspective we can better understand the thrust of Nephi’s confession of error in writing, “And now, if I do err, even did they err of old” (1 Nephi 19:6; cf. 2 Nephi 33:4), a disclaimer also included by Moroni in the Title Page (and repeated at Ether 12:25–26 and Mormon 8:17). If he erred in the composition of his history, it was not with regard to data or fact, but rather, apart from the difficulties of writing in his linguistic medium, in the selection of material for its relevance in teaching or testifying of Christ, or his failure to clarify the moral lesson to be derived from an historical incident, as borne out in the verses that follow:

For the things which some men esteem to be of great worth, both to body and soul, others set at naught and trample under their feet. Yea, the very God of Israel do men trample under their feet. . . . And behold, he cometh, according to the words of the angel, in six hundred years from the time my father left Jerusalem. (1 Nephi 19:7–8)

The long Messianic prophecy that concludes 1 Nephi 19 confirms the central concern of Nephi’s narrative and his hope to avoid errors in his composition, because, in the final analysis, Nephi only wrote “these things unto my people, that perhaps I might persuade them that they would remember the Lord their Redeemer. Wherefore, I speak unto all the house of Israel, if it be so that they should obtain these things” (1 Nephi 19:18–19).

In conclusion, then, the Title Page of the Book of Mormon states at the outset the Christ-centered purpose of the work, a theme reconfirmed by the other historians. The subthemes of Israelite, Nephite, and Lamanite history, genealogy, covenant lan-

guage, and events all support this theme by combining to testify and teach of Christ in a work of exemplar historiography. No other document in the Book of Mormon gathers all these related yet disparate threads of theme together into as tightly woven a text as this testamentary envoi by the last Nephite historians.¹⁷

¹⁷ A parallel text to the Title Page is the extended editorial comment by Mormon at 3 Nephi 5:20–26, which covers the same themes.