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Steven L. Olsen

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Remember is one of the most frequently used verbs in the Book of Mormon. It is consistently used by its authors in a covenant context—establishing or renewing an eternal relationship with God, expressing and realizing the blessings of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and preserving the distinctive identity of a covenant people. The present study examines the complex and profound ways that the complementary concepts of memory, identity, and covenants express the meaning of the sacred Nephite history through the vocabulary and narrative structures of the text and postulates how and why the Nephites preserved this official record for posterity.
MEMORY AND IDENTITY IN THE BOOK OF MORMON

STEVEN L. OLSEN

FROM THE EDITOR:
Once again, Steven Olsen has produced a detailed analysis of the use of memory and identity in the Book of Mormon, particularly through the book’s use of the term remember and of the traditions of preserving the records. What makes his work significant is his ability to see how these themes help shape the narrative that Mormon created. Without saying as much, he again has demonstrated that a naive, mostly uneducated, nineteenth-century youth could not have produced this sacred record on his own.

Lehi and his family at the coastline. Illustration by Joseph Brickey.
The present study explores the concept of memory in the text of the Book of Mormon. The study is divided into three parts:

1. Vocabulary. It traces the use of the term remember and its variants—for example, remembering, remembered, remembrance, and so on—and considers the connotations of these terms within specific literary contexts and patterns.
2. Narrative contents. It examines how the word remember informs and integrates the historical narrative, thus helping to define and express Nephite historical consciousness.
3. Records preservation. It illustrates how traditions of managing the Nephite archive enlarge and refine this concept of memory.

The overall thesis of this study is that the Book of Mormon concept of memory is more than a cognitive awareness of the past. Rather, it represents a special kind of historical consciousness—one that is fundamental to the identity of a covenant people of God. Readers familiar with Zakhor, Yosef Yerushalmi’s classic study of Jewish concepts of memory, will see many similarities with the present study of the Book of Mormon, particularly during the period of biblical Judaism: the role of memory in historiography, covenant ideology, and the formation and preservation of cultural identity. These similarities derive primarily from the fact that the Book of Mormon has its roots in biblical Judaism. Hence its writers were steeped in and consciously preserved or rejected elements of this literary culture in their own record keeping (see 1 Nephi 1:1-2; 13:23-28; 14:23; 2 Nephi 25:1-6; 29:3-14).

**Vocabulary**

As the prophet Moroni closes the record of the Nephites, he declares how all mankind may receive a divine witness of its truthfulness. Contemporary Latter-day Saints call this passage Moroni’s challenge, which is usually cited as follows:

> And when ye shall receive these things, I would exhort you that ye would ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true; and if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost. And by the power of the Holy Ghost ye may know the truth of all things. (Moroni 10:4-5)

Many church members may not realize that Moroni’s challenge actually begins in the preceding verse: “Behold, I would exhort you that when ye shall read these things, if it be wisdom in God that ye should read them, that ye would remember how merciful the Lord hath been unto the children of men, from the creation of Adam even down until the time that ye shall read these things, and ponder it in your hearts” (Moroni 10:3). The more complete citation suggests that remembering is an essential component of spiritual conversion.

In the Book of Mormon, the importance of remembering relative to obtaining a divine witness is understood not only by the last Nephite prophet but also by disciples of Christ from earlier times as well. For example, in order to convince his unbelieving brothers that God can also lead their family to a promised land, Nephi declares how God had guided Moses and the children of Israel from Egypt to the Holy Land (1 Nephi 17:23-55). Although Nephi recognizes that only a small portion of his family’s experiences can be preserved on plates, he indicates that the sacred sealed portion of the Nephite record will “reveal all things from the foundation of the world unto the end thereof” (2 Nephi 27:10). Several centuries later, in order to revitalize the church of Christ among the Nephites, Alma the Younger reminds church members that a merciful God had...
delivered their fathers from captivity (Alma 5:1-13). When the four sons of King Mosiah introduce the gospel of Jesus Christ to the Lamanites, the missionaries begin their formal instruction by rehearsing the things of God from the creation to the present day (Alma 18:36-40; 22:12-14). The grandest example of Moroni’s model of conversion comes from Christ himself. During his postresurrection ministry to the Nephites, he “did expound all things unto them, both great and small . . . even from the beginning until the time that he should come in his glory . . . even unto the great and last day” (3 Nephi 26:1-4; see also 23:14). Nephite prophets from Nephi to Moroni recognize that gaining and retaining a proper understanding of the past are essential in coming to know the things of God.

The verb remember, along with its variants, appears some 220 times in the Book of Mormon, making it one of the most frequently used verbs in the entire text. Frequency, however, is just one indicator of significance. Another is the specific literary contexts in which this constellation of related words appears. The imperative form of the verb regularly appears in sermons, exhortations, prophecies, and spiritual counsel. For example, Nephi repeats the term eight times as he closes his sacred record with his testimony (2 Nephi 29). The term also appears eight times in Jacob’s brief but masterful discourse on the atonement of Christ (2 Nephi 9). Benjamin uses the term nine times in his grand valedictory address (Mosiah 2–5). Alma repeats the term multiple times while renewing the church among the Nephites and again while exhorting his sons to faithfulness at the end of his own life (Alma 5:7; 34-42). Alma’s son Helaman repeatedly emphasizes the concept in his final instructions to his own sons (Helaman 5:6-12). Christ also repeats the term numerous times to the Nephites during his ministry (3 Nephi 13-29). In short, religious leaders from the Book of Mormon exhort their followers to remember as much as to obey, repent, pray, and worship.

In these contexts, remember appears not only frequently but also at the spiritual apex of the exhortation: “O remember, remember that these things are true” (Mosiah 2:41); “And now, O man, remember, and perish not” (Mosiah 4:30); and “O remember, remember, my sons . . . yea, remember that there is no other way nor means whereby man can be saved, only through the atoning blood of Jesus Christ, who shall come; yea, remember that he cometh to redeem the world” (Helaman 5:9). These uses imply that the term remember connotes more than cognitive awareness of the past. Indeed, it is associated with spiritual maturity and is an essential component of righteousness.

The following uses of the term expand its connotations by characterizing how God remembers divine promises relative to his covenant people.

When that day cometh . . . that they no more turn aside their hearts against the Holy One of Israel, then will he remember the covenants which he made to their fathers. Yea, then will he remember the isles of the sea; ye, and all the people who are of the house of Israel, will I gather in, saith the Lord . . . from the four quarters of the earth. (1 Nephi 19:15–16)

But behold, there shall be many—at that day when I shall proceed to do a marvelous work among them, that I may remember the covenants which he made to their fathers. Yea, then will he remember the isles of the sea; yea, and all the people who are of the house of Israel, will I gather in, saith the Lord . . . from the four quarters of the earth. (1 Nephi 19:15-16)

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And I will show unto thee, O house of Israel, that the Gentiles shall not have power over you; but I will remember my covenant unto you, O house of Israel, and ye shall come unto the knowledge of the fulness of my gospel. (3 Nephi 16:12)

And after they have been driven and scattered by the Gentiles, behold, then will the Lord remember the
It is difficult to imagine an omniscient God forgetting (in the usual sense) something as vital as a covenant with or the prayers of his people. Rather, in these and related passages, remember carries the connotation of “restore,” “renew,” “revitalize,” or “refresh.” In each case, that which God remembers is an essential part of the identity of a people whom God distinguishes from the rest of humanity by means of a covenant and its periodic renewal.

The covenant connotation of remember is made explicit in the prayers offered during the sacrament of the Lord’s supper, the centerpiece of Nephite public worship. While Nephite worship services are not detailed to any great extent in the Book of Mormon, Moroni includes verbatim the prayers over the emblems of Christ’s atoning sacrifice in Moroni 4–5. Each prayer divides into three parts:

1. **Invocation**, in which the officiator addresses “God, the Eternal Father” and states the purpose of the prayer—that is, “to bless and sanctify” the bread or wine, respectively
2. **Promise**, in which members of the congregation commit to certain devotional acts that are central to their identity as members of Christ’s church
3. **Blessing**, in which the officiator declares how God will bless members of the congregation who keep their covenantal promise—that is, “that they may always have his Spirit [i.e., the Holy Ghost] to be with them”

While the specific wording of the promise portion of each prayer is not identical, the promises themselves are the same, as expressed in the two verbs remember and witness. In partaking of the sacrament, church members promise to remember and to witness to certain eternal truths in devotion to the Savior and as evidence of their membership in his church. The precise wording of the promise portion of each prayer is as follows:

That both prayers emphasize the same set of promises indicates that remembering and witnessing are key principles of personal devotion and covenant identity for members of the church of Christ.

Another literary construction of the term remember in the Book of Mormon is as a prelude to or component of action—for example, “remember to keep the commandments,” “remember to observe the statutes and judgments of the Lord,” and “remember to retain the name [of Christ] written always in your hearts” (1 Nephi 15:25; Alma 46:23; Helaman 5:6; 2 Nephi 1:16; Mosiah 5:12). This literary pattern is not relevant to all possible Nephite actions, only to those connected with devotion to God, and it carries the connotation not only of cognitive recall but more importantly of spiritual commitment. Thus remember lies at the foundation not only of an awareness of divine truth—the role it

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*covenant which he made unto Abraham and unto all the house of Israel. And also the Lord will remember the prayers of the righteous, which have been put up unto him for them. (Mormon 5:20–21)*

*And as the Lord liveth he will remember the covenant which he hath made with [the house of Israel]. (Mormon 8:23)*

*that they may eat [the bread] in remembrance of the body of thy Son, and witness unto thee, O God, the Eternal Father, that they are willing to take upon them the name of thy Son, and always remember him, and keep his commandments which he hath given them. (Moroni 4:3)*

*that they may do it [i.e., drink the wine] in remembrance of the blood of thy Son, which was shed for them; that they may witness unto thee, O God, the Eternal Father, that they do always remember Him. (Moroni 5:2)*


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plays in Moroni’s challenge—but also of a covenant commitment to a life of righteousness. From this perspective, repeated use of the term in the sacrament prayers implies that those who partake of the emblems of Christ’s atoning sacrifice acknowledge the truth of the atonement and the mission of Jesus Christ and commit to live the gospel of the Savior as they have received it.

Synonyms and antonyms of remember reveal related nuances of its meaning. The text contains few instances of the common English synonyms of remember—for example, remind, recall, recollect, and so on. When these words do appear in the text (e.g., Enos 1:23; Alma 11:43), they connote simply “cognitive recall” rather than the suite of spiritual meanings of remember mentioned above. Thus, while remember has certain common synonyms in English, the specific connotations of these words in the Book of Mormon diverge from those of remember, which focus instead on covenant relations and spiritual devotion found in keeping commandments.

The Book of Mormon word that is the closest antonym to remember is forget. While forget and its variants appear far fewer times than remember, all usages connote a spiritual imperative similar to remember, and most occur within a covenant context. The word forget in the Book of Mormon thus connotes “turning from,” “breaking,” “severing,” or “rejecting” rather than the more common English connotation of “putting out of mind.”

Given the covenant-based contexts for most uses of remember, it may be reasonable to consider the relevance of another possible antonym. While the term dismember itself does not appear in the Book of Mormon, a few related terms do. For example, cut is used over seventy times in the text, all but nine of which are combined with off, as in cut off. Nearly all uses of this phrase occur in an explicit covenant context that implies spiritual or physical death as the ultimate consequence of breaking a covenant by not remembering. Likewise, the term destroy and its variants usually connote the physical or spiritual death of those who forget their covenants.

This general pattern of word usage suggests that while the connotation of “cognitive recall” exists in the Book of Mormon, it plays only a secondary or supporting role relative to the book’s lofty spiritual objectives. More to the point is that use of the term remember—along with its variations, synonyms, and antonyms—exhibits patterns that are consistently associated with righteousness, obedience, covenants, and salvation and are regularly contrasted with evil, death, and destruction. None of the over 220 uses of remember occurs in a mundane, casual, completely empirical, or purely cognitive context. Rather, they connote such meanings as “hold fast,” “commit to,” “embrace,” “keep sacred,” “restore,” “renew,” “be true to,” “gather,” and “preserve.” That this pattern is abundantly manifest throughout the Book of Mormon suggests that its principal authors intend the constellation of related terms to communicate a set of precise meanings that are central to the book’s core spiritual purposes. These terms occupy a special place in the language of the Book of Mormon, one that acknowledges the empirical past and the role of cognition in human consciousness but that focuses these capabilities on God and his eternal purposes.

Narrative Contents

Record keeping is one of the principal duties given to the Nephites by God. On two separate occasions, the Lord commands Nephi to keep a record of his mortal ministry (1 Nephi 19:1–5; 2 Nephi 5:28–34). At the time that he distinguishes his followers as a separate people, Nephi identifies record keeping as one of the key measures by which they preserve their covenant-based identity (2 Nephi 5:12). In addition, Nephi appears to have used his divine vision (1 Nephi 11–14) as a microcosm for his own record, and Mormon seems to have used it as a pattern for framework to abridge the Nephite archives.

On a more comprehensive level, the Nephite concept of tradition contrasts dramatically with that of related peoples. While the Nephites maintain their traditions largely by written records compiled and preserved by supreme spiritual leaders and for covenant-based spiritual purposes, the people of Zarahemla bring no written records with them from Jerusalem and thus lose their covenant identity, even though they trace their descent from the royal lineage of the Jews and occupy the promised land for a period of time comparable to the Nephites (Omni 1:17; Helaman 8:21). Likewise, the Lamanites seem to have kept no written records; hence, their religious and social traditions are transmitted largely orally and are described in the Nephite record as “incorrect,” “wicked,” and “abominable” (Alma 3:8; 23:3; 37:9; Helaman 15:7; 16:20). By contrast, “silly” and
“foolish” are the epithets used by apostate Nephites to justify their rejection of the church and gospel of Christ among the Nephites (Alma 8:11; 21:8; 30:14–31; 31:17; compare Helaman 16:20). To reinforce the central role of record keeping in the preservation of Nephite covenant identity, Book of Mormon prophets specifically mention the desire of wicked Nephites and Lamanites to destroy the records of the Nephites, whom they also seek to destroy as a people (Enos 1:14–16; Alma 14:8).

The covenant-based concept of remember considerably influences the historical narrative of the Book of Mormon. Nephi’s initial use of the term occurs in the context of his making sacred covenants with God. In his first recorded spiritual experience, Nephi declares that the Spirit had softened his heart so that he can accept his father’s dire predictions of Jerusalem’s impending destruction and the resulting need for his family to flee into the wilderness. Having received this special witness, Nephi tries, but with limited success, to convince his siblings of these radical but revealed truths. Because of his faithfulness and humility in making the attempt, the Lord blesses Nephi. The divine blessings are expressed as covenants. In this paper, the first is called the covenant of the promised land and the second the covenant of the chosen people. The covenant of the chosen people identifies Nephi’s “seed” (who come to be known collectively as “Nephites” or the “people of Nephi”) as a “ruler and a teacher” over the “seed” of his rebellious brothers (eventually called “Lamanites”). According to this covenant, the Lamanites in their rebellious state will have “no power” over the Nephites unless they too rebel against God. In their own state of rebellion, the Nephites will be scourged by the Lamanites in order “to stir them up in the ways of remembrance” (1 Nephi 2:16–24).

Nephi’s brother Jacob reinforces this covenant-based distinction. While recognizing descent as one way to distinguish social subgroups, he contrasts their perpetual antagonists, the Lamanites, or be destroyed if they altogether reject, or forget, their covenant with God.

Covenant ideology in the Book of Mormon informs the historical consciousness of the Nephites and their identity as a chosen people of God. In fact, the two concepts—historical consciousness and covenant ideology—are sufficiently connected in the text to be virtually indistinguishable. In the Book of Mormon, the term people is the most frequently used noun, appearing some 1,800 times. As remember is about more than the past, people is about more than a collection of individuals or even a society as a whole. In the Book of Mormon, the primary connotation of people is a group that is united, defined, and governed by sacred covenants. Nephi, for example, distinguishes Nephites from Lamanites largely in terms of a covenant with God. That is, the people of Nephi are those who follow God and are thereby blessed by their faithfulness, regardless of their lineal descent. By contrast, the Lamanites are those who fight against the Nephites and are thereby cursed, regardless of their literal ancestry. As a result, Nephi typically characterizes his followers as righteous, stable, civil, delightful, pure, prosperous, powerful, hardworking, unified, and happy and the Lamanites as indolent, nomadic, savage, repulsive, wicked, and ignorant of the things of God.

Nephi’s brother Jacob reinforces this covenant-based distinction. While recognizing descent as one way to distinguish social subgroups, he contrasts
Nephites from Lamanites primarily in terms reminiscent of God’s initial covenants with Nephi: “I shall call them Lamanites that seek to destroy the people of Nephi, and those who are friendly to Nephi I shall call Nephites, or the people of Nephi” (Jacob 1:14; see also 1 Nephi 2:21–24; Mormon 1:8). Because Nephites and Lamanites are both defined in terms of the covenant, they are each identified as a people. The house of Israel is also considered a people in this sense because of its association with God’s covenant with Abraham. The rest of humanity, however, is identified as Gentiles, a term connoting undifferentiated, residual human groups. While Gentiles are occasionally called nations, kingdoms, or multitudes in the Book of Mormon, they are never referred to as a people in this covenantal sense.

Nephite prophets anticipate a time when many Gentiles will accept the Abrahamic covenant and live the gospel of Jesus Christ. According to these prophecies, they will then be included with God’s covenant people and forego their Gentile identity (e.g., 1 Nephi 13; 2 Nephi 30; 3 Nephi 20–22).

Mormon adopts Nephi’s and Jacob’s covenant-based distinctions in his abridgment of the large plates (see Alma 3:11). Accounts of Nephite-Lamanite relations throughout the thousand-year history illustrate both aspects of this covenant pattern. As the Nephites remember their covenant, they enjoy spiritual blessings, prevail against external aggression, and succeed in converting many Lamanites to the gospel of Jesus Christ. On the other hand, whenever the Lamanites gain political, social, or military advantage, it is because the Nephites forget their covenant. However, as the Nephites are scourged in and restored to “the ways of remembrance,” they regain ascendancy over their enemies and reclaim peace and protection for their society. In the end, however, the Nephites are destroyed as a people once they altogether reject the covenant, despite repeated scourging.

Mormon portrays the Nephites ideally as a peace-loving, God-fearing people who are nevertheless willing to defend themselves against aggression. In general, the Nephites are also well-governed by leaders—whether king, priest, judge, or prophet—whose essential leadership quality is righteousness. Righteous leaders seek the welfare of the governed. In turn, the governed serve one another and support their leaders. Thus, for the most part, the Nephites are unified, prosperous, delightsome, and pure, in contrast to the Lamanites, who are ferocious, savage, aggressive, godless, and prone to wickedness.

The covenant of the chosen people acknowledges that these cultural stereotypes can be reversed or contradicted altogether because they are not associated exclusively with particular descent groups. When Nephites, for example, turn from their covenants, they reject the church of Christ, undermine established governments, foment social discord, and seek alliances with Lamanites in order to pursue their unrighteous objectives (e.g., Alma 9–14, 30–35, 46–49, 51–52, 59–62; Helaman 1–2, 4, 8–9). By contrast, when Lamanites are converted to the gospel of Jesus Christ, they exemplify qualities of godliness often to a greater degree than Nephites themselves (e.g., Alma 25–27; Helaman 6). When righteousness prevails generally, social distinctions disappear and no “manner of -ites” exists among the descendants of Lehi; they come to be known collectively as the “children of Christ” (4 Nephi 1:17; see Mosiah 5:7–6:2). However, when the spiritual utopia disintegrates, the dissenters take upon themselves the name of “Lamanites,” regardless of their actual descent lines (4 Nephi 1:20). Finally, the group that Mormon credits with the overthrow and eventual destruction of the entire Nephite nation is never referred to in the text as a people. Rather, they are variously called the “band,” “robbers,” or “society” of Gadianton (Helaman 2:13–14).

Virtually all uses of remember in the Book of Mormon can be understood in a covenant context. Obedience, righteousness, spirituality, faithfulness, holiness, protection, deliverance, salvation, as well as their negative counterparts—in short, all of the things that the Nephites are enjoined to remember—are part of the covenant ideology by which they order and make enduring sense of their lives. Remembrance, then, is not just a mnemonic exercise for historians. It is, rather, an essential spiritual discipline that allows a covenant people to preserve their identity. Furthermore, it is not the past in general that must be remembered. It is, rather, those portions of the past that exemplify covenant identities and relationships, strengthen and expand faith in Christ, and assure salvation in the kingdom of God. For the Nephites, these values are not simply internal matters of the heart (emotions) and mind (intellect) but are also external truths manifest in the lives of a people. Thus
their “ways of remembrance” can be written down and preserved in historical records.

From this perspective, the Book of Mormon is more than simply an ancient historical narrative. Its contents and structure are thoroughly informed by covenant ideology. Thus remembering the past by compiling records; preserving, studying, and pondering their contents; and teaching and keeping their precepts constitutes a pattern that is implied by its authors to be a form of sacred covenant renewal.18
Records Preservation

The foregoing discussion suggests that the Book of Mormon is not simply the history of an ancient community, society, family, or lineage. Rather, it is the official record of a covenant people. Nephite records not only provide an account of their sacred covenants but also are the most powerful witness to those covenants. For the Nephites, keeping records from generation to generation is a sacred duty, one that is entrusted only to Nephite spiritual leaders. So sacred is this archival responsibility that one Nephite holy man suggests that properly understanding the past is the special province of a “seer” (Mosiah 8:13–19).

As a result, the Nephites leave no aspect of records preservation to chance. Preserving records is so vital to Nephite identity that the names, positions, and spiritual roles of the successive stewards of the records, as well as the manner in which those records are preserved, constitute an important subtext of the Book of Mormon narrative. This degree of editorial transparency contrasts markedly with that of the Hebrew Bible. Furthermore, the high degree of consistency with which Nephites preserve records throughout their thousand-year history suggests that maintaining the traditions of records preservation is as important to the Nephites as preserving the records themselves.

As Lehi’s successor, Nephi is the first prophet-king of the “people of Nephi” (2 Nephi 5:9). Of all his responsibilities, none receives more attention than keeper of their sacred records. He maintains two sets of records, both of which are commanded of him by God but at different periods. He begins the first shortly after they have obtained the land of promise and the second after Nephi organizes his followers as a separate people a few decades later (1 Nephi 19:1–7; 2 Nephi 5:29–34). In short, the commencement of Nephi’s two records coincides with the initial fulfillment of the two covenants by which God defines his spiritual identity—possessor of a promised land and leader of a chosen people (see 1 Nephi 2:19–24). During his life, Nephi becomes aware that his people will be eventually annihilated as a people (1 Nephi 12:13–23; 2 Nephi 26:10). Thus his record will be the principal enduring memory and tangible evidence of
their existence. Nephi also learns that the record he 
and his successors create will be the primary means 
by which God fulfills his ancient covenant with 
Abraham in the latter days (1 Nephi 13:13–42). As a 
result, Nephi invests his best efforts to record “that 
which is pleasing unto God” and takes great pains to 
instruct those who will subsequently preserve and 
eventually translate the records so that they can ful-
fill this ambitious mission (1 Nephi 6; 2 Nephi 5:32; 
25:22–26; 27).

The line of successive stewards becomes an im-
portant part of the record itself and, in some cases, its 
primary entry of a given generation (e.g., Omni 1:1-10). The first set of Nephite records (called the large 
plates of Nephi) is initially kept by the line of kings 
and the second (called the small plates of Nephi) 
by the descendants of Jacob, Nephi’s brother. After 
early five centuries, the small plates are full, and 
the current steward, Amaleki, entrusts this record to 
King Benjamin, who is also the steward of the large 
plates at the time (Omni 1:23-25). At the end of his 
eventful life, Benjamin transfers both sets of records 
to his son and successor, Mosiah (Mosiah 1:10–18).

At the dissolution of the kingship and the formation 
of an institutional church among the Nephites, Mo-
siah transfers the record-keeping function to Alma 
the Elder, who has been appointed “chief priest” 
over the church (Mosiah 28:20). For the next four 
centuries, both sets of records are kept by a succes-
sion of Alma’s righteous descendants until Ammaron 
identifies a ten-year-old boy who shows promise to 
be the next Nephite prophet (3 Nephi 5:20; 4 Nephi 
1:48–49; Mormon 1:1–5; 8:13). In his turn, Mormon 
keeps a “full account” of his own period. In addition, 
he is eventually directed by God to abridge all the 
previous contributions to the large plates. Having 
done so, he instructs his son Moroni to complete 
the Nephite record, abridge the Jaredite record, and 
“seal up” the collection of plates in view of their “coming forth” in the last days (Mormon 2:18; Words 
of Mormon 1:1-2).

The Book of Mormon identifies not only those 
who possess and compile the official Nephite archive 
from generation to generation but also the manner 
of its preservation. Instructions that accompany the 
transfer of records justify their preservation in terms
of covenant ideology, historical consciousness, the Nephites’ identity as a people, and their hope for salvation.

King Benjamin, for example, prepares his son Mosiah for the archival duty by having him “taught in all the language of his fathers,” as Lehi had previously done for Nephi, in order that he might become a man of “understanding”—that is, familiar with the prophecies that had been received and recorded by “their fathers.” Benjamin teaches his son about the plates of brass and declares that the additional records preserved by their predecessors are “true,” thus enabling the people (1) to know the “mysteries of God” and (2) to “keep the commandments of God.” Because of their care in keeping sacred records, the Nephites are able to maintain their covenant-based distinctiveness from the Lamanites (Mosiah 1:2–7).

Some seventy years later and toward the end of his own life, Alma the Younger charges his son Helaman to keep sacred not only all the received records, including those of the people of Ether, but also the sacred objects associated with the records. These include (1) the stone or interpreters that bring to light “works of darkness” and “wickedness and abominations” of mankind and (2) the Liahona or compass that directs people of faith to understand and follow the will of God. Acknowledging that preserving the records may seem to some a “small and simple” thing, Alma emphasizes that doing so is nevertheless crucial to ensure the righteousness of the people. To this end, he witnesses to his son that the Nephite records “[did enlarge] the memory of this people, yea, and convinced many of the error of their ways, and brought them to a knowledge of their God unto the salvation of their souls” (Alma 37:8). He further declares that these complementary benefits of remembrance, repentance, and knowledge unto salvation will eventually extend to other peoples and to “future generations” (Alma 37:18) as long as the records are properly preserved. Thus Alma enjoins Helaman to continued righteousness so that he can successfully carry out this sacred archival duty and lead the people of God (Alma 37:21–47; 45:2–17).

For most of the history of the Nephites in the promised land, sacred records are kept and preserved by the supreme leaders, whether king, prophet, priest, or general. As the society begins to disintegrate, the preservation of records by leaders, regardless how righteous, becomes more problematic. Near the end, stewards of the records begin hiding and even compiling them in caves or in other secure natural repositories. Hence the hill Shim and hill Ramah play an important role among the Nephites and their counterparts among the Jaredites (Mormon 1:3; 4:23; Ether 9:3; 13:13–14; 15:11). Not being able to secure sacred records in the traditional way is a sign that society has so completely forgotten their covenants that they are “ripe for destruction,” in accordance with the covenants’ curse.

Conclusion

Nephi repeatedly testifies that that he writes nothing on plates except that which is sacred. One thousand years later, Mormon testifies that he intends to model his abridgment on Nephi’s writings (Words of Mormon 1:4–5). By implication, everything about the Book of Mormon—language, contents, literary structures, manner of transmission and preservation, and latter-day mission—is to be considered sacred. The foregoing study has shown how concepts of memory and identity support this perspective. Not only do these concepts pervade the narrative, but they also complement each other in consistent, complex, and profound ways. Both themes derive meaning from and are grounded in divine revelation and sacred covenants, which helps to distinguish the Book of Mormon as a scriptural record.

According to the Book of Mormon, covenants are established by God with his children through revelation to a prophet. They serve as the basis of a unified community of committed believers and of an enduring relationship with God as well as a primary mechanism for realizing the blessings of salvation, partially in mortality and fully in eternity. Thus the Book of Mormon portrays history as the record of covenants that distinguish a chosen people and give eternal meaning to their lives, including their eventual destruction. While Mormon and Moroni include only a small portion of the available material in the final Nephite record, the narrative illustrates the extent to which an impressive array of information—military, domestic, spiritual, ecclesiastical, political, economic, social, and so on—can be accounted for within a covenant framework. Keeping such a record is crucial to Nephite identity, and thus this function is entrusted to supreme spiritual leaders. In addition to being a key to understanding the people of Nephi, this covenant pattern is shown in the Book
of Mormon to be equally relevant to other peoples of the past and future. The Book of Mormon presents itself as both a record of God’s covenants among an ancient people and the agent of covenant renewal in the latter days. Thus the Book of Mormon defines a comprehensive covenant-based worldview whose principal purpose is the salvation of mankind in the kingdom of God.

NOTES

1. Yosef Yerushalmi, Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982). The scholarly literature on memory is extensive, ranging from the cognitive and social sciences to the humanities and philosophy. One of the more valuable and broad-ranging examinations of the subject from a philosophical perspective is Paul Ricoeur, Memory, History, Forgetting, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

2. R. Gary Shapiro, comp., An Exhaustive Concordance of the Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price (Salt Lake City: Hawkes, 1977), s.vv. “memory,” “remember,” “remembered,” “rememberest,” “remembereth,” “remembering,” “remembrance.” Of the several hundred different verbs in the Book of Mormon, only about three dozen appear more frequently than remember, and many of these are basic verbs (e.g., to be, to have, to go).

3. The literary similarities between the sacrament prayers (Moroni 4:3; 5:2) and Moroni’s promise (Moroni 10:3–5) imply a degree of conscious intentionality on Moroni’s part and, hence, a strong relationship of meaning among covenant renewal, historical consciousness, social identity, and spiritual witness.

4. The following usage strengthens the association of remember with righteous action. In his final blessing to his posterity, Lehi urges his children, “Wherefore, my sons, I would that ye would remember; yea, I would that ye would hearken unto my words” (2 Nephi 1:12). In the Book of Mormon, the second clause in such a construction reinforces and amplifies the meaning of the first. Hence, remember in the first clause is defined and its importance is amplified by hearken in the second. Thus hearken connotes more than “listen” or “pay attention”; rather, it implies “mind,” “give heed to,” or “live according to” the counsel.

5. Shapiro, Exhaustive Concordance, s.vv. “recall,” “recollection,” “remin­ded,” “reminding.”


8. Shapiro, Exhaustive Concordance, s.vv. “cut,” “cutteth,” “cutting.”

9. Shapiro, Exhaustive Concordance, s.vv. “destroy,” “destroyed,” “destroyeth,” “destroyers,” “destroying,” “destruction(s).”


14. Shapiro, Exhaustive Concordance, s.vv. “people.”

15. These stereotypical distinctions between Nephites and Lamanites are made explicit in 2 Nephi 5 and are developed throughout the rest of the Book of Mormon; see, for example, Enos 1:20–21; Jarom 1:5–11.

16. Shapiro, Exhaustive Concordance, s.vv. “Gentile(s),” “people.”

17. See also Shapiro, Exhaustive Concordance, s.vv. “band,” “Gadianton,” “robbers,” “society.”


Steven L. Olsen [PhD, University of Chicago] is senior curator of the LDS Church History Department. His professional career includes exhibit development, historic sites restoration, and public history administration at the LDS Church History Department. Olsen has published extensively in Mormon studies and museum studies.