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Prophecy and History: Structuring the Abridgment of the Nephite Records

Steven L. Olsen


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Utilizing techniques adapted from literary criticism, this paper investigates the narrative structure of the Book of Mormon, particularly the relationship between Nephi’s first-person account and Mormon’s third-person abridgment. A comparison of the order and relative prominence of material from 1 Nephi 12 with the content of Mormon’s historical record reveals that Mormon may have intentionally patterned the structure of his narrative after Nephi’s prophetic vision—a conclusion hinted at by Mormon himself in his editorial comments. With this understanding, readers of the Book of Mormon can see how Mormon’s sometimes unusual editorial decisions are actually guided by an overarching desire to show that Nephi’s prophecies have been dramatically and literally fulfilled in the history of his people.
The Book of Mormon is a wondrous story. Between its miraculous beginning and tragic ending, numerous individuals step onto a dramatic stage and act in accordance with their moral agency in pursuit of certain goals. The narrative is filled with such diverse actions as migrations, conversions, sermons, prophesying, wars, captivity and liberation, death and succession, social renewal and disintegration, and apostasy and genocide. The fabric of these events, woven together into an epic narrative, constitutes the official record of an ancient civilization.

What are we to make of the narrative quality of this sacred record? Is the historical frame integral to meaning or primarily of heuristic value? Would the book’s essential meaning change if its messages were communicated through a perspective other than narrative? Is the story’s structure as central to overall meaning as are its contents? Did the principal authors consciously craft the narrative into an integrated whole, or was their literary task simply to edit, however drastically, preexisting primary sources?
Grounds for Investigation

This study is an effort to address such questions regarding the Book of Mormon. Serious study of the book’s narrative is suggested partly by some of its unusual characteristics, including the following:

Point of view. The Book of Mormon consists of major portions of first- and third-person narrative. All of Nephi’s “small plates” and the entire books that Mormon and Moroni wrote concerning their own times consist of first-person narrative. These sections comprise roughly one-third of the Book of Mormon text and one-half of the time period of Nephite history. The rest of the story is narrated mostly in the third person, occasionally reverting to a first-person account (e.g., Mosiah 9–10; Alma 36–42). It is significant to note, by contrast, that the narrative portions of the Hebrew Bible are primarily in the omniscient third person. The Book of Mormon is the only extended first-person historical narrative in the Old Testament. Furthermore, first-person narrative appears only briefly in the “Prophets” section (Isaiah–Malachi but excluding Daniel), largely to document a prophet’s divine calling or to otherwise contextualize his prophecies. Though seldom used in the Bible, first-person narrative plays a major role and serves a central value in the Book of Mormon. The relationship between first- and third-person narrative may reveal something fundamental about this ancient record.

Editorial commentary. The whole Book of Mormon (both the first- and third-person sections) is replete with conscious editorial intrusions by the narrators. By contrast, in the Hebrew Bible the narrators’ influence is seen mostly in the crafting of the story line—what is included and excluded and how it is expressed and ordered within the narrative—and seldom in direct editorial commentary. The editorial commentary in the Book of Mormon often occurs at critical junctures in the narrative, such as crises of leadership, social disintegration, major spiritual transitions, and moral collapse (see 1 Nephi 6, 9; Alma 24:19; 28:13–14; 46:8–9; Helaman 2:13–14; 12; Mormon 6:16–7:10; 8:33–41; Moroni 10:30–34). Significantly, one of the most extended editorial comments is so crucial to the narrative that it is distinguished with its own title, “Words of Mormon.” This aside is devoted to explaining one of Mormon’s most unusual editorial decisions. After abridging Nephi’s “large plates” (covering the time of Lehi to the reign of King Benjamin), Mormon found a smaller record, written by Nephi and subsequent prophets, that cov-
ered the same time period and included many of the same events. He decided to add the smaller record in its entirety to the larger narrative, its abridged counterpart, so that the original version of his history would have first- and third-person accounts of the same period (see Words of Mormon 1:3–6).

Furthermore, not only did the Book of Mormon narrators feel free to add explicit editorial commentary, but they also played major roles in the historical story lines.5 They were named or otherwise identified, filled critical roles, and on occasion consciously incorporated the history of their record keeping into the larger narrative they were carefully crafting. It is as though keeping the narrative record of their people was equivalent to preserving the essence of their unique identity. By contrast, the biblical narrators are not characters in the story. With the exception of Ezra and Nehemiah, we know little about who they were and less about the roles they might have played in the larger sacred history of the Jews.6

Narrative content. Much of the Book of Mormon clearly supports its single-minded spiritual purposes. This content includes doctrinal discourses, ecclesiastical missions, conversion experiences, revelations and prophecies, and, of course, the crowning account of the risen Christ’s ministry. At the same time, however, the spiritual significance of the book’s other content—military campaigns, political intrigues, and social crises (see Alma 43–3 Nephi 10)—seems incongruous with, or extraneous to, the book’s explicit spiritual purposes. This seeming incongruity intensifies when it becomes clear that Mormon subordinated or eliminated altogether material such as the work of the Church of Christ and the gospel’s influence on its adherents in favor of giving full narrative attention to seemingly secular content (e.g., Alma 45:22–23; 46:6, 38; 50:23–25; 62:44–51). Equally curious is Mormon’s drastic truncation of the account of the nearly two centuries of utopian-like righteousness following Christ’s ministry to the Nephites (see 4 Nephi 1:1–20). Furthermore, Mormon and Moroni end their sacred history with an account of the gruesome annihilation of their people, even though these two prophets were acquainted with and could have included the stories of righteous Nephites who had initially escaped the catastrophe and continued to live the gospel as best they could, given their abject circumstances (see Mormon 8:2–3; Moroni 1:1–2). However, Mormon and Moroni chose not to include details of such courage and sacrifice. Contemporary historians could hardly conceive of a patently religious history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints reflecting documentary priorities like these. What was Mormon’s motivation for shifting his editorial focus?

If such seemingly secular content is considered in isolation—that is, with individual passages interpreted as though they were disconnected from one another and from the rest of the story—it is of course still possible for modern readers to draw important moral or ethical lessons from those passages. However, if we assume that Mormon was crafting an integrated narrative rather than assembling a patchwork of random events, then the task of interpretation in light of authorial intent becomes all the more difficult. It requires identifying a set of principles that enables us to understand simultaneously these “secular” and other portions of the narrative from a unified perspective. While there is no certainty that Mormon intended to create an integrated narrative (attempting to do so would have been an ambitious and significant undertaking), the supreme concern with which Book of Mormon authors approached their literary mission and the eternal value of their resulting narrative suggest the likelihood of an integrated approach.

Establishing an Analytical Framework

Understanding the Book of Mormon from an integrated and unified perspective is facilitated by applying the following analytical principles:
Comprehensive. This principle assumes that the best analytical framework will account for all data relevant to the question under investigation. Any approach that fails in this regard must be considered of limited value or inherently flawed.

Systematic. Responsible analysis does not simply account for the existence of data. The better the analytical framework, the more it will reveal the systematic connections among the data under investigation. The principles that reveal these interrelationships are often those that define the meaning of the phenomena under investigation.

Simple. This principle privileges an analytical perspective that reveals the systematic relations among the greatest amount of relevant data using the fewest number of independent premises. Premises are considered independent if they are not derived from or dependent upon one another.

Concrete. For analysis to be truly scholarly, it must also be falsifiable. This principle requires that the study’s premises be capable of empirical or logical contradiction. For scholarly purposes, if a theoretical premise is incapable of being proved false, then either it is logically flawed (e.g., based on circular or tautological reasoning) or it belongs to a nonscientific realm of discourse (e.g., ethics or metaphysics) whose premises (e.g., “God is dead” or “Love is the most distinctively human of emotions”) are simply asserted and whose logical implications are examined but are not ordinarily subject to empirical verification.

Any research methodology entails certain premises that guide inquiry. Key to the present study are the following three analytical premises, which find support in the course of this study:

1. Even though the principal authors of the Book of Mormon struggled mightily with their respective literary missions, Nephi and Mormon were conscious of an overall purpose for their writing, and they crafted a text consistent with and integral to that purpose. Evidence of this literary consciousness and the resulting craftsmanship comes from the nature of the completed text and from their numerous editorial asides.

2. The meaning of the text is intricately connected with its structure. That is, the spiritual significance of the Book of Mormon is in large measure a function of its status as a historical narrative.

3. The first- and third-person portions of the narrative, particularly Nephi’s small plates and Mormon’s abridgment, exist in a dynamic and intricate interrelationship. Their meaning derives from and depends upon each other.

These premises owe much to, but are not directly derived from, the biblical scholarship of Robert Alter, Meir Sternberg, David Noel Freedman, and their colleagues. In an effort to relate the literary forms of the Hebrew Bible to its meaning, these scholars have identified various principles used to craft its diverse contents. Heavily influenced by literary criticism, their work reveals an impressive array of literary conventions employed in that process. Sternberg has gone so far as to say that this body of insight constitutes a “poetics” of biblical narrative.

I am also indebted to an analytical tradition called “structuralism.” Influenced by the field of linguistics, structuralism is a subspecialty of cultural anthropology that attempts to derive a kind of architectonic logic from the intensive study of sacred texts. Examining the systematic organization of data within texts—collectively called their “structures”—provides insight into the role and significance of those texts within a particular culture. Just as architectural historians, archaeologists, and curators look for patterns of order in various kinds of material culture, structural anthropologists look for literary patterns in texts and oral narratives. When the latter are woven together by an expert craftsman, their “structures” yield remarkable insights into the meaning of a text and the soul of a people.

This study will illustrate one small but significant pattern of narrative structuring in the Book of Mormon. The steps of this analysis will (1) identify
a pattern of historical structure that is distinctive to and pervades Mormon’s abridgment, (2) relate this structure to a complementary pattern in Nephi’s small plates, (3) test the validity of this patterning of the historical narrative against Mormon’s explicit editorial asides, and then (4) suggest the interpretive significance of these correlated patterns for the Book of Mormon as a whole.

Patterning in Mormon’s Abridgment

This study of Book of Mormon narrative structure encompasses the book’s three distinctive characteristics mentioned earlier: point of view, editorial commentary, and narrative content. I start with the contents that seem somewhat out of place in a religious record: military campaigns, political intrigues, and social crises. Mormon begins his detailed account of the Nephite wars with an explicit editorial shift (see Alma 43:2–3). Although he had known of and alluded to extensive armed conflict in his earlier abridgment of the Nephite records (e.g., Mosiah 10; 20; Alma 2; 15), to this point in his narrative he had chosen not to detail even one battle. In further contrast, Mormon had just completed a detailed account of the remarkable spiritual conversions and relatively successful ministries of Alma the Elder, Alma the Younger, and the sons of Mosiah among both the Nephites and Lamanites (see Mosiah 17–Alma 35). He had also included the verbatim account of the final spiritual counsel of Alma the Younger to his sons Helaman, Shiblon, and Corianton (see Alma 36–42).

After focusing on patently spiritual matters for over 100 pages of text, Mormon makes an abrupt shift in his narrative. He acknowledges that Alma and his sons continued their missions but then explicitly states, “Now we shall say no more concerning their preaching” (Alma 43:2). This shift in focus was not required by a lack of ecclesiastical data; throughout the war narrative, Mormon intermittently refers to their ongoing ministries (e.g., Alma 45:22–23; 46:6, 38; 50:23–25; 62:44–51). Yet instead of focusing on ecclesiology, theology, conversions, and spiritual epiphanies, Mormon chooses at this point to focus his account of the next century of Nephite history almost exclusively on military conflicts between Lamanites and Nephites, fractious internal Nephite politics, social disintegration, and natural catastrophes (Alma 43–3 Nephi 9). The preaching of Samuel the Lamanite is a notable exception (Helaman 13–15).

Principal themes during this period include the Lamanite wars as fomented by Nephite dissenters and apostates (Alma 43–63), the political intrigues and social disintegration that rendered Nephite society increasingly vulnerable to Lamanite incursions and the terrorism of the Gadianton band (Helaman 1–3 Nephi 4), the inability of the Church of Christ to stem the general tide of wickedness among the Nephites (3 Nephi 6–7), and the natural disasters sent by God to destroy the wicked (3 Nephi 8–9). As a result of these developments, Nephite society was in total disarray. Many of its cities and lands had been destroyed, its citizens slaughtered or displaced, and its institutions and social structure ruined. Virtually nothing remained of the civilization that had prospered in the promised land for nearly 600 years. Mormon devotes nearly one-fifth of his entire history of the Nephites to this century of progressive decline and destruction.

Within this setting of virtual catastrophe, the resurrected Christ appeared to a crowd of survivors gathered at the temple in the land Bountiful (3 Nephi 11:1). Christ’s ministry to the Nephites consisted of three full days and a number of subsequent visits (3 Nephi 26:13). During this brief ministry, Christ testified of his divinity (3 Nephi 9:15–11:17), delivered his gospel (3 Nephi 12–16; 27:13–33), organized and named his church (3 Nephi 11:18–12:1; 18:1–20:9; 27:1–12), ministered...
to the spiritual needs of his followers (3 Nephi 17; 20:1–9), and prophesied concerning his kingdom in the latter days (3 Nephi 20–22; 24–25). Mormon’s account of these events occupies 36 pages in the present edition, constituting by far the most detailed portion of the entire Book of Mormon narrative.

Mormon’s abridgment next focuses on the resulting two centuries of righteousness. In contrast to the detailed account of Christ’s ministry, which averages roughly 10 pages of text per day in the present edition, that of the spiritual utopia averages nearly 10 years per verse of text (4 Nephi 1:1–20). This extended period is one of great spiritual achievement: converting the rest of the people (4 Nephi 1:1–2); eliminating poverty, crime, sin, and oppression (vv. 2–3, 16–17); performing miracles (vv. 5, 13); rebuilding destroyed cities (vv. 7–10); establishing harmony and peace throughout the society (vv. 2, 13, 15); and realizing the blessings of the gospel in the lives of Christ’s followers (vv. 11–12, 18). Yet Mormon does not include in his narrative one detail of any of these extraordinary spiritual accomplishments.

His purpose for omitting those details from the narrative must have been greater than any value gained by including them. Elsewhere in his abridgment, Mormon specifically references a divine injunction in which the Lord has him omit supremely sacred contents (e.g., 3 Nephi 26:9–11). Yet he is silent as to his reasons for drastically truncating the spiritual high point of his narrative.

Mormon’s narrative ends with the total annihilation of his people (see 4 Nephi 1:21–Mormon 8). While his accounts of the four generations of righteousness and of the Nephites’ destruction each encompasses about 175 years, his account of the destruction receives much greater emphasis in the narrative than the generations of righteousness do—about 17 pages compared with less than 2 pages of text in the present edition. Mormon suggests why he did not provide more details of this genocide (see Mormon 4:11–12; 5:8–9). Although nearly all the narrative of the final destruction focuses on his futile efforts to forestall the inevitable, yet he is not fatalistic. Except for one period in which he refuses to lead the Nephite armies, serving instead as an “idle witness” to their wickedness, he tirelessly works with his people to avert catastrophe (see Mormon 3:9–16).

In short, the second half of Mormon’s abridgment addresses four major historical themes: Nephite turmoil preceding Christ’s ministry, Christ’s ministry to the survivors of simultaneous natural disasters, the resulting spiritual utopia in the promised land, and the final annihilation of the Nephites. Considerable attention is given to the turmoil and to Christ’s ministry, virtually no attention to the nearly two centuries of spiritual utopia, and moderate attention to the Nephites’ demise. Accounting for these major themes in Mormon’s abridgment, not in isolation from one another but in terms of their systematic interrelationship and the context of Mormon’s larger narrative, has never been attempted. The rest of this study seeks to do so with reference to both critical portions of the historical narrative and central editorial comments of its principal author.

Correspondence in Nephi’s Small Plates

A narrative pattern that corresponds quite closely with Mormon’s abridgment of these four major themes is found in Nephi’s account of his own vision of the tree of life and in his associated prophecies in 1 Nephi 11–14. Before considering the details of Nephi’s vision in relation to Mormon’s abridgment, we must consider Nephi’s vision in relation to his father’s dream. These two profoundly spiritual experiences are linked in two critical dimensions. Chronologically, the account of Nephi’s vision almost immediately follows that of Lehi’s dream. In fact, the dream is the direct motivation for the vision, since Nephi received the vision after hearing and desiring to understand his father’s dream (see 1 Nephi 11:1). The dream and vision are also metaphorically connected in that both are representations of the plan of salvation. In quite different but complementary ways, they express Nephi’s desires for and understandings of God’s ultimate blessings for his children.

On the one hand, the dream is an allegorical representation of salvation in which elements, personalities, and events stand for spiritual realities. For example, the tree of life and fountain of living waters represent the love of God; the fruit of the tree stands for eternal life, “the greatest of all the gifts of God”; the iron rod represents the word of God; the great and spacious building represents the pride
of world; and the river of water represents filthiness and the “awful gulf” that separates the wicked and righteous (see 1 Nephi 11:25, 35–36; 15:21–36). Although the only identified individuals in the dream are members of Lehi’s family, the “numberless concourses of people” (1 Nephi 8:21) represent all of humanity. Interpreting the dream as an allegory, we conclude that salvation is available to all who hold fast to the word of God, who resist the influence of the wicked world, who partake of the atonement of Christ, and who endure in faith until the end.

By contrast, Nephi’s vision is not a figurative but a literal representation of the plan of salvation. It depicts God’s redemptive work as it unfolds in real-world spatial, temporal, and human contexts. Through actual persons, places, and events, God’s plan of salvation becomes manifest and its purposes partially realized in mortality.

Nephi’s historical vision of the plan of salvation is, in essence, an extended prophecy consisting of a spiritual drama in four acts. Each act focuses on a dominant theme: the earthly ministry of Christ in the Holy Land (1 Nephi 11), the Nephites and Lamanites in the promised land (1 Nephi 12), the Gentiles and the House of Israel in the Old and New Worlds (1 Nephi 13), and the triumph of good over evil at the end of time (1 Nephi 14).

Let us take up the second act of this drama of redemption—the history of the Nephites and Lamanites in the promised land—because of all the acts in this drama, this envisioned history is most relevant to the historical contours we have identified in Mormon’s abridgment. This portion of Nephi’s vision contains four distinct but related prophecies: the “wars and contentions” of the Nephites prior to Christ’s coming (1 Nephi 12:1–5), the ministry of Christ in the promised land (12:6–10), the resulting four generations of righteousness.
(12:11–12), and the final annihilation of the Nephites by the Lamanites (12:13–19). When this prophetic pattern of events is compared to Mormon's historical pattern, several remarkable similarities appear. The two patterns are virtually identical in terms of contents, sequence, and relative weighting of the depicted events. In both, the order of events is the same: “wars and destructions” followed by Christ's ministry, spiritual utopia, and Nephite annihilation. The relative attention to detail is also similar. Considerable attention is given to the Nephite wars and to Christ's ministry, very little focus rests on the four generations of righteousness, and a relatively greater emphasis is given to the final destruction of the Nephites. If viewed in isolation, such textual similarities could be considered coincidental. However, when viewed systematically within the entire historical narrative, the correspondence between the prophetic and historical accounts of these events seems to be integral to the authors’ purpose and central to the book's overall meaning. It seems as though Mormon's abridgment is documenting the fulfillment of key prophecies from Nephi's vision. If so, Mormon structured his historical account to imitate the prophetic account in order to demonstrate how literally and completely those prophecies of Nephi had been fulfilled.

The possibility that this correspondence is intentional is heightened when viewed from the perspective of repetition in the Hebrew Bible, an established literary convention. Although Nephi eschewed the general “manner of prophesying among the Jews” (2 Nephi 25:1), he did not reject the tradition altogether. Witness his liberal citations from the prophecies of Isaiah, Zenos, Zenock, and other named and unnamed Hebrew prophets in 1 Nephi 19–21 and 2 Nephi 6–8; 12–24 (for examples of subsequent Nephite prophets citing additional Hebrew prophets, see Jacob 5; Mosiah 14; Alma 33–34; Helaman 8; 3 Nephi 10; 22; 24–25). Biblical narrators used repetition to reinforce central messages of documented events, interpret historical events for different audiences, and mark the literal fulfillment of prophecy. If the biblical practice can be considered a valid antecedent, the degree of repetition between Nephi’s prophetic and Mormon’s historical accounts of these events may provide rhetorical evidence of their significance for this sacred history. Mormon may have structured his historical account to mirror Nephi’s prophetic account in order to illustrate how completely and literally this portion of the Nephite plan of salvation was fulfilled. Before testing the validity of this insight against explicit editorial comments of the authors, I must illustrate one more way that prophecy and history seem to connect Nephi’s small plates and Mormon's abridgment.

In addition to using Nephi’s prophecies as a model to structure his historical abridgment, Mormon seems also to have used Nephi’s prophecies to define the corpus of Nephite prophecy for his abridgment. Of the hundreds of individual prophecies included in the Book of Mormon, nearly all find their initial expression in Nephi’s record. Nephi’s prophecies are further reiterated, refined, enlarged, and detailed in Mormon’s and Moroni’s subsequent narratives. Not surprisingly, the prophecies anticipating Christ’s ministry, which find greatest attention in Nephi’s record, are those that are most often repeated in Mormon’s abridgment. By contrast, Nephi’s prophecy of the four generations of righteousness is repeated only twice (briefly) in Nephi’s account and only twice (indirectly) in Mormon’s entire abridgment (compare 1 Nephi 12:11–12; 2 Nephi 26:9 and Alma 45:12; 3 Nephi 27:31–32).
Mormon’s abridgment includes a few prophecies that do not initially appear in the small plates.15 These prophecies play an important but very narrow role in the course of the historical narrative. They are generally uttered and fulfilled within particular historical contexts; hence they never reach the grand scale of the many prophecies that unify Nephi’s and Mormon’s accounts more generally. Because these prophecies are so infrequent in their appearance and so relatively modest in their significance within Mormon’s narrative, they do not undermine the general rule that Nephi’s record defines a corpus of prophecy that Mormon uses to abridge the Nephite records.

Mormon’s Preface

We now test the thesis that Mormon consciously used Nephi’s small plates as a framework to abridge the large plates, measuring it against Mormon’s explicit editorial comments. In the absence of documentation that lies outside a text (e.g., correspondence, notes, initial drafts, and descriptions of the writing process by others), editorial commentary within the text can help clarify the author’s intentions and objectives in writing. Regarding the creation of the Book of Mormon, only the completed text (as represented by the printed editions and extant portions of the initial manuscripts) has survived. Hence we must weigh its internal evidence—narrative and editorial—carefully and rigorously when drawing interpretive conclusions.

The extended editorial comment called Words of Mormon is the most straightforward statement of the principal author’s literary intent. Even though this two-page aside appears one-third of the way through the published text, it serves the whole as a kind of preface, revealing as clearly as any other editorial comment what Mormon understood to be the interpretive focus of his abridgment.16 Although seemingly misplaced as a preface, Words of Mormon is strategically positioned to explain one of Mormon’s most innovative literary initiatives: his inclusion of Nephi’s small plates verbatim into the larger narrative after he had abridged an account from the large plates covering the same time period.

According to this editorial statement, after Mormon finished abridging Nephi’s large plates from the time of Lehi to King Benjamin, something caused him to search further among the records “which had been delivered into my hands” (Words of Mormon 1:3). Mormon was likely prompted to do so by a reference in the large plates to a second record of Nephi of which Mormon had been previously unaware. Nephi’s first record, which inaugurates the large plates, was begun in response to a divine commandment that he received shortly after Lehi’s family arrived in the land of promise (see 1 Nephi 19:1–6). His second record, known today as Nephi’s small plates, was begun between 20 and 30 years later (see 2 Nephi 5:29–34). After Nephi’s death, the record on the large plates continued to be kept by Nephi’s kingly successors, while his prophetic successors continued to keep their record on the small plates. During King Benjamin’s righteous reign some four centuries later, the prophet Amaleki transferred the small plates to Benjamin, making him the first steward of both sets of plates since the prophet Nephi (see Omni 1:25; Words of Mormon 1:10–11). The reference to this second record of Nephi probably appeared in the expanded account of the succession of kings—either that of Mosiah to his son Benjamin or of Benjamin to his son Mosiah—since inventorying and reviewing the significance of the sacred records and artifacts seem to be a customary part of the formal succession of Nephite leaders (see Mosiah 1:1–16; 28:11; Alma 37; 63:1–3; Helaman 3:13–15; 3 Nephi 1:2–3; 4 Nephi 1:48).

By searching among the plates in his possession, Mormon found the missing record. What attracted his attention at this time was the discovery of certain contents that convinced him to include the entire account verbatim in his abridgment, even though he had just completed the abridgment of a more extensive account of exactly the same time period from Nephi’s large plates. Supporting his decision to include the entirety of the small plates, Mormon comments that the contents of Nephi’s second record “are choice unto me; and I know they will be choice unto my brethren” (Words of Mormon 1:6).

To help the reader understand the significance of this unusual decision to combine comparable historical accounts, Mormon identifies the contents of the newly found record that he found so compelling:

And the things which are upon these plates pleasing me, because of the prophecies of the coming of Christ; and my fathers knowing that many of them have been fulfilled; yea, and I also know that as many things as have been
prophesied concerning us down to this day [late fourth century AD] have been fulfilled, and as many as go beyond this day must surely come to pass. (Words of Mormon 1:4)

Having identified the contents of the small plates that he found worthy to preserve verbatim, Mormon next declares his interpretive purpose for doing so: “Wherefore, I chose these things [i.e., the “prophesyings and revelations” of Nephi’s second record; see Words of Mormon 1:6], to finish my record upon them, which remainder of my record I shall take from the [large] plates of Nephi” (Words of Mormon 1:5).

While the precise meaning of this declaration of editorial intent may be debated, the following interpretation is as plausible as any. Mormon found the sacred contents of Nephi’s second record so compelling that he used them as a framework to abridge and thereby interpret the remainder of the large plates. In particular, Nephi’s prophecies became so crucial to his literary purpose that he consciously structured a major portion of his narrative in order to document their literal and complete fulfillment. This reading is internally consistent with Mormon’s editorial comment itself, with the broad textual evidence of his crafting of the abridgment, and with the preliminary interpretive insights about the structural relations between Nephi’s small plates and Mormon’s abridgment of the large plates. In the absence of absolute certainty concerning the meaning of declarations like Mormon’s, we must rely on degrees of probability. The proposed interpretation has a high degree of probable accuracy, given its systematic relevance to disparate data throughout the Book of Mormon text. Until a more probable interpretation is presented, the one advanced here merits serious consideration. What is beyond question is, first, that Mormon discovered something of great value in Nephi’s small plates that he had not gained from abridging the large plates covering the same time period, and second, that he subsequently utilized these insights in abridging the rest of the large plates.

This study suggests one way that Nephi and Mormon, the two principal authors of the Book of Mormon, may have explicitly structured the contents of their epic history. Its thesis is that Mormon abridged the large plates of Nephi consistent with a pattern that he discovered in Nephi’s small plates. As a result, the two records share a purpose that transcends the value of their individual contents if considered in isolation. Evidence for this thesis comes from Mormon’s explicit editorial comments and from systematic textual parallels between the two accounts. From this perspective, Mormon included all of Nephi’s small plates in his abridgment in order to draw attention to the close correspondence between prophecy and scriptural history.

Meaning Reflected in Narrative Structure

The correspondence between the small and large plates suggests that Mormon adopted the prophecies in the small plates not only to structure the bulk of his historical abridgment but also to emphasize some of its most sacred contents. If Mormon indeed “chose these things” of Nephi’s record “to finish my record upon them” (Words of Mormon 1:5), what are we to make of the relationship between prophecy and history in the Book of Mormon? Within the limits of this study, I offer a few preliminary observations on the nature of the Book of Mormon as a historical record.

Because the narrative seems to be influenced to a great extent by Nephi’s vision of the plan of salvation, the Book of Mormon is neither a general history of the Nephites nor a record of primarily descriptive value. Although the narrative is replete with objective contents, its purpose is not empirical but rather spiritual documentation. The authors include historical, social, geographical, and other details in order to define the plan of salvation in real-world terms and to demonstrate its partial fulfillment among a portion of God’s children. Placing historical events within such a divine perspective, Mormon’s historical narrative achieves a greater degree of spiritual significance. The prophetic utterances and their historical fulfillment are complementary parts of the same process of showing to God’s children (1) the way that they may return to him through the gospel of Jesus Christ and (2) the consequences for their souls if they do not. For Mormon, this purpose seems to be far more compelling than anything else his record might have accomplished. In fact, circumstances, personalities, and events that do not help explicate this revealed plan and other exalted purposes are treated as extraneous, trivial, or otherwise unworthy to be preserved.
in this official record. Thus Mormon includes in his abridgment less than one one-hundredth of the historical information available to him (see Words of Mormon 1:5; Alma 13:31; 3 Nephi 5:8; 26:6).

Just as the concept of history in the Book of Mormon is singular, so is the set of personal qualifications needed for the authors to produce such a work. In particular, priesthood keys and highly refined spiritual gifts—including prophecy, revelation, and “seeing”—were required to grasp the mind and will of God, as regards the overall focus and particular contents of the narrative. In addition, its principal authors needed well-developed analytical and literary skills to reveal such exalted concepts within and through the stuff and substance of everyday life and language. For Nephi and Mormon, the past, in this exalted sense, was no more knowable than the future without such spiritual and professional capacities (e.g., Mosiah 8:16–17 identifies one of the qualities of a seer as being able “to know of things which are past,” presumably in a way that was unattainable to record keepers who did not possess this spiritual gift).

The principal authors of the Book of Mormon developed and refined their literary and spiritual capacities through similar life experiences. Both Nephi and Mormon received formal training early in life in order to realize their extraordinary potential (see 1 Nephi 1:2; Mormon 1:2–6). Both writers overcame considerable opposition and affliction in their personal lives, some of which came as a direct result of their literary endeavors (e.g., 2 Nephi 33:3; Mormon 5:8–24). These challenges deepened their spiritual sensitivities and personal resolve to devote their full effort to record only “the things of God” (see 1 Nephi 6:3–4).

They also refined their literary skills through extensive prior writing. Nephi, for example, had been compiling the first account of his ministry for some 30 years before the Lord commanded him to begin a second record (see 1 Nephi 19:1; 2 Nephi 5:30–33). Likewise, Mormon had likely compiled the “full account” of his own ministry before undertaking his abridgment of the large plates, and then he refocused his abridgment after discovering Nephi’s small plates (see Mormon 2:18; Words of Mormon 1:3–5).

From this perspective, the meaning of the Book of Mormon is reflected in the structure of the narrative as much as in its contents. While particular contents of the narrative may be considered meaningful in isolation from one another or in a context whose focus lies outside the text itself, the approach advocated in this study, while not inimical to such a perspective, relies on the full text of the Book of Mormon for a fuller understanding of its meaning. Such insights are gained by identifying detailed, systematic, and complex patterns and relationships among various parts of the text. These patterns then become the evidence of the prevailing concerns that the authors had in producing the work in the first place. Explicit editorial comments of the authors help to connect these portions of the text in similarly meaningful ways.

Sometimes such insights come from portions of the narrative that seem unusual or out of place. For example, the presence of an extended war narrative (Alma 43–62) or of a severely truncated account of a spiritual utopia (4 Nephi 1:1–20) may seem odd in a work that is considered to be of supremely spiritual value. Likewise, the presence of two accounts dealing with a similar time frame (e.g., the ministries of Lehi and Nephi on the large and small plates, respectively) begs for detailed analysis. From this perspective, the principal object of study is the text itself, whose structure reveals some of the most telling insights into the authors’ literary purposes.

This study adds to an understanding of the ways in which the structure of the Book of Mormon narrative can be considered spiritually significant. Further studies of the narrative’s structure will certainly reveal additional insights into the richness and profundity of the scriptural text and the process of its editorial development.
monarchy. Despite Mosiah's reforms, Nephiite government persisted in monarchical prac-
tices, with life tenure for the chief judges, hereditary suc-
cession, and the combination of all functions in one official” (57).

51. Givens, By the Hand of Mor-
mon, 169.

Prophecy and History: Structuring the Abridgment of the Nephite Records
Steven L. Olsen
1. In this paper the terms small plates and large plates initially appear in quotation marks to identify usage among Latter-

2. See, for example, Ezra 7:28–9:15; Nehemiah 1–13; Isaiah 6; Jeremiah 1; Ezekiel 1–2.

3. Most frequently, direct editorial comment in the Hebrew Bible orients readers con-
temporary with the narrator to cultural or geographical references in the text. See, for example, Robert Alter, The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), 113n2, 123n50, 182n33, 270n34, 273n11.

4. Two studies that inventory several explicit editorial state-
ments in the Book of Mor-
mon as evidence of the text’s complexity and the manner of its compilation are John A. Tvedtnes, “Mormon’s Editorial Promises,” in Rediscovering the Book of Mormon, ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Tho-

5. Prior studies of the editor-
oral role of Book of Mormon authors include S. Kent Brown, “Nephis’s Use of Lehi’s Record,” in Rediscovering the Book of Mormon, 3–14;

Grant R. Hardy, “Mormon as Editor,” in Rediscovering the Book of Mormon, 15–28; and John S. Tanner, “Jacob and His Descendants as Authors,” in Rediscovering the Book of Mormon, 52–66. Grant R. Hardy’s The Book of Mormon: A Reader’s Edition (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003) is a fuller treatment of this theme.

6. The identity of biblical narrators has captured the attention of several biblical scholars, whose conclusions are based on inferences from the narra-
tive itself more than on explicit breaks in the narrative’s third-


8. Among the earliest and best-
known studies of the explicit crafting of the Book of Mor-

9. Relevant structural studies of sacred texts include Claude Levi-Strauss, “The Structural Study of Myth,” in his Structural Anthropology (New York: Basic Books, 1963), 206–31; Edmund Leach, Genesis as Myth and Other Essays (Lon-

10. See the similar direction of the Lord to Nephi in 1 Nephi 14:28 and to Moroni in Ether 13:13.

11. As a matter of convenience, I refer to Lehi’s dream- vision as a dream and to Nephi’s vision as a vision. In so doing, I do not mean to diminish the sig-
nificance of Lehi’s experience, since dreams in ancient times were considered viable means of divine communication.

12. Earlier examinations of the complementary nature of Lehi’s dream and Nephi’s vision are Courtney J. Lasser-

13. On the interpretive value of repetition in the Hebrew Bible, see Alter’s Five Books of Moses, 349n21, and Art of Biblical Narrative, 88–113; and Sternberg’s Poetics of Biblical Narrative, 365–440.

14. Among the prophecies included in both the small plates and Mormon’s abridg-
ment are the following (this list includes selected citations of prophecies, the first is which from which come the small plates, followed by those, as appropriate, from Mormon’s abridgment): the destruction of Jerusalem (1 Nephi 1:4, 13, 18; 2 Nephi 1:4; Alma 9:9; Helaman 8:20–21); finding and settling the promised land (1 Nephi 2:20; 18:23); the curse upon the Lamanites (1 Nephi 2:22; 2 Nephi 5:21; Alma 17:15); the Nephites as rulers in the promised land (1 Nephi 2:22; 2 Nephi 5:19); the mortal ministry, atonement, and res-
surrection of Christ (1 Nephi 11; Mosiah 3:4–14; 15; Alma 7; 34; Helaman 10); the resurrec-
tion of all mankind (2 Nephi 9–10; Alma 11; 40–41; Hela-
man 14); the “wars and conten-
tions” of the Nephites (1 Nephi 12:1–5; 2 Nephi 26:2; Enos 1:24; Omni 1:3; Alma 50:1); the ministry of the resurrected Christ among the Nephites (1 Nephi 12:5–10; 2 Nephi 26:1; Enos 1:8; 3 Nephi 11); the four generations of righteousness (1 Nephi 12:1–11; 2 Nephi 26:9; 3 Nephi 27:31–32); the annihilation of the Nephites (1 Nephi 12:13–17; Alma 1:12; Alma 45:1–14; Helaman 15:17); the abject baseness of the surviving Lamanites (1 Nephi 12:20–23; 15:13; 2 Nephi 26:15; Helaman 17:2; Mormon 5:15); the conditions of apos-
tasy among the Gentiles in the latter days (1 Nephi 13; 2 Nephi 26; 3 Nephi 16:9–11; 21:10–21; 30:1–2; Ether 12); the migration of the Gentiles to the promised land (1 Nephi 13:12–20; 21:5–7; Mormon 5); the conversion of the house of Israel and the Gentiles in the last days (1 Nephi 14; 2 Nephi 25:17–18; 3 Nephi 15:22–20); the gathering of Israel and establishment of Zion in the last days (1 Nephi 13:37; 15:19–16; Mosiah 12:21–22; 3 Nephi 18; 20–21; 29); the judgment of all mankind (1 Nephi 22:21; Mosiah 27:31; Alma 12:27); and the second coming of Christ and founding of the millennial kingdom of God (1 Nephi 22:26; 2 Nephi 12:12–13; 30:18; 3 Nephi 24–25; Ether 13:1)

15. The following prophecies are initially uttered and fulfilled within Mormon’s historical narrative (the first citation is the prophecy and the second is its fulfillment): Abinadi foretells the tragedy to befall the people of Limhi (Mosiah 1:21–2; 21:1–4), the fiery death of King Noah (Mosiah 12:3; 19:20), and the cruelty of Limhi’s rebellious descendants (Mosiah 17:1; Alma 25:5); Alma predicts the destruction of the city of Ammonihah (Alma 10:23; 16:2–3) and the movement of Lamanite armies (Alma 43:24; 43:49–54); and Nephi reveals the secret murder of the chief judge and the identity of its perpetrator (Helaman 8:27; 9:3–38).

16. Whether Mormon included a comparable editorial aside at
Recovering the Original Text of the Book of Mormon: An Interim Review

Introduction
M. Gerald Bradford
1. About 28 percent of the original manuscript (dictated by Joseph Smith) is extant. The printer’s manuscript (copied by Oliver Cowdery and two other scribes) is nearly fully extant (missing are about three lines of text at 1 Nephi 1:7–8, 20).

The Book of Mormon Critical Text Project
Terry L. Givens
5. Uncovering the Original Text of the Book of Mormon, 18.
7. Skousen’s running dialogue in this volume with David Calabro, another close reader, is a pleasure to overhear.
8. I am a great fan of Hugh Nibley—he is often provocative and always entertaining—but Skousen’s precision and rigor put him to shame. See, for example, Skousen’s discussion of Nibley’s explanation of the phrase “or out of the waters of baptism” at 1 Nephi 20:1.
9. A similar project, dealing with more modern materials, is the Joseph Smith Papers, a scholarly edition of documents associated with the Prophet that will be published jointly by Brigham Young University and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in 26 volumes over the next decade.
10. Similarly, outside of translators, how many Latter-day Saints have read 2 Nephi 3:18 carefully enough to notice that there is a direct object missing: “I will raise up unto the Church of God another close reader, is a pleasure to overhear.

Joseph Smith and the Text of the Book of Mormon
Robert J. Matthews
1. See the Wentworth Letter, in History of the Church, 4:537; Doctrine and Covenants 1:29; and “The Testimony of Three Witnesses,” in the forepart of the Book of Mormon.
2. See History of the Church, 1:220.
4. Minutes of the School of the Prophets, Salt Lake City, 14 January 1871, Family and Church History Department Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

Scholarship for the Ages
Grant Hardy
2. Skousen shows his age by using the letters DHC (p. 14) as an abbreviation for what used to be called the Documentary History of the Church. The contemporary practice is to use the abbreviation HC for History of the Church.