

[Some Notes on the Abridgment of Mormon]

Mormon wrote or abridged the following books or passages in the Book of Mormon:

Words of Mormon
Mosiah
Alma
Helaman
3 Nephi
4 Nephi
Mormon 1—7
Moroni 8, 9

In his book, *Feasting on the Word: The Literary Testimony of the Book of Mormon*, Richard Dilworth Rust writes:

When we first encounter Mormon, in the Words of Mormon following the books from the small plates of Nephi, we learn a great deal about his narrative approach. He begins at the end of the Nephite drama: “I have witnessed almost all the destruction of my people,” he says, and he supposes his son Moroni “will witness the entire destruction of my people” (Words of Mormon 1:1-2). Saying his account is brief, he prays that his brethren, the Lamanites and renegade Nephites, “may once again come to the knowledge of God, yea, the redemption of Christ” (Words of Mormon 1:8). (p. 20)

Grant R. Hardy writes:

We can learn much about Mormon’s priorities and purposes when we identify patterns in the type of details he chose to delete or include. For instance, his editing may be responsible for some of the more puzzling features of the Book of Mormon, such as its fascination with war (Mormon himself was a general) . . . (p. 15-16)

Unlike most of the biblical text, the Book of Mormon text readily acknowledges editing, and we are told quite a bit about the sources used. We can often see where primary sources are worked into Mormon’s abridgment. We can also assume that, for nearly any passage, Mormon had much more information than he included. . . . I believe that two major tendencies are evident [in Mormon’s editorial choices]: he interpreted political events in spiritual terms, and he highlighted the distinction between the obedient and the disobedient. . . . Mormon tended to interpret political and historical events in spiritual terms, and this inclination is evident in his editing as well as in his direct “thus we see” comments. (p. 19-21)

(Grant R. Hardy, “Mormon as Editor,” in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon: Insights you may have missed before*, edited by John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne.)

[Notes on Mormon's Abridgment]

Richard Rust writes: "An important part of Mormon's method is using repetition, parallels, and contrasts to teach, emphasize, and confirm."

Repetition appears purposefully within Book of Mormon narratives; indeed it seems that every important action, event, or character type is repeated. For instance, two wealthy men (Lehi and Amulek) lose their riches as they pursue prophetic callings. Kings Benjamin and Limhi each assemble their people in order to speak to them. Two sons of kings (Ammon and his brother and Aaron) speak with kings (Lamoni and his father). Alma the Younger and Lamoni fall into trances in which they appear to be dead. Two detailed accounts are given of prophets threatened within a prison (Alma and Amulek, Nephi and Lehi). Two Lamanite leaders (who also are brothers) are killed by a spear within their tents. And prophets (Abinadi, Alma, and Samuel) are cast out of cities and then return at the Lord's bidding. Further, prophet-leaders (Lehi, Zeniff, and Mosiah) gather people to read records to them. Antichrists (notably Sherem, Korihor, and Nehor) lead people to follow their iniquities. A man named Ammon, living in the time of King Mosiah, is captured and taken before King Limhi—and ends up helping Limhi's people escape from captivity; Mosiah's son Ammon is captured and taken before the Lamanite king Lamoni and helps save Lamoni's people both spiritually and physically. And three prophets, Alma the Younger, Nephi the son of Helaman, and Samuel the Lamanite, depart out of the land and are "never heard of more," with the implication that Alma is translated and does not taste death (Alma 45:18-19). (Richard Rust, *Feasting on the Word*, p. 21-22.)

Grant Hardy adds:

In Mormon's world, similar experiences are not necessarily random or coincidental; historical repetition is evidence of God's engagement with humankind. . . . Mormon's task as an editor, then, is to make the hand of God manifest by deftly emphasizing (not creating) patterns that were already present in past events. He uses selection, arrangement, and phrasal repetition to indicate the parallel nature of certain episodes, and through such means he cumulatively constructs an elaborate argument for the rationality of belief, documenting God's intervention in Nephite history and, by extension, in human history at large. . . . He is an active narrator who makes judgments, inserts comments, and proclaims moral principles. He provides the first round of interpretation so that the basic message of the text is unmistakable. (Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide*, p. 155.)

A Note on the Literary Importance of Words of Mormon

In a very important 14-page article titled, "Prophecy and History: Structuring the Abridgment of the Nephite Records," Steven L. Olsen writes:

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. 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). . . .

By searching among the plates in his possession, Mormon found the missing record [the small plates]. What attracted his attention at this time was the discovery of certain [structured] 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 . . . 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. . . .

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. . . .

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 [and Moroni], the past, in this exalted sense, was no more knowable than the future without such spiritual and professional capacities (Mosiah 8:16–17).

(Steven L. Olsen, “Prophecy and History: Structuring the Abridgment of the Nephite Records,” Journal of Book of Mormon Studies, Vol. 15/1 (2006): 18-29, 70-71.)