

Book of Mormon Plates and Records

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The Book of Mormon is a complex text with a complicated history. It is primarily an abridgment of several earlier records by its chief editor and namesake, Mormon. All these records are referred to as "plates" because they were engraved on thin sheets of metal. Various source documents were used by Mormon in his compilation, leading to abrupt transitions and chronological disjunctions that can confuse readers. However, when one is aware of the history of the text, these are consistent and make good sense. The various plates and records referred to in the Book of Mormon and used in making it are (1) the plates of brass; (2) the record of Lehi; (3) the large plates of Nephi ¹; (4) the small plates of Nephi; (5) the plates of Mormon; and (6) the twenty-four gold plates of Ether.

THE GOLD PLATES. The gold plates that the Prophet Joseph Smith received and translated were the plates of Mormon on which Mormon and his son Moroni ² made their abridgment. Mormon, a prophet and military leader who lived at the end of the Nephite era (c. A.D. 385), was the penultimate custodian of the records of earlier Nephite prophets and rulers. In particular, he had the large plates of Nephi, which were the official Nephite chronicle and which he was commanded to continue ([Morm. 1:4](#)). He later made his own plates of Mormon, on which he compiled an abridgment of the large plates of Nephi ([W of M 1:3-5](#); [3Ne. 5:9-10](#)), which covered 985 years of Nephite history, from Lehi's day to his. The large plates drew on still earlier records and the writings of various prophets and frequently included various source materials such as letters, blessings, discourses, and memoirs.

After Mormon had completed his abridgment through the reign of King Benjamin (c. 130 B.C.), he discovered the small plates of Nephi, a separate history of the same time period focusing on the spiritual events of those years and quoting extensively from the plates of brass. Inspired to add the small plates of Nephi to his own record, Mormon inserted a brief explanation for the double account of early Nephite history ([W of M 1:2-9](#)).

Mormon continued his abridgment, selecting from the large plates, paraphrasing, and often adding his own comments, extending the account down to his time. Anticipating death, he passed the plates to his son Moroni. Over the next few decades, Moroni wandered alone, making additions to his father's record, including two chapters now included in a book previously abridged by his father ([Morm. 7-8](#)) and an account of the Jaredites that he had abridged from the twenty-four gold plates of Ether. He also copied an extensive vision of the last days that had been recorded by an early Jaredite prophet, the brother of Jared, and which Moroni was commanded to seal ([Ether 4:4-5](#)). He also added brief notes on church rituals ([Moro. 1-6](#)), a sermon and two letters from his father ([Moro. 7-9](#)), and an exhortation to future readers ([Moro. 10](#)). Finally, Moroni took this somewhat heterogeneous collection of records—the plates of Mormon, the small plates of Nephi, his abridgment of the plates of Ether, and the sealed portion containing the vision of the Brother of Jared—and buried them in the earth. About 1,400 years

later, in 1823, Moroni, now resurrected, appeared to the Prophet Joseph Smith and revealed the location of these records. The plates of Mormon, which, except for the sealed portion, were subsequently translated by Joseph Smith, are known today as the gold plates.

The present English Book of Mormon, however, is not simply a translation of all those gold plates. Joseph Smith and Martin Harris began by translating the plates of Mormon, and when they had reached the reign of King Benjamin, they had 116 pages of translation. Harris borrowed these pages to show to his wife, then lost them, and they were never recovered (see [Manuscript, Lost 116 Pages](#)). Joseph was commanded not to retranslate this material ([D&C 10:30-46](#)), but instead to substitute a translation of the parallel small plates of Nephi, which includes the books of 1 Nephi, 2 Nephi, Jacob, Enos, Jarom, and Omni. Thus, the present Book of Mormon contains only the second account of early Nephite history.

The translation continues from the rest of the plates of Mormon, which were abridged from the large plates of Nephi, and includes the books of Mosiah, Alma, Helaman, 3 Nephi, 4 Nephi, and Mormon (the last two chapters of which were written by Moroni). Next follow Moroni's abridgment of Jaredite history (the book of Ether) and his closing notes (the book of Moroni). Joseph Smith was commanded not to translate the sealed vision of the Brother of Jared, which apparently made up a substantial portion of the gold plates (Ludlow, p. 320). Although Joseph Smith translated only from the gold plates, he and his associates saw many other records (*JD* 19:38; *Millennial Star* 40 [1878]:771-72).

THE PLATES OF BRASS. It is now known that many ancients of the Mediterranean area wrote on metal plates. "Where the record was one of real importance, plates of copper, bronze, or even more precious metal were used instead of the usual wooden, lead, or clay tablets" (*CWHN* 5:119; see also H. C. Wright, in *Journal of Library History* 16 [1981]:48-70). Such a metal record was in the possession of one Laban, a leader in Jerusalem in 600 B.C. How Laban obtained these plates and where they originally came from are not known. Several theories have been advanced, including the possibility that the plates of brass originated in the days of Joseph of Egypt (Ludlow, p. 56). The Book of Mormon indicates that Laban and his father had inherited and preserved the record because they were descendants of this Joseph ([1 Ne. 5:16](#)).

The Book of Mormon does tell how the prophet Lehi came to possess the plates of brass. After fleeing Jerusalem, Lehi was commanded by God to send his sons back to the city to obtain the plates from Laban. When he received them, Lehi found that they contained the five books of Moses, a record of the Jews from the beginning down to the reign of Zedekiah, the prophecies of the holy prophets for that same time period (including some of Jeremiah's prophecies), and a genealogy of Lehi's fathers ([1 Ne. 3-5](#)).

Nephi and succeeding spiritual leaders highly valued the plates of brass. They were passed down by major prophets from Nephi to Mormon, and since they were written in an adapted form of Egyptian (see [Book of Mormon Language](#)), their keepers were taught to read that language ([Mosiah 1:2-4](#)). The plates of brass were the basic scriptures of the Nephite nation, and for centuries their prophets read them, quoted them in sermons, and excerpted material from them to enrich their own writings. For example, when the prophet Abinadi cited the Ten Commandments in a disputation with the priests of Noah, his knowledge of the Ten Commandments was due, at

least indirectly, to the plates of brass ([Mosiah 12-13](#)). As Mosiah₂ stated, "For it were not possible that our father, Lehi, could have remembered all these things, to have taught them to his children, except it were for the help of these plates" ([Mosiah 1:4](#)).

Book of Mormon records, particularly the small plates of Nephi, occasionally quote at length from the plates of brass, and these quotations include twenty-one complete chapters from Isaiah. Although the translation of these quotations generally follows the wording of the King James Version of the Bible, there are many significant differences, which may indicate the existence of older textual sources (Tvedtnes, pp. 165-77). It is also evident from the scriptural quotations in the Book of Mormon that the plates of brass contained a more extensive record of the writings of Hebrew prophets than does the present Old Testament. For example, the Book of Mormon includes prophecies of Joseph of Egypt that are not found in the Bible, as well as writings of Zenos, Zenock, Neum, and Ezias, prophets who are not specifically named in the Old Testament.

THE RECORD OF LEHI. Unfortunately, Mormon's abridgment of the record of Lehi was the material translated in the 116 manuscript pages that were lost, and consequently it is not available in the present Book of Mormon. Lehi wrote an account of his life and spiritual experiences that was included in the large plates of Nephi ([1 Ne. 19:1](#)). Mormon abridged this record in his plates, and Joseph Smith translated it, but since it was lost by Martin Harris, very little is now known about it except what can be inferred from references in other texts (Brown, pp. 25-32; see also the preface to the first edition [1830] of the Book of Mormon). When Nephi and Jacob cite the words of Lehi, they seem to be quoting from this now-lost text, and at least the first eight chapters of 1 Nephi (part of the small plates) appear to be based on the record of Lehi. Other passages in the small plates may also have been derived from that record.

THE LARGE PLATES OF NEPHI. Nephi began the large plates soon after his arrival in the New World. They were the official continuous chronicle of the Nephites from the time they left Jerusalem (c. 600 B.C.) until they were destroyed (A.D. 385). Apparently the large plates were divided into books, each named for its primary author. These plates "contained a 'full account of the history of [Nephi's] people' ([1 Ne. 9:2, 4](#); [2 Ne. 4:14](#); [Jacob 1:2-3](#)), the genealogy of Lehi ([1 Ne. 19:2](#)) and the 'more part' of the teachings of the resurrected Jesus Christ to the Nephite nation ([3 Ne. 26:7](#))" (Ludlow, p. 57). Begun as basically a secular history, they later became a combined record, mingling a thousand years of Nephite history and religious experiences.

The large plates emphasize the covenants made with the house of Israel and quote messianic prophecies of Old World prophets not found in the Old Testament. This information was excerpted from the plates of brass that Lehi's colony brought with it from Jerusalem. They also record wars and contentions, correspondence between military leaders, and information on various missionary journeys. The interventions and miraculous power of God permeate this history. The recorded sermons of King Benjamin, Abinadi, and Alma₂ are indicative of these individuals' deep understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ and of their faith in his prophesied coming. These plates feature an account of the post-Resurrection ministry and teachings of Christ to the people of the western world ([3 Ne. 11-28](#)).

The large plates of Nephi were passed down from king to king until they came into the possession of Mosiah₂. He added such records as those of Zeniff and Alma₁ to the large plates

and then gave them to Alma². The plates subsequently passed through a line of prophets until Ammaron's day in the early fourth century A.D. Ammaron chose Mormon, then only a child, to continue the record when he was mature. Mormon recorded the events of his day on the large plates and then used them as the source for his abridgment, which was later buried in the hill Cumorah. Joseph Smith did not receive the large plates, but the Book of Mormon suggests that they may yet be published to the world ([3 Ne. 26:6-10](#)).

THE SMALL PLATES OF NEPHI. Approximately twenty years after beginning the large plates, Nephi was commanded to make another set of plates. This second set was to be reserved for an account of the ministry of his people ([1 Ne. 9](#); [2 Ne. 5:28-33](#)). They were to contain the things considered most precious- "preaching which was sacred, or revelation which was great, or prophesying" ([Jacob 1:2-4](#)).

The small plates were kept for over four centuries, not quite half the time covered by the large plates, by nine writers: Nephi, Jacob, Enos, Jarom, Omni, Amaron, Chemish, Abinadom, and Amaleki. All of these authors were the sons or brothers of their predecessors. Though these plates include the writings of many over a long time period, 80 percent of the text was written by Nephi, the first writer, and an additional 12 percent by his brother Jacob.

Mormon included the small plates with his record when he delivered the plates of Mormon to his son Moroni because their witness of Christ pleased him and because he was impressed by the Spirit of the Lord to include them "for a wise purpose" ([W of M 1:3-7](#)). However, since the small plates covered the historical period already recorded in his abridgment of the record of Lehi (namely, from Lehi down to the reign of King Benjamin) and since the book of Mosiah began with the end of King Benjamin's reign, Mormon found it necessary to write a brief explanation to show how the small plates of Nephi connect with the book of Mosiah. He entitled this explanation "Words of Mormon."

While the writers of the small plates recognized the need to provide a historical narrative, their main purpose was to talk of Christ, to preach of Christ, and to prophesy of Christ ([2 Ne. 25:26](#)). Because Nephi was concerned with teaching his people the covenants and promises made to ancient Israel, he extracted these teachings from earlier prophets as recorded on the plates of brass. He quoted extensively from the prophet Isaiah ([2 Ne. 12-24](#); cf. [Isa. 2-14](#)) and then wrote a commentary on it, predicting the future of Jews, Lamanites, and Gentiles and prophesying much that would happen in the latter days ([2 Ne. 25-30](#)).

Jacob continued his brother's approach by recording his own sermons and a long quotation from and explanation of a prophecy of Zenos. The writings of later authors in the small plates are much briefer and less concerned with spiritual matters.

Amaleki noted in his writings that the small plates were full and turned them over to King Benjamin ([Omni 1:25, 30](#)), who then possessed both the large and the small plates of Nephi, as well as the plates of brass. All these sets of plates were handed down from generation to generation until they were entrusted to Mormon.

THE PLATES OF MORMON. After Mormon received the plates, he made a new set on which he engraved his abridgment of the large plates of Nephi ([3 Ne. 5:10-11](#)). It is this abridgment plus some additions by Mormon's son Moroni that constitute the gold plates given to Joseph Smith. He described them as follows: These records were engraven on plates which had the appearance of gold, each plate was six inches wide and eight inches long and not quite so thick as common tin. They were filled with engravings, in Egyptian characters and bound together in a volume, as the leaves of a book with three rings running through the whole. The volume was something near six inches in thickness, a part of which was sealed. The characters on the unsealed part were small, and beautifully engraved [Jessee, p. 214].

The descriptions reported by other witnesses add details which suggest that the plates were composed of a gold alloy (possibly tumbaga) and that they weighed about fifty pounds (Putnam, pp. 788-89, 829-31). Each plate was as thick as parchment or thick paper.

Most of the time, Mormon relied on the large plates of Nephi for his information. Much of the historical narrative in the Book of Mormon appears to be his paraphrase of earlier records, but occasionally first-person documents are worked into the text. For example, in [Mosiah 9 and 10](#) the narrative suddenly includes a first-person account of Zeniff (apparently an earlier document that Mormon simply copied), and then in chapter 11 Mormon's paraphrase resumes. In addition, many sermons, blessings, and letters appear to be reproduced intact.

Nevertheless, some passages can definitely be ascribed to Mormon: the abridgment of his contributions to the large plates ([Morm. 1-7](#)), his sermon and letters recorded by Moroni ([Moro. 7-9](#)), and the explanatory comments that he inserted into his narrative. In some of these interpolations he identifies himself ([W of M; 3Ne. 5:8-26; 26:6-12; 28:24; 4 Ne. 1:23](#)), but it seems likely that the frequent "thus we see" comments are also Mormon attempting to stress matters of particular spiritual importance to his readers (e.g., [Alma 24:19, 27; 50:19-23; Hel. 3:27-30; 12:1-2](#)).

THE TWENTY-FOUR GOLD PLATES OF ETHER. These twenty-four gold plates were a record of ancient Jaredites, inhabitants of the Americas before the Nephites. This particular people left the Tower of Babel at the time of the confusion of tongues. Their prophet-leaders were led to the ocean, where they constructed eight peculiar barges. These were driven by the wind across the waters to America, where the Jaredites became a large and powerful nation. After many centuries, wickedness and wars led to a final war of annihilation. During that final war, Ether, a prophet of God, wrote their history and spiritual experiences on twenty-four gold plates, perhaps relying on earlier Jaredite records (see J. Welch, "Preliminary Comments on the Sources behind the Book of Ether," in *F.A.R.M.S. Manuscript Collection*, pp. 3-7. Provo, Utah, 1986).

After witnessing the destruction of his people, Ether hid the twenty-four gold plates. Many years later (c. 121 B.C.) they were discovered by a small Nephite exploring party and given to Mosiah 2, a prophet-king, who translated them into the Nephite language through the use of seer stones ([Mosiah 8:8-9; 28:11-16](#)). Much later (c. A.D. 400) Moroni abridged this history of the Jaredites as his father Mormon had intended, concentrating on spiritual matters and adding inspired commentaries. Moroni included this abridgment, now known as the book of Ether, with what he

and his father had already written. (The twenty-four gold plates of Ether were not among the plates received by Joseph Smith.)

CHARACTERISTICS OF MORMON'S EDITING. The Book of Mormon is quite complicated. The foregoing summary of the plates and other records from which the book was derived is drawn from a number of scattered but consistent comments included in the present text. The narrative itself is often complex. For instance, in [Mosiah 1-25](#), Mormon narrates the stories of three separate groups and subgroups of people—principally the people of Mosiah, of Limhi, and of Alma—with their respective histories and interactions with each other and with the Lamanites (see [Book of Mormon Peoples](#)). The story might have been quite confusing, as it jumps from one people to another, and back and forth in time, but Mormon has kept it remarkably clear. [Alma 17-26](#) is a lengthy flashback recounting the histories of several missionaries on the occasion of their reunion with old friends, and [Alma 43-63](#) narrates the history of a war with the Lamanites, keeping straight the events that happened on two fronts.

Mormon's account might have been much more complex. He emphasizes that he is presenting less than one hundredth of the material available to him (e.g., [W of M 1:5](#); [3 Ne. 26:6-7](#)). Furthermore, his source materials give a lineage history of one family, Lehi and his descendants, and do not encompass all events in the ancient western world (Sorenson, 1985, pp. 50-56). Mormon further simplifies his record by continuing Jacob's practice of lumping diverse peoples into two major groups: Now the people which were not Lamanites were Nephites; nevertheless, they were called Nephites, Jacobites, Josephites, Zoramites, Lamanites, Lemuelites, and Ishmaelites. But I, Jacob, shall not hereafter distinguish them by these names, but 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, according to the reigns of the kings [[Jacob 1:13-14](#); see also [Morm. 1:8-9](#)].

The vast editing project that produced the Book of Mormon would require clear guidelines for selecting materials for inclusion. Mormon is quite explicit about the purpose of his abridgment. Like Nephi, he is writing a history to lead people to Christ, and he is writing specifically for the people of later times ([2 Ne. 25:23](#); [Morm. 7](#)). The plates of Mormon were created to come forth in the latter days. Mormon is interested in pointing out the principles that will be of most use to such people, and his careful editing and his "thus" and "thus we see" passages are all directed at making the moral lessons easier to identify and understand.

Finally, Mormon took his job as record keeper and abridger very seriously. He was commanded by God to make his record (title page to the Book of Mormon; [3 Ne. 26:12](#)). Also, Nephite society had a strong tradition of the importance of written records, and this was one of the criteria by which they distinguished themselves from the more numerous Mulekites ([Omni 1:14-19](#)). Furthermore, the various plates seem to have been handed down from one prophet or king to another as sacred relics and symbols of authority ([Mosiah 28:20](#); [3 Ne. 1:2](#)). In addition, the Nephites had a ceremonial record exchange when different branches of the family were reunited ([Mosiah 8:1-5](#); [22:14](#)). Most important, the Nephites knew that they would be held responsible for and would be judged by what was written in the records, just as all people will be ([2 Ne. 25:21-22](#); [33:10-15](#); [Morm. 8:12](#)).

Many ancient documents such as King Benjamin's speech or the plates of brass were quoted or abridged by the ancient authors who compiled the books found on the small and large plates of Nephi. The abridgments, quotations, and original writings of those Book of Mormon historians are displayed on the left-hand and middle columns of this chart and are then shown in relation to the new set of plates produced by Mormon and Moroni that was delivered to Joseph Smith by the angel Moroni. Joseph dictated the original manuscript of the Book of Mormon from the plates of Mormon. The first edition of the Book of Mormon was typeset from that printer's manuscript.