

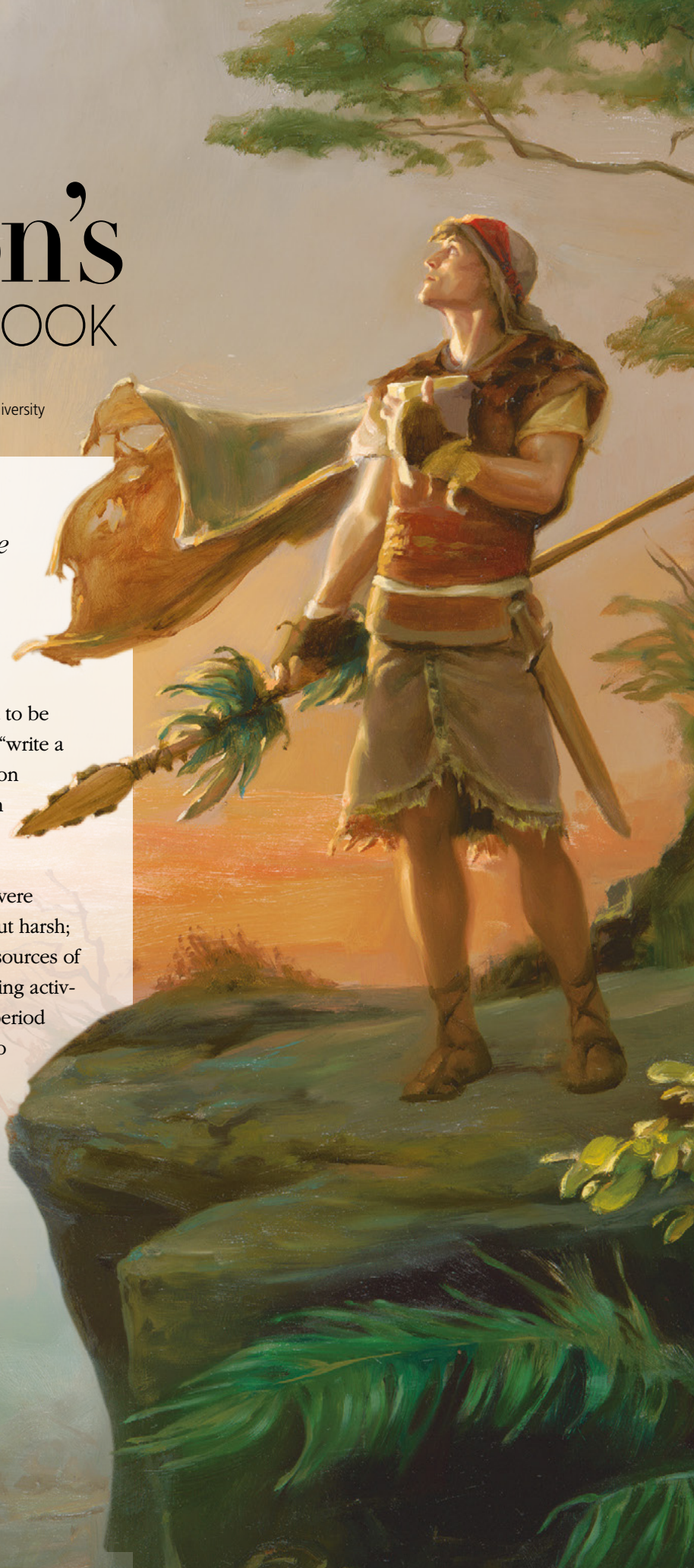
Mormon's MIRACULOUS BOOK

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Mormon carried out the daunting task of abridging the Nephite records in an effective and miraculous manner.

When Mormon saw that his Nephite people were about to be exterminated, he set out to “write a small abridgment” of their records (Mormon 5:9). This project began at the last location where the Nephites camped before they finally gathered to the land of Cumorah. The subsistence conditions the Nephites were enduring could not have been anything but harsh; the people were refugees with uncertain sources of food, clothing, and shelter. Mormon’s writing activity probably extended into the four-year period of preparation for the final battle agreed to by the Lamanite commander, but in any case the abridged history was completed and the archive was buried in the Hill Cumorah well before the final conflict (see Mormon 6:6).





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It is clear that the creation of the Book of Mormon was a daunting feat, especially given the “field” conditions in which Mormon had to work and his competing duties in commanding his forces as they prepared for the final battle. And understandably, the final product isn’t without imperfections.¹

Limitations on Mormon’s Work

Consider some of the limitations Mormon faced in realizing his aim:

1. The size of his new record would have to be severely restricted. The book had to be portable enough that Moroni could carry it to a safe location.
2. The physical product must be prepared to endure for centuries.
3. Of the possible writing systems Mormon could use, only one was concise enough to fit in the book.
4. The narrative had to be of practical length, faithful to the facts of history in the records he was summarizing, and phrased in a manner he considered appropriate.
5. The work schedule was short. Mormon had little more than three years to do all of the compiling and writing of over 600 years of history. He may not have had time even to read through all the archival records in his hands, and there surely would be no time for stylistic fine-tuning or reediting.

Given all these constraints, how did Mormon choose what information to include and what to omit?

In some ways his inspired accomplishment in producing the Book of Mormon was just as surprising and admirable as Joseph Smith’s later achievement in translating the record in such short order.

Choosing a Writing System

The Book of Mormon text reports at several points the difficulty the scribes had in making their statements clear (see Jacob 4:1; Mormon 9:33; Ether 12:23–25, 40). Mormon said, “There are many things which, according to our language, we are not able to write” (3 Nephi 5:18). “Our language” in this sense obviously refers to their writing system, not to their spoken tongue. Moroni further tells us that there would have been “no imperfection” (Mormon 9:33) had they used Hebrew script, an alphabetic system.

The “characters” used for writing were called by Nephtie historians “reformed Egyptian” (Mormon 9:32). This system consisted of “the learning of the Jews and the language of the Egyptians” (1 Nephi 1:2). Egyptian glyphs were occasionally used in ancient Palestine to write the sounds of Hebrew words.² From the sample of characters in “the Anthon Transcript,”³ which purports to be a copy of characters from the plates Joseph Smith translated, it is apparent that they were not modeled directly on the Egyptian writing in everyday use in Lehi’s time. They look more like signs of hieratic Egyptian, an older, parallel sign system still used by the Egyptians when they employed brush and ink instead of engraving on stone.

The hieratic system was more concise than the alphabetic Hebrew script but also more ambiguous, because a large majority of the characters represented whole, complex morphemes or words (today called logograms) rather than sounds spelled out to form words as in an alphabet. The meaning of each logogram had to be memorized. This ambiguity may have been part of the problem of “the placing of our words” (Ether 12:25) spoken of by Moroni.

An additional cause of “imperfections” could have been that since hieratic Egyptian was mainly used to write cursively, its use to engrave a record on metal plates could mean that minor slips of an engraver’s hand without an effective “eraser” at hand to make corrections could result in misreading the characters.

Many Sets of Records

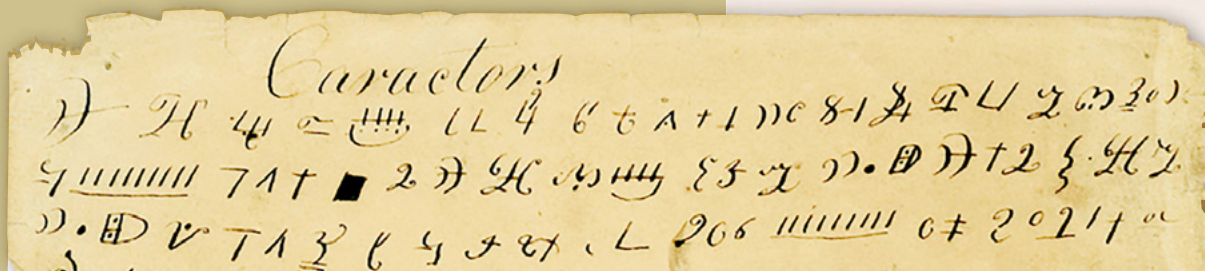
In addition to the large plates of Nephi, supplementary documents were used at certain points in creating Mormon’s narrative. He noted several times his dependence upon “[Alma’s] own record” (Alma 5:2; chapter 7, heading; 35:16). He also utilized “the records of Helaman” and “of his sons” (introduction to the book of Helaman), and we also read of the “record of Nephi” (3 Nephi 5:10).

Sometimes Mormon also depended on other original writings, some of which he did not distinctly identify. Some possible supplementary records include:

- The text of King Benjamin’s great discourse (Mosiah 2:9–Mosiah 5).
- The record on the plates of Zeniff (Mosiah 9–22).
- Alma’s first-person preaching at Zarahemla, Gideon, and Melek (Alma 5, 7, and 8).
- The story of Alma’s and Amulek’s experiences at Ammonihah (Alma 9–14).
- The detailed account of the ministry of the sons of Mosiah and their companions among the Lamanites (Alma 17–27).
- Alma’s discourses to his sons Helaman, Shiblon, and Corianton (Alma 36–42).

Moroni also included his translation and abstract of Ether’s history of the Jaredites, prepared and appended by Moroni as the book of Ether, as well as excerpts of teachings and letters from his father, Mormon (Moroni 7–9).⁴

The key sacred records were kept on metal to ensure their permanence; accounts kept on any more perishable substance would, they assumed, become unreadable over time (see Jacob 4:2). The use of copies of the scriptures on paper for everyday use is implied by the burning of those in the possession of Alma’s converts at Ammonihah (see Alma 14:8; compare Mosiah 2:8; 29:4; and Alma 63:12). Metal plates were not easy to manufacture (see Mormon 8:5) and engrave, so they were in limited supply.



Drawing on the varied materials available to him, Mormon composed his history “according to the knowledge and the understanding which God” had given him (Words of Mormon 1:9). Divine assistance was sometimes direct and specific, as when the Lord instructed him not to include a lengthier treatment of Jesus’s teachings to the Nephites (see 3 Nephi 26:6–12), but no indication is given that additional historical information was revealed to him.

“And Thus We See”

Mormon said several times that his abridgment could not treat more than a fraction of the historical material found on the large plates of Nephi (see Words of Mormon 1:5; 3 Nephi 5:8; 26:6; see also Jacob 3:13–14; 4:1). How, then, did he make his selection of materials?

His primary criterion comes through repeatedly in his book. The aim was to ensure that his readers, especially the future inhabitants of the American promised land and particularly Lehi’s descendants, grasp the significance for them of the promise and prophecy given to father Lehi: “Inasmuch as ye will keep my commandments ye shall prosper in the land” (Jarom 1:9). Actually, it is Amaron’s *negative* version of Lehi’s dictum to which Mormon gives prime attention: “Inasmuch as ye will *not* keep my commandments ye shall *not* prosper in the land” (Omni 1:6; emphasis added).

Mormon’s lessons draw the contrast between good and evil dramatically. The people in his record emphasize obedience and virtue on the one hand versus stubborn villainy on the other. He describes scoundrels as thoroughly evil and deserving of their fates; he describes heroes as praiseworthy in almost all respects. Characters in the gray zone are barely noted. Mormon wanted to leave no question in the

minds of his readers that good and bad are polar opposites (note Mormon’s own words on that contrast in Moroni 7:5–19).

Mormon certainly colored some of his reporting with inspired personal interpretation.

This stance is often signaled by use of a phrase like “and thus we see” (for instance, in Alma 42:4, 7, 14; Helaman 3:23–31; 6:34–40).

Mormon and Moroni present their “brief” record to their future readers as a unique kind of interpretative history. They conferred it on the ages to come not as a historian’s history but as a powerful moral message intended to school readers in the lessons the two men had learned in long, arduous service to their people and to God. They used the best sources available in the most efficacious way they knew how. The labor and dedication their work displays have been for the gain of all people in our day.

They have my profound thanks. ■

NOTES

1. For instance, minor errors (the equivalent of modern “typos”) may be among the “faults” alluded to by Moroni on the title page of the Book of Mormon that are “the mistakes of men.” They include the erroneous report of the capture of the city of Nephiah (Alma 51:26; contrast Alma 59:5) and a mistake where the same event is said in one passage to have taken place in the 26th year of the judges (Alma 56:9) and in another in the 28th year (Alma 53:22–23). Such flaws show the human side of the historian’s task, although they need not cause us any serious problem in reading the account.
2. See John A. Tvedtnes and Stephen D. Ricks, “Jewish and Other Semitic Texts Written in Egyptian Characters,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2 (1996), 156–63; and John A. Tvedtnes, “Linguistic Implications of the Tel-Arad Ostraca,” *Newsletter and Proceedings of the Society for Early Historic Archaeology*, no. 127 (1971).
3. See B. H. Roberts, *New Witnesses for God*, 3 vols. (1909), 2:93–104.
4. For more on the different sources of the record, see “A Brief Explanation about the Book of Mormon” in the Book of Mormon.

