

*Abstract: This paper looks at the Book of Mormon through the lens of library science and the concept of archival provenance. The Nephites cared deeply about their records, and Mormon documented a thorough chain of custody for the plates he edited. However, ideas of archival science and provenance are recent developments in the western world, unknown to biblical authors or to anyone at Joseph Smith's time. Understanding this aspect of Mormon's authorship and Joseph Smith's translation provides additional evidence to the historical validity of the Book of Mormon.*

I often thought of the prophet Mormon as I studied library science and learned about collection development, cataloguing, and archive management. In addition to his roles as author, historian, prophet, and military general, Mormon worked as an archivist, librarian, and records manager. Reading the Book of Mormon with that in mind, some intriguing insights emerge about what is fundamentally a record of records. The concept of provenance, which is the description of a chain of custody used to verify sources, is a prevailing component of Mormon's work. This is vital to claims of authenticity in our modern world but is less evident in Joseph Smith's time or in biblical tradition.

From its creation to its translation and publication, the Book of Mormon is profoundly and essentially a *book* that discusses its own authorship and editing at length. It is self-referential, unique from other books as it examines its own genesis and future. Even a non-LDS writer observed:[Page 100]

The Book of Mormon is about writing books. Every few pages, the story's various narrators describe to us how the writing of this book is going. Every narrator in the Book of Mormon describes how he wrote, why he wrote, where he wrote. ... In a narrative with scores of characters and plots and subplots, the one constant is the story of how this book became a book. Its narrative arc follows the real-world physical process of creating manuscripts, of how the book was written, preserved, edited, and archived and passed along through history, usually under the worst of conditions. A thousand years and thousands of miles separate Nephi on the first page from Moroni, ... and another thousand years and thousands of miles separate those ancient guys from Joseph, the book's translator. But the one steady character throughout the story is the record itself, the book, the various manuscripts that Mormon edited down into the gold plates, which Joseph eventually excavated and translated.<sup>1</sup>

That very physicality of the plates is the underpinning of Restoration claims of historicity, and "for those few for whom the Book of Mormon was as tangible as it was for Nephi and Mormon, none denied that physical experience even if they might have questioned later religious experiences."<sup>2</sup>

Understanding the importance of records in this narrative and for the Nephite society begins with our very first named author, Nephi, and extends to its translator, Joseph Smith. Both Nephi and Joseph were teens when they first encountered the power that a book would play in their lives. Nephi was commanded by the Lord to retrieve a book at the cost of Laban's life, a pivotal event that influenced his worldview, in which records are instrumental to God's plan. The Book of Mormon's translator confirmed that idea by dying for his own connections to the book:

In the short space of twenty years, he [Joseph Smith] has brought forth the Book of Mormon, which he translated by the gift and power of God, and has been the means of publishing it on two continents; ... has brought forth the revelations and [Page 101]commandments which compose this book of Doctrine and Covenants, and many other wise documents and instructions for the benefit of the children of men; ... and like most of the Lord's anointed in ancient times, has sealed his mission and his works with his own blood (Doctrine and Covenants 135:3).

Framed in blood (Nephi's killing to Joseph's martyrdom) like Passover doorposts, the Book of Mormon record is exalted to bring salvation to the world through its testimony of Christ.

As LDS scholar Richard Bushman questioned, "Why all the record keeping? Why the immense effort lasting over

centuries? Why the care to convey the records from one generation to the next? Why did Mormon, in the midst of his many troubles, work through the voluminous records to write a history? And going from the record-keepers themselves to their theology, what kind of a God makes so much of records? Why open a dispensation of the gospel with the translation of an ancient book?"<sup>3</sup> He continued, "Nephi introduces himself as a record-maker ... and goes on to testify of the record's truth before telling a single event. ... Besides launching us into the story of the family's visions and adventures, Nephi self-consciously informs us about the mechanics of getting it all down and of managing the various records being made. ... The return for Laban's plates lets the reader know that records loom large in this culture."<sup>4</sup>

As modern readers of scripture, this seems absolutely normal to us. Current Latter-day Saints also live in a culture based on paperwork, legal documents, and the religious injunction that "there shall be a record kept among you" (D&C 21:1). We build on the example of prior gospel dispensations that kept books of remembrance to honor "God's dealings with his children ... records of religious ordinances[,] and histories of nations and peoples."<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, for an unlearned frontier boy such as Joseph Smith, this was not the expectation. Books and paper were costly and dear, and the normal record keeping of an early American family might extend only to marking family births and deaths in a Bible. Joseph Smith did not live in a world as centered on record keeping as the Nephites he would encounter. [Page 102]

## Ancient Record Keeping

Lehi's family left a literate Jerusalem. Intriguingly, Lehi had lived through King Josiah's religious reforms, sparked by the "rediscovery of the 'book of the law' in 622 bc, during a renovation of the temple ... [which] had profound impact on Lehi's generation. It showed among other things that the word of God would be preserved and would endure, even though it might be hidden from the world for a time."<sup>6</sup> Lehi himself kept a record (1 Nephi 6:1) and it is probable that Zoram's custody of Laban's Brass Plates meant that he had scribal training, which he could have passed on to others in the Nephite group. Brant Gardner theorizes that Nephi, as a fourth son not likely to inherit the family business, was himself trained as a scribe.<sup>7</sup> There is scholarly debate concerning scribal education in ancient Israel, but the presence of a standardized script and continuity in the Hebrew orthography over time suggests academic training that was perhaps state-sponsored.<sup>8</sup> Scribal training included a curriculum covering "a range of topics, from languages, classic texts, and the interpretation of texts, to public speaking"<sup>9</sup> and sheds light on Nephi's facility with both Egyptian and Hebrew. In addition, Nephi's proclivity for explaining Isaiah in the text and his "ethnogenesis[,] that is, ... a document designed to establish and legitimize a new people,"<sup>10</sup> match well with a trained scribal background.

To put the origin of Book of Mormon record keeping in historical context, John Welch explained,

As the political scene in Jerusalem grew even more tense and as whole civilizations during this period faced the prospect of extinction, a great urge to recapture and preserve the records of past cultures swept the ancient Near Eastern world. Whether one looks to the attempt made in this period by the pharaohs of the Twenty-sixth Dynasty to recapture the glories of the past Pyramid Age, or to the effort in Assyria to copy [Page 103]and preserve royal libraries, or to Laban's jealous possession of the brass plates, the phenomenon is the same: an intense awareness of civilization's frailty and a grasp in desperation to preserve it, accompanied by a premonition of impending doom. Lehi perceived this precisely.<sup>11</sup>

He passed that mandate down through his descendants. In the Americas only a generation after their arrival, Lehi's grandson and fellow record keeper Enos prayed fervently that God would preserve the records of his people (Enos 1:13–18).

Other ancient regions and cultures are known for their literary works and impressive documentary caches. Much more has and could be written on the topic; famed libraries of the past include those in Alexandria, Greece, Ebla,

India, and Herculaneum. One particular example of ancient archives comes from thirteenth century bc Hittite tablets, which provide evidence of their highly literate society and archival institutions connected to the temple and palace complexes. The Hittite scribes were often tied by kinship and trained within families, just as craftsmen apprentice father to son. Within the administrative sphere, scribal schools there processed records of “long-term significance” and “short-term relevance”<sup>12</sup> in a well-organized system of cataloguing in locations known as Tablet Houses. Documents ranging from land grants to treaties were stored, copied, and retrieved using a shelf system and organized by colophons.<sup>13</sup> These colophons were informational headers that organized and served as helpful reminders; they are found in our modern Book of Mormon version as italicized headings before most of the books (as LDS scholars including Nibley, Tvedtnes, Mackay, and others have examined).

Although we know less about record keeping in the ancient Americas than in some other civilizations, Mesoamerican glyphs and iconography are still being discovered and studied. Both climate and conquest have obscured much of their past; Spaniards destroyed all the Mayan codices they could find, and the humidity in that region does not promote long term preservation like the dry desert of the Middle East or the ash of Vesuvius’s eruption.

There is abundant proof in the Book of Mormon of a literate civilization with widespread scribal training. Records anchored the [Page 104]Nephites to their religion, their language, their history, and their rulers. They were symbols of authority. Beyond the educated religious and political elite, the following scriptural terms indicate a society with frequent written communication: *commandments, prophecies, ordinances, message, lawyers, judges, laws, priesthood, blotted out, proclamation, decree, correspondence, epistles, statutes, calendars, astronomy, scriptures, petitions*. Even the most destitute immigrants are presumed to be literate as Alma asks the Zoramites, “Ye ought to search the scriptures. . . . Do ye remember to have read what Zenos, the prophet of old, has said?” (Alma 33:2–3, emphasis added). Further back than the Nephites, it even appears that royal females were educated in Jaredite society, as the conspiring daughter of Jared asked her father if he had not “read the record which our fathers brought across the great deep? Behold, is there not an account concerning them of old?” (Ether 8:9). The Jaredites and Nephites both found inspiration, whether for good or evil, in ancient records. This illuminates the power of their archival practices in preserving documents and their library practices in facilitating access, both of which are in evidence.

The Nephite focus on record keeping permeated societal values and reinforced their superiority over their fellow Mulekites and Lamanites, who had been record-slackers. After all, in Nephi’s mountaintop vision, the idea of “precious things taken away from the book” equaled deep apostasy (1 Nephi 13:28). Righteous Nephites prayed for the future safety of their records (Enos 1:15–16), and wicked Nephites burned records along with believers (Alma 14:8). The function of Nephite record keepers as timekeepers alludes to their priestly status and the fact that righteousness was a factor in record validity (3 Nephi 8:1–2). Records were used to convert (Alma 18:36), to testify, and to condemn (Mosiah 12:29). Record keeping even led Lamanites to prosperity once they were taught how to keep them (Mosiah 24:6–7).

King Benjamin served as a unifier of the record cache; as the king he had possession of the brass plates and large plates history, and then Amaleki gave him the sacred small plates “consolidating for the first time since Nephi [whose records division had taken place several hundred years prior] these important elements of Nephite religious leadership and political power in the hands of a single individual.”<sup>14</sup> When King Benjamin gave his son charge over both the kingdom and [Page 105]the records, the records were listed as next to the kingdom in importance (Mosiah 1:16). As he explained,

I say unto you, my sons, were it not for these things, which have been kept and preserved by the hand of God, that we might read and understand of his mysteries, and have his commandments always before our eyes, that even our fathers would have dwindled in unbelief, and we should have been like unto our brethren, the Lamanites, who know nothing concerning these things. . . . O my sons, I would that ye should remember that these sayings are true, and also that these records are true. And behold, also the plates of Nephi, which contain the records and the sayings of our fathers from the time they left Jerusalem until now, and they are true; and we can know of their surety because we have them

before our eyes. (Mosiah 1:5–6)

Benjamin’s final address invoked the sanctity of the written word that will “stand as a bright testimony against this people, at the judgment day” (Mosiah 3:24), and he solemnized the biblical-themed occasion by recording the names of the covenant believers (Mosiah 6:1). Similarly, the main question Alma had for his son Helaman about the future concerned his belief in the records (Alma 45:2).

A Nephite “records reunion” was a poignant event in their history, as disparate groups reunited after generations apart presented and read their respective accounts together (Mosiah 22:14). Bushman theorized that this was symbolic of Nephite place in time and space: “Records, then, in the Nephite conception of the world, were, in effect, surrogates of peoples. They encompassed their revelations and their experience, and when Providence in the end assembled and united all peoples, bringing history to a conclusion, the records stood for the people. At that final day, their records would give the Nephites a part in the grand orchestra of the nations.”<sup>15</sup>

During Christ’s pivotal visit in 3 Nephi, he expected his audience to have both record keeping skills and record-literacy. The resurrected Christ himself examined their records (3 Nephi 23:6–13), gave the people additional scriptures, and corrected what had been missed in earlier records. This hands-on direction reinforced the vital nature of records to the Nephites. “Records guided and sustained culture; without a true record, religion and the social order fell apart. Within the world of the [Page 106]Book of Mormon, it was perfectly consistent for the resurrected Christ to examine the Nephite records and require their amendment when an omission was found. The maintenance of culture depended on accurate records.”<sup>16</sup> If “true records had the power to revive and redirect a people,”<sup>17</sup> the legacy of the records would save memories and reestablish religious beliefs. What better way to restore a Christian church in the latter days than by producing a new (to us) record such as the Book of Mormon?

## Mormon the Archivist

Young Mormon was an unusual boy, with the weight of a prophetic commission from age ten onwards. This influenced his spiritual and secular education, as he “came to maturity in the midst of a society revolutionizing itself. Because of his lofty priestly connections, his noble lineage, and the consequent high degree of literacy he must have commanded, he was thrust into a leadership role with which no average sixteen-year-old would ever have been entrusted.”<sup>18</sup> Mormon’s position in society and his charge from Ammaron gave him perspective and authority as he shaped the Nephite archive into the record we now have,<sup>19</sup> with primary goals that scholars have identified as fulfilling prophecy, testifying of the land of promise, providing spiritual guidance, recording what the Spirit impressed upon him, and affirming that Jesus is the Christ.<sup>20</sup>

As Mormon worked with the Nephite record trove, the modern concept of library science and records management would have not seemed entirely foreign to him.<sup>21</sup> Records management is the process of documents moving from primary daily use to historical archives/secondary use, which was happening with the Nephite records from the very beginning. What had [Page 107]been war epistles or royal speeches or counsel from father to son relevant to daily life became treasured documents from Nephite past. Mormon was therefore involved in long-term storage, access, and retrieval. Librarians and archivists deal with the essential concerns of collection development and cataloguing, which requires both weeding and selection. Mormon inherited an overwhelming amount of Nephite history in the records that Ammaron entrusted to the hill Shim: he repeatedly stated that he could not write the hundredth part of their thousand-year history (Words of Mormon 1:5, Helaman 3:14, 3 Nephi 5:8, 26:6). Mormon had to sift through this material and determine what was consequential to the points he wanted to emphasize in his record.

The requisite skills Mormon needed to edit this collection are impressive. Although we have little sense of how exactly the records were stored, preserved, and organized, Mormon was able to incorporate excerpts from a surprising variety of ancient sources, including letters, diaries, military accounts, and religious writings. Thus some system of cataloguing must have helped him in this endeavor, whether he invented his own or past Nephite chroniclers had a way of organizing and retrieving information. Mormon spent a significant amount of time and

space discussing the records themselves: their transmission, their meaning, their translation, and their attribution. Grant Hardy analyzed the complexity of text and multiple records, embedded documents, and letters, explaining that Mormon saw himself as a historian with a strict chronology and distinct narrative style.<sup>22</sup> Thomas Mackay detailed these editorial intricacies:

In the Book of Mormon, we have a range of introductory and inserted notations: names of authors for records, speeches, and epistles that are quoted or abridged — imbedded source indicators; genealogical or other authenticating information about the authors; and brief or extended summaries of contents, including subheaders for complex inserts or documents. Nephi himself is in this tradition, a tradition that seems to be evident in what we have from Lehi, too, for he cites prophets from the brass plates. Heir to this literary tradition, Mormon develops it, and he assiduously presents to his readers source documents and texts while retaining a unity of narrative flow by his historical account. Thus, [Page 108]even while transcribing a record, Mormon may paraphrase or summarize and then return to a first-person quotation. The resultant text is clearly the product of a superb ancient historian concerned about naming and adhering to his sources while presenting an edited account that exhibits his own philosophy and purpose.<sup>23</sup>

Scholars have determined that the majority of this scribal work was done during a ten-year peace treaty window that coincided with the jubilee year of 350 ad:

It was probably during this time that Mormon ... did the bulk of his work on the Nephite record, exploring the vast historical archive with which he had been entrusted, formulating the narrative he wanted to tell, and abridging and condensing that material into much of the Book of Mormon. Moroni was probably a teenager during this time of peace, working under his father as an apprentice, learning the history of his people, and preparing for his role as the final Nephite record keeper and abridger.<sup>24</sup>

Combining his multiple roles as prophet, historian, and editor, perhaps Mormon viewed Christ as the ultimate editor, archivist, and historian of his faith. As Mormon's son Moroni concluded this massive archival and editorial undertaking, he referred to the importance of "relying alone upon the merits of Christ, who was the author and the finisher" of our faith (Moroni 6:4). What a perfect connection for Moroni to describe Christ by that name, as he himself was an author and finisher of the Book of Mormon.

## And it Came to Pass ...

Some historic tablets and scrolls indicate that scribes signed their work and noted the lineage of copy transmission.<sup>25</sup> Yet the idea of record provenance, which traces the chronology of ownership and custody of records to document their authenticity, was a nineteenth and twentieth [Page 109]century development by European archivists. In the mid-nineteenth century, American interest in the past grew with the formation of historical societies (such as the Daughters of the American Revolution) to honor the dying colonial generation. However, American society experienced a slow beginning in organizing historical records. As a historian noted, "the handwritten world of colonial records did not adopt a sophisticated recordkeeping system. Discussions on colonial records and recordkeeping mostly focus on individual or organizational negligence or natural damage by fire and water."<sup>26</sup> It was not until the twentieth century revolution of typewriters and duplicators (and further digital transformations) that record keeping changed dramatically.

The resources for a historian in Joseph Smith's era would have been limited, insofar as library access, organization, and retrieval went. A nineteenth-century frontier historian searching through volumes of early Plymouth history or Harvard College's records would not have the benefit of alphabetical arrangement, indices, cross-references, and topical searches, as these concepts were in their infancy. Additionally, more advanced archival principles like chain of custody, keeping fonds (an archival group of papers) together (officially known as "respect des fonds"), and

archival integrity were nascent at the time Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon.

While archival methodology began to move in new directions around 1830 (interesting coincidence of date) in Europe, it was not until the early twentieth century that these ideas became accepted on a widespread level in the United States:

Although archives have existed for thousands of years, much of the archival paradigm — not unlike that of library science — coalesced between the mid-nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Several key treatises and manuals codifying archival theory and practice were published between 1830 ... and 1956. ... The most influential of these was the *Manual on the Arrangement and Description of Archives*, written in 1898 by Dutch archivists ... which brought together the French and Prussian ideas of *respect des fonds* and provenance. The translated manual was widely disseminated and was a major topic of discussion when librarians and archivists met for the first time for an international congress at the 1910 World's [Page 110]Fair in Brussels. As a result, the concept of provenance was adopted by the congress as the basic rule of the archival profession.<sup>27</sup>

Consider how the above information affects our understanding of Book of Mormon studies: the archival profession as we understand it now did not exist in Joseph Smith's time. The concept of provenance (a record of ownership to guide claims of authenticity) and chain of custody (documenting that record of ownership) was not identified. The Bible, Joseph's main resource for an example of ancient writing at the time he translated the Book of Mormon, gave very little indication of who wrote it and how its records were copied and transmitted throughout the ages. These ideas were not something anyone in the mid-nineteenth century could have held a working conceptual knowledge of that would allow their incorporation into the Book of Mormon. Provenance is a modern convention used today and developed in the past century to validate claims (notably in art auctions); Mormon made the chain of custody and provenance of his record abundantly clear from millennia prior. As "questionable provenance can still create an atmosphere of distrust,"<sup>28</sup> conversely a secure, credible provenance can foster belief. The Nephite authors were doing something unknown from biblical texts, and unheard of in Joseph Smith's day.

Legal precedent for using chain of custody as documentary evidence in court is also relevant to consider in this context: "A proper chain of custody requires three types of testimony: (1) evidence that a piece of evidence is what it purports to be; (2) evidence of continuous possession by each individual who has had possession of the evidence ... and (3) evidence by each person who has had possession that the particular piece of evidence remained in substantially the same condition from the moment one person took possession until the moment that person released the evidence into the custody of another."<sup>29</sup> Not only is this process used for court evidence, but also in tracking materials and products in manufacturing and food supply concerned with product source, origin, and content. Looking at the Book of Mormon through [Page 111]this evidentiary lens, is the record (1) what it says it is, (2) in continuous possession by each individual who had possession, and (3) in substantially the same condition until it passed into the next person's custody?

## Book of Mormon Chain of Custody

In the Book of Mormon text itself, Mormon gave us a complete chain of records transmission, clearly establishing its provenance (and thus its authenticity). In Jerusalem around 600 bc, Nephi took the brass plates records from Laban and brought them overseas to the New World, where he began keeping his own small and large plates records. Nephi has a complete explanation of how and why he made his record:

And it came to pass that the Lord commanded me, wherefore I did make plates of ore that I might engraven upon them the record of my people. And upon the plates which I made I did engraven the record of my father, and also our journeyings in the wilderness, and the prophecies of my father; and also many of mine own prophecies have I engraven upon them ... And after I had made these plates by way of commandment, I, Nephi, received a commandment that the ministry and the prophecies,

the more plain and precious parts of them, should be written upon these plates; and that the things which were written should be kept for the instruction of my people, who should possess the land, and also for other wise purposes, which purposes are known unto the Lord. Wherefore, I, Nephi, did make a record upon the other plates, which gives an account, or which gives a greater account of the wars and contentions and destructions of my people. And this have I done, and commanded my people what they should do after I was gone; and that these plates should be handed down from one generation to another, or from one prophet to another, until further commandments of the Lord. And an account of my making these plates shall be given hereafter; and then, behold, I proceed according to that which I have spoken; and this I do that the more sacred things may be kept for the knowledge of my people. (1 Nephi 19:1–5)

These three different sets of records were divided: large plates and brass plates entrusted to the royal or political descendants, and small plates kept by the prophetic lineage. Nephi gave the small plates to his brother Jacob, after which those records were passed from father to [Page 112]son through Enos, Jarom, Omni, Amaron, Chemish, Abinadom, and finally to Amaleki, who, lacking an heir, turned the record over to King Benjamin, at which point it joined the royal records collections (see Appendix for details of documented chain of custody). Each of Nephi's eight successors in keeping the small plates followed a mandate from Nephi recorded in Jacob 1:1–4 to keep their genealogy, write personally, and pass the records down,<sup>30</sup> thus fulfilling their required scribal duties.

Nephi kept the monarchical large plates, his successor known as King Nephi the Second then kept that record and passed it down to other kings mentioned in the lost 116 pages, and then the large plates record was kept by Mosiah<sub>1</sub>, Benjamin, and Mosiah<sub>2</sub>. At that point (c. 92 bc) the monarchy transformed into an elected leadership of chief judges, and the complete records collection (large plates, small plates, Jaredite twenty four gold plates, brass plates of Laban) was given to Alma<sub>2</sub> after the king's sons gave up their birthright.<sup>31</sup> The records continued down through Alma<sub>2</sub>'s descendants for the next several centuries: Alma<sub>2</sub> gave them to his son Helaman<sub>1</sub>; upon Helaman<sub>1</sub>'s untimely death, his brother Shiblón took over briefly before passing the records on to his nephew, Helaman<sub>1</sub>'s young son, also named Helaman<sub>2</sub>. From there Helaman<sub>2</sub> gave them to his son Nephi<sub>3</sub>, who gave them to his son Amos<sub>1</sub>, to his son Amos<sub>2</sub>, and to his brother Ammaron, at which point (c. 320 AD) Ammaron was commanded to bury the record collections. He commissioned the child Mormon to retrieve them at age twenty-four. Mormon then abridged these records and gave them to his son Moroni.

The twenty-four gold plates that were abridged into the book of Ether also have a clear custody: taken from Jaredite records found by the Limhites (Mosiah 8), given to Ammon, and then taken to Mosiah<sub>2</sub>, who translated them and kept them with the Nephite records; they were then passed down through the same lineage from Alma to Mormon, after which they were eventually abridged by Mormon's son Moroni.<sup>32</sup> [Page 113]Moroni buried the records (large and small plates, abridgement of Ether, sealed portion of Jaredite records) and returned to personally deliver them to their translator, Joseph Smith, in 1827. Joseph Smith translated the records, which, according to the earlier chain of evidentiary custody requirements (1) were the plates they purported to be; (2) came through a line of continuous unbroken transmission; and (3) any changes to the records were explained by each subsequent author and editor, and they "retain[ed] their brightness" undimmed by time (Alma 37:5, 1 Nephi 19:5), indicating that they were in their original condition, until Joseph Smith retrieved and translated them.

Richard Bushman noted that "in between Nephi and Moroni, we never lose sight of the records. Their descent is meticulously accounted for ... [and] the Jacobean record tells us step by step of the passage from one record-keeper to another. For a time in Omni, the transmission of the records was nearly all that was written about. Throughout the Book of Mormon, there is a recurrent clanking of plates as they pass from one record-keeper to another. To my mind, it is noteworthy that there is nothing like this explicit description of records and record-keeping either in the Bible or in books current in nineteenth-century America."<sup>33</sup> Science fiction author Orson Scott Card explained that written hoaxes are a product of their time, easily unmasked by later scientific understanding.<sup>34</sup> If the Book of Mormon was purely a Joseph Smith creation, how he did or did not include lineage and custodial authorship information should conform to nineteenth-century manners and ring false to modern readers. Yet the more we learn about archival provenance and chain of custody, the more remarkable it is to discover the precise documentation of

such practices in the Book of Mormon.

## Scriptural Genealogy

Another related feature to this concept of provenance and transmission is the listing (or lack thereof) of genealogies in scripture. Biblical lineages would have been very familiar to Joseph Smith: the Old Testament “begats” chronicle the sons of various progenitors by their [Page 114]wives and concubines. These genealogies connect characters back to their prominent ancestor and Israelite tribe and sometimes specify ages, professions, and deaths (Genesis 36, 1 Chronicles 1–9). New Testament genealogies tie generations in with symbolic numbers, kings, events, and even deity (Matthew 1, Luke 3). Women are mentioned by name. These do not always match modern ideas of strict historical accuracy because the genealogy is delineated (and sometimes abridged or fictionalized) for a certain purpose, such as establishing rightful kingship.

Did this Israelite affinity for lineage continue through the brass plates into the Nephite tradition? Lehi found the brass plates so delightful partly because he learned his genealogy there (1 Nephi 3:12, 5:16–17), and Nephi continued to keep this genealogy in his large plates record (1 Nephi 19:2). Yet the Book of Mormon editors and translator did not use or imitate biblical lineage protocol despite still being concerned with lineage history. Although we are missing Mormon’s beginning to the Book of Lehi in the lost 116 pages, Mormon may have listed record keepers, prophets, and kings back to Lehi, founder of his starring dynasty. It is likely that his son Moroni’s abridgement of Ether followed a similar pattern to what his father had done. Yet Moroni’s version in Ether 1 does not use the word begat, or mention generational numbers or tribes, or specify ages, wives, professions, or deaths: it simply lists the kings as the son of the next progenitor, back for almost three dozen generations of male names (Ether 1:6–33). Scholars suggest that this “carefully crafted” royal lineage “established the authority of Ether and the authoritative nature of his record. By making that king list the organizing principle of the Jaredite story, Moroni authoritatively tied the origins of the Jaredite civilization back to the divine guidance given to the Brother of Jared.”<sup>35</sup>

However, in other portions of the Book of Mormon where this sort of biblical lineage record might be expected, it likewise does not occur — Mormon, for example, simply notes that he was “a descendant of Nephi (and my father’s name was Mormon)” (Mormon 1:5). If Joseph Smith had been trying to copy familiar biblical style, the result would have been very different. The small plates might instead say, “Now these are the generations of Lehi, who came from Jerusalem. Lehi took Sariah to wife, and she bare Laman and Lemuel and Samuel and Nephi. And while they dwelt in the wilderness, Lehi knew his wife and she begat Jacob and Joseph. These are the names of Laman’s sons: ABC. And the sons of [Page 115]Lemuel were XYZ. And the sons and daughters of Samuel were this. And these are the names of Nephi’s children. So all the days of Lehi were so many years, and he died” and so forth. Although the commandment to keep their genealogy was a key component of the small plates instructions (Jarom 1:1), and lineage history was a powerful influence on Nephite society (4 Nephi 1:37–38 shows the persistence of these affiliations after centuries), it was not Mormon’s primary concern in the record.

The presentation of historical antecedents and custodial male lineage is not only different in the Book of Mormon than in biblical accounts, it also varies greatly from Joseph Smith’s milieu. When Joseph Smith authored his own history in 1838, he followed neither the biblical nor Book of Mormon style in detailing his genealogy: Joseph merely listed his parents’ and siblings’ names (including the women), and the name of his maternal grandfather. Not a single begat or ethnic connection or tribal affiliation: “His family consisting of eleven souls, namely, my father, Joseph Smith; my mother, Lucy Smith (whose name, previous to her marriage, was Mack, daughter of Solomon Mack); my brothers Alvin, . . . Hyrum, myself, Samuel Harrison, William, Don Carlos; and my sisters, Sophronia, Catherine, and Lucy” (JS-H 1: 4).

This is exactly what one would expect, given Joseph Smith’s circumstances. Despite our current ancestral focus, genealogy was not a matter of great interest to early Americans, including Latter-day Saints. “Because of the difficulty of genealogical pursuits at the time and the additional challenge created by the colonial context and transatlantic distance, such genealogies usually did not reach beyond a writer’s father’s or grandfather’s generation.”<sup>36</sup> Rather than demonstrating family pride, it showed aristocratic tendencies.<sup>37</sup> In the mid-nineteenth



century, interest in one's pedigree grew into an acceptable and fruitful new field due to pension legislation for Revolutionary War veterans, the creation of historical societies, and the birth of scholarly genealogy. But until the prophet Elijah restored the sealing keys in 1836, genealogy simply was not a serious consideration for frontier Americans.

[Page 116]The Book of Mormon emphasis on record keeping was an inspiration to the early LDS leaders as they began their own history. The Lord commanded them to keep a record (D&C 21:1) just as the church was founded in 1830, and from Liberty Jail in 1838 Joseph pleaded with “great earnestness” of the “imperative duty” to “take statements and affidavits; and also to gather up the libelous publications that are afloat; and all that are in the magazines, and in the encyclopedias, and all the libelous histories that are published, and are writing, and by whom” (D&C 123:4–5, 11, 14). This directive formed the basis of the ongoing Church Archives and historical collections and was unusual for its time and place. Joseph and the early Saints were also schooled in the eternal importance of record keeping for temple ordinance work: “whatsoever you record on earth shall be recorded in heaven, and whatsoever you do not record on earth shall not be recorded in heaven; for out of the books shall your dead be judged ... according to the records which they have kept concerning their dead” (D&C 128:8).

## Conclusion

Although he was tutored as he grew in his prophetic role, the translator Joseph Smith was not an archivist nor a genealogist who knew about provenance and documenting the transmission of records. Yet the Nephites cared deeply about the records of their past and their impact on future generations. Although we can only speculate as to what influences shaped their particular culture a thousand years post-Jerusalem in Mormon's scribal training, his meticulous work to document the record of the records is striking.

As the Book of Mormon account began, Lehi was given a divine book to read about Jerusalem's coming destruction. This “manifested plainly of the coming of a Messiah, and also the redemption of the world” (1 Nephi 1:19), yet sharing the contents of this book was deadly. Joseph Smith must have resonated with this scenario, as he too read in a heavenly book of the coming of the Messiah and the future destruction of his people unless they repented, only to find that his own life would be forfeit once he preached this message. The record that caused death, however, is the one that leads us all to eternal life. And the Book of Mormon concludes with Moroni's warning that when we meet him at the bar of God, we will be judged from the words which were written in this book: “and God shall show unto you that that which I have written is true” (Moroni 10:27–29). Record keeping is of more than merely historical interest; it has eternal significance and consequences.

[Page 117]As John Sorenson noted, “Mormon and Moroni present their ‘brief’ record to their future readers as a unique kind of interpretive 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.”<sup>38</sup> That these sources and this “efficacious way” would fit with later-identified archival principles of provenance and chain of custody is yet another compelling testament to the authenticity of Mormon's editorial work and Joseph Smith's translation, under the direction of the Author and Finisher (and Archivist) of our faith. Truly we are people of the book that bears record of Him.

*[Editor's Note: The author thanks three anonymous peer reviewers for their encouragement and ideas as well as David Cramer, Liz Hansen, Eliza Wells, Matt Wells, Lia Marie Adam, and Jack Welch for their historical, editorial, technical, and scriptural insights.]*

[Page 118]

## Appendix: Documented Chain of Custody

## within the Book of Mormon<sup>39</sup>

*Dates in italics are inferred*

### BRASS PLATES

Created by unknown Israelite scribes from descendants of Manasseh, possibly Northern Tribes **Laban's ancestors**  
*c. 600 bc*, Jerusalem, 1 Nephi 5:16

**Laban** *c. 600 bc*, Jerusalem, 1 Nephi 3:3, 24

**Nephi**<sub>1</sub> *c. 592 bc*, Jerusalem, 1 Nephi 4:24, 38

**Lehi** *c. 592 bc*, Arabian Desert, 1 Nephi 5:10–22

**Nephi**<sub>1</sub> *c. 570 bc*, New World land of Nephi, 2 Nephi 5:12

**Second King Nephi** *c. 520 bc*, land of Nephi, Jacob 1:11

**Third King Nephi** *c. 480 bc*, land of Nephi, Jacob 1:11

**Nephite kings** (lost 116 pages) *c. 450 bc–180 bc*, land of Nephi, Words of Mormon 1:10–11, Mosiah 28:20

**Mosiah**<sub>1</sub> *c. 170 bc*, land of Zarahemla, Omni 1:14

**Benjamin** *c. 130 bc*, land of Zarahemla, Mosiah 1:3

**Mosiah**<sub>2</sub> land of Zarahemla, Mosiah 1:16

**Alma**<sub>2</sub> *c. 92 bc*, land of Zarahemla, Mosiah 28:11, 20

**Helaman**<sub>1</sub> *c. 74 bc*, land of Zarahemla, Alma 37:3–4

**Shiblon** *c. 56 bc*, land of Zarahemla, Alma 63:1

**Helaman**<sub>2</sub> *c. 52 bc*, land of Zarahemla, Alma 63:11–13

**Nephi**<sub>2</sub> *c. 40 bc*, land of Zarahemla, Helaman 3:37

**Nephi**<sub>3</sub> *c. 1 bc*, land of Zarahemla, 3 Nephi 1:2–3

**Amos**<sub>1</sub> *c. 110 ad*, 4 Nephi 1:19

**Amos**<sub>2</sub> *c. 194 AD*, 4 Nephi 1:21[Page 119]

**Ammaron** *c. 305 AD*, 4 Nephi 1:47; *320 AD*, directed to hide up all sacred records in the Hill Shim of the land Antum

**Mormon** *c. 375 AD*, retrieved all records from Hill Shim, Mormon 4:23, Words of Mormon 1:11, hid records in Hill Cumorah *c. 385 AD*, Mormon 6:6

## LARGE PLATES OF NEPHI for royal line

**Nephi<sub>1</sub>** created in the New World c. 580 bc, 1 Nephi 19:1–2

**Second King Nephi** land of Nephi, Jacob 1:11

**Third King Nephi** land of Nephi, Jacob 1:11

**Nephite kings** (as documented in lost 116 pages) c. 450 bc–180 bc, land of Nephi, Mosiah 28:20

**King Mosiah<sub>1</sub>** c. 160 bc, took the plates from land of Nephi to land of Zarahemla, Omni 1:12–13, Mosiah 1:16

**Benjamin** c. 135 bc, land of Zarahemla, Omni 1:23

**Mosiah<sub>2</sub>** c. 124 bc, land of Zarahemla, Mosiah 1:16

**Alma<sub>2</sub>** c. 92 bc, land of Zarahemla, Mosiah 28:11, 20

**Helaman<sub>1</sub>** c. 74 bc, land of Zarahemla, Alma 37:1–2; sent forth copies of all engravings except forbidden parts  
Alma 63:12

**Shiblon** c. 56 bc, land of Zarahemla, Alma 63:1

**Helaman<sub>2</sub>** c. 52 bc, land of Zarahemla, Alma 63:11–13

**Nephi<sub>2</sub>** c. 40 bc land of Zarahemla, Helaman 3:37

**Nephi<sub>3</sub>** c. 1 bc, land of Zarahemla, 3 Nephi 1:2–3; these records examined by Christ when he visited the land of Bountiful, 3 Nephi 23:6–13

**Amos<sub>1</sub>** c. 110 ad, 4 Nephi 1:19

**Amos<sub>2</sub>** c. 194 AD, 4 Nephi 1:21

**Ammaron** c. 305 AD, 4 Nephi 1:47; 320 AD, directed to hide up all sacred records; commanded Mormon to retrieve only plates of Nephi in 334 AD, Mormon 1:3–4

**Mormon** c. 345 AD, [Page 120]retrieved plates Mormon 4:23; Words of Mormon 1:11; abridged large plates into his golden plates record beginning c. 350–360; hid large plates source records in Hill Cumorah c. 385 AD, Mormon 6:6

## SMALL PLATES OF NEPHI for priestly line

**Nephi<sub>1</sub>** created in the New World land of Nephi c. 560 bc (“forty years had passed away;”after death of Lehi, separation of people), 2 Nephi 5:30

**Jacob** c. 544 bc, land of Nephi, Jacob 1:1–3

**Enos** c. 420 bc, land of Nephi, Enos 1:23

**Jarom** c. 399 bc, land of Nephi, Jarom 1:1–2

**Omni** c. 323 bc, land of Nephi, Jarom 1:15, Omni 1:1–3

**Amaron** c. 279 bc, land of Nephi, Omni 1:3–4

**Chemish** c. 240 bc, land of Nephi, Omni 1:8–9

**Abinadom** c. 205 bc, land of Nephi, Omni 1:10–11

**Amaleki** c. 170 bc, Omni 1:12, 25, 30: “these plates are full;” added to royal record after righteous Nephites moved from the land of Nephi to Zarahemla

**Benjamin** c. 130 bc, land of Zarahemla, Omni 1:25

**Mosiah**<sub>2</sub> c. 124 bc, Mosiah 1:16

**Alma**<sub>2</sub> c. 92 bc, land of Zarahemla, Mosiah 28:11, 20

**Helaman**<sub>1</sub> c. 74 bc, land of Zarahemla, Alma 37:1

**Shiblon** c. 56 bc, land of Zarahemla, Alma 63:1

**Helaman**<sub>2</sub> c. 52 bc, land of Zarahemla, Alma 63:11–13

**Nephi**<sub>2</sub> c. 40 bc, land of Zarahemla, Helaman 3:37

**Nephi**<sub>3</sub> c. 1 bc, land of Zarahemla, 3 Nephi 1:2–3

**Amos**<sub>1</sub> c. 110 ad, 4 Nephi 1:19

**Amos**<sub>2</sub> c. 194 AD, 4 Nephi 1:21

**Ammaron** c. 305, 4 Nephi 1:47; 320, directed to hide up all sacred records in the Hill Shim

**Mormon** c. 375, retrieved all records from Hill Shim, Mormon 4:23; c. 385, appended Small Plates to his abridgement, Words of Mormon 1:3–6

**Moroni** c. 400 AD, [Page 121]buried plates c. 421, Moroni 10:1–2, JSH 1:34

**Stone box, Hill Cumorah New York** September 21, 1823–September 22, 1827, JSH 1:51–54

**Joseph Smith** September 22, 1827 Palmyra, New York; Harmony, Pennsylvania, JSH 1:59

**Angel Moroni** July–September 1828, D&C 3:14

**Joseph Smith** September 1828–at least July 2, 1829, when shown to Eight Witnesses

**Angel Moroni** returned to his possession sometime after July 2, 1829 and before May 2, 1838, JSH 1:60

## JAREDITE RECORD: 24 engraved plates of gold

**Brother of Jared** c. 2500 bc, created in Old World and brought to New World, Ether 3:22–27, 4:1, 4–6; unknown Jaredite record-keepers through the ages

**Ether** c. 600~200 bc, New World, Ether 15:33–34; plates hidden

**43 Limhite explorers** c. 121 bc, wilderness discovery, Mosiah 8:9

**Limhi** c. 121 bc, land of Nephi, Mosiah 8:12, brought plates to land of Zarahemla Mosiah 22:14

**Mosiah**<sub>2</sub> c. 93 bc, land of Zarahemla, Mosiah 28:11; translated with seerstones

**Alma**<sub>2</sub> c. 92 bc, land of Zarahemla, Mosiah 28:20

**Helaman**<sub>1</sub> c. 74 bc, land of Zarahemla, Alma 37:21

**Shiblon** c. 56 bc, land of Zarahemla, Alma 63:1

**Helaman**<sub>2</sub> c. 52 bc, land of Zarahemla, Alma 63:11–13

**Nephi**<sub>2</sub> c. 40 bc, land of Zarahemla, Helaman 3:37

**Nephi**<sub>3</sub> c. 1 bc, land of Zarahemla, 3 Nephi 1:2–3

**Amos**<sub>1</sub> c. 110 ad, 4 Nephi 1:19

**Amos**<sub>2</sub> c. 194 AD, 4 Nephi 1:21

**Ammaron** c. 305 AD, 4 Nephi 1:47; 320 directed by Holy Ghost to hide up all sacred records in the Hill Shim

**Mormon** c. 375 AD, retrieved records from Hill Shim, Mormon 4:23; hid records in Hill Cumorah c. 385 AD, Mormon 6:6

**Moroni** c. 400 AD, [Page 122]abridged Jaredite plates to create book of Ether, Ether 1:2

## **PLATES OF MORMON: gold plates source for our English Book of Mormon translation**

Large plates abridgement by Mormon + small plates addition + Moroni's Jaredite abridgement + sealed Jaredite records, six by eight by six inches bound with three rings, weighing about fifty pounds

**Mormon** commenced abridgement c. 350–60 AD, Mormon 3:16–17, 6:1, Words of Mormon 1:1–2

**Moroni** c. 385 AD, Mormon 6:6; wrote a few words c. 400 AD; added Jaredite abridgement and sealed portion Ether 1:2; buried plates c. 421, Moroni 10:1–2, JSH 1:34

**Stone box, Hill Cumorah, Palmyra, New York** prior to September 21, 1823–September 22, 1827, JSH 1:51–54

**Joseph Smith** September 22, 1827, Palmyra, New York; Harmony, Pennsylvania, JSH 1:59

**Angel Moroni** July–September 1828, D&C 3:14

**Joseph Smith** September 1828–at least July 2, 1829, when shown to Eight Witnesses

**Angel Moroni** returned to his possession sometime after July 2, 1829 and before May 2, 1838, JSH 1:60

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[15.](#) Bushman, *Believing History*, 72.

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[18.](#) John L. Sorensen, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985),

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- [19.](#) See KnoWhy #226, “What Do We Know About Mormon’s Upbringing?” November 8, 2016, accessed January 11, 2017, <https://knowhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/content/what-do-we-know-about-mormon%E2%80%99s-upbringing>.
- [20.](#) KnoWhy #230, “What Was Mormon’s Purpose In Writing The Book of Mormon?” November 14, 2016, accessed January 11, 2017, <https://knowhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/content/what-was-mormon%E2%80%99s-purpose-in-writing-the-book-of-mormon>.
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[32.](#) Beyond the scope in this paper, Valentin Arts addressed the issue of the sealed portion of the Jaredite record in an intriguing examination that posits the existence of a third Jaredite record. Along with the provenance for this and other records, there are artifacts such as interpreters, the sword of Laban, and Liahona to account for in LDS history. He explored the chain of custody of those artifacts in conjunction with the sealed record. See “A Third Jaredite Record: The Sealed Portion of the Gold Plates,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 11/1 (2002), accessed January 11, 2017, <http://publications.mi.byu.edu/fullscreen/?pub=1406&index=10>.

[33.](#) Bushman, *Believing History*, 68–69.

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[35.](#) KnoWhy #235, “Why Does The Book of Ether Begin With Such A Long Genealogy?” November 21, 2016, accessed January 11, 2017, <https://knowhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/content/why-does-the-book-of-ether-begin-with-such-a-long-genealogy>

[36.](#) Francois Weil, *Family Trees: A History of Genealogy in America* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2013), 36.

[37.](#) Royal genealogies mattered in European history: heraldry, coats of arms, escutcheons crested on the family silver linked past connections to aspirational power. By the late eighteenth century in America, engraved silver became a way to demonstrate aristocratic connections, yet it is intriguing to note that the Book of Mormon (for all its golden plates, brass plates, steel swords, and balls of curious workmanship) mentions no engraved silver crests validating claims of authenticity.

[38.](#) John L. Sorenson, “Mormon’s Miraculous Book.” *Ensign* (February 2016), 41, accessed January 11, 2017, <https://churchofjesuschrist.org/ensign/2016/02/mormons-miraculous-book?lang=eng>.

[39.](#) The author created this appendix with her own research and inferences; similar lists with additional details and some variation (particularly in dates) are found in Welch’s *Charting the Book of Mormon* (Charts 2–13 through 2–21 found online at <https://byustudies.byu.edu/book-of-mormon-charts>, accessed January 11, 2017) and in Camille Williams, “Women in the Book of Mormon,” 113, footnote 99. Grant Hardy also has a thorough explanation of the various plates and their keepers in “Book of Mormon Plates and Records” *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* (New York: Macmillan, 1992), accessed January 11, 2017, [https://eom.byu.edu/index.php/Book\\_of\\_Mormon\\_Plates\\_and\\_Records](https://eom.byu.edu/index.php/Book_of_Mormon_Plates_and_Records).