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"I Make This Small Abridgment"

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Chapter 1

“I MAKE THIS SMALL ABRIDGMENT”

Therefore I write a small abridgment, daring not to give a full account of the things which I have seen, because of the commandment which I have received, and also that ye might not have too great sorrow because of the wickedness of this people. (Mormon 5:9)

Some sixty-four percent of the Book of Mormon (Mosiah through Mormon 7) comprises Mormon’s abridgment of the Nephite records. While there are other hints about his work, Mormon uses the words “abridgment” only twice within the record (Words of Mormon 1:3; Mormon 5:9), with a third mention of his “abridgment of the record of the people of Nephi” occurring in the title page. Moroni continued his father’s work in Mormon 8-9 and began “abridging the account of the people of Jared” (Moroni 1:1), noting, “I give not the full account, but a part of the account I give” (Ether 1:5). This “abridgment taken from the Book of Ether” is also mentioned in the title page.

Mormon and Moroni were not the only Nephites to have abridged records. In the beginning, Nephi instituted record-keeping among his people, and wrote, “Behold, I make an abridgment of the record of my father, upon plates which I have made with mine own hands; wherefore, after I have abridged the record of my father then will I make an account of mine own life” (1 Nephi 1:17).¹

¹ For a discussion of Lehi’s “running log” record from which Nephi abridged his account, see S. Kent Brown, “Lehi’s Personal Record: Quest for a Missing Source,” *BYU Studies* 24/1 (winter 1984), 19-42, and the latest iteration as chapter 3, “Recovering the Missing Record of Lehi,” in his *From Jerusalem to Zarahemla*:

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ABRIDGMENT IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

But neither Mormon nor Nephi invented the concept of abridging records. It was already a common phenomenon evidenced in the Bible. Specific phrases and anachronisms, as well as reference to earlier writings containing greater detail, provide evidence for the abridgment of earlier records to produce our current Bible.

One such phrase is “unto this day,” which refers to an historical event marking the establishment of something that remained in place at the time of the individual who made the final record. We find the expression in works attributed to Moses (Genesis 19:37-38; 26:33; 32:32; 35:20; 47:26; 48:15; Deuteronomy 2:22; 3:14; 10:8; 11:4; 34:6) and to Joshua (Joshua 4:9; 5:9; 6:25; 7:26; 8:28-29; 9:27; 14:14; 15:63; 16:10), as well as various historical books (Judges 1:21, 26; 6:14; 10:4; 15:19; 18:12; 19:30; 1 Samuel 5:5; 6:18; 27:6; 30:25; 2 Samuel 18:18; 1 Kings 8:8; 9:13, 21; 10:12; 12:19; 2 Kings 2:22; 8:22; 10:27; 14:7; 16:6; 17:23; 1 Chronicles 4:41, 43; 5:26; 2 Chronicles 5:9; 10:19; 20:26; 21:10). It is even found in Matthew 27:8 in reference to the purchase of a field with the money Judas had returned to the chief priests in Jerusalem.

Often, this expression denotes an anachronism in the text. For example, in Deuteronomy 3:14, we read of an event that occurred in the days of Moses: “Jair the son of Manasseh took all the country of Argob unto the coasts of Geshuri and Maachathi; and called them after his own name, Bashan-havoth-jair, *unto this day*.” It seems obvious that this expression would have been inappropriate in Moses’ own day and that it must have been added at a later date. Many Bible scholars see this as evidence that Moses did not write the books of the Pentateuch, but this need not be so. The phenomenon can just as easily be attributed to later editors of

Literary and Historical Studies of the Book of Mormon (Provo: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1998).

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works originally prepared by Moses.

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Evidence for abridgment or redaction of earlier documents is found throughout the historical books of the Bible (Judges through 2 Chronicles). The book of Judges covers such a long period of time that it must have been compiled from earlier records or oral traditions. That it was composed by a single historian is suggested by the fact that the book, as a whole, describes what the author saw as a cycle of sin, followed by captivity, then the cry of the people for assistance, and their delivery by a judge called by God. The perspective is clearly *ex post facto* rather than contemporary.

According to the Talmud, Samuel wrote the book of Judges (TB *Baba Bathra* 14b). But the notice that “in *those* days there was no king in Israel” (Judges 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25) suggests that the book was composed at a time when there *was* a king in Israel. Moreover, the use of the name “Israel” leads to three possible conclusions. Either the book was written during the time of the united monarchy (Saul, David, Solomon), or it was composed in the kingdom of Israel after its split with Judah following the death of Solomon, or it was composed after both kingdoms had ceased to exist and had become mere historical facts. In any event, the author would have had to have access to earlier records (whether written or oral) and may thus be termed an “abridger.” One of the records used by this abridger is the book of Joshua. Thus, for example, the story in Judges 1:11-15 is also found in Joshua 15:15-19, while Judges 2:6-9 draws upon Joshua 24:28-31.

But we can narrow down the time period for the composition of Judges even more. In Judges 18:30, we read of the establishment of a shrine at the site of Dan, in northern Israel, where the family of one Jonathan “were priests to the tribe of Dan until the day of the captivity of the land.” Since the ten tribes were

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taken captive by the Assyrians in 722 B.C., it is likely that the book of Judges was written after that time or that, at the very least, an editor added these comments at the later date.

The dating of the book of Joshua is more clear, for Joshua 11:21 speaks of Joshua cutting off the Anakims "from all the mountains of Judah, and from all the mountains of Israel." This statement could only have made sense after the split that resulted in the establishment of the kingdom of Israel in the north and the kingdom of Judah in the south, which took place in the days of Rehoboam, son of Solomon (1 Kings 12:16-21; 2 Chronicles 10:16-17; 11:1).

Similar phenomena are found in the book of Samuel, which was only later divided into 1-2 Samuel.² Samuel, of course, did not write the book. His death is recorded in 1 Samuel 25:1. Since this is before the end of the later subdivision of 1 Samuel, it is clear that he did not write that book in its present form either. This does not mean that Samuel wrote nothing, for we have a clear statement in 1 Samuel 10:25 that Samuel had written some things. Some of his material may have been used by a the later author who composed the book of Samuel. Indeed, because it covers such a long span of time, Samuel evidently is a combination of various works (see 1 Chronicles 29:29).

The time period in which the book of Samuel was written may be indicated by some of the anachronisms that appear in it. For example, in 1 Samuel 2:10, there is reference to "his king," in a period supposedly predating the choosing of Saul (1 Samuel 9) as Israel's king. In several passages, we find mention of Judah and

² Samuel, according to the fourth-century Christian writers Eusebius and Jerome, was a single book in Hebrew. The Greek Septuagint Bible divided it and Kings into the 1-4 "Book of the Kingdoms," adopted by the Vulgate. This division was introduced into a Hebrew manuscript of 1448 and into the Bomberg Bible of 1517. The unity of the "books" of Samuel is confirmed by the fact that, among the Dead Sea Scrolls, several documents had 1-2 Samuel together on the same roll (1Q7, 4Q51, 4Q52, 4Q53) as a single book.

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Israel at a time when they were supposedly a united people under either Saul or David (1 Samuel 11:8; 17:52; 18:16; 2 Samuel 3:10; 5:5; 11:11; 12:8; 19:11, 40-43; 21:2; 24:1, 9; see 1 Chronicles 21:5).

In 1 Samuel 1:9, there is reference to a temple, at a time when, according to other statements found in the Bible, there was not yet a temple. This places the writing at least in the time of Solomon, who constructed the temple. But the reference to the kingdom of Judah in 1 Samuel 27:6 provides evidence that the book was written after the death of Solomon, for the kingdom was not split in two until the time of his son Rehoboam.

Such phenomena continue into the books of Kings. Thus, some passages speak of Judah and Israel at a time when all the tribes constituted a united kingdom under Solomon (1 Kings 1:35; 4:20-21). In 1 Kings 4:25 we read that "Judah and Israel dwelt safely, every man under his vine and under his fig tree, from Dan even to Beersheba, all the days of Solomon." The mention of Judah and Israel as separate entities again suggests that the text was written after the split in the kingdom. Indeed, the passage may be dependent on Jeremiah 23:6, where we read, "In his days Judah shall be saved, and Israel shall dwell safely: and this is his name whereby he shall be called, the Lord our righteousness." This supports the story in the Talmud (TB *Baba Bathra* 14a) that makes Jeremiah the author of Kings.

WHAT RECORDS WERE ABRIDGED?

Elsewhere, we find evidence that the books of Kings were compiled from earlier records. These annals were known as the "chronicles of the kings of Judah" (1 Kings 14:29; 15:7, 23; 22:45; 2 Kings 8:23; 12:19; 14:18; 15:6, 36; 16:19; 20:20; 21:17, 25; 23:28; 24:5) and the "chronicles of the kings of Israel" (1 Kings 14:19; 15:31; 16:5, 14, 20, 27; 22:39; 2 Kings 1:18; 10:34; 13:8, 12; 14:15, 28; 15:11, 15, 21, 26, 31). They should not be confused with the books of Chronicles in our current Bible,

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which are a reworking of the account in Kings. The Hebrew term, rendered "chronicles" in both the lists of annals and in the title of the books of Chronicles, is the same, *spr dbry h-ymym*—literally, "book of the things/words of the days." Another source for the account in Kings is the "book of the acts of Solomon" (1 Kings 11:41).

The Chroniclers, who lived after the period of Babylonian exile, long after Lehi left Jerusalem, drew upon the accounts found in the books of Samuel and Kings as confirmed in their own record (1 Chronicles 9:1; 2 Chronicles 16:11; 20:34; 24:27; 25:26; 27:7; 28:26; 32:32; 33:18; 35:27; 36:8). They also referred to other annals, such as the "chronicles of king David" (1 Chronicles 27:24; cf. Nehemiah 12:23). One passage refers to "the book of Samuel the seer . . . the book of Nathan the prophet, and . . . the book of Gad the seer" (1 Chronicles 29:29) as sources for the acts of David, while another notes that the acts of Solomon were recorded in "the book of Nathan the prophet . . . the prophecy of Ahijah the Shilonite, and in the visions of Iddo the seer" (2 Chronicles 9:29). Elsewhere, we read that the acts of Rehoboam were "written in the book of Shemaiah the prophet, and of Iddo the seer" (2 Chronicles 12:15; cf. 13:22). Another passage (2 Chronicles 20:34) notes that the acts of Jehoshaphat had been "written in the book of Jehu the son of Hanani, who is mentioned in the book of the kings of Israel" (see 1 Kings 16:1, 7; 2 Chronicles 16:7; 19:2).

CONCLUSION

From this, we can see that the concept of abridging the records of former generations is a long-standing one in ancient Israel. Nephi's acquaintance with the brass plates of Laban may have given him insights into the methodology used by his predecessors (1 Nephi 3:3-4; 4:16, 38; 5:10-19; 19:21-23; 22:1, 30; 2 Nephi 4:15; 5:12). Indeed, he learned from an angel that the record of the Jews, the Bible, would be "a record like unto the engravings which are upon the plates of brass, save there are not so

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many” (1 Nephi 13:23). Among the writings found on the brass plates but missing from the Bible were the prophecies of Joseph (2 Nephi 4:1-2) and, evidently, the records of the prophets Zenos, Zenock, Neum, and Ezias (1 Nephi 19:10, 12; Jacob 5:1; 6:1; Alma 33:3, 13, 15; 34:7; Helaman 8:19-20; 15:11; 3 Nephi 10:16). Extracts from these writings were included in the Nephite abridgements. While there remains some question as to the identity of the Old Testament abridgers, we may be grateful for the knowledge of exactly who it was that abridged the record we have as the Book of Mormon.