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Mormon's Editorial Promises

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Chapter 3

MORMON'S EDITORIAL PROMISES

John A. Tvedtnes

An author may promise in the course of writing to return to a subject later to supply further details. Actually keeping such a promise can prove difficult. Even with modern writing aids, memory can betray a person into failing to tuck in the corners of plot or information. Mormon, the editor of much of the Book of Mormon as we have it, made these types of promises at least seven times. In each case, he or his son Moroni followed through perfectly.

The seven cases where Mormon promised to elaborate on some point are as follows:

- Mormon spoke in Mosiah 21:35 of Limhi's people, saying that "an account of their baptism shall be given hereafter." Almost a hundred verses followed before he told in Mosiah 25:17–18 about that ordinance being performed.

- The preaching mission of the sons of Mosiah was related in Alma 17–25, eighteen chapters after Mormon had said in Mosiah 28:9 and 19–20 that he would later tell about it.

- In Alma 35:13, Mormon promised to describe the Nephite-Lamanite war that began in the eighteenth year. But, since he proposed first to copy Alma's teachings to his sons, he postponed the story of the war until Alma 43, where in verse three he introduced the topic with the words, "And now I return to an account of the wars."

- Writing in Mosiah 28:11–19, Mormon said that he would later give the story of the Jaredites. He made this statement at the point where he mentioned that King Mosiah had translated

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the record of that people. Apparently the problems he faced in his role as commander of the Nephite armies in his people's battles against the Lamanites kept him from abridging the Jaredite record. But his son, Moroni, fulfilled the promise by giving us the Book of Ether. So Moroni preserved the Book of Mormon editorial pattern of not failing to cover what was promised, even though it took a generation.

○ Third Nephi 18:36–37 contains Mormon's statement that Jesus had given his twelve disciples "power to give the Holy Ghost." He added, "I will show unto you hereafter that this record is true." In the next chapter, verse thirteen, he described how the Holy Ghost fell on the twelve after their baptism. Then at 4 Nephi 1:1, he wrote that those baptized by the twelve "did also receive the Holy Ghost." Further consistency was shown in Moroni's later quotation of Christ's words to the twelve, which Mormon had left out in 3 Nephi 18 where they logically might have been given: "Ye shall have power that to him upon whom ye shall lay your hands, ye shall give the Holy Ghost" (Moroni 2:2). He then added, "On as many as they laid their hands, fell the Holy Ghost" (v. 3). The reporting of the matter involved two prophets and four distinct passages of scripture, but eventually nothing was left out of the story.

○ What is in our present scripture under the title the Words of Mormon serves as an editorial bridge between the book of Omni on the small plates and the book of Mosiah in Mormon's abridgment of the large plates. In verse two of Words of Mormon, Mormon said he hoped that his son Moroni would write "concerning Christ." That hope was realized about 350 pages later when Moroni told important matters concerning the Savior in Ether 3:17–20 and in 12:7, 16–22, and 38–41. At the very end of the whole volume (Mormon 9 and Moroni 2, 6, 7, 10), the son included his own testimony of Christ.

○ In Helaman 2:12–14, Mormon said that he would speak more of Gadianton and his secret band "hereafter." Indeed he did. The problems caused by the robbers and much about their characteristics were detailed in Helaman 6; 3 Nephi 1:27–29; 2:11–

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18; 3:1–4:29; and beyond in 4 Nephi and Mormon. The editorial comments in Helaman 2:12–14 are particularly interesting, for they show how Mormon thought and worked in carrying out his task of preparing the Nephite record.

In 2:4 we read of the “secret work of murder and of robbery.” If these acts were secret, how is it that the record told so much about them? That there were murderers was of course obvious to the people of the time, but they could have known nothing about any plan or society that was indeed secret. Only later, in the period reported in Helaman 6, was the Gadianton band discovered and some of them were arrested. Perhaps their confessions revealed the secret. We can see that Mormon, the historian writing years later, would have been aware of those later events when he edited what we see as Helaman 2, so he could refer to “secret work.”

If following through on editorial promises to return to a subject is difficult in writing, it is even harder done in haste with no written record to serve as a reminder of the promises made. In 1829 Joseph Smith dictated to Oliver Cowdery most of the scripture attributed to Mormon within the period of a few weeks, and without proofreading or revising. Under these circumstances, if Joseph were the original author, then leaving no gaps in the promised materials would have been a remarkable achievement. This makes it much more likely that Joseph was translating rather than creating, and that the editorial consistency is Mormon's work.