



“Words of Mormon” by Normandy Poulter

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WHY SHOULD READERS PAY ATTENTION TO THE BOOK OF MORMON’S EDITORIAL PROMISES?

“And I will show unto you hereafter that this record is true.”

3 Nephi 18:37

THE KNOW

In several ways, the authors and editors of the Book of Mormon offered commentary to help readers anticipate what will come next in its pages. Its writers informed readers about the content and structure of what would follow, testified to the truthfulness of impending narratives, and occasionally explained that further information would be provided about topics that had only been briefly discussed. These types of editorial promises—or, in other words, commitments to discuss or revisit certain topics—are plentifully scattered throughout the Book of Mormon. Impressively, these promises are also consistently and accurately fulfilled, even when their fulfillments are separated from the promises by large amounts of text.

Book and Chapter Headings

Some of the Book of Mormon’s editorial promises can be found in book headings. The book of 1 Nephi, for example, begins with a lengthy summary of what will follow, including statements like “Nephi’s brethren rebel against him. He confoundeth them, and buildeth a ship. They call the name of the place Bountiful. They cross the large waters into the promised land, and so forth” (1 Nephi 1).¹ These details help readers know in advance what main events will take place in Nephi’s book. Similar summary headings can be found at the beginning of various chapters throughout the Book of Mormon.² These ancient book and chapter headings (often referred to as colophons)³ were in the original text that Joseph Smith dictated to his scribes and should not be confused with the italicized chapter summaries that were produced in modern times by the

Scriptures Committee of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.⁵

Editorial Transitions

Anita Wells explained, “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.”⁶ Naturally, much of its self-discussion can be found either before or after its various transitions. The Book of Mormon editors often provided commentary that, like seams which join separate pieces of fabric, help stitch together separate literary units at their transition points. These transitions typically occur as a narrator shifts between storylines, clarifies an intended audience, weaves in and out of various source texts, or digresses into spiritual or explanatory commentary. In order to guide readers through these otherwise jarring shifts, the ancient narrators often pointed out what had just taken place or what was *about* to take place. Thus, editorial transitions are a very good place to look for editorial promises.

Passing Comments

Although most editorial promises can be found in headings and near transitions, they are sometimes just given in passing. One example can be found in Mosiah 28:9. After relating that King Mosiah would give his sons permission to preach to the Lamanites, Mormon committed to readers that he would “give an account of their proceedings hereafter.” Then, without further ado, he promptly returned back to the normal flow of the narrative.

Immediate, Sustained, and Intermittent Fulfillments

While many of the Book of Mormon’s editorial promises begin to be fulfilled immediately, some of them receive sustained or recurring attention before being fully realized. In 2 Nephi 11:2, for instance, Nephi declared, “And now I, Nephi, write more of the words of Isaiah, for my soul delighteth in his words.” Although Nephi’s promise began to be fulfilled seven verses later in 2 Nephi 12:1, it is sustained for 13 full chapters before being completely fulfilled (2 Nephi 12–24). Then, immediately afterward, Nephi began to fulfill his promise to “liken [Isaiah’s] words unto my people,” which was also given back in 2 Nephi 11:2 and which is also sustained for multiple chapters (2

Nephi 25–30). To further complicate things, near the beginning of these chapters (2 Nephi 25–30), Nephi delivered and then began to fulfill yet other promises, such as

- showing his people how the judgments of God will come upon all nations (2 Nephi 25:3),
- delivering his own prophecies in plainness (2 Nephi 25:4),
- addressing those who doubt the worth of his words (2 Nephi 25:8),
- and confining his words to his own people (2 Nephi 25:8).

While some of these promises are immediately fulfilled and then sustained throughout 2 Nephi 25–30, others are only intermittently fulfilled throughout the same span of chapters (see appendix). Most readers probably don’t realize how many overlapping editorial commitments with varying types of fulfillments that Book of Mormon authors sometimes juggled at a time.

Delayed Fulfillments

Perhaps even more impressive, many editorial promises are separated from their fulfillments by entire chapters and even books. For example, after reporting that King Mosiah translated the Jaredite record, Mormon declared that “this account shall be written hereafter” (Mosiah 28:19). Apparently, Mormon himself didn’t have time to include the Jaredite record before he was killed by the Lamanites (Mormon 8:3). Yet Moroni, who finished out his father’s record, made good on his father’s promise when he abridged the book of Ether.

In another instance, Mormon promised in Alma 35:13 to give an account of the wars between the Nephites and Lamanites that began in the eighteenth year of the reign of the judges. True to his word, Mormon notified readers eight chapters later that he would now to “return to an account of the wars between the Nephites and the Lamanites, in the eighteenth year of the reign of the judges” (Alma 43:3). Throughout the Book of Mormon, dozens of editorial promises are similarly separated from their fulfillments by a least a chapter or more of text (see appendix).⁷

THE WHY

Paying attention to editorial promises can help readers keep track of the organizational structure and flow of the Book of Mormon's various literary units. These promises also help reveal what the book's ancient authors and editors thought was important. For example, at the beginning of his record, Nephi declared that he would show readers "that the tender mercies of the Lord are over all those whom he hath chosen, because of their faith, to make them mighty even unto the power of deliverance" (1 Nephi 1:20). With this thesis statement so openly declared, readers might ask themselves relevant questions about the rest of Nephi's book, such as: How does a particular story demonstrate the Lord's power of deliverance? What does it mean to be chosen? And what happens to those in Nephi's record who fail to exercise faith?⁸ Noticing editorial promises can launch readers into an investigation of details and themes that were clearly a priority to the Book of Mormon's prophetic writers.

At the same time, the scores of fulfilled editorial promises scattered throughout the Book of Mormon provide evidence of its complexity and sophistication.⁹ As John A. Tvedtnes explained, "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."¹⁰

Yet Joseph Smith didn't have modern writing aids, such as a computer with a search engine, when he translated the Book of Mormon. In fact, he didn't have any writing aids, period. When asked, in an interview in 1879, if Joseph Smith had a manuscript to read from while dictating the Book of Mormon, his wife Emma declared, "He had neither manuscript nor book to read from." She further insisted, "If he had had anything of the kind he could not have concealed it from me."¹¹ Similarly, in an interview with the Chicago Times in 1881, it was reported that David Whitmer "emphatically asserts as did [Martin] Harris and [Oliver] Cowdery, that while [Joseph] Smith was dictating the translation he had no manuscript notes or other means of knowledge."¹²

Thus, the primary witnesses to the translation insisted that Joseph Smith was not using notes or an outline to

help him keep track of the Book of Mormon's numerous details, which include over 170 editorial promises and their various fulfillments (see appendix). All Joseph had were divinely prepared translation instruments and scribes to record his dictation.¹³

Keeping track of such promises under these circumstances would have been further complicated by the breakneck speed of the translation, which, from start to finish, was most likely completed between April 7 and June 30, 1829.¹⁴ John W. Welch has concluded that, with various interruptions accounted for, "not many more than the equivalent of about 60 actual working days" would have been available during these months.¹⁵ That works out to about eight pages of translated text a day, a rate which Welch described as "blistering."¹⁶ In light of this situation, Tvedtnes concluded,

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.¹⁷

Indeed, even a *marvelous* achievement (see 2 Nephi 27:26).

The Book of Mormon's numerous editorial promises can reasonably be explained if they were created by various ancient authors and editors who most likely had access to notes and outlines and many more than 60 working days to accomplish their task. In contrast, it is hard to believe that this complex array of promises and fulfillments could have been produced through essentially unedited rapid dictation by a frontier farmer like Joseph Smith, whose limited education and lack of literary training was glaringly obvious to those who knew him at the time.¹⁸

The Book of Mormon's editorial promises therefore provide remarkable evidence of its miraculous origins and divine authenticity. At the same time, they help

prove that the Lord “hath all power unto the fulfilling of all his words” (1 Nephi 9:6). The Lord promised the Book of Mormon’s ancient authors that He would bring forth their words in the latter days,¹⁹ and that promise, like so many other promises scattered throughout the book’s pages, has been miraculously and accurately fulfilled.²⁰

FURTHER READING

Anita Wells, “[Bare Record: The Nephite Archivist, The Record of Records, and the Book of Mormon Provenance](#),” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scriptures* 24 (2017): 99–122.

John L. Sorenson, “[Mormon’s Sources](#),” *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 20, no. 2 (2011): 2–15.

Thomas W. Mackay, “[Mormon as Editor: A Study in Colophons, Headers, and Source Indicators](#),” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2, no. 2 (1993): 90–109.

John A. Tvedtnes, “[Mormon’s Editorial Promises](#),” in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon: Insights You May Have Missed Before*, ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1991), 29–31.

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NOTES

1. Ancient headings can be found at the beginning of the following books: [2 Nephi](#), [Jacob](#), [Alma](#), [Helaman](#), [3 Nephi](#), [4 Nephi](#), and [Ether](#).
2. While not every chapter in the Book of Mormon has an anciently supplied heading (in fact most chapters don’t have one), all of its ancient chapter headings correspond to chapter breaks in the original text, which often differ from the chapter divisions found in recent editions. Ancient chapter headings can be found in [Mosiah 9; 23](#); [Helaman 7; 13](#), [Alma 5; 7; 9; 17; 21; 36; 38–39; 45](#); [3 Nephi 11](#), and [Moroni 9](#). For a convenient chart of the Book of Mormon’s original chapter breaks compared to the 1981 edition (which, as far as chapter divisions go, is consistent with the 2013 edition), see John W. Welch and J. Gregory Welch, *Charting the Book of Mormon: Visual Aids for Personal Study and Teaching* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1999), chart 170.
3. See Book of Mormon Central, “[Why Did Book of Mormon Authors Use Colophons?](#) (1 Nephi 1:3),” *KnoWhy* 443 (June 21, 2018).
4. For a discussion of the Book of Mormon’s various headers and source indicators, see Thomas W. Mackay, “[Mormon as Editor: A Study in Colophons, Headers, and Source](#)

5. See “[A Brief Explanation about the Book of Mormon](#)” found in the introductory pages to the 2013 edition of the Book of Mormon. For a history of the publications of the Latter-day Saint scriptural canon, including discussions of when Book of Mormon chapter headings and other study aids were added and revised, see “[History of LDS Scriptures](#),” online at lds.org.
6. Anita Wells, “[Bare Record: The Nephite Archivist, The Record of Records, and the Book of Mormon Provenance](#),” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scriptures* 24 (2017): 99.
7. For a discussion of seven notable examples of delayed fulfillments, see John A. Tvedtnes, “[Mormon’s Editorial Promises](#),” in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon: Insights You May Have Missed Before*, ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1991), 29–31.
8. See Book of Mormon Central, “[How Can We Be Delivered through the Lord’s Tender Mercies?](#) (1 Nephi 1:20),” *KnoWhy* (July 5, 2018).
9. See Book of Mormon Central, “[Evidence of the Book of Mormon: Internal Complexity](#),” online at bookofmormoncentral.org; Melvin J. Thorne, “[Complexity, Consistency, Ignorance, and Probabilities](#),” in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1997), 179–193; John W. Welch, “[Textual Consistency](#),” in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon: A Decade of New Research*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992), 21–23; Book of Mormon Central, “[How Does Prophecy Shape the Book of Mormon’s Content and Structure?](#) (Words of Mormon 1:4),” *KnoWhy* 498 (January 15, 2019).
10. Tvedtnes, “[Mormon’s Editorial Promises](#),” 29.
11. John W. Welch, “[The Miraculous Timing of the Translation of the Book of Mormon](#),” in *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–1844*, ed. John W. Welch, 2nd edition (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and BYU Press, 2017), 143.
12. Welch, “[The Miraculous Timing](#),” 168.
13. See Book of Mormon Central, “[Why Was a Stone Used as an Aid in Translating the Book of Mormon?](#) (Alma 37:23),” *KnoWhy* 145 (July 18, 2016); Book of Mormon Central, “[Were Joseph Smith’s Translation Instruments Like the Israelite Urim and Thummim?](#) (Alma 37:24),” *KnoWhy* (March 20, 2018); Book of Mormon Central, “[Is There Evidence That Joseph Smith Possessed a Urim and Thummim and Breastplate?](#) (Ether 4:5),” *KnoWhy* (February 20, 2018).
14. See Book of Mormon Central, “[Why Is the Timing of the Book of Mormon’s Translation So ‘Marvelous?’](#) (2 Nephi 27:26),” *KnoWhy* 506 (March 15, 2019).
15. John W. Welch, “Timing the Translation of the Book of Mormon: ‘Days [and Hours] Never to Be Forgotten,’” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 57, no. 4 (2018): 34.
16. John W. Welch, “[The Miraculous Timing of the Translation of the Book of Mormon](#),” in *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–1844*, 2nd edition, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and BYU Press, 2017), 119.
17. Tvedtnes, “[Mormon’s Editorial Promises](#),” 31.

18. See Book of Mormon Central, “[Why Would God Choose an Uneducated Man to Translate the Book of Mormon?](#) (2 Nephi 27:9),” *KnoWhy* 397 (January 9, 2018).
19. See [Enos 1:15–18](#); [Doctrine and Covenants 10:46–52](#).
20. See Book of Mormon Central, “[Why Did the Book of Mormon Come Forth as a Miracle?](#) (2 Nephi 27:23),” *KnoWhy* 273 (February 10, 2017).