



Bookshelf

---

2009

# The Book of Mormon: A Very Short Introduction

Terryl Givens

University of Richmond, [tgivens@richmond.edu](mailto:tgivens@richmond.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.richmond.edu/bookshelf>

 Part of the [Christian Denominations and Sects Commons](#), and the [Liturgy and Worship Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Givens, Terryl. *The Book of Mormon: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

**NOTE:** This PDF preview of *The Book of Mormon: A Very Short Introduction* includes only the preface and/or introduction. To purchase the full text, please click [here](#).

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Bookshelf by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact [scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu](mailto:scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu).

FX  
8627  
.G51  
2009

Terryl L. Givens

# THE BOOK OF MORMON

A Very Short Introduction

OXFORD  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

LIBRARY  
UNIVERSITY OF RICHMOND  
VIRGINIA 23173

# Chapter 1

## Origins, narrators, and structure

The Book of Mormon, first published in 1830 in upstate New York, is at the center of a complex tapestry of intersecting narratives, each with a very different beginning. These multicolored threads weave a story of seafaring Israelites and an American farm-boy prophet, of pre-Columbian Christians and nineteenth-century gold plates, of vanished civilizations in Central America, and the genesis of one of the world's fastest growing religions. Any attempt to distill into a plot summary a religious text as multilayered as the Book of Mormon would necessarily misrepresent its meaning and significance. But for purposes of general orientation, a synopsis of the Book of Mormon would go something like this: The Book of Mormon tells the story of an Israelite clan under the patriarch Lehi that flees Jerusalem just before the Babylonian captivity (ca. 600 BCE), sails to the Western Hemisphere, and establishes a colony. The clan immediately fractures into two opposing parties of the generally peaceful Nephites and the generally aggressive Lamanites. There follow one thousand years of fratricidal wars, missionary efforts going in both directions, and cycles of prosperity and spiritual decline.

In telling the story of the Trojan War, some poets opted to begin with the construction of the gigantic horse that heralded the final apocalypse, some with the sailing of the Achaean fleet, some with

the abduction of Helen of Troy, or even her birth. One could also begin in the modern age, with Heinrich Schliemann's excavations of the city's ruins, or our modern texts of Homer, and work backward to reconstruct the city of King Priam and its eventual destruction.

In a similar way, one could begin the story of the Book of Mormon from any number of points. One could start with the middle eastern world of the sixth century BCE, in which the narrative begins. Or with the description Lehi's son Nephi gives of his commission to maintain a family history of his people after they arrive in the New World. Or working from the other direction, one could begin with the Book of Mormon's publication in March 1830, the immediate furor it created, and its role as a lightning rod for both conversion and criticism. One could begin a little earlier, with Joseph Smith's account of his recovery of buried gold plates in 1827, or with the first visit to Smith of an angel named Moroni in 1823, or with the Second Great Awakening (ca. 1790-1840) that conditioned an entire generation's religious expectations and molded the range of dreams and visions and human institutions that reflected their deepest religious yearnings.

What the Book of Mormon claims to be is so radical that the storms of controversy over its origins and authenticity have almost completely obscured the text itself. The book presents itself as a revelation from God to a boy prophet, comprising scripture equal in significance and authority to the Bible, and heralding the opening of the heavens after a silence of almost two millennia. The Bible alone excepted, the Book of Mormon is by far the most widely printed and circulated book in the history of the Western Hemisphere. Yet, the Roman Catholic scholar of Mormonism Thomas O'Dea's humorous observation is also astute: "The Book of Mormon has not been universally considered by its critics as one of those books that must be read in order to have an opinion of it." The circumstances surrounding the book's purported translation and publication have been so controversial, and the religious

ramifications of belief and disbelief so profound, that relatively little attention has been paid to what the book actually says. From its publication in 1830, the text has been the contested focus of claims and counterclaims, a complex reception history involving church-building, persecution, environmental explanations, and proselytizing fury. Believers and nonbelievers alike have seen the central fact of the book's origins, as either inspired scripture or fanciful fabrication, as the most important point. In the process, the pages themselves have been rendered largely silent.

This volume will therefore go against the grain of many Book of Mormon treatments by serving, first and foremost, as an introduction to the Book of Mormon itself, by which I mean the narrative between the covers. As far as possible, I have chosen to let the record tell its own story. The focus here will be on the persons, themes, and events described by myriad authors, editors, and anonymous chroniclers from Nephi to Moroni. Only later will we turn to survey the modern history of the Book of Mormon, and the role it has played in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS). The narrative incorporates numerous genres, including prophecies, conversion narratives, epistles, and sermons, along with an account of political developments, intrigues, and family dramas. Above all else, however, the Book of Mormon is a collection of overlapping and intersecting stories that chronicle the role God plays in the lives of a host of individuals. These stories unfold against a backdrop of epic history, involving tribes and peoples, exodus and colonization, church-building and wars of destruction. But the focus of the Book of Mormon is always on the individual. Like the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, the Book of Mormon attests to the sovereignty of a living God. The words of the Book of Mormon are principally personal accounts of how that living God actively intervenes in human life, answers prayers, makes and keeps covenants with individuals as well as peoples, and directs the lives of those who look to him for guidance and for knowledge. The God who emerges from these pages is a God of "tender mercies."

To those familiar with the Bible, the Book of Mormon will present a mix of the new and the known. It suggests a number of familiar themes, only to recast them with enough novelty to make of them an utterly new scripture. For example, it opens with a scene steeped in the trappings of biblical prophets and prophecy at the time of Jeremiah, then moves decisively in the direction of a divine discourse, a personal revelation, that is literal, egalitarian, and indicative of a God entirely passible, accessible, and personal in his interactions with individuals. Christ is a central figure in the Book of Mormon. It documents his Palestinian birth and life, crucifixion, and resurrection, but then explodes their sublime historical uniqueness by reenacting Christ's ministry and ascension in a New World setting, and by suggesting there were others besides. Similarly, the book affirms Jehovah's covenants with Israel, even as it specifies America as a separate "land of promise," and then chronicles a whole series of portable Zions founded and abandoned by covenant peoples in successive waves. The Book of Mormon affirms the Bible's status as scripture, even as it qualifies it. For while it testifies to "the gospel of Jesus Christ" and predicts its modern-day restoration in purity, the Book of Mormon demolishes the Bible's monopoly on its articulation. It makes the Bible one in a series of God's textual revelations to mankind. In these ways and others, the Book of Mormon occupies the unusual position of invoking and affirming Biblical concepts and motifs, even as it rewrites them in fairly dramatic ways. The book has thus unavoidably been seen by readers past and present as emulating Christian scripture in innumerable ways, even as it subverts Christian ideas about the closed nature of the Christian scriptural canon. But before it accomplishes any of these ends, the Book of Mormon is the story of God's personal and intimate dealings with flesh-and-blood characters caught up in dramas of family, rather than national, dimensions. The concrete particularity of those individuals, and the traces they leave, is the book's first concern.

The Book of Mormon opens with a series of sentences that claim and reaffirm one central point: the original story that we are

reading was personally narrated by a historical character, Nephi the son of Lehi: "I Nephi . . . make a record of my proceedings in my days," he writes. Then adds, "I make a record in the language of my father," "I make" a record which I know "is true," "I make it with my own hand," and "I make it according to my knowledge."

Why this redundancy? Why such emphatic insistence on the literal origins of the record at Nephi's own hand? Clearly, this is unlike the impersonal voice with which Genesis opens the biblical account of creation, and which focuses on cosmic history, epic events, and God's primal acts of creation, with its portentous, "In the beginning, God created . . ." By contrast, the Book of Mormon's first named author urgently presses upon his audience the very human, very local, and very historical nature of his narrative. It is as far removed from mythic beginnings and anonymous narratives as he can possibly make it. This is firsthand, eyewitness history of local events. It is a beginning also strikingly unlike the gospels of the New Testament. The anonymity of those books attributed to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John seems calculated to emphasize the infinitely greater significance of the Christ who is the focus of their narratives. The authors disappear in deference to the Messiah they proclaim. The Book of Mormon, by contrast, begins with the personal introduction of the book's first author.

Before turning to the story he tells, we need to consider how this theme of personal authorship is developed, since it constitutes a core of the scripture's essential meaning. Nephi is a record-keeper who believes God has called him to maintain his clan's history. He at some point awakens to the significance of his record, and the fact that it has a role to play in the future of his people. (Nephi learns in vision that his "seed" will write things of importance to future generations of gentiles [1 Ne. 13:35; see also 2 Ne. 3:12]). Nephi is of course unable personally to steer and shepherd his work to this eventual audience that he only vaguely apprehends, and his focus remains on his immediate family and posterity. His preoccupation with audience, and with self-authentication in the

face of his inability to control the fate of his written words and the terms of their reception, weighs upon him like a sacred burden. Hence, the motif that Nephi emphatically foregrounds is the question of provenance.

In art history, provenance means derivation. More fully, it means authenticity that is secured in a particular way, by establishing the unbroken history of transmission of an object from original owner to the present. In the Book of Mormon, as we shall see, we never lose sight of the transmission chain. There is a remarkable consistency to this aspect of the Book of Mormon; at the same time, these authors and editors show marked awareness of an audience that shifts dramatically in the course of the narrative.

Nephi will faithfully maintain not just one, but two parallel accounts of his people (one of which is no longer extant in any form, as we will see later). He tells us he begins writing his first record about eleven years after the flight from Jerusalem, in what would be about 589 BCE by the Book of Mormon's reckoning, in obedience to a specific command of the Lord (1 Ne. 19:1). This record, we learn, is largely a family history, recounting the significant events and developments pertaining to his father's family in the Old World and the family's establishment and development in the New. It is, essentially, a historical chronicle of his clan. In response to another divine directive, twenty years later he commences a second, more religiously oriented account and maintains it until 544 BCE. This is the account that fills the first 117 pages of text in the modern edition, making Nephi by far the major author of the Book of Mormon (though much of his material is explicitly borrowed from Isaiah). He gives in these pages an outline of his family's exodus from Jerusalem, voyage to a promised land, and dispersal into two rival factions of Nephites (those aligned with himself) and Lamanites (those aligned with his rebellious brother Laman). His brother Jacob describes his commission from Nephi to continue the record-keeping ("Nephi gave me, Jacob, a commandment . . . that I should preserve these plates and hand



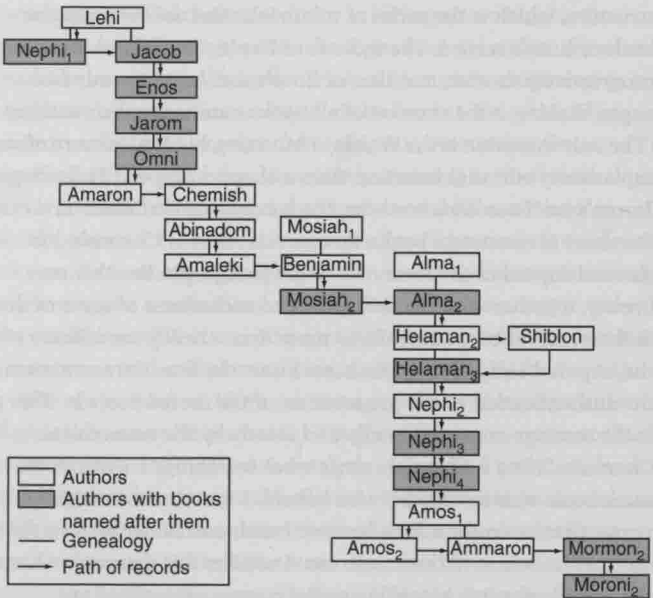
them down unto my seed, from generation to generation"—Jac. 1:1-3), and does so for an indeterminate period. He concludes his portion of the record by clearly stating the passing on of the commission to his son Enos ("I told him the things which my brother Nephi had commanded me, and he promised obedience unto the commands"—Jac. 7:27). Enos likewise assumes stewardship for the duration of his life.

We see the preoccupation of Nephi echoed in the pattern that pervades the balance of the Book of Mormon. Each inheritor of the plates attests to the unbroken chain of transmission and calls the responsibility to continue the tradition a "commandment" passed on through the generations. The weight of solemn obligation felt by these chroniclers is evident in their clear attestations of a responsibility both executed and then transferred, and explains one of the more curious features of the Book of Mormon's structure, which is the series of minibooks that follow upon the heels of Enos's record. The records of Nephi, Jacob, and Enos are progressively shorter, and that of Enos's son Jarom is only two pages, making it the shortest of all books named for their authors. (The only exception is the Words of Mormon, but that is more of an explanatory editorial insertion than a chapter proper.) Following Jarom's brief account, however, the succeeding chronicles are too short to constitute books. In one case, that of Chemish, his stewardship takes the form of a single paragraph. But this very brevity, together with the self-confessed wickedness of some of the authors, serves only to reinforce more dramatically the efficacy of the imposed obligation to maintain intact the line of transmission, the authentication of the provenance, of the sacred records. This is the message conveyed loudly and clearly by the economical Chemish: "Now I, Chemish, write what few things I write in the same book with my brother; for behold, I saw the last which he wrote, that he wrote it with his own hand; and he wrote it in the day that he delivered them unto me. And after this manner we keep the records, for it is according to the commandments of our fathers. And I make an end" (Omni 9). These brief first-person

accounts continue a few more pages until an abrupt editorial intrusion that complicates our picture of the record we are reading.

Mormon, a prophet and record-keeper writing in the fourth century CE, explains that he is the editor and compiler of a master narrative of which the portions we have been reading, authored by Nephi, are a self-contained, unabridged part. But virtually all that follows in the Book of Mormon has been subjected to Mormon's abridging hand. With apparent redundancy, he also edited and included Nephi's second, parallel history, but that is not a part of the modern Book of Mormon, having been lost before publication in 1830. Providentially, as it were, the second, spiritual record of Nephi survived to fill the void left by loss of the first account. What this means is that the Book of Mormon in its modern form

## Who Kept the Records in the Book of Mormon?



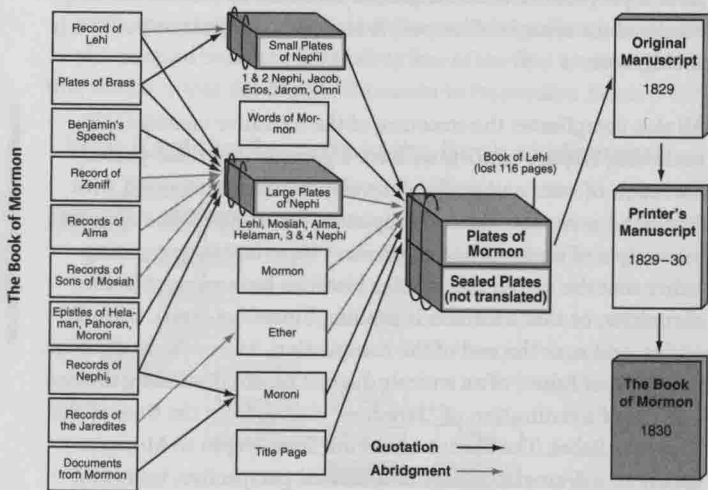
### 1. Book of Mormon Authors

comprises the unabridged writings of Nephi and his descendents, covering a period from 600 BCE until about 130 BCE. They record what they consider to be “precious things” of spiritual worth to Nephi and his people. In 130 BCE, Mormon informs us, the line of record-keepers having died out, Chemish’s son Amaleki hands the plates over to the secular ruler of his day, King Benjamin. The particular details of subsequent transmission history are collapsed into Mormon’s assertion that, from this point on, we will be reading his abridgment of a secular history of his people, one that is maintained for several hundred subsequent years. The theme of certain provenance is reaffirmed, as Mormon tells us he has duly inherited the records of his people and personally carried out their abridgment.

All this complicates the structure of the narrative considerably. Following Nephi’s history, we have a good deal of third-person narration of wars and political developments, interspersed with first-hand accounts, numerous epistles, descriptions and apparent transcripts of sermons and missionary experiences (suggesting either that the sacred and secular histories have merged in the chronicles, or that Mormon is availing himself of both), editorial asides, and near the end of the compilation, Moroni’s abridgment (the Book of Ether) of an entirely distinct record describing the rise and fall of a civilization of “Jaredites” dating from the time of the Tower of Babel. The abrupt transition from Nephi to Mormon ushers in a dramatic change of authorial perspective, tone, and thematic preoccupations. Nephi, remember, is writing at the beginning of what he sees prophetically as a minor colony with an important destiny in the land of promise. Mormon, on the other hand, is editing his history from the other side of time, having personally witnessed the collapse into depravity and barbarism, and eventual genocide, of his own people. His son Moroni, in a pattern now a thousand years old, testifies that he has resumed the record-keeping of his fallen father. And then he tells us that he is sealing up the records, bringing to closure a book of scripture whose narrative framing constitutes a sacred genealogy, but not

of Christ back to Abraham or of the human family back to Adam. It attests rather to its own provenance, in a chain of authority traceable from God's first command to Nephi, through a thousand years of providential history, to the plates' earthly tomb. In this sense, the Book of Mormon serves more as a sacred relic than a mere repository. The narrative thread it embodies stretches back unbroken through centuries of obscurity and silence to its origins in a world pervaded by contact with the miraculous and the divine.

## Book of Mormon Plates and Records



## 2. Structure of Book of Mormon