

Alma and the Sacred Things

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Following a challenging but successful mission among the Zoramites, Alma gathered his sons together in order to give each one of them “his charge” (Alma 35:16). These commandments to Helaman, Shiblon, and Corianton are contained in Alma chapters 36–42.¹ Alma’s counsel to his son Helaman contains a specific commandment to “take care of these sacred things” (Alma 37:47). This included the Nephite records—in particular the large plates of Nephi (37:1–2), the brass plates (37:3–12), and the twenty-four gold plates discovered by the people of Limhi (37:21–22, 26–32)—as well as the interpreters (37:23–25) and the Liahona (37:38–46). Concerning these special items, Mormon noted, “These things were to be kept sacred, and handed down from one generation to another” (Alma 63:13). Alma had received these sacred things from King Mosiah, and Helaman would eventually confer them upon his brother Shiblon (see Mosiah 28:10–11, 20; Alma 63:1).

The evidence presented in this paper falls into two main categories. First, I will analyze each of the sacred items Alma commissioned his son Helaman to keep safe, discussing what is known of its origin and subsequent history. Second, I will discuss the phenomenon of safeguarding sacred objects in other relevant cultures and then trace the history of the acquisition of these sacred items within Nephite society and their conferral upon others from generation to generation. This examination demonstrates that Alma's charge to his son concerning the sacred things constituted a fundamental but inspired change in practice. Whereas these sacred things had previously been safeguarded by heads of state since the time of Nephi, they would, from this time forth, be kept by the religious leaders, primarily within Alma's genealogical line. The significance of this study is that it outlines in detail how Alma's decision to confer these special items upon Helaman fulfilled Nephi's original instructions that they be safeguarded by prophets (1 Nephi 19:4). It also highlights the importance that God placed upon the Nephites safely preserving these sacred things as powerful symbols of his love and concern for their welfare. Finally, it serves as a reminder to members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints of the important roles these items played in the restoration of the gospel.

Large Plates of Nephi

Alma began his commission of Helaman by commanding him to "take the records which have been entrusted with me" (Alma 37:1). These records included "the plates of Nephi" (37:2), meaning the large plates of Nephi. Alma instructed Helaman to "keep a record of this people, according as I have done" upon these plates and assured his son that "it is for a wise purpose that they are kept" (37:2). It is important to note that Alma commanded Helaman not only to keep the records safe, but also to continue writing the record of his people.

Generations earlier, shortly after Lehi's family arrived in the promised land, the Lord commanded Nephi to "make plates of ore" so that he might "engraven upon them the record of [his] people" (1 Nephi 19:1). Upon these plates Nephi included several things, such as the record of his father Lehi, the journey of his family from Jerusalem to the promised land, the prophecies of Lehi, and many of his own prophesies. After Nephi and his followers separated from Laman and the others, the Lord instructed Nephi to "make other plates" (2 Nephi 5:30). Nephi called both sets of records "the plates of Nephi" (1 Nephi 9:2). His brother Jacob, however, distinguished these sets of plates by calling the first record "the larger plates" (Jacob 3:13) and the second record "the small plates" (Jacob 1:1).² It is unknown whether the designation "small" refers to the dimensions of the plates themselves or merely to the number of plates in the record. Mormon said concerning the small plates that he simply "put them with the remainder of [his] record" (Words of Mormon 1:6), meaning he inserted them after his abridgment of the large plates that he engraved on the gold plates. This may indicate, as Brant Gardner has suggested, that there was a standard size for individual Nephite leaves and that the "small plates" were so designated because they contained a shorter account.³

The primary distinguishing factor between the large and small plates was the content.⁴ Nephi explained that upon the large plates "should be engraven an account of the reign of the kings, and the wars and contentions of my people" (1 Nephi 9:4), but upon the small plates he wrote "the things of God" in order to "persuade men to come unto the God of Abraham . . . and be saved" (1 Nephi 6:3-4). Similarly, Jacob recalled Nephi's instruction that upon the small plates he should write those things which he "considered to be most precious" and "not touch, save it were lightly, concerning the history of this people" (Jacob 1:2). Thus, if there were "preaching which was sacred, or revelation which was great, or prophesying," Jacob was commissioned to "touch upon them as much as it were possible" (1:4) in the small plates.

Brass Plates

Alma then spoke to Helaman concerning the plates of brass, reminding him of the prophecy of father Lehi (see 1 Nephi 5:17–19)—that “they should be kept and handed down from one generation to another . . . until they should go forth unto every nation, kindred, tongue, and people” (Alma 37:4) and further, that they would “retain their brightness” (37:5).⁵ There may have been a literal aspect of understanding this prophecy. “Copper alloys such as bronze and brass,” according to Jeffrey Chadwick, will not “oxidize or rust away over time” if “minimal maintenance on a regular basis” is provided.⁶ For example, Mormon was able to read the brass plates nearly a millennium after Nephi had acquired them (3 Nephi 10:17).

The idea of retaining brightness, however, may refer most significantly to the enduring spiritual importance of the content rather than merely the appearance of the metal, for, as Alma concluded, “all the plates which do contain that which is holy writ” will likewise retain their brightness (Alma 37:5).⁷ The eternal brightness of this record helped accomplish God’s “great and eternal purposes” (37:7). The information contained on the plates of brass “enlarged the memory” of the Nephites (37:8). In addition, the truths found therein “convinced many of the error of their ways”—for example, the Lamanites taught by Ammon and his brethren—“and brought them to the knowledge of their God unto the salvation of their souls” (37:8).

The importance of the plates of brass is aptly illustrated by the great effort required to retrieve them from Jerusalem. After traveling approximately two hundred miles from Jerusalem down to “the borders near the shore of the Red Sea” (1 Nephi 2:5; possibly near modern-day Eilat, Israel, and Aqaba, Jordan) and then continuing an additional “three days in the wilderness” of Arabia (2:6), Lehi informed his sons that God commanded them to return to Jerusalem in order to obtain the plates of brass.⁸ Nephi’s brothers understandably responded by saying this request was “a hard thing” (1 Nephi 3:5). Nephi’s firsthand knowledge of the dangers of this

journey makes his response all the more inspiring: “I will go and do the things which the Lord hath commanded” (3:7). Why did the Lord not require this of Lehi before his family left Jerusalem in the first place? Perhaps the difficulties associated with obtaining the plates of brass would have been easier for the smaller group of brothers to negotiate than for a larger group consisting of Lehi and his entire family. Gardner suggests that the timing of the revelation to return to Jerusalem was “purposeful—preparing Nephi not only for a difficult task but also one that would be a major turning point in his spiritual development.”⁹

After Nephi slew Laban and returned to his father’s tent in the wilderness with the plates of brass, Lehi carefully examined the plates and discovered that they contained “the five books of Moses” (1 Nephi 5:11), versions of our Old Testament books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. These plates also contained “a record of the Jews” and “prophecies of the holy prophets,” both of which spanned the time period “from the beginning, even down to the commencement of the reign of Zedekiah” (5:12–13). This likely would have included versions of the historical books from Joshua through 2 Kings as well as prophetic books such as Isaiah and “many prophecies which have been spoken by the mouth of Jeremiah” (5:13).¹⁰

Interestingly, the plates of brass also contained a genealogy of Lehi’s ancestors through “Joseph who was the son of Jacob, who was sold into Egypt” (1 Nephi 5:14). Nephi explained that Laban was a descendant of Joseph as well, “wherefore he and his fathers had kept the records” (5:16). Lehi was a descendant of Joseph of Egypt through his eldest son Manasseh (Alma 10:3). Since the tribes of Joseph (Ephraim and Manasseh) were both in the northern kingdom of Israel, how did these records end up in Jerusalem, the capital of the southern kingdom of Judah? One possibility is that the plates of brass (as well as Lehi’s ancestors) came to Jerusalem with the many Israelite refugees who fled south during the years when Assyria threatened the northern kingdom of Israel.¹¹

Nephi explained the significance of obtaining and preserving the brass plates for his people. God had instructed Nephi: “Inasmuch as thy seed shall keep my commandments, they shall prosper in the land of promise” (1 Nephi 4:14). Nephi reasoned that his people “could not keep the commandments of the Lord according to the law of Moses, save they should have the law” as recorded upon the brass plates (4:15). Thus, the brass plates would be a critical guide to the Nephites as they continued to keep the law of Moses until the coming of Christ. In addition, the brass plates contain many precious teachings from prophets not included in our current Bible and will in the future play an important, but not yet fully understood, role in the latter days as they eventually “go forth unto every nation, kindred, tongue, and people, that [all people] shall know of the mysteries contained thereon” (Alma 37:4).

Twenty-Four Gold Plates

Helaman’s father next counseled him concerning the twenty-four gold plates that had been discovered by the people of Limhi. Moroni said that these plates contained the record of the Jaredite prophet Ether (Ether 1:1–2; 15:33).¹² Alma explained that these plates contained a record of a people who had been “destroyed” and that Helaman was to preserve them, in order that the “secret works” and the “wickedness and abominations” of those people “may be made manifest unto this people” (Alma 37:21). On the other hand, Helaman was to “retain all their oaths, and their covenants” as well as “all their signs” which were contained in the record (37:27).¹³ Alma said that these things were not to be revealed so that the Nephites would not “fall into darkness also and be destroyed” (37:27). Alma declared that the people described in the record had “murdered all the prophets of the Lord” and therefore “the judgments of God did come upon” them (37:30). Alma summarized:

Ye shall keep these secret plans of their oaths and their covenants from this people, and only their wickedness and their

murders and their abominations shall ye make known unto them; and ye shall teach them to abhor such wickedness and abominations and murders; and ye shall also teach them that these people were destroyed on account of their wickedness and abominations and their murders. (37:29)

When King Mosiah translated the plates of Ether, the Nephites rejoiced because “it gave them much knowledge” (Mosiah 28:18). But Alma’s counsel to Helaman emphasized that the real importance of this record to the Nephites was that it revealed to them the “works of darkness” (Alma 37:21) as well as the “judgments of God” (37:30) that came upon those who perpetuated such evil acts. Moroni reemphasized this truth in his abridgment of Ether’s record, directing his words to those who would read this account in the latter days: “O ye Gentiles, it is wisdom in God that these things should be shown unto you, that thereby ye may repent of your sins, and suffer not that . . . the sword of the justice of the Eternal God shall fall upon you” (Ether 8:23).

Interpreters

In conjunction with his teachings concerning the twenty-four gold plates, Alma also instructed Helaman with respect to the interpreters, which were used to translate that record.¹⁴ He told his son that “these interpreters were prepared” (Alma 37:24) so that God could publicly expose the “secret works” and “abominations” of the Jaredites “unto every nation that shall hereafter possess the land” (37:25). Alma quoted an otherwise unknown prophecy concerning the interpreters: “The Lord said: I will prepare unto my servant Gazelem, a stone, which shall shine forth in darkness unto light, that I may discover unto my people who serve me, that I may discover unto them the works of their brethren, yea, their secret works, their words of darkness, and their wickedness and abominations” (37:23).

It is unclear whether this was a revelation given directly to Alma or whether he knew of this from one of the records in his possession. Michael MacKay and Nicholas Frederick have suggested that this prophecy was “possibly from the time of the brother of Jared.”¹⁵ Likewise, it is uncertain whether the name *Gazelem* refers to the servant or to the stone. Because there was no punctuation on the original or the printer’s manuscripts, John Gilbert added punctuation as he typeset the Book of Mormon. Thus the prophecy could mean: “I will preserve unto my servant a stone named *Gazelem*, which will shine forth.” Or it could mean: “I will preserve a stone unto my servant named *Gazelem*, which will shine forth.”¹⁶ According to MacKay and Frederick, Alma felt that *Gazelem* referred to Mosiah, son of Benjamin, who brought the “secret abominations” of the Jaredites “out of darkness” (Alma 37:26), revealing them unto the Nephites.¹⁷ Early members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints used the term *Gazelem* to refer to Joseph Smith as well as to his seer stone.¹⁸ Regardless of whether the term *Gazelem* referred to a person or the stone, Alma understood the interpreters to be sacred and of great importance.

Traditionally, the interpreters possessed by Mosiah are understood to be the same ones given to the brother of Jared.¹⁹ After the Lord touched the sixteen stones which the brother of Jared had made, he showed the brother of Jared sacred things and instructed him: “Ye shall write them and shall seal them up. . . . And behold, these two stones will I give thee, and ye shall seal them up also with the things which ye shall write” (Ether 3:22–23). MacKay and Frederick acknowledge the possibility that there may have been two different sets of interpreters—the one set given to the brother of Jared and a different set possessed by Mosiah—because only Mosiah’s were described as being “fastened into the two rims of a bow” (Mosiah 28:13).²⁰

The traditional view, however, is more likely. Concerning the account of his vision and the interpreters, the brother of Jared was told to “seal them up” (Ether 3:22–23), or in other words, hide them

to come forth at a later time (3:27–28). Moroni concluded, “For this cause did king Mosiah keep them, that they should not come unto the world until after Christ should show himself unto his people” (Ether 4:1). The 1830 edition, however, states, “For this cause did king Benjamin keep them.”²¹ The change from Benjamin to Mosiah (presumably meaning Mosiah, the son of Benjamin) was made by Orson Pratt in the 1849 edition. Royal Skousen has come to the conclusion that the 1830 reading is correct.²² This has caused MacKay and Frederick to propose that “at some point” Mosiah, father of Benjamin, came into possession of the interpreters—the same interpreters the Lord gave to the brother of Jared.²³

The Book of Mormon does not reveal exactly how the interpreters came into the possession of the Nephites. By the time Ammon met up with the people of Limhi, King Mosiah₂ already had the interpreters. When Limhi asked Ammon if he knew of anyone who could translate, Ammon responded in the affirmative concerning Mosiah, saying, “for he has wherewith that he can look, and translate all records that are of ancient date; and it is a gift from God. And the things are called interpreters” (Mosiah 8:13). It is possible, as MacKay and Frederick have proposed, that the interpreters originally came into the possession of Mosiah₂’s grandfather, King Mosiah₁. After Mosiah₁ united the Nephites with the people of Zarahemla, “a large stone [was] brought unto him with engravings on it” (Omni 1:20). Perhaps the people of Zarahemla also gave the interpreters to Mosiah₁ at this time. Although the account does not explicitly mention the interpreters, it does say that Mosiah “did interpret the engravings by the gift and power of God” (1:20). Similarly, in the preface to the original 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith stated that he translated the book “by the gift and power of God.”²⁴ In making this summary statement Joseph did not mention his use of seer stones, even though they were clearly instrumental in the process. At other times, however, Joseph did indeed mention his use of the Urim and Thummim.²⁵

Regardless of how these interpreters originally came into the possession of Mosiah₂, they were passed down with the other sacred things from generation to generation until Moroni “sealed up the interpreters” (Ether 4:5). A revelation received by Joseph Smith in June 1829 states that the Three Witnesses—Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris—would be able to view the following sacred things: the gold plates, the breastplate, the sword of Laban, the Liahona, and “the Urim and Thummim, which were given to the brother of Jared upon the mount when he talked with the Lord face to face” (Doctrine and Covenants 17:1).²⁶ MacKay and Frederick suggest the possibility that these Jaredite seer stones may not have been the ones used by Joseph Smith to translate the Book of Mormon.²⁷ The fact that the list of sacred items in Doctrine and Covenants 17:1 is so similar to the list of sacred things that Alma conferred upon Helaman, however, leads to the more natural conclusion that the seer stones given to the brother of Jared were the same interpreters that Mosiah₂ passed down from generation to generation until Moroni buried them and Joseph Smith used them to translate the Book of Mormon.²⁸

As prophesied by Alma and Moroni, the interpreters have been instrumental in providing valuable warnings to both ancient Nephites and latter-day readers concerning the consequences of participating in “secret combinations” (Alma 37:31; Ether 8:22). But the interpreters have assisted in bestowing much more than just warnings against sinful behavior. Like Alma taught his son concerning the Nephite records, the interpreters have been the means of bringing forth the entire Book of Mormon, which has “enlarged the memory” of those who read it, “convinced many of the error of their ways,” and “brought them to the knowledge of their God unto the salvation of their souls” (Alma 37:8).

Liahona

Lastly, Alma instructed Helaman “concerning the thing which our fathers call a ball, or director—or our fathers called it Liahona, which

is, being interpreted, a compass" (Alma 37:38).²⁹ This is the first and only time the Nephite term *Liahona* is used in the Book of Mormon. Nephi himself identified the object merely as "a round ball of curious workmanship" (1 Nephi 16:10). Alma reminded his son that the Liahona "was prepared to show unto our fathers the course which they should travel in the wilderness" and that "it did work for them according to their faith in God" with the result that "those spindles should point the way they should go" (Alma 37:39–40). There have been several proposals concerning how the spindles worked.³⁰ One theory is that one spindle would point in a fixed direction such as north, and the other spindle would point the direction they should travel.³¹ Another theory is that the two spindles would only unite and point in one direction in response to faithful obedience; otherwise the spindles would separate and nobody would know which direction to go.³²

Either way, if Lehi and his family were "slothful, and forgot to exercise their faith and diligence," then the Liahona "ceased" to function and the family "did not progress in their journey" because they "did not travel a direct course" (Alma 37:41–42). Alma concluded that "these things are not without a shadow" (37:43). Just as faithful obedience provided access to the power of the Liahona to direct Lehi's family through the wilderness, so also if a person would "give heed to the word of Christ," it "will point to you a straight course to eternal bliss" (37:44).³³ Thus Alma urged Helaman to avoid being "slothful because of the easiness of the way," but rather to "look to God and live" (37:46–47).

Nephi's account of the discovery and initial use of the Liahona confirms Alma's assessment. In the small plates, Nephi narrates how, following the Lord's command to depart further into the wilderness, his father Lehi discovered this "round ball of curious workmanship" directly outside his tent door, which was made of "fine brass" and contained "two spindles; and the one pointed the way whither we should go into the wilderness" (1 Nephi 16:10). Nephi observed that the spindles in the Liahona "did work according to the faith

and diligence and heed which we did give unto them” (16:28).³⁴ After traveling into the wilderness, Nephi broke his bow and his brothers’ bows “lost their springs” (16:18, 21), making it impossible to obtain food. Circumstances were so bad that even Lehi complained against the Lord and the Liahona stopped working (16:23–25). After Lehi humbled himself, the Liahona began to work again, and it directed Nephi where to go in order to “obtain food” (16:28–31).

On another occasion, while journeying in a ship toward the promised land, Nephi’s brothers rebelled and the Liahona ceased to work again (1 Nephi 18:12). Only after a severe storm threatened to sink the ship did the brothers of Nephi repent, and the Liahona then directed Nephi where to steer the ship (18:13–15, 21–22). After they arrived in the promised land, there is no evidence that the Nephites used the Liahona in this way again, choosing instead to seek guidance directly from prophets.³⁵ The Liahona seems to have served its purpose and thereafter it became a sacred relic passed down from one leader to another as a reminder of those lessons from the past.

The Liahona played a vital role in the temporal salvation of Lehi and his family. Without it, they would have faced almost certain death as a result of being lost in the wilderness and not being able to find food. Thereafter in Mormon’s abridgment, however, the importance of the existence of the Liahona was not so much in its original function to provide blessings of directional guidance for Lehi’s family but in preserving the memory that it once had done so. The physical object provided later Nephites with a reassurance that God loved Lehi’s family enough to provide a way for their temporal salvation in the wilderness, and he would do the same for their family if they were obedient (Alma 37:46). Likewise, for members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Liahona serves as a powerful reminder that, as Alma taught Helaman, “the word of Christ . . . will point to you a straight course to eternal bliss” (37:44).

Sacred Artifacts in Other Contexts

Sacred objects were preserved by royal and religious leaders within the ancient Israelite society from which Lehi's family originated. Some notable examples of this phenomenon are recorded in the Old Testament. For instance, when the children of Israel constructed the tabernacle in the wilderness of Sinai, they placed in the holy of holies the ark of the covenant (Exodus 26:34), a symbol of God's presence among them (Exodus 30:6). Within the ark itself, they stored sacred items such as the tablets containing the law (Exodus 40:20), Aaron's rod (Numbers 17:10), and a pot of manna which God commanded "to be kept for your generations" (Exodus 16:33).³⁶ These items were important symbols reminding Israel that God had preserved them, appointed the descendants of Aaron to lead them, and commanded them to obey his will. They were kept and preserved in the holy of holies until the destruction of Solomon's temple.³⁷ The brass serpent that Moses constructed at the command of God in order to heal those who had been bitten by poisonous snakes (Numbers 21:6–9) was also safeguarded, apparently within the sacred temple complex, until it was destroyed by King Hezekiah because some people had begun to burn incense to it (2 Kings 18:4). This reminds one that these kinds of sacred objects had the potential to be misused.

The written law was evidently a sacred item intended to be preserved by the royal and religious leaders of Israel. Concerning future kings, the law of Moses stated: "When he sitteth upon the throne of his kingdom, . . . he shall write him a copy of this law in a book out of that which is before the priests" (Deuteronomy 17:18). When Joash became king of Judah, the priest Jehoiada conferred upon him sacred items: "He brought forth the king's son, and put the crown upon him and gave him the testimony; and they made him king" (2 Kings 11:12). Stephen Ricks argues that "the testimony" given to Joash was the written law which was conferred upon the king in order that he might accept the responsibility to instruct the people and also safeguard the record for future generations.³⁸

Some kings and priests were apparently more diligent than others in their responsibility to preserve these sacred records. During the reign of King Josiah, the high priest Hilkiah discovered “the book of the law in the house of the Lord” (2 Kings 22:8; compare 2 Chronicles 34:14)—possibly a version of the book of Deuteronomy³⁹—which unbeknownst to them had been kept in the temple treasury. Thus, in this case, the sacred object was safeguarded but also neglected. Gordon Thomasson refers to such sacred items as “national treasures” and concludes that they functioned as “tangible symbols of [the king’s] authority.”⁴⁰ In similar ways, the traditions of preserving sacred treasures and relics by the royal and religious leaders continued among the Nephites.⁴¹

In a New World setting, there appears to have existed a similar phenomenon among the Hopewell tradition.⁴² The Hopewell tradition refers to common features of Native American cultures that existed in the regions of the Northeastern and Midwestern United States from approximately 200 BC to AD 500.⁴³ Among the remains of the Hopewell tradition in Ohio, for example, archaeologists have discovered artifacts, such as copper plates, which Martin Byers refers to as “group custodial regalia.”⁴⁴ According to Byers, these sacred objects were “highly valued as symbolic warrants for constituting important ritual offices and their related activities,” and they “would not accompany the deceased but would be withheld and passed on to the next steward.”⁴⁵ This practice is reminiscent of Alma’s conferral of the “sacred things” (Alma 37:47) upon his son Helaman.

From Generation to Generation

Alma instructed his son Helaman to “take care of these sacred things” (Alma 37:47). Numerous references confirm that sacred items, including records and other relics, were safeguarded by the Nephites from generation to generation. But how did this tradition begin, how was it carried out, and by whom? This section will trace the history of

the sacred things beginning with Nephi down to Alma's commission to Helaman.⁴⁶

In his account of making the different sets of plates, Nephi explained, "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" (1 Nephi 19:4). Nephi often used the phrase "these plates" to specifically refer to the small plates, but in this context it seems to refer to the large plates.⁴⁷ When the followers of Nephi separated from the followers of Laman and Lemuel, Nephi states that he was safeguarding the large plates, the brass plates, the Liahona, and the sword of Laban (2 Nephi 5:12, 14, 29). After settling in the land of Nephi, the Lord then instructed Nephi to make the small plates (5:30–31), which also became part of his collection of sacred things.

Nephi had become king (2 Nephi 5:18; 6:2), and as the head of state he kept the sacred things. He also consecrated his brothers Jacob and Joseph as "priests and teachers" to be religious leaders of the people (5:26). Before his death, Nephi made the decision to separate the responsibility for safekeeping the different sets of plates, commanding his brother Jacob to continue the religious record kept on the small plates (Jacob 1:1–2). Jacob recalled that Nephi instructed him to "preserve these plates and hand them down unto [his] seed, from generation to generation" (1:3).⁴⁸ Thus Nephi's successors on the throne were to safeguard all the sacred things, except the small plates, which would be kept by Jacob's descendants in the priesthood. The small plates were then passed down from Jacob to his son Enos (Jacob 7:26–27); this pattern continued down to Jacob's fourth great-grandson Amaleki (Omni 1:12). Before his death, however, Amaleki completed the small plates and gave them to King Benjamin, because Amaleki did not have any children upon whom he could confer them (1:25, 30).⁴⁹ So, after many generations, the small plates were again part of the collection of sacred things kept by Nephi's successors upon the throne, for Benjamin put the small plates with the other

plates which “had been handed down by the kings, from generation to generation” (Words of Mormon 1:10).

At the conclusion of his reign as Nephite king, Benjamin designated his son Mosiah as his successor (Mosiah 1:10). He charged Mosiah with safeguarding the sacred things, which included “the plates of brass; and also the plates of Nephi; and also, the sword of Laban, and the ball or director” (1:16). It is interesting that this account does not mention the interpreters. On the one hand, this could indicate that the interpreters did not come into the possession of the Nephite kings until during the reign of Mosiah. Or this omission could simply be because Mormon’s abridged account of the large plates did not contain all the details of the original record. It should be remembered that when Alma charged Helaman with the sacred things, Mormon’s account of Alma’s words does not specifically mention the sword of Laban, even though that item is clearly part of this sacred collection (1:16).⁵⁰

By the time Ammon visited the people of Limhi, Mosiah already had the interpreters in his possession (see Mosiah 8:12–13). When the people of Limhi arrived in the land of Zarahemla, Limhi gave the twenty-four gold plates to Mosiah, who translated them by means of the interpreters (Mosiah 28:13). Thus the twenty-four gold plates and the interpreters became included in the collection of sacred things kept by the king (28:11). It is at this point that Mosiah makes an important decision concerning the preservation of these items. Since the time of Nephi, the sacred things had been kept safe by the kings, down to Mosiah. Mormon’s abridged account, however, says that “king Mosiah had no one to confer the kingdom upon” because none of his sons would accept the nomination to succeed their father on the throne (28:10). Responding to this development, Mosiah decided to confer the sacred things upon Alma the Younger (28:20), though Alma the Elder was currently the leader of the church (Mosiah 25:19).

Gardner points out that Mormon only explicitly mentions “all the records and also the interpreters” among the sacred things given to Alma (Mosiah 28:20). He suggests that at this point Mosiah

separated the Liahona and the sword of Laban from the other items: “The separation of the religious leader from the political leader is mirrored in the separation of sacred artifacts.”⁵¹ This theory is possible, but it is also an argument from silence. Alma the Younger is not the religious leader yet and would not be until the death of his father (Mosiah 29:47). By the time Alma the Younger conferred the sacred things upon Helaman, the Liahona is explicitly mentioned in the collection (Alma 37:38). It seems more likely that when Mormon states that Mosiah gave to Alma “all the things which he had kept” (Mosiah 28:20), it included everything.

It should be noted that according to Mormon’s chronology, Mosiah made the decision to confer the sacred things upon Alma before he dissolved the monarchy and before Alma was appointed as the first chief judge (Mosiah 29:37–42). Mosiah’s decision to confer the sacred things upon Alma the Younger may indicate that Mosiah intended for the sacred things to be kept by the religious leaders rather than by heads of state, assuming he understood that Alma the Elder would eventually ordain his son to succeed him as leader of the church. On the other hand, Mosiah may simply have moved ahead with the conferral, assuming that Alma was a likely candidate to become the first chief judge anyway, thus keeping the sacred things in possession of the leader of the government. Either way, once Alma the Elder passed away (29:47), Alma the Younger assumed the dual responsibilities of church leader and chief judge, and the sacred things were once again kept by the head of state—this time by the chief judge instead of the king.

After eight years as chief judge, Alma decided to give up the judgment seat in order to preach the gospel full time (Alma 5:15). He apparently kept possession of the sacred things after giving up the chief judgeship, rather than give them to the second chief judge, Nephiah. Before Alma died, however, he offered to confer the sacred things upon Nephiah, but for reasons unknown the chief judge refused (Alma 50:38). Mormon otherwise characterized Nephiah as a “wise man” (Alma 4:16) who served “with perfect uprightness before God” (Alma

50:37). It is possible that Nephiah's refusal was a result of humility.⁵² It should be noted that the responsibility to safeguard the plates included the responsibility to continue writing the history of the people (Alma 37:1–2). There are enough examples of Nephite record keepers who felt self-conscious about their writing ability to make one wonder if Nephiah felt similarly, possibly contributing to his decision to refuse taking possession of the records and other sacred things.⁵³

Whatever Nephiah's reasons were, his refusal meant that Alma needed to appoint someone else to safeguard the sacred things and continue keeping the Nephite history. Though Helaman may have known he was his father's second choice, Alma's charge to his son makes it clear that the conclusion to confer the sacred things upon him was the result of revelation from heaven. Alma reassured Helaman: "And now remember, my son, that God has entrusted you with these things, which are sacred" (Alma 37:14). Alma's inspired decision solidified a fundamental change in practice for the Nephite leaders. Whereas the sacred things had been kept by the heads of state from Nephi, the first king, down to Alma, the first chief judge, they would now be safeguarded by the leaders of the church, starting with Alma through his son Helaman. This modification in practice is especially important in light of the fact that not all of the later chief judges were righteous.⁵⁴ In this way, Alma's inspired decision ensured the continued safety of these sacred items for future generations.

After Helaman

Some of the subsequent religious leaders, such as Helaman's grandson Helaman and great-grandson Nephi, would also function as chief judges. The sacred things, however, continued to be kept by descendants of Alma down to Mormon and Moroni. This succession was typically from father to son, with two exceptional cases. The first deviation from this pattern arose after the death of Helaman. For some reason, Helaman did not confer the sacred things on anyone before his death. After Helaman died, his brother "Shiblon took possession

of those sacred things which had been delivered unto Helaman by Alma” (Alma 63:1).⁵⁵ But before his own death, Shiblon ensured that the responsibility for safeguarding the sacred things was reestablished with Helaman’s family and conferred them upon Helaman son of Helaman (63:11). Mormon connects Shiblon’s decision to the commandment that the sacred things were to be “handed down from one generation to another” (63:13).⁵⁶

The second variance to the pattern of succession from father to son involved Ammaron and Mormon. When Amos, the third great-grandson of Helaman, died, the record says that “his brother, Ammaron, did keep the record in his stead” (4 Nephi 1:47). When Mormon was only ten years old, Ammaron informed him of the place where the records, and presumably the other sacred things, were kept, and he commissioned young Mormon to continue keeping the record of his people on the large plates (Mormon 1:3–4). The biological relationship between Ammaron and Mormon is unknown. Mormon’s father was named Mormon, not Ammaron or Amos (1:5). The record keepers from Alma down to Ammaron were all descendants of Alma, who was a descendant of Nephi (Mosiah 17:2). Mormon described himself as “a pure descendant of Lehi” (3 Nephi 5:20) through Nephi (Mormon 1:5), possibly within the same genealogical line as Alma and therefore related to Ammaron somehow.

Mormon later explained that the Nephite records “were handed down from king Benjamin, from generation to generation until they have fallen into my hands” (Words of Mormon 1:11). Eventually, Mormon “hid up in the hill Cumorah all the records which had been entrusted to [him]” (Mormon 6:6), and Moroni finished the record upon the gold plates (Mormon 8:1). Neither Mormon nor Moroni mention the other sacred things, but it is assumed that they were passed down from Mormon to Moroni as well. When Moroni guided Joseph Smith to find the gold plates, the stone box also contained at least the interpreters (Joseph Smith—History 1:52). And the Three Witnesses were promised that if they were faithful, they would be able to see the plates, the sword of Laban, the interpreters, and the Liahona

(Doctrine and Covenants 17:1). This is important, because, in a sense, the sacred things were being entrusted to those in the latter days to cherish them, keep them sacred, and use them to teach gospel truths.

Conclusion

Nephi desired that the large plates be passed down “from one generation to another” (1 Nephi 19:4). The collection of sacred items to be entrusted to future generations eventually included other items, such as the brass plates, the interpreters, the twenty-four gold plates, and the Liahona. This sacred succession outlined by Nephi was accomplished through his prophet-king descendants down to king Mosiah, son of Benjamin. When Mosiah realized that none of his sons would become king, he decided to confer these items upon Alma the Younger, who became the first chief judge (Mosiah 28:20) and eventually the head of the church as well. When the second chief judge, Nephihah, refused to take possession of these sacred things, Alma needed to confer them upon someone else.

His decision to entrust these items to his son Helaman was inspired by God (Alma 37:14) and implemented a fundamental change in policy. From this point on, the sacred items would be kept by the religious leader, rather than the head of state. In an important way, it fulfilled Nephi’s commandment with precision, for he stated that these sacred things “should be handed down from one generation to another, *or from one prophet to another*, until further commandments of the Lord” (1 Nephi 19:4; emphasis added). The Lord inspired Alma to entrust the sacred things to Helaman and his descendants, who would be the prophet-leaders of the Nephite people from his own time all the way down to Mormon and Moroni, just as Nephi envisioned.

Each of the sacred items were powerful reminders to the Nephite leaders and people that “the Lord God doth work by means to bring about his great and eternal purposes; and by very small means the Lord doth confound the wise and bringeth about the salvation of

many souls” (Alma 37:7). The Liahona was preserved as a physical reminder of God’s desire to lead his people to safety—in particular through the words of his Son Jesus Christ (37:43–46). The records and interpreters were initially kept and used anciently to provide warning and instruction for the Nephites (37:8). Ultimately, however, the “wise purpose” (37:2) for which these records and interpreters were preserved was that the accounts might be abridged into a sacred volume by Mormon and Moroni to come forth in the latter days and that the interpreters might be used to translate the record by Joseph Smith through the gift and power of God as the Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ.

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Notes

1. For a general study of Alma’s counsel to his sons, see John W. Welch, “The Testimony of Alma: ‘Give Ear to My Words,’” *Religious Educator* 11, no. 2 (2010): 67–88. For a recent application of some of the spiritual elements of this counsel, see Elder Craig C. Christensen, “Put Your Trust in God: The Admonition of Alma to His Sons,” speech given at Brigham Young University commencement, 11 August 2016.
2. See David R. Seely, “Plates of Nephi,” in *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, ed. Dennis L. Largey (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 645–47.
3. Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 1:113.
4. See Seely, “Plates of Nephi,” 645–47.
5. On the brass plates in general, see Robert L. Millet, “Plates of Brass,” in Largey, *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, 643–44.

6. Jeffrey R. Chadwick, "Lehi's House at Jerusalem and the Land of His Inheritance," in *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem*, ed. John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann H. Seely (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2004), 114.
7. Joseph Fielding McConkie and Robert L. Millet, *Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1991), 3:273.
8. On Lehi's journey from Jerusalem into the wilderness, see S. Kent Brown, "New Light from Arabia on Lehi's Trail," in *Echoes and Evidences of the Book of Mormon*, ed. Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and John W. Welch (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2002), 56–62.
9. Gardner, *Second Witness*, 1:100.
10. On the contents of the brass plates and the issue of including some of Jeremiah's prophecies, see Sidney B. Sperry, "Some Problems of Interest Relating to the Brass Plates," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 4, no. 1 (1995): 185–91.
11. See Chadwick, "Lehi's House," 87–93.
12. On this record, see Dennis L. Largey, "Plates of Ether," in Largey, *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, 644.
13. See Daniel C. Peterson, "Secret Combinations," in Largey, *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, 709–10.
14. See Andrew H. Hedges, "Urim and Thummim," in Largey, *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, 773–74.
15. Michael Hubbard MacKay and Nicholas J. Frederick, *Joseph Smith's Seer Stones* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2016), 103.
16. See Michael Hubbard MacKay and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, *From Darkness unto Light: Joseph Smith's Translation and Publication of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2015), 67–69.
17. MacKay and Frederick, *Joseph Smith's Seer Stones*, 103. Elliott Jolley has proposed that Gazelem was a Jaredite prophet. See Elliott Jolley, "Gazelem the Jaredite," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 27 (2017): 85–105.
18. Jolley, "Gazelem the Jaredite," 103–5; Doctrine and Covenants 74.

19. See, for example, Bruce R. McConkie, ed., *Doctrines of Salvation: Sermons and Writings of Joseph Fielding Smith* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1956), 3:223–24.
20. MacKay and Frederick, *Joseph Smith's Seer Stones*, 96–97.
21. Royal Skousen, ed., *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 682.
22. Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2009), 6:3765.
23. MacKay and Frederick, *Joseph Smith's Seer Stones*, 99.
24. Joseph Smith, "Preface," in *The Book of Mormon: An Account Written by the Hand of Mormon, Upon Plates Taken from the Plates of Nephi* (Palmyra, NY: printed by E. B. Grandin, for the author, 1830), 1.
25. See Michael Hubbard MacKay and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, "Firsthand Witness Accounts of the Translation Process," in *The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon: A Marvelous Work and a Wonder*, ed. Dennis L. Largey, Andrew H. Hedges, John Hilton III, and Kerry Hull (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2015), 61–79; Richard E. Turley Jr., Robin S. Jensen, and Mark Ashurst-McGee, "Joseph the Seer," *Ensign*, October 2015, 49–55; and "Book of Mormon Translation," *Gospel Topics*, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, topics.ChurchofJesusChrist.org. For a more in-depth analysis, see Brant A. Gardner, *The Gift and Power: Translating the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2011).
26. Terryl Givens has pointed out that some accounts mention the sword of Laban as well as the Liahona as being part of the items in the stone box uncovered by Joseph Smith. See Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 14–15.
27. MacKay and Frederick, *Joseph Smith's Seer Stones*, 100.
28. See Valentin Arts, "A Third Jaredite Record: The Sealed Portion of the Gold Plates," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 11, no. 1 (2002): 54; Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 243–44; Hedges, "Urim and Thummim," 663–64; MacKay and Dirkmaat, *From Darkness unto Light*, 64–65; and

- Stephen E. Robinson and H. Dean Garrett, *A Commentary on the Doctrine and Covenants* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000), 1:99.
29. In general, see Neal E. Lambert, "Liahona," in Largey, *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, 519–20.
 30. For a recent study, see Alan Miner, *The Liahona: Miracles by Small Means* (Springville, UT: Cedar Fort, 2013).
 31. Nephi said the Liahona contained "two spindles; and the one pointed the way whither we should go into the wilderness" (1 Nephi 16:10). On this theory, see Jeffrey R. Holland, *Christ and the New Covenant* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997), 176.
 32. Concerning this theory, see Robert L. Bunker, "The Design of the Liahona and the Purpose of the Second Spindle," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 3, no. 2 (1994): 1–11.
 33. For a discussion on the comparison of the Liahona to the words of Christ, see Elder W. Rolfe Kerr, "The Words of Christ—Our Spiritual Liahona," *Ensign*, May 2004, 36–37.
 34. On this principle, see David A. Bednar, "That We May Always Have His Spirit to Be with Us," *Ensign*, May 2006, 30–31.
 35. Interestingly, later in the narrative Mormon alluded to the principle by which Nephi used the Liahona. For example, the Nephites had faith that "if they were faithful in keeping the commandments of God" then "God would make it known unto them whither they should go to defend themselves against their enemies" (Alma 48:15–16). Mormon did not explicitly mention whether this revealed knowledge came to these later Nephites by means of the Liahona itself or by revelation through a prophet. The one specific example Mormon included, however, suggests it was through revelation and not the Liahona. On one occasion, the Nephite chief captain wanted to know where the Lamanites had taken Nephite prisoners. Since he had "heard that [Alma] had the spirit of prophecy" he approached Alma and "desired of him know whither the Lord would that they should go into the wilderness in search of their brethren" (Alma 16:5).
 36. There is no evidence that the Jews reconstructed the ark of the covenant when they rebuilt the temple following the exile. The writer of Hebrews, describing the temple as it had been before the exile or how it ideally

- should have been in the second temple, later recalled the tradition that within the ark of the covenant was “the golden pot that had manna, and Aaron’s rod that budded, and the tables of the covenant” (Hebrews 9:4).
37. The last reference to the ark of the covenant in the Old Testament is during the eighteenth year of the reign of King Josiah (ca. 622 BC), a few decades before the destruction of Solomon’s temple (ca. 587 BC); see 2 Chronicles 35:3.
 38. See Stephen D. Ricks, “Kingship, Coronation, and Covenant in Mosiah 1–6,” in *King Benjamin’s Speech: “That Ye May Learn Wisdom,”* ed. John W. Welch and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1998), 247–48.
 39. See Mark Alan Powell, ed., *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 103.
 40. See Gordon C. Thomasson, “Mosiah: The Complex Symbolism and the Symbolic Complex of Kingship in the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2, no. 1 (1993): 26.
 41. Ricks, “Kingship, Coronation, and Covenant,” 244–54; and Thomasson, “Mosiah: The Complex Symbolism,” 25–34.
 42. The term *Hopewell* is the name of the family who owned the property where notable remains of this tradition were discovered and explored in Ohio in the nineteenth century. It is unknown what these Native American groups originally called themselves.
 43. A. Martin Byers, *The Real Mound Builders of North America: A Critical Realist Prehistory of the Eastern Woodlands, 200 BC–1450 AD* (New York: Lexington Books, 2018).
 44. A. Martin Byers, *The Ohio Hopewell Episode: Paradigm Lost and Paradigm Gained* (Akron, OH: University of Akron Press, 2004), 481.
 45. Byers, *Ohio Hopewell Episode*, 336–37.
 46. See the summary chart of Nephite record keepers in *Book of Mormon Student Manual: Religion 121–122* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2009), 408; see also “Transmission of the Large and Small Plates,” *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 22, no. 2 (2013): 47.

47. Gardner, *Second Witness*, 1:359; and Monte S. Nyman, *I, Nephi, Wrote This Record* (Orem, UT: Granite Publishing and Distribution, 2003), 285.
48. For an in-depth study of Jacob, the brother of Nephi, see Robert J. Matthews, "Jacob: Prophet, Theologian, Historian," in *The Book of Mormon: Jacob through Words of Mormon, To Learn with Joy*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1990), 33–53.
49. See Gary R. Whiting, "The Testimony of Amaleki," in Nyman and Tate, *Book of Mormon: Jacob through Words of Mormon*, 295–306.
50. On the sword of Laban, see Brett L. Holbrook, "The Sword of Laban as a Symbol of Divine Authority and Kingship," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2, no. 1 (1993): 39–72; and Daniel N. Rolph, "Prophets, Kings, and Swords: The Sword of Laban and Its Possible Pre-Laban Origin," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2, no. 1 (1993): 73–79.
51. Gardner, *Second Witness*, 3:468.
52. For this conclusion, see James Moss, "Six Nephite Judges," *Ensign*, September 1977, 61–65.
53. Note, for example, Nephi (1 Nephi 19:6), Jacob (Jacob 4:1), Mormon (3 Nephi 5:8, 17), and Moroni (Mormon 9:31–33 and Ether 12:23–25).
54. Recall, for example, the chief judge Seezoram, who was murdered by his brother Seantum (Helaman 8:26–27; compare 9:26–27). Both of them were part of the "secret band, whose author is Gadianton" (Helaman 8:28).
55. Gardner again suggests that this collection did not include the Liahona nor the sword of Laban, because "he was not a sitting judge" and therefore could not be entrusted with "the sacred symbols of Nephite rulers." Gardner, *Second Witness*, 4:767. But the separation of the Liahona and the sword of Laban is never stated in the Book of Mormon. When Alma taught Helaman concerning the Liahona and immediately instructed him to "take care of these sacred things" (Alma 37:47), the natural assumption is that "these things" included the Liahona.
56. On this see Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, 143–44.