

Records and Relics

Covenantal Transition in Alma 37

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Alma 37 is a unique chapter in the Book of Mormon, a significant transition point in Nephite history that changed a centuries-old tradition about who had possession of the Nephite records and how they were kept. It is the second part of a conversation between Alma and his oldest son, Helaman, with chapter 36 being the first part; the chapter break is not reflected in the original 1830 edition¹ but is a natural division in terms of the two distinct messages in the chapters.

In this paper I argue that the conversation in Alma 37 is the most thorough and clearly covenantal in a line of transitions relating to the responsibility for the important Nephite historical records and relics, which represented the founding and authority of their culture. I carefully examine the items in Alma's charge to Helaman, showing their significance to the covenant charge and their place in the society. I also postulate that the message and structure of the Book of Mormon

as we have it today resulted in large part from Alma's unprecedented decision to give the records to his son Helaman.²

Alma Commands Helaman: Covenant Language

We can recognize covenant language when we see commandments coupled with an expressed commitment to be obedient. This is especially true when it is related to a responsibility from the Lord and when terms or phrases are repeated multiple times, echoing previous covenant exchanges. Likewise, covenant language often includes promised blessings associated with obedience and judgment if the covenant is not kept. This is exactly what we see in Alma and Helaman's conversation in Alma 37.

Alma used the phrase "command you" five times in Alma 37—four times as an imperative to Helaman (37:1, 2, 20, and 27) and once to reflect a command of the Lord (37:16). The word *command* is not used at all in chapter 36, signaling a shift in the conversation and the importance of the charge Alma was giving to Helaman in this latter part of their dialogue, especially concerning the records.

Previous handoffs of the plates between stewards used similar command language. Jacob related that "Nephi had commanded me" regarding the records and in turn gave the same commandment to his son, Enos (Jacob 7:27). In fact, Jacob's handoff to Enos emphasizes that Jacob repeated to his son the same language that Nephi had used with him, indicating a formal, even ceremonial transition. Later, Omni also stated that he was "commanded by my father, Jarom," to write on and preserve the plates (Omni 1:1). Then when Mosiah, son of Benjamin, gave the plates to Alma, he "commanded him that he should keep and preserve them, and also keep a record of the people" (Mosiah 28:20). This harks back to the original creation of the plates by Nephi, which was recorded as a divine commandment: "The Lord hath commanded me to make these plates" (1 Nephi 9:5), and "the Lord commanded me, wherefore I did make plates of ore" (1 Nephi 19:1–2).

In his account, Jacob noted that after hearing his charge, Enos “promised obedience unto the commands” Jacob had given him relative to the records, just as Jacob assures us that he made his best effort to keep his promise to Nephi (Jacob 7:26–27).

Transitional Patterns of Language

A close look at the language of Alma 37 compared to previous transitions helps us understand the patterns of language used in this very detailed account and more powerfully portrays the covenantal nature of this responsibility. The repetition of terms and phrases indicates that Alma 37 is the most complete representation of a developed ritual surrounding these objects that grew out of earlier commissions.

Take / Keep / Preserve

Verbs related to *take*, *keep*, and *preserve* are used to explain Helaman’s new responsibilities with the records and relics in Alma 37, as well as represent blessings from obedience. This includes “*take* the records” (verse 1; emphasis added throughout); “*keep* a record” (37:2); “*keep* all these things sacred which I have *kept*, even as I have *kept* them” (37:2); “*kept* and *preserved*” (37:4; also 37:14); “these things should be *preserved*” (37:8; also 37:12, 18, 19, 21); “no power of earth or hell can *take* them [the records] from you, for God is powerful to the fulfilling of all his words” (37:16); “*keep* them” (37:21); and “*take* care of these sacred things” (37:47). Similar terms are used in prior accounts related to the records and relics, including those listed below.

Nephi’s initial experiences with the records and relics

- ✦ “we should obtain these records, that we may *preserve* . . . the words which have been spoken by the mouth of all the holy prophets” (1 Nephi 3:19–20)
- ✦ “we *took* the plates of brass . . . and departed into the wilderness” (1 Nephi 4:38)

- “my father, Lehi, *took* the records which were engraven upon the plates of brass” (1 Nephi 5:10)
- “we had obtained the records which the Lord had commanded us, . . . insomuch that we could *preserve* the commandments of the Lord” (1 Nephi 5:21)
- “I *took* the compass, and it did work” (1 Nephi 18:21)
- “the things which were written should be *kept* for the instruction of my people” (1 Nephi 19:3)
- “I, Nephi, had *kept* the records upon my plates” (2 Nephi 5:29)
- “these things which I shall write shall be *kept* and *preserved*” (2 Nephi 25:21)

Nephi to Jacob

- “I should *preserve* these plates and hand them down unto my seed” (Jacob 1:3)

Jacob to Enos

- “I said unto my son Enos: *Take* these plates” (Jacob 7:27)
- “*preserve* a record of my people, the Nephites” (Enos 1:13)
- “the Lord God was able to *preserve* our records” (Enos 1:15–16)

Jarom, Omni, Amaron, and Chemish

- “I, Jarom, write a few words according to the commandment of my father, Enos, that our genealogy may be *kept*” (Jarom 1:1)
- “I deliver these plates into the hands of my son Omni, that they may be *kept* according to the commandments of my fathers” (Jarom 1:15)
- “I, Omni, being commanded by my father, Jarom, that I should write somewhat upon these plates, to *preserve* our genealogy” (Omni 1:1)

- ✦ “I had *kept* these plates according to the commandments of my fathers; and I conferred them upon my son Amaron” (Omni 1:3)
- ✦ “Now I, Chemish, write what few things I write . . . after this manner we *keep* the records, for it is according to the commandments of our fathers” (Omni 1:9)

Amaleki to Benjamin

- ✦ “after Amaleki had delivered up these plates into the hands of king Benjamin, he *took* them and put them with the other plates” (Words of Mormon 1:10)

Benjamin to Mosiah

- ✦ “these things, which have been *kept* and *preserved* by the hand of God, that we might read and understand” (Mosiah 1:5)

Mosiah to Alma

- ✦ “he *took* the records which were engraven on the plates of brass, and also the plates of Nephi, and all the things which he had *kept* and *preserved*” (Mosiah 28:11)
- ✦ “he *took* the plates of brass, and all the things which he had *kept*, and conferred them upon Alma, who was the son of Alma; yea, all the records, and also the interpreters, and conferred them upon him, and commanded him that he should *keep* and *preserve* them, and also *keep* a record of the people” (Mosiah 28:20)

This repetition of terms suggests strongly that Alma’s language to Helaman intentionally drew heavily on prior language used in other transitions. Alma’s conversation with Helaman was a formal, covenantal exchange, carrying on the long tradition of responsibility for these plates and artifacts.

Wise purpose

Another phrase surfaces in this initial charge to Helaman: “it is for a *wise purpose* that they are kept” (Alma 37:2). In the Book of Mormon, the phrase “wise purpose” is used only seven times, four of which are in this chapter and all of which relate to either the plates of Nephi or the brass plates. Nephi used it twice to refer to the small plates (1 Nephi 9:5; 19:3), and Mormon tied the phrase to his adding the same small plates to his record (Words of Mormon 1:7). In each case, the source of the wisdom is the Lord, and it is for his “wise purpose” that the small plates are kept and preserved.³ Alma’s use of the phrase is another strong tie to Nephi’s original description of his work with sacred records, demonstrating ritualistic reuse of language in Alma’s charge to Helaman.

Prosper in the land

Finally, the repeated use of the phrase (or a close variation) “as ye shall keep the commandments of God ye shall prosper in the land” (Alma 36:1, 30; 37:13) and the correlating opposite “as ye will not keep the commandments of God ye shall be cut off from his presence” (Alma 36:30; 37:13) are both formulaic in the Book of Mormon and thus add to the more ceremonial nature of this account.

This is especially interesting when we consider the kingship ritual of David handing over the monarchy to his son Solomon. In 1 Kings chapter 1, David had already publicly declared Solomon his heir with the formal riding of David’s mule across the Gihon spring into the city and the anointing of Solomon by Zadok the high priest, followed by trumpet blowing and a united cry of the people, “God save king Solomon” (1 Kings 1:38–39). In chapter 2, however, David was near death, and the final ritual of transition was enacted: “[David] charged Solomon his son, saying, I go the way of all the earth: be thou strong therefore, and shew thyself a man; and keep the charge of the Lord thy God, to walk in his ways, to keep his statutes, and his commandments, and his judgments, and his testimonies, as it is written

in the law of Moses, that thou mayest prosper in all that thou doest” (1 Kings 2:1–3). David’s language harks back to the books of Moses. In the covenant between God and Israel in Deuteronomy, the people are promised that they will “prosper in all that [they] do” if they keep “the words of this covenant” (Deuteronomy 29:9). Though directed only to priests, the contrasting punishment for disobeying the Lord was to be “cut off from my presence: I am the Lord” (Leviticus 22:3).

Similar language was used by Nephi in the beginning of the Book of Mormon, as the Lord spoke to him in covenantal terms: “And inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments, ye shall prosper, and shall be led to a land of promise” (1 Nephi 2:20). This was used in several variations in 1 Nephi but solidified in Nephite culture in the formal blessings Lehi gave to his family just prior to his passing: “And [the Lord] hath said that: Inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments ye shall prosper in the land; but inasmuch as ye will not keep my commandments ye shall be cut off from my presence” (2 Nephi 1:20; also 2 Nephi 4:4). This phrase was repeated and verified by subsequent Book of Mormon authors, to the point of becoming proverbial, yet always reminiscent of the Lord’s prior covenants.⁴

When Alma used it in Alma 37 with Helaman, he evoked both the pattern of kingship transition from the Old Testament and formal covenant making in prior biblical and Book of Mormon accounts to set Helaman on a covenant path as the formal record- and relic-keeper of the Nephite people. He concluded with a final charge:

And now, my son, see that ye take care of these sacred things [the records and relics], yea, see that ye look to God and live. Go unto this people and declare the word, and be sober. My son, farewell. (Alma 37:47)

Nephite Records in Alma 37

Alma’s first command in this chapter is to “take the records which have been entrusted with me” (Alma 37:1). This is a summary directive

to Helaman relative to records that will be called out individually in the verses that follow, with varying responsibilities depending on the records themselves. To appreciate the uniqueness of this account, it's helpful to understand how Alma was entrusted with the various Nephite records in the first place.

There are three specific records listed in this chapter: “the plates of Nephi” (Alma 37:2); the “plates of brass” (37:3), and the “twenty-four plates” or the Jaredite record (37:21). Each of these have a unique history of transmission to Alma.

The plates of Nephi

Nephi, the son of Lehi, followed his father's example and began keeping his own records later in his life (1 Nephi 1:17; 6:1–6). In the end, he created two sets of plates that for convenience we call the large and small plates (based on the language in Jacob 1:1; 3:13; and Jarom 1:2). The designations likely had to do with the number of plates in each collection, not their dimensions.⁵ The small plates were created and written after the large plates and for a more spiritual purpose, but also “by way of commandment” from the Lord (1 Nephi 9:2–6; 19:1–6).

The large plates were kept by the royal successors to Nephi (Jacob 1:3, 9; Omni 1:11). Being kept by the kings, the large plates became the official and ongoing record of the people, and the charge to each king was to keep them up to date with important events and teachings (see 1 Nephi 19:4; Jacob 1:3). Since the first part of the Book of Mormon (1 Nephi through Omni) is the record of the small plates, the first text modern readers encounter from the large plates is in the first chapter of Mosiah, where ironically Benjamin was preparing to hand the records off to his son, Mosiah, at the end of his reign (Mosiah 1:15–17).

The small plates, on the other hand, were given to Nephi's brother Jacob and stayed with his family for several generations (Jacob 1:1–4; 3:13–14; 7:26–27; Jarom 1:14–15; Omni 1:1, 8, 11). When the small plates were filled, the last writer, Amaleki, turned them over to the

Nephite king, Benjamin, because he had no descendants (Omni 1:25, 30). Thus the small plates were concluded at the time of Benjamin with no evidence of additional writing. They seem to have been archived and even ignored as time passed: the small plates are not mentioned in the record except in Mormon's explanation of why he added them to his abridgment, even though they were redundant to his record (Words of Mormon 1:3–6).⁶ This long neglect of the small plates may explain why Mormon was seemingly unaware of their existence until he had progressed quite far in his abridgment of the large plates, only finding them after he made extra effort and “searched among the records” (Words of Mormon 1:3). In fact, it may have been an account of Amaleki giving the small plates to Benjamin that Mormon read in the large plates that prompted him to search for Nephi's second record.

Alma received charge of “all the records” from Mosiah when Mosiah's sons all left to preach to the Lamanites (Mosiah 28:20) and just prior to his becoming the first chief judge (Mosiah 29:42). Alma appears to have received custody of the records from Mosiah because all the king's sons had left the land for their Lamanite mission. At the time, Alma was the leader of the church, which authority he had received from his father, Alma, “the founder of the church” (Mosiah 29:47). However, he quickly also became chief judge, which continued the tradition of the records being kept by the political leader.

Alma's expectation was that at least the large plates and other sacred relics would remain with the political leader. After Alma resigned from being chief judge to focus his efforts solely on the ministry, he attempted to turn the records and relics over to the new chief judge, Nephiah. But Nephiah refused for unstated reasons (Alma 50:38). Alma thus kept the records, eventually transferring the artifacts to Helaman, as discussed in Alma 37.

Alma's charge to Helaman was to keep the large plates up to date: “keep a record of this people.” Though not explicitly called out, the small plates, which Nephi called “precious” and “sacred” (Jacob 1:2, 4), were likely included in the second part of this verse's charge

to protect that which was deemed sacred: “and keep all these things sacred which I have kept, even as I have kept them” (Alma 37:2).

The plates of brass

Nephi took the brass plates from the treasury of Laban and brought them to the New World, then maintained possession of them when he separated from his brothers (1 Nephi 4:24, 38; 2 Nephi 5:12). Like the large plates, the brass plates appear to have been handed down through the line of the kings; Mosiah₁, the father of king Benjamin, had them when he joined with the people of Zarahemla (Omni 1:14). Though no passing of these plates is recorded from Mosiah₁ to Benjamin, they are explicitly mentioned when Benjamin gave them to his son Mosiah (Mosiah 1:16) and when Mosiah gave them to Alma (Mosiah 28:20).

The brass plates were the canonized and fixed scriptures of the Nephites and were recognized as such in much of the record (Mosiah 1:3; 10:16; 3 Nephi 10:17). Alma spoke of them that way to Helaman: “these plates of brass . . . have the records of the holy scriptures upon them” (Alma 37:3). By comparison, in the Doctrine and Covenants the phrase “holy scriptures” refers exclusively to the Bible (Doctrine and Covenants 20:11, 35, 69; 33:16), and in the King James Version of the New Testament the only two occurrences of the phrase are in Paul’s writings pointing to the scriptures of their day, the Old Testament (Romans 1:2; 2 Timothy 3:15). The Book of Mormon’s only use of the phrase “holy scriptures” is found in the books of Alma and Helaman, with all references pointing to the brass plates as their singular source of scripture; other references to just the word *scriptures* also refer to the same brass plates.⁷ This demonstrates that when the Nephites spoke of scriptures, they were specifically referring to the brass plates.

This high status of the brass plates leads to two items of note in Alma’s discussion of them in this chapter. First, he declares that the brass plates would “be kept and preserved by the hand of the Lord” that in the end they might “go forth unto every nation, kindred, tongue, and people” (Alma 37:4). Alma’s charge to Helaman

was to preserve them that these words of scripture could achieve their prophesied (and yet future) destiny. This echoes language Nephi and others used (see discussion above).

Second, Alma taught that these plates “must retain their brightness” (Alma 37:5), a phrase unique in all of scripture.⁸ One scholar postulated that while the “brightness” of the plates required human intervention—care and attention—“the plates’ brightness is only a sign of their more important function . . . inseparably connected to their value,”⁹ which ties back to the first prophecy. Both of these prophecies about the brass plates originated with Lehi, though recorded on Nephi’s small plates with slightly different wording: “That these plates of brass should go forth unto all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people who were of his seed. Wherefore, he said that these plates of brass should never perish; neither should they be dimmed any more by time” (1 Nephi 5:18–19). By citing Lehi’s original prophecy in speaking of the brass plates to his son, Alma also invoked the authority of Lehi and the power of that tradition relating to this responsibility; to obey Alma’s command was to fulfill prophecy itself. These prophecies about the brass plates point to a future time when they will be known to the world.

Alma’s comments about the plates of brass raise some intriguing questions about their use in his day. Returning to the plates being preserved for a “wise purpose,” Alma explained to Helaman that one such wise purpose was “the restoration of many thousands of Lamanites to the knowledge of the truth” (Alma 37:18–19). When Ammon, Alma’s peer and friend, was teaching King Lamoni among the Lamanites, he taught him about God’s role in the creation, the fall, “and rehearsed and laid before him the records and the holy scriptures of the people, which had been spoken by the prophets, even down to the time that their father, Lehi, left Jerusalem.” He also “expounded unto them all the records and scriptures from the time that Lehi left Jerusalem down to the present time” (Alma 18:36, 38).

In the first reference, Ammon was clearly referring to the brass plates, calling them “the holy scriptures” and using a similar

description to what Nephi provided, that they contained the “the five books of Moses, which gave an account of the creation of the world” and “the prophecies of the holy prophets, from the beginning, even down to the commencement of the reign of Zedekiah,” which is when Lehi had his first visionary experience (1 Nephi 5:11–13; see 1 Nephi 1:4–6). This language indicates that the holy scriptures were physically “laid before” Lamoni so they could be examined. Additionally, the other “records and scriptures” of the people of Nephi, referring perhaps additionally to the large or even the small plates, were “expounded” by Ammon.

This language signals that Ammon and his brothers may well have taken the brass plates with them on their mission to the Lamanites, making Alma’s comment to Helaman literal that the brass plates had been the means of bringing “thousands of Lamanites to the knowledge of the truth” (Alma 37:19). Given their status as sons of the king, the brass plates would certainly have been available to them prior to their departure—their father was the custodian of the holy scriptures. It also adds insight to the note that the sons of Mosiah “were men of a sound understanding” because they had “searched the scriptures diligently, that they might know the word of God” (Alma 17:2). If they had the brass plates with them, they would have the ability to search them daily. Further, according to an early chapter in Alma’s book, for a Lamanite to become a Nephite they had to, among other things, believe “those records which were brought out of the land of Jerusalem” (Alma 3:11), a reference that clearly points to the brass plates, the only records brought from Jerusalem. The ability of the Lamanites to physically see, touch, and read those plates would greatly enhance their ability to believe them.¹⁰

The Jaredite plates

The third group of records Alma mentions are “those twenty-four plates” (Alma 37:21). These plates were not created by the Nephites but were found by them. Limhi, son of Noah and king of the people of Zeniff in the land of Nephi, sent a search party to look for

Zarahemla, the city that his grandfather had left, to seek help in being freed from the bondage of the Lamanites. Finding a destroyed civilization instead, they returned with twenty-four “pure gold” plates that they could not read (Mosiah 8:7–11). When the people of Limhi later joined the Nephites in Zarahemla, Mosiah₂ was able to translate the record (Mosiah 28:11–17). Mosiah subsequently handed off these plates to Alma (Mosiah 28:20). We know the contents of these plates because Moroni included an abridgment of it in the book of Ether; they contain the history of the Jaredite people.

Alma’s counsel to Helaman regarding these plates differs from that given about the other plates, as much as does their origin. Helaman was told to “keep them” in order that the “mysteries and works of darkness” of the destroyed people “may be made manifest unto this people” (Alma 37:21). But Helaman should not publicize their “oaths, and their covenants, and their agreements in their secret combinations,” nor “their signs and their wonders” (37:27). In other words, he was to explain to the people how wickedness destroyed the Jaredites but was not to give the details about “these secret plans” (37:29). The treatment of the twenty-four Jaredite plates occupies more space in the chapter than any other single topic, most of it decrying their wickedness, darkness, and “secret combinations” (37:21–32).

Nephite Relics in Alma 37

Besides the various records discussed, Alma also charged Helaman concerning two ancient Nephite relics: the interpreters and the Liahona.¹¹

The interpreters

The Nephite interpreters are first mentioned in Mosiah 8:13 when Ammon (not the son of Mosiah₂, missionary to the Lamanites of Alma’s day) explained to Limhi, the king of the people who had left Zarahemla to return to the land of Nephi two generations earlier, that Mosiah₂, son of King Benjamin, could interpret the language

on the twenty-four (Jaredite) plates that Limhi's people had found. Ammon explained, "For he has wherewith 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). He further stated, "These interpreters were doubtless prepared for the purpose of unfolding all such mysteries" (Mosiah 8:19; see Omni 1:20; Mosiah 21:28). How Mosiah₂ came to have the interpreters is not explained. A pair of stones with a similar function was given to the brother of Jared by the Lord to leave with his own record so they could later be read (Ether 3:21–24), but since Mosiah₂ was in possession of his interpreters prior to the discovery of the Jaredite record by Limhi's people, we are left to consider at least two possibilities for their origin: (1) There were two independent sets of interpreters, one first mentioned with Mosiah (Mosiah 8:13) and another set being given to the brother of Jared (Ether 3:22); (2) Mosiah came to possess the same Jaredite pair of stones.

We know that the interpreters Joseph Smith received were the Jaredite ones, according to Doctrine and Covenants 17:1. Because the descriptions of the interpreters are nearly identical in all cases, we are led to the conclusion that the second explanation emerges as the most probable.¹² But how did Mosiah₂ get them?

The two most likely scenarios through which Mosiah₂ could receive the Jaredite interpreters independently of their records are briefly given in Omni's record.¹³ First, it is possible that Coriantumr had the interpreters with him when he was "discovered by the people of Zarahemla" and gave the stones to them before he died about nine months later (Omni 1:21). More likely, however, the interpreters were also discovered by the people of Zarahemla when they reported finding "a large stone" (1:20) that they brought back to Zarahemla. This seems like the best scenario because Mosiah₁ (grandfather of Mosiah₂) determined that the stone told the brief story of the Jaredite people when he was able to "interpret the engravings by the gift and power of God" (1:20–22).

Importantly, the phrase “gift and power of God” are the exact words Joseph Smith consistently used to describe his own translation experience with the interpreters and seer stones,¹⁴ potentially pointing to Mosiah₁’s use of newly discovered interpreters to read the stone. The interpreters would then have been passed to Benjamin and to Mosiah₂ as part of their royal responsibilities.

However he came to possess them, Mosiah₂ passed the interpreters on to Alma when the latter became chief judge (Mosiah 28:20). These interpreters are highlighted in Alma 37 as part of the transition of objects to Helaman in verses 21–24 during the discussion of the Jaredite record, including a reference to “my servant Gazelem, a stone” (Alma 37:23). Some believe Gazelem is the name of the servant, others the stone.¹⁵ Alma used it in the context of a quotation from an unknown statement by the Lord (perhaps from the Jaredite record) that he tied to the interpreters, noting that they were prepared in order to bring the Jaredite record “out of darkness unto light” (37:25).

The Liahona

The very name of this item that we use today—Liahona—comes from verse 38. When it first appeared, Nephi₁ called it “a round ball of curious workmanship” or just “the ball” (1 Nephi 16:10). Later, he called it a “compass” (2 Nephi 5:12), and Mormon called it a “director” in his record of King Benjamin (Mosiah 1:16). Alma used all three terms in verse 38, explaining that the word *Liahona* means “a compass.” This item was given to Lehi by the Lord and by divine power led the Lehite party through the desert to Bountiful and then to the promised land.¹⁶ Nephi took the ball with him when he separated from his brothers (2 Nephi 5:12), and it was among the items Mosiah received from his father, Benjamin (Mosiah 1:16). While the Liahona is not specifically listed as one of the objects Mosiah₂ gave to Alma in Mosiah 28:20 or as one of the items Helaman received in Alma 37, the implication is strong that he did, given the detailed and lengthy language Alma used to explain the item’s use and symbolic meaning (Alma 37:38–46).

Impact of Alma 37

The final words of Alma 37 strengthen the notion of the formality of the scenario, especially considering that Alma continued to interact with Helaman for another year under the status quo. Helaman did not formally take on responsibility for the sacred things until Alma 45, after an additional and thorough worthiness interview by Alma, his father, concluding with the inspired promise to his son that echoed the previous language of Alma 37: “Blessed art thou; and the Lord shall prosper thee in this land” (Alma 45:2–8). After Alma blessed Helaman and his other sons and blessed the earth and the church, he “departed out of the land of Zarahemla,” though he did not arrive at his intended destination and “was never heard of more” (Alma 45:15–18).

Significantly, the handing over of the records and relics to Helaman started a new pattern, where the leader of the church had charge of all these things instead of a political ruler. The type of information recorded on the plates soon shifted as well, with the record of the large plates going from being “the history of [this] people” (Jacob 1:3) to becoming more like the initial purpose of the small plates, to preserve “preaching which was sacred, or revelation which was great, or prophesying” (1:4). This pattern of spiritual leaders recording sacred events and activities was especially dominant in the visit of Jesus Christ, which was recorded by Nephi₃, great-grandson of the Helaman in Alma 37 and one of the twelve disciples called by Jesus (3 Nephi 23:7–8). Nephi₃ gave the records to his son, Nephi₄ (4 Nephi 1:19), whose position in the church is not recorded. From there it continued in the family line, going to Nephi₄’s son Amos₁ (1:19) and his son Amos₂ (1:21). As with Nephi₄, the record is silent on the role of these two men named Amos except to state that they faithfully kept the records. Amos₂ gave them to his brother, Ammaron (1:47), about whom we know little except that he was “constrained by the Holy Ghost” to “hide up the records” (1:48). Thus in the end, the large plates followed a similar pattern to the small, mostly going from

father to son but with little additional information added by each succeeding generation, until a final record keeper turned them over to someone outside the family line.

In the case of the large plates, breaking with now long-standing family tradition and for reasons unexplained in the text,¹⁷ Ammaron conferred responsibility for the records on a ten-year-old boy named Mormon, instructing him that when he was older, he was to “take the plates of Nephi” and “engrave on the plates of Nephi all the things that ye have observed” (Mormon 1:1–5). But Mormon greatly exceeded this charge, taking the vast records of his people and creating the abridged record that we read today. This he then turned over to his son, Moroni, who added to, kept, and preserved the records according to “the commandment of my father” (Mormon 8:3), continuing the covenant tradition of passing on the records and relics one final time among the Nephites.

The final book that we have in our possession today was shaped by Nephihah’s refusal and Alma’s covenantal handoff of the plates to his son Helaman, which shifted the chronicles from a royal record to a more spiritual account of the people. Putting the records in the hands of successive family members for generations, this record became the sacred source material of the young Mormon. Had the plates of Nephi continued only with the chief judges, whose record keeping may have focused exclusively on politics and wars, we can hypothesize how the spiritual impact of the Book of Mormon might have been lessened. Instead, Mormon received a rich record of missions, preaching, and the teachings of Jesus Christ himself, which he used to craft a book that speaks to our day and facilitates the conversion of millions. President Russell M. Nelson said, “The Book of Mormon is central to the gathering of Israel. In fact, if there were no Book of Mormon, the promised gathering of Israel would not occur.”¹⁸

The covenant pattern of possession of the plates, however, did not end with Moroni. It was renewed fourteen hundred years later, when that same Moroni put Joseph Smith under covenant to protect the plates and relics he would receive or he “should be destroyed” (Joseph

Smith—History 1:42). This language was strengthened when the plates were delivered to Joseph in 1827: “The same heavenly messenger delivered them up to me with this charge: that I should be responsible for them; that if I should let them go carelessly, or through any neglect of mine, I should be cut off; but that if I would use all my endeavors to preserve them, until he, the messenger, should call for them, they should be protected” (Joseph Smith—History 1:59). “This charge,” “responsible,” “cut off,” and “protected”—Moroni’s covenant messages to Joseph Smith echoed the long line of Nephite record keepers themselves, linking the young prophet to each transition of the records and relics throughout history.

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Notes

1. The entire exchange between Alma and Helaman is recorded as “Chapter XVII” in the 1830 Book of Mormon, with the heading “The Commandments of Alma, to his son Helaman.”
2. Because of the focus on Alma 37, unless otherwise indicated, the names *Alma* and *Helaman* refer to Alma₂ and Helaman₂, following the convention of the *Index to the Triple Combination* included with Latter-day Saint scriptures, which numbers the names where two or more people in the Book of Mormon have the same name (though using subscripts to avoid confusion with footnote numbers). We commonly call this Alma “the Younger,” and Helaman is his oldest son (Alma 31:7).
3. The only other two instances of the term in the standard works are from Doctrine and Covenants 5:9 and 61:35, both of which refer to the wise purpose of the Lord being fulfilled by Joseph’s and other’s actions.
4. For example, Jarom 1:9; Omni 1:6; Mosiah 2:31; Alma 9:13.

5. “Think of two books of the same general size but one with several times more pages. That would be the large book and the other the small book even though the basic dimensions of each page were the same.” Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 2:467.
6. Mormon explains that Benjamin “put them [the small plates] with the other [the large] plates” and they were “handed down by the kings” until he received them (The Words of Mormon 1:10).
7. For “holy scriptures,” see Alma 14:8; 18:36; 34:30; 37:3; Helaman 15:7. A search for just the word *scriptures* produces a number of references in 1 and 2 Nephi, Jacob, Mosiah, 3 Nephi, Mormon, and Ether, and additional ones in Alma and Helaman, all still pointing to the brass plates. Alma also calls them “holy writ” in Alma 37:5, the only place that term appears in all the standard works.
8. One interesting cross-reference is to the story of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies who buried their swords, previously used for “many murders,” so “they may be kept bright” (Alma 24:11–16).
9. Gardner, *Second Witness*, 4:507.
10. Of course, it is possible that the sons of Mosiah merely carried copies of the words on the brass plates during their missions among the Lamanites, which was what they studied and laid before the king. However, the language in the passages cited strongly favors them literally carrying the brass plates with them, which would have a more powerful impact on Lamoni and the other Lamanites than copies.
11. Noticeably absent from the list is the sword of Laban, which appears in one earlier transition narrative (Mosiah 1:16) and which was clearly passed down through the line of kings (Jacob 1:10; Words of Mormon 1:13). The sword was recognized as one of the important Nephite relics in Doctrine and Covenants 17:1 but ceases to be mentioned in the Book of Mormon record after Mosiah 1:16; Mormon seems to have deemed tracking its possession of little importance in his large plates abridgment.
12. Though the difference in the timeline in the record between Mosiah using the interpreters and the discovery of the Jaredite records many years later would make it seem like two interpreters are required; see an explanation

for them potentially being the same instruments in Michael Hubbard MacKay and Nicholas J. Frederick, *Joseph Smith's Seer Stones* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2016), 99–102. See also Gardner, *Second Witness*, 3:220–21, and Book of Mormon Central, “Why Was a Stone Used as an Aid in Translating the Book of Mormon?” <https://knowwhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/content/why-was-a-stone-used-as-an-aid-in-translating-the-book-of-mormon>.

13. John A. Tvedtnes lists three general possibilities: the Lord could have given them to Mosiah; the Nephites discovered them; or they came into the possession of the Mulekites. He does not tie these suggestions to specific events as I have done. See John A. Tvedtnes, *The Most Correct Book* (Salt Lake City: Cornerstone, 1999), 318–22. Brant Gardner cites Tvedtnes and agrees with his general conclusion in *Second Witness*, 3:220–21.
14. In the preface to the reader in the 1830 Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith said, “I would inform you that I translated, by the gift and power of God,” the record on the plates. The Book of Mormon title page uses the same language today. See also “The Testimony of Three Witnesses” in the front of the Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants 135:3. There are numerous examples of this phrase in Joseph Smith’s histories, journals, and letters. For two examples, first see an 1833 letter from Joseph Smith to Noah Saxton, a newspaper editor in Rochester, New York, where he said the Book of Mormon was “translated into our own Language by the gift and power of God.” Joseph Smith, “Letter to Noah C. Saxton, 4 January 1833,” in *Documents, Volume 2: July 1831–January 1833*, ed. Matthew C. Godfrey, Mark Ashurst-McGee, Grant Underwood, Robert J. Woodford, and William G. Hartley, Vol. 2 of the Documents series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, Richard Lyman Bushman, and Matthew J. Grow (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2013), 354. The second example is the Prophet’s explanation to Robert Matthews in 1835 where he related that he “translated them [the plates] into the English language; by the gift and power of God.” Joseph Smith, “Conversations with Robert Matthews, 9–11 November 1835,” in *Documents, Volume 5: October 1835–January 1838*, ed. Brent M.

- Rogers, Elizabeth A. Kuehn, Christian K. Heimbürger, Max H Parkin, Alexander L. Baugh, and Steven C. Harper, Vol. 5 of the Documents series of *The Joseph Smith Papers* (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2017), 44. See also 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; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2015), especially 61–78.
15. Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon: Part Four, Alma 21–25* (Provo, UT: The Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, Brigham Young University, 2007), 2361–63.
 16. See 1 Nephi 16:10, 16; 18:12, 21. Nephi recorded that the device also had words from the Lord to guide and correct them (1 Nephi 16:26–27).
 17. Mormon merely explains that Ammaron told him he was “a sober child” and “quick to observe” (Mormon 1:2). Mormon assures us that he was a “descendent of Nephi” (1:5) but offers no additional reason why Ammaron would give him such a responsibility.
 18. “Hope of Israel,” Worldwide Youth Devotional, 3 June 2018, <https://www.ChurchofJesusChrist.org/study/broadcasts/worldwide-devotional-for-young-adults/2018/06/hope-of-israel>.