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WRITING THE THINGS
OF GOD*Terry Színk*

Latter-day Saints are a record-keeping people. We keep institutional records such as sacrament meeting attendance, home and visiting teaching percentages, and priesthood ordinations. Leaders have also encouraged us to keep journals and write personal histories. For example, President Spencer W. Kimball urged, “We renew our appeal for the keeping of individual histories and accounts of sacred experiences.”¹

Likewise, the Book of Mormon provides ample evidence of the importance of writing and reading records. From Nephi to Moroni, the prophets of the Book of Mormon viewed the keeping of records as a sacred commandment. It also contains examples of the consequences of not abiding by this commandment. This chapter will demonstrate the importance the Book of Mormon places on record keeping and journal writing, using several examples that demonstrate principles of personal record keeping.

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WRITING IN THE BOOK OF MORMON

More than any other volume of scripture, the Book of Mormon is concerned with writing. Various forms of the word *write* occur 344 times in the Book of Mormon, compared to 258 in the Old Testament, 214 in the New Testament, and 110 in the Doctrine and Covenants and Pearl of Great Price. When we expand the search to include words like *engrave* or *plates*, which describe specific ways the records were kept, the Book of Mormon emphasis on writing is even more pronounced.² Furthermore, the Book of Mormon contains several instances in which writers are specifically commanded by God to write (see 1 Nephi 9:5; 19:1; 2 Nephi 33:11; 3 Nephi 16:4; 23:13; 24:1; 26:12; 30:1; Ether 4:1; 4:5; 5:1).

The first Book of Mormon prophet to receive this command was Nephi. God first instructed Nephi to make plates that would contain the complete record of the Nephite people (see 1 Nephi 19:1–2). Those plates contained genealogies, accounts of wars, history, and information regarding the reign of the kings as well as the complete prophecies of Lehi, Nephi, and presumably other Nephite prophets. This record, which Nephi called the “first plates” (1 Nephi 19:2) and Jacob called the “larger plates” (Jacob 3:13), was handed down from king to king, beginning with Nephi and ending with King Mosiah II (see Words of Mormon 1:10–11). Mosiah, the last king of the Nephites, turned the plates over to Alma the Younger, who became the chief judge upon Mosiah’s death. We can perhaps consider these plates to be a kind of public record.

God also commanded Nephi to make a second set of plates. Nephi made these plates and began writing on them thirty years after the group had left Jerusalem (see 2 Nephi 5:28–30). Nephi explained that these plates were not to be complete but that they were to contain things “pleasing unto God” (2 Nephi 5:32) and the “more plain and precious parts” of his “ministry and the prophecies.” God stated that two of the purposes of these plates were “for the instruction of my people” and “for other wise purposes” (1 Nephi 19:3). In hindsight, we understand that one of these “wise purposes” was that the record on these plates was meant to take the place of the 116 pages lost by Martin Harris.³

NEPHI AND JACOB AND THE THINGS OF THE SOUL

If we understand the first set of plates to be a type of public record, then the second set of plates, which Jacob described as small, is more of a private record. Perhaps this is why Nephi included “the things of [his] soul” (2 Nephi 4:15). Indeed, this record contains the type of biographical details that have made Nephi one of the most beloved figures in all scripture. The reader admires Nephi’s resolve to follow God’s commandments (see 1 Nephi 3:7), his anguish because of his failed relationship with his elder brothers (see 1 Nephi 17:45–47), his sincere desire to lead his people in righteousness (see 2 Nephi 33:3–4), and, most of all, his great love for Jesus Christ (see 2 Nephi 25:12–13, 25–26; 33:9–11).

Nephi’s small plates are an example of what good personal histories and journal writing should be. He not only recorded events from his life but also explained how those events affected him. He wrote about what mattered in his life, not shying away from painful episodes. He bore strong personal testimony and described how he had obtained that testimony. In writing our journals and personal histories, we should follow this example and write those details of our lives that will enrich the faith of our descendants and draw them unto Christ.

This second set of plates did not pass down from king to king but went from Nephi to his brother Jacob, who seems to have become the spiritual leader of the community. Nephi made sure Jacob understood the purposes and nature of the record entrusted to him. Jacob began his portion of the plates by repeating the instructions Nephi had given him. He was to include only the things he considered “most precious” and focus on sacred preaching, great revelation, and prophesying. Jacob stated categorically that he would not write Nephite history because the other plates would contain a complete history (see Jacob 1:2). Jacob certainly followed his brother’s instructions. A glance at the content of the book of Jacob reveals the text of an important talk he delivered at the temple (see Jacob 2), Zenos’s prophetic allegory of the olive tree (see Jacob 5–6), and the confrontation with the anti-Christ Sherem (see Jacob 7). There is little of what we would call political history: Jacob did not even name the king who succeeded Nephi. Jacob’s

purpose was identical to his brother's: to help people come unto Christ. Jacob then delivered the plates to his son Enos (see Jacob 7:27).

ENOS'S PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

Jacob stated that he had relayed Nephi's instructions regarding the plates to his son Enos (see Jacob 7:27). Although Enos did not describe his contribution as "precious" as his father Jacob (see Jacob 1:2) and his uncle Nephi did (see 1 Nephi 19:3), his decisions regarding what to include in the record indicate understanding of the nature and purpose of the plates.

He began his story telling of his long prayer to God, which he described as a "wrestling" (see Enos 1:2). The account of Enos's prayer can teach us important things. God promised Enos three things: (1) his sins were forgiven, (2) the Nephites would be preserved in their land according to their obedience to His commandments, and (3) the Lamanites would not be destroyed and a record of the Nephites would be preserved and brought to them so that they might someday believe and be saved. Note that in answering Enos's prayers, God did not reveal anything new. He had already made the promise numerous times that the Nephites would be protected in the land if they kept the commandments (see 1 Nephi 13:30; 2 Nephi 1:7, 4:4). He had also previously promised that a remnant of the Lamanites would survive and that the Nephite record would someday come forth unto them (see 1 Nephi 13:31-40; 2 Nephi 27:6-20). What makes the account of Enos's prayer memorable is how his encounter with the divine changed him. Notice how his concerns shifted as he prayed. At first, he was worried about his own welfare. He cried "unto [God] in mighty prayer and supplication for [his] own soul" (Enos 1:4). After his first prayer was answered and he was assured that his sins were forgiven, he continued to pray, but his thoughts were now for "the welfare of [his] brethren, the Nephites" (Enos 1:9). Upon hearing the Lord's promise to them, Enos's circle of concern widened to include "[his] brethren, the Lamanites" (Enos 1:11). As Enos prayed, his soul expanded to include even those who might previously have been considered enemies.

Enos's account illustrates another principle of good personal record keeping—personal history and journal entries do not need to contain

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new revelations from God to be useful and interesting to our posterity. The facts of the gospel do not change, but they can and should change us, and that is why we need to record our relationship with these truths.

JAROM'S MISUNDERSTANDING

Enos's son Jarom seems to have not understood the nature or purpose of the record to be kept upon the plates. He began his portion, stating, "Now behold, I, Jarom, write a few words according to the commandment of my father, Enos, that our genealogy may be kept" (Jarom 1:1). As noted, Nephi made the small plates to write the things "pleasing to God." He intended that the genealogy and history be written on the first set of plates. Jarom continued, "I shall not write the things of my prophesying, nor of my revelations" (Jarom 1:2). Again, this is at variance with the original purpose of the record.

We should not think Jarom an evil man. He stated that he did have prophecies and revelations but decided not to include them because his fathers had already revealed the plan of salvation and "this sufficeth [him]" (Jarom 1:2). Instead of prophecy or revelations, Jarom wrote a general evaluation of the Nephites, a little about their culture, and the fact that they were in a state of apostasy. I believe that Jarom made a mistake in not writing his prophecies and revelations because the information he gave is, for the most part, forgettable. It does not have the impact Jacob's preaching or Enos's prayer have, and it does nothing to help bring us to Christ. In fact, Jarom does not so much as mention the name of Jesus Christ in his book. Jarom may have gone against Nephi's commandment that his seed "not occupy these plates with things which are not of worth unto the children of men" (1 Nephi 6:6). Jarom's book teaches us to make our histories and journals personal. Simply writing about the general events of the day is not enough. We need to inject ourselves into what we write if we are to have an impact upon those who read our words. President Joseph Fielding Smith commented on this: "Some people keep a daily record; about like this: 'Got up in the morning, made the beds, washed the dishes, went to the picture show, came home, went to bed'; and so it goes. That means nothing. If you have accomplished *something worth while* during the day, put it down; it may be of use to posterity."⁴ Certainly every one of us has accomplished

something worthwhile in our lives. We should commit these accomplishments to paper for our posterity.

PERSONAL PROBLEMS IN PERSONAL RECORDS

Omni continued his father's misunderstanding about the purpose of the plates. He also wrote that the plates were to preserve genealogy. Omni also stated that he was "a wicked man" who had "not kept the statutes and the commandments of the Lord as [he] ought to have done" (Omni 1:2). However, we should not be too quick to condemn Omni. We might ask ourselves, Who among us has kept the statutes and commandments of the Lord as he or she ought to have done? The fact that Omni admits that he was a wicked man is at least evidence of humility. Wicked people do not normally acknowledge the fact that they are wicked. A clue to Omni's personality may be found in his reporting that he "fought much with the sword to preserve [his] people, the Nephites, from falling into the hands of their enemies, the Lamanites" (Omni 1:2) and that there were "many seasons of serious war and bloodshed" (Omni 1:3). Omni may have been a victim of what has been called "soldier's heart," "shellshock," and, most recently, "combat stress reaction." Often those called upon to defend themselves and their families and country in war are affected negatively by their military service.

Omni's contribution to the book that bears his name raises the issue of what not to include in our journals and personal histories. Certainly we should not gloss over our problems or personal failings, but we should not dwell upon our sins or weakness, nor should we write too explicitly about them. Our posterity do not need to read about the exact nature of our shortcomings but rather on how we battled and overcame them.

THE DANGER OF PROCRASTINATION

Omni passed the plates on to his son Amaron. We can perhaps best understand his short contribution by examining the one verse his brother Chemish wrote: "Now I, Chemish, write what few things I write, in the same book with my brother; for behold, I saw the last which he wrote, that he wrote it with his own hand; and he wrote it in

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the day that he delivered them unto me. And after this manner we keep the records, for it is according to the commandments of our fathers. And I make an end” (Omni 1:9). One possibility is that Amaron was a procrastinator. His father had given him the responsibility to maintain the record, but he may have put this off until he delivered the plates to his brother, writing a brief passage on the very day he gave them up. Certainly there are other possible scenarios which may explain why Amaron’s contribution was so brief.⁵ Amaron, however, does appear to be a righteous individual. He wrote that the “the more wicked part of the Nephites were destroyed” (Omni 1:5) in accordance with the words of the Lord.

Without question, procrastination is an enemy of good journal keeping and personal history writing. The advantage writing has over memory is that it does not change with time. A Chinese proverb states, “The palest ink is better than the best memory.” The more time that passes between an event and an account of it, the greater chance that details will be changed or lost.

Chemish’s son Abinadom wrote two scant verses, reporting that warfare between the Nephites and the Lamanites continued. He also wrote, “I know of no revelation save that which has been written, neither prophecy; wherefore, that which is sufficient is written. And I make an end” (Omni 1:11). It may not always be necessary to write about new revelations or prophecies. Personal responses to the gospel are often some of the most interesting parts of journals and personal histories.

AMALEKI’S RETURN TO GOOD RECORD KEEPING

This brings us to Abinadom’s son Amaleki, the most significant writer in the book of Omni.⁶ Not only did Amaleki write almost two-thirds of this small book, but he was the first writer in the small plates of Nephi after Enos who mentioned Christ. Amaleki wrote: “And now, my beloved brethren, I would that ye should come unto Christ, who is the Holy One of Israel, and partake of his salvation, and the power of his redemption. Yea, come unto him, and offer your whole souls as an offering unto him, and continue in fasting and praying, and endure to the end; and as the Lord liveth ye will be saved” (Omni 1:26). He clearly

understood the purpose of the plates that had been handed down from Nephi. As Dennis L. Largey has written, “Amaleki’s writing is consistent with the commandment given by his ancestor Nephi that the small plates were to persuade readers to ‘come unto’ Christ.”⁷

Amaleki also provided important historical information. He explained that God had commanded the Nephites to leave the land of Nephi. Those who followed King Mosiah escaped destruction and discovered the people of Zarahemla. These people descended from a group that had left the Old World at the time of the destruction of Jerusalem and included Mulek, who was a son of Zedekiah (see Omni 14–19; Helaman 6:10; 8:21). Amaleki’s description of the people of Zarahemla included the fact that because they brought no records from the Old World, their language had become corrupted. Perhaps this may have been the cause of their serious contentions and their loss of religious faith, as Amaleki mentioned. He explained that the Nephites taught the people of Zarahemla their language and that Mosiah became the king of the united people.

Throughout the rest of the history of this united people, the Nephites appeared to have dominated politically and culturally though the people of Zarahemla were numerically superior.⁸ All the kings, high priests, and chief judges of the Nephite people were descendants of Nephi rather than descendants of the people of Zarahemla. Perhaps this is because the Nephites had a culture of record keeping. Pete Carril, the great basketball coach of Princeton University, relates a truth he learned from his father: “In this life . . . the big, strong guys are always taking from the smaller, weaker guys, but . . . the smart take from the strong.”⁹

Certainly keeping and reading records makes one smart. The book of Mosiah offers an example of the power of writing. The Lamanites appointed Amulon, leader of the apostate priests of King Noah, as a teacher. Although they did not teach about God, Amulon and his priests “taught them that they should keep their record, and that they might write one to another. And thus the Lamanites began to increase in riches, and began to trade one with another and wax great, and began to be a cunning and a wise people, as to the wisdom of the world” (Mosiah 24: 6–7). President Gordon B. Hinckley has mentioned the

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educational value of record keeping: “To you women of today, who are old or young, may I suggest that you write, that you keep journals, that you express your thoughts on paper. Writing is a great discipline. It is a tremendous educational effort. It will assist you in various ways, and you will bless the lives of many—your families and others—now and in the years to come, as you put on paper some of your experiences and some of your musings.”¹⁰ As writers record the events, accomplishments, and feelings of their lives, their ability to express themselves will grow.

BENJAMIN TEACHES HIS SONS

Wise Benjamin, in preparing his sons to take his place as king, emphasized the importance of writing and reading, especially sacred texts, in preserving civilization. Mormon explained that Benjamin taught his sons the language of the plates “that thereby they might become men of understanding; and that they might know concerning the prophecies which had been spoken by the mouths of their fathers, which were delivered them by the hand of the Lord” (Mosiah 1:2). He explained it would be impossible to remember all the commandments. He further pointed out that without the written records, the Nephites would have dwindled in unbelief as the Lamanites had. Benjamin understood that writing is one of the greatest tools mankind possesses. Through written records, we can read the wisdom and folly of previous generations. As King Benjamin pointed out to his sons, the tool of writing means that we can pass on the accumulated knowledge of mankind to future generations. The collective knowledge of a culture is as large as the written records that exist in that culture. Alma understood this too. While handing over the sacred plates to his son, he said that the written records had “enlarged the memory” of the people (Alma 37:8).

PRESERVING THE RECORD

We can learn one final lesson about journal and personal history writing from the authors of the Book of Mormon. Jacob wrote, “Whatsoever things we write upon anything save it be upon plates must perish and vanish away; but we can write a few words upon plates, which will give our children, and also our beloved brethren, a small

degree of knowledge concerning us, or concerning their fathers” (Jacob 4:2). He understood the importance of not only writing records but also preserving them so future generations could read them. As we record our lives for our posterity, we should take care to do so in a way that our records will be preserved. We must first use an appropriate medium. We may be tempted by the ease of recording our thoughts in the latest technology. However, we should remember that the very speed with which technology advances may threaten the records kept by it. Documents can become inaccessible as the word-processing programs used to produce them become obsolete. Records stored on floppy disks may no longer be read as computer manufacturers replace the floppy drives with Zip drives and subsequently with flash memory. Certainly important records should not be left only on hard drives, which can crash, destroying all the information they contain. Printed copies on acid-free paper should be produced and stored in safe places. Perhaps we should take a lesson from the ancients. Some of the oldest writing has been preserved by very low technology—incised on rocks, or written on baked clay tablets. Joseph was able to read the record of the Nephites because it had been engraved on gold plates, a “low-tech” method of preservation.

Once produced, records can best be preserved by making multiple copies and distributing them far and wide. Single copies of records can be destroyed in fires, floods, or other natural disasters. Multiple copies ensure that if one copy is lost, others will survive.

CONCLUSION

The Book of Mormon not only demonstrates the importance of record keeping but also gives examples of how good records should be kept. We have seen that personal records should record the personal feelings and accomplishments of the record keeper without dwelling excessively on sins and personal problems. Furthermore, the Book of Mormon has shown that one need not write about visions or new revelations to produce a record that will be interesting and important to future readers. One wonders if some authors knew the future of their writings. Did Enos know that millions would be uplifted by the account of his great prayer? This should inspire us in our writing. Future

generations may well look upon our efforts in the same way we view Nephi's writing, as scripture.

NOTES

1. Spencer W. Kimball, *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, ed. Edward L. Kimball (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982), 349.

2. Versions of the word *engrave* appear 46 times in the Book of Mormon, compared to 11 times in the Bible. There are 147 instances of the word *plates* in the Book of Mormon, compared to 11 in the Bible. Kent Jackson has noted that the Book of Mormon is a "thoroughly self-conscious book" that is replete with references to its own writing (see "Joseph Smith and the Historicity of the Book of Mormon," in *Historicity and the Latter-day Saint Scriptures*, ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson [Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2001], 125–26).

3. See D&C 3; 10:1–46; and Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957), 1:20–31.

4. Joseph Fielding Smith Jr., *Doctrines of Salvation* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1955), 2:204.

5. Jarom mentioned that the plates were "small" (Jarom 1:2, 14), which may explain why he and the authors of the book of Omni did not write much. Amaleki reported at the end of his portion of the book of Omni that the plates were "full" (Omni 1:30). However, one wonders that if this were the problem why did they not simply make additional plates.

6. Victor L. Ludlow has suggested that this book be named for Amaleki, who wrote almost two-thirds of it ("Scribes and Scriptures," in *Studies in Scripture, Vol. 7: 1 Nephi to Alma 29*, ed. Kent P. Jackson [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987], 201).

7. Dennis L. Largey, "Amaleki," in *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, ed. Dennis L. Largey (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 44.

8. Mormon explained, "There were not so many of the children of Nephi, or so many of those who were descendants of Nephi, as there were of the people of Zarahemla" (Mosiah 25:2).

9. Pete Carril with Dan White, *The Smart Take from the Strong* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), 17.

10. Gordon B. Hinckley, in Conference Report, October 1984, 111.