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# TITLE PAGE; WITNESSES; 1 NEPHI 1-3

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Book of Mormon, Adult Institute Class, Monday, 31 Aug 2009 (revised 2024)

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## TITLE PAGE

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**Joseph Smith:** “I wish also to mention here, that the Title Page of the Book of Mormon is a literal translation, taken from the very last leaf, on the left hand side of the collection or book of plates, which contained the record which has been translated, the language of the whole running [the] same as all Hebrew writing in general; and that, said Title Page is not by any means a modern composition either of mine or of any other man’s who has lived or does live in this generation.”<sup>1</sup> Thus because the title page was the last thing written on the plates, we surmise that Moroni was its author, since he finished writing the book.

Three purposes are outlined in the second paragraph:

- “to show unto the remnant of the House of Israel what great things the Lord hath done for their fathers”
- “that they [the House of Israel] may know the covenants of the Lord, that they are not cast off forever”
- “to the convincing of the Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the Christ, the Eternal God, manifesting himself unto all nations.

The scriptures bring many phrases into our lives. In some cases, people say the phrase without being aware of its origin. The Title Page may have one of those: “if there are faults they are the mistakes of men.”

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## INTRODUCTION

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Written in our day, this introduction gives a brief summary of what the Book of Mormon is, its message, and some of its history, along with an invitation to read, ponder, and pray about the book. One of the notable changes in recent years is in the first paragraph, stating that the Lamanites “are *among* the ancestors of the American Indians” (emphasis added). Older versions said that they were the ancestors but it’s clear from many forms of external evidences that the inhabitants of North and South America have many ancestral lines.

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## WITNESSES

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<sup>1</sup> JS, History, [ca. June 1839–ca. 1841]; handwriting of James Mulholland and Robert B. Thompson; sixty-one pages; in JS History, 1838–1856, vol. A-1, CHL.

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## THE THREE WITNESSES

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Joseph and Martin Harris had translated the first manuscript by June 1828. When Martin lost that manuscript, the translation stopped and Joseph lost his gift as well as the plates. These were restored later that summer (probably 22 September 1828; D&C 10:1-3), but Martin was not allowed to continue as scribe. The work appears to have stopped as Joseph's time and resources were limited by the necessity of supporting his family.

During this time, Joseph had received a revelation about other witnesses to support his own (D&C 5:11-17).

Everything changed relating to the translation on 6 April 1829, when Oliver Cowdery arrived in Harmony, PA, to assist the Prophet. The two of them forged ahead and finished the translation by June 1829. During this time, the Aaronic and Melchizedek priesthoods were restored to the two of them. During the translation, they came across two more passages that spoke of the three witnesses (Ether 5:2-4 and 2 Nephi 27:12).

At the end of June, after the translation was nearly finished, Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris asked Joseph to inquire of the Lord if they might be the three witnesses. Their answer is recorded in D&C 17.

The account is best told through Joseph's words (Joseph Smith—History 1:54-55).

Oliver was selected as a witness because he was involved in the translation and other great events of those days. Martin Harris, likewise, was involved in the early translation and supported Joseph Smith financially during this time. David Whitmer's involvement is a bit less known but no less important—he made the sacrifice to go get Joseph and Oliver in Harmony and bring them back to Fayette so the translation could be finished in peace and the book could be printed.

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## THE EIGHT WITNESSES

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Joseph Smith offers little background to the next set of witnesses. But his mother, Lucy Mack Smith, says that Joseph was instructed to also get eight other men as witnesses. He took the Whitmers (including Hiram Page, a brother-in-law) with him on a trip to his parents' home, then accompanied by his father and two brothers, went into a grove near their home (perhaps the same place as the grove where the First Vision occurred). Joseph had been told that a Nephite would deliver the plates to that spot at this time. The men saw no angelic visitor but were able to see and touch the plates for themselves. Some accounts describe this as two events, one with Smith family members and one with the Whitmers.

The witnesses consisted of five Whitmers and three Smiths:

- Christian Whitmer
- Jacob Whitmer
- Peter Whitmer, Jr.
- John Whitmer
- Hiram Page (married to a Whitmer)
- Joseph Smith, Sr.
- Hyrum Smith

- Samuel H. Smith

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## OTHER WITNESSES

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Besides the ‘formal’ witnesses whose testimonies are published in the Book of Mormon, there were a number of ‘informal’ witnesses.

William Smith, Joseph’s younger brother, is a great example. The night Joseph Smith brought the plates home the first time, he had wrapped them in his coat or “tow frock.” Upon arriving home, he put them in a pillowcase. Joseph was forbidden to let anyone see the plates, but apparently had permission to let his family touch them. William Smith testified all his life that he held the plates wrapped in Joseph’s coat and then in the pillowcase. He could feel the shape, the edges of the pages, and the rings holding the plates together. He estimated that they weighed about sixty pounds.

Joseph’s mother, Lucy, was allowed to not only hold the wrapped plates, but saw the Urim and Thummim and breastplate.

Martin Harris’ wife (later involved in the loss of the first manuscript) and daughter both lifted the plates in a box where they were stored. They were “about as much as she could lift.”

Emma Smith never saw the plates, but encountered them daily since she was in the house with Joseph during the whole translation, even acting as scribe for some of it. She talks about moving them about to do her work, about feeling their shape under the linen cloth covering them, and about lifting the pages and hearing metallic rustling as she did so.

Perhaps the most remarkable story was given by her son about Mary Whitmer, wife of Peter Whitmer, Sr. Being burdened with caring for not only her own family, but Joseph, Emma, and Oliver during the translation, she was one day greeted by a man who told her, “You have been very faithful and diligent in your labors, but you are tried because of your toil; it is proper therefore that you should receive a witness that your faith may be strengthened.” He showed her the plates, turned the pages so she could see them, and promised her great blessings if she continued faithful. Later she said that the man was Nephi himself, and she was always a strong believer in the Book of Mormon as a result.

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## THE TESTIMONY OF THE PROPHET JOSEPH SMITH

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This is an excerpt from Joseph Smith—History in the Pearl of Great Price.

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## A BRIEF EXPLANATION ABOUT THE BOOK OF MORMON

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As explained on this page, there are four types of plates mentioned in the record (really five). [**Read the page**]

The translation process was described by many witnesses. Some recall Joseph using the Urim and Thummim, others a seer stone which he put in his hat to better view. All agree that the words of the translation were given to him, including the spelling of words and names.

Starting in the 1980s, a “critical text project” on the manuscripts and publications of the Book of Mormon was begun under the leadership of Royal Skousen of BYU. Still being published, this work is up to 8 volumes now with several more planned. As a result of their efforts, the following items have been learned and noted.

1. Joseph Smith spelled out unfamiliar names, such as Coriantumr (first spelled Coriantummer by Oliver Cowdery, then corrected).
2. Some errors crept into the text over the years that make more sense in the original manuscripts. For example, 1 Nephi 12:18 reads “the **word** of the justice of the Eternal God,” but the original reads, “the **sword** of the justice of the Eternal God.”
3. Alma quoted Nephi on several occasions without saying so. For example, Alma 36:22 quotes 1 Nephi 1:8.
4. In some cases, we don’t have the original manuscript (it has been partly destroyed), so some readings are suggested by cannot be confirmed. This includes 2 Nephi 2:11, which reads “neither holiness nor misery” but should probably read “neither happiness nor misery.” This decision is made based on other texts with similar wording.
5. In some cases, the original manuscript is wrong and is corrected later. For example, 1 Nephi 7:5 says, in the original, “Ishmael and also his hole hole.” The printer’s manuscript reads, “Ishmael and also his household.”
6. Such errors show that the scribe was hearing the dictation, not seeing a text. There are many examples of minor mistakes such as “and” and “an”; “weed” and “reed”; “him” and “them”; or “meet” and “beat.” Many of these mistakes are corrected in the printer’s manuscript.
7. More errors come from textual transmission than the original dictation. That is, errors continued to be made with subsequent editions. Many of these were corrected in the 1981 edition. None have blocked anyone from receiving a testimony of the work.
8. Later editions “corrected” some phrasing that was poor English, making it more ‘standard’.
9. The original text more closely reflects the English of the 1500s than the time of Joseph Smith.
10. There are many Hebraisms in the text, such as multiple “ands” or the possessive construct using “of” (rod of iron). There are more such Hebraisms in the original manuscripts and the 1830 Book of Mormon than in the more modern ones, because they tend to be poor English and thus get edited out.
11. The printer’s manuscript contains a number of changes that are actually incorrect and more complex, going against the ‘normal’ scribal pattern of simplifying things.
12. The 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon was used to make the changes to the book of Isaiah in the Joseph Smith Translation.
13. Joseph Smith wrote exactly 28 words of the original manuscript. Perhaps this is when Oliver tried to translate, or when Oliver simply took a break.
14. Chapter and other divisions are not in the original manuscripts, but were added by the printer.
15. The 116 pages included not only the book of Lehi but up to two chapters of Mosiah (the manuscript has Mosiah starting at “chapter 3”). This explains why Mosiah starts in the middle of the story, has no colophon (book heading), and is not named after the first major character in the book (unlike all the other books).

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## 1 NEPHI 1-3

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1:1 **goodly parents.** What makes them “goodly”? Some have pointed out that this is Nephi’s explanation as to why he was taught to read and write. The meaning probably has to do with the wealth and status of his family—because there were “goodly” (had means), Nephi was able to get schooling.<sup>2</sup> Others believe that “goodly” relates to Nephi’s name, which likely means “good.”

2:2 **learning of the Jews and the language of the Egyptians.** The language of the Egyptians is an efficient writing system. Hebrew is alphabetic, but Egyptian is based on ideas, with one character able to say several things. The idea of Hebrew being written in anything other than Hebrew script in 1830 was absurd, but today a number of texts have been discovered, including some of scripture, where Hebrew is written in another script, including Egyptian.

1:4 **the first year of the reign of Zedekiah.** 597 B.C., according to astronomically-correlated Babylonian records. This is when Lehi has his vision, not when they leave Jerusalem, though the latter was probably fairly soon after his vision (1 year?).

1:4 **there came many prophets.** This includes Lehi, Jeremiah, Zephaniah, Habakkuk, and perhaps Nahum in Jerusalem. Daniel and Ezekiel were contemporaries in Babylon. And one prophet, Urijah (Jeremiah 26:20-23) left no book of his own but was killed for his preaching at the same time as Lehi.

1:6 **there came a pillar of fire.** This is the first of Lehi’s seven visions in the Book of Mormon. Seven is an important number to the ancient Hebrews signifying completeness or perfection relating to God. It is unlikely that Joseph Smith would have known that or been able to weave seven visions so seamlessly into the text. The seven visions (mostly dreams—later, Nephi’s are day-time visions) are:

1. The vision on the road (1 Ne 1:5-7). This is the initial theophany as recorded by many prophets, including Isaiah (Isa 6); Jeremiah (Jer 1); Ezekiel (Ezek 1); Zephaniah (Zeph 1); and Zechariah (Zech 1).
2. The vision on his bed (1 Ne 1:8-15). Vv. 13-14 are direct quotations from Lehi’s record. Here is theophany part two, plus Lehi learns of the coming destruction of Jerusalem through a book. 1 Ne 1:19 also notes that he understood from this vision about the coming of the Messiah.
3. The command to leave (1 Ne 2:1-2). Another quote from Lehi’s record. Notice that the whole departure and the journey of thousands of miles with great hardship started with a *dream*, to which Lehi was immediately obedient.
4. The command to get the plates (1 Ne 3:2-6). But now the commandment is to the sons through the father, and we start to see the doubts from the older sons.
5. The tree of life and the restoration of Israel (1 Ne 8:2-35; 10:2-15). We’ll study this dream in more detail later, along with Nephi’s parallel vision, but this was a powerful teaching moment for Lehi, and Nephi mostly quotes from his father’s record in recording it, though because he is going to write his similar experience in great detail, doesn’t write down everything his father saw (1 Ne 8:29; 9:1). But note that Lehi’s dream is not just the tree, but includes a vision of the destruction of Jerusalem, the coming of the Messiah and his prophet (John the Baptist), Jesus’ teachings and atonement, the Gentiles, and their going to the promised land.

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<sup>2</sup> *Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon* by Joseph McConkie and Robert Millet, 1:19.

6. Chastisement after murmuring (1 Ne 16:24-27). After Nephi's bow broke, even Lehi murmured. But when the new bow is constructed, Lehi prays and is chastened through the Lord's voice and the Liahona.
7. The confirmation of Jerusalem's destruction (2 Ne 1:4). This fulfills his earlier prophesying.

In addition, Lehi had several prophecies, including:

1. Jacob on fidelity in marriage (Jacob 2:23-33). Starting in v. 25 Jacob is quoting the Lord. But the source he credits for this information at the end is his father, Lehi (Jacob 2:34). Jacob is quoting from Lehi's prophecies.
2. Lehi's blessings to his family (2 Ne 1:6 – 4:12). Much of this is in Lehi's voice ("I, Lehi", as in 1:6), so a direct quotation from Lehi's prophetic record. Here Lehi prophecies of things like Joseph Smith (3:6-11, 13-15) and Sidney Rigdon (3:17-18); the Book of Mormon (3:12); the role of opposition (2:10-12); and the Messiah (2:6-10).
3. Alma about the plates of brass (Alma 37:3-4). Alma quotes "our fathers" that the plates would be preserved and "go forth unto every nation, kindred, tongue, and people." Other verses in the chapter referencing "our fathers" shows that he is mainly referring to Lehi (Alma 37:17, 38-39, 43-46).

**1:17 *an abridgment of the record of my father.*** Nephi is condensing his father's writings, which are now lost to us because they were at the beginning on the 116 pages. But they were not lost to Alma and others, who quote from them. For example, it's how we know the name of the instrument which Nephi calls "Director" but Alma refers to as the Liahona.

**1:20 *I, Nephi, will show unto you.*** Pres Tanner (Redmond Stake president) pointed out last night that this is one of several key Book of Mormon phrases that are designed to key us in on important lessons. Another common one is "and thus we see."

**2:4 *he departed into the wilderness.*** This language shows that they probably left Jerusalem headed immediately east, then turned south on the other side of the Dead Sea. Otherwise, it would not have been "wilderness" but still part of Zedekiah's kingdom, and thus potentially unsafe.

**2:4 *family, and provisions, and tents.*** This shows they used pack animals, probably camels. Their provisions and tents alone would have weighed hundreds of pounds—not possible to be carried by a group of men.

**2:5 *down by the borders near the shore of the Red Sea.*** The family went south until they reached Aqaba, an eastern finger of the Red Sea. This journey would have taken them about a week from Jerusalem.

**2:5 *my mother, Sariah.*** One of only three women mentioned by name in the Book of Mormon. The family inventory does not include any sisters here, though they are mentioned later (2 Nephi 5:6). Could be he just didn't mention them, or it could be they didn't join the party until Ishmael arrived (leading to the conclusion that they were married to Ishmael's sons).

**2:6 *traveled three days.*** Loaded camels can go about 25 miles per day. So this journey is about 75 miles. Remarkable that a valley that matches the one described here in all details was recently found about 75 miles south of Aqaba.

2:6 **river of water**. An odd phrase to our ears—what else would it be a river of? But to the bedouin this makes perfect sense. A “river of water” is one that has water all the time. A “river” is dry most of the time—what we today call a *wadi*.

2:7 **built an altar of stones**. See Exodus 20:24-26 or Deuteronomy 27:5-8. Lehi probably built the altar and wrote the words of the Law on the stones, as prescribed by Moses.

2:13 **Neither did they believe that Jerusalem, that great city, could be destroyed**. It has survived the Assyrian assault a century earlier and had withstood all invaders so far. Why should the Lord abandon it now and let it be destroyed? It would only be bad for his image (weaker than the attacking gods).

2:16 **did visit me, and did soften my heart**. Nephi wondered about his father’s words, too, but decided to turn to the Lord for guidance, and got his answer.

2:20-21 **prosper . . . cut off**. This is the first mention of the famous Book of Mormon doctrine that is binary in nature (like the gospel of John and the book of Revelation): black/white, either/or, etc.

3:3 **Laban hath a record**. In a time when scriptures were hard to come by, Laban somehow possessed a copy of the scriptures on brass plates. The origin of these are not known, but the fact that they contained some of the writings of Jeremiah show that they were kept current, and not just copies of older records.

3:9 **took our journey with our tents**. No small task—to load the camels and travel back would be at least 10 days each way, plus time to do their business in the city. No wonder later Sariah is worried that they’ve been gone so long.

3:14-15 The brothers are about to give up and go home, but Nephi makes a solemn oath “As the Lord liveth” and so commits himself to accomplishing what his father—and the Lord—has asked them to do.

3:29 **the Lord hath chosen him to be a ruler**. This is the first the brothers learn of Nephi’s calling—from an angel.

3:31 **How is it possible**. They doubt even the words of an angel.

3:31 **he can command fifty**. A good Hebraism (a number with no noun) but also an indication of Laban’s position in Jerusalem—military commander.

## SOURCES

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