The Know

In 1984, John W. Welch observed that after Jacob some of
the keepers of the small plates “do not appear eager to write,
nor do they seem to have much to say.” While it is popular to
see them as lazy or negligent, Welch continued, “It is interesting,
however, that they manifest a strong sense of duty about
writing what little they do.” Jacob 1:1–4 documents the man-
date Nephi gave to his brother Jacob, and Jacob states that he
passed this same commandment on to his son Enos (Jacob 7:27).

Welch delineates seven obligations that can be found in Ne-
phi’s instructions in Jacob 1:1–4:

1. A record is to be kept on the small plates by way of
   commandment (Jacob 1:1–2).
2. The record must be personally written (Jacob 1:2).
3. The record must be preserved (Jacob 1:3).
4. The record must handed down within the lineage of
   Jacob from generation to generation (Jacob 1:3).
5. The record should include: (a) a few things which the
   writer considered most precious; (b) sacred preaching;
   and (c) great revelation or prophesying (Jacob 1:4). Welch
   stressed the important caveat, “The record keeper was
   only expected to record these things ‘if there were’ such
   things to be found in his lifetime.”
6. The record was only to lightly cover the history of the
   people of Nephi (Jacob 1:2).
7. The words on the record were meant, “as much as it
   were possible for Christ’s sake, and for the sake of our
   people” (Jacob 1:4).

The writings of Jacob and each of his descendants can be ex-
pressly evaluated on these criteria (see chart).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Jacob 1:8</th>
<th>Jacob 7:27</th>
<th>Jarom 1:1</th>
<th>Omni 1:3</th>
<th>Omnl 1:12</th>
<th>Amaron 1:8</th>
<th>Chemish 1:9</th>
<th>Abinadom 1:11</th>
<th>Amaleki 1:12</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>By way of commandment</td>
<td>Jacob 1:8</td>
<td>Jacob 7:27</td>
<td>Jarom 1:1</td>
<td>Omni 1:1</td>
<td>Omnl 1:3</td>
<td>Omnl 1:9</td>
<td>Omnl 1:10-11</td>
<td>Omnl 1:12</td>
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<tr>
<td>Personally Written</td>
<td>Jacob 3:14</td>
<td>Enos 1:11, 11, 17, 19</td>
<td>Jarom 1:1-2</td>
<td>Omni 1:3</td>
<td>Omnl 1:3</td>
<td>Omnl 1:4, 9</td>
<td>Omnl 1:9</td>
<td>Omnl 1:10</td>
<td>Omnl 1:12</td>
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<tr>
<td>Preserved</td>
<td>Enos 1:18</td>
<td>Enos 1:13-17</td>
<td>Jarom 1:14</td>
<td>Omnl 1:3</td>
<td>Omnl 1:8</td>
<td>Omnl 1:9</td>
<td>Omnl 1:11</td>
<td>Omnl 1:30</td>
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<tr>
<td>Handed Down</td>
<td>Jacob 7:27</td>
<td>Jarom 1:1</td>
<td>Jarom 1:15</td>
<td>Omnl 1:3</td>
<td>Omnl 1:8</td>
<td>Omnl 1:10</td>
<td>Omnl 1:12</td>
<td>Omnl 1:25</td>
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<tr>
<td>Includes few most precious things</td>
<td>Jacob 5:63,74</td>
<td>Enos 1:2-4</td>
<td>Jarom 1:1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Omnl 1:25</td>
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<tr>
<td>Contains revelation/prophesy</td>
<td>Jacob 4:4-6, 7:6, 11, 14, 19</td>
<td>Enos 1:19, 23, 26</td>
<td>Jarom 1:2, 4, 10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Light on History</td>
<td>Jacob 1:9-10, 3:13</td>
<td>Enos 1:20-21</td>
<td>Jarom 1:5-13</td>
<td>Omnl 1:3</td>
<td>Omnl 1:5</td>
<td>Omnl 1:10</td>
<td>Omnl 1:12-29</td>
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<tr>
<td>Writing for the sake of Christ</td>
<td>Jacob 4:11-12, 6:8-9, 7:6, 11, 14, 19</td>
<td>Enos 1:8, 26-27</td>
<td>Jarom 1:11</td>
<td>Omnl 1:27</td>
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<td>Writing for the sake of the people</td>
<td>Jacob 1:19, 7:9-11</td>
<td>Enos 1:3-11</td>
<td>Jarom 1:2, 12</td>
<td>Omnl 1:2</td>
<td></td>
<td>Omnl 1:10</td>
<td>Omnl 1:25-26</td>
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While not every author satisfies every criterion, given the brevity of their writings they actually do an impressive job covering the basics of Nephi’s directive. Each of these writers makes a point of writing in the first person: “I, Jarom” (Jarom 1:1), “I, Omni” (Omni 1:1), or “I, Amaron” (Omni 1:4), thus discharging the personal obligation Nephi gave to Jacob and his successors, as Jacob reported: “that I should write” (Jacob 1:2).  

Likewise, Chemish and others comment that they will write only a “few things” (Jacob 4:2; Jarom 1:1; Omni 1:4, 9, 22), as Nephi had also explicitly instructed (“few,” Jacob 1:2).

Even when these authors know of no new revelations, they typically certify that “I know of no revelation save that which has been written, neither prophecy; wherefore, that which is sufficient is written” (Omni 1:11; see also Jarom 1:2; Omni 1:25).

In addition, a careful reading of the vocabulary used by multiple of the authors of the small plates reveals that even in their brief comments, they consciously “echo the instructions of Nephi in many respects.” Welch concluded, “the textual evidence is persuasive that the command of Nephi was followed by Jacob and his descendants as they wrote the books of Jacob, Enos, Jarom, and Omni.”

The Why  
Recognizing the faithful adherence of Jacob, Enos, Jarom, Omni, Amaron, Chemish, Abinadom and Amaleki to Nephi’s instructions provides a different perspective on these often overlooked Book of Mormon authors. “Although these writers,” explained Welch, “are most often thought of simply for their terseness and lack of substance, modern readers should not overlook the fact that their brevity was dictated in large part by the small size of the plates and by the specific limitations of Nephi’s command.”

Using Nephi’s command as a template, modern readers can appreciate these small entries for their scribal attention to duty and detail. Although Nephi’s instructions to Jacob are soon forgotten by most people reading the Book of Mormon today, and probably passed just quickly through Joseph Smith’s consciousness as he labored over the task of rendering the text into English, Nephi’s mandate was not forgotten by Jacob and his seven successors.

Their diligent adherence to Nephi’s instructions explains why these small books follow a particular pattern in a manner that is worthy of admiration: “Modern readers should not underrate the consistent and subtle way in which the record shows that this command was dutifully obeyed to the end of this line of Jacob’s lineage.” While the temptation is to breeze through these brief entries on the small plates, careful reading and thinking about these often neglected voices rewards patient readers.

Further Reading  

Notes  


3. See Welch, “The Father’s Command,” 2–3. Welch actually outlines 8 criteria, but his (5) is not clearly stated in Nephi’s commission but seems implicit in (4), and therefore redundant. For these reasons, it has been omitted here.

4. While it is true that they could have personally written on the plates without writing in first person, the first person declarations are the evidence available to readers today they wrote directly and personally on the plates.


