



“Ultimas Paginas (2)” by Jorge Cocco

KnoWhy #477
October 18, 2018



WHEN DID MORMON WRITE HIS LETTER RECORDED IN MORONI 9?

“My beloved son, I write unto you again that ye may know that I am yet alive; but I write somewhat of that which is grievous.”

Moroni 9:1

THE KNOW

Moroni 9 contains a letter from Mormon, written to his son Moroni, which describes the spiritual decline of their people.¹ Although Mormon never said when he wrote this letter, it may be possible to identify its historical context and the approximate date of its composition by comparing its details with Mormon’s

own record.² In particular, it appears that the contents of Mormon’s letter correlate with the historical events and spiritual themes found in Mormon 4, 5, and 6.

Losses in Battle

In his letter, Mormon stated, “I have had a sore battle with the Lamanites, in which we did not conquer” and

in which “we have lost a great number of our choice men” (Moroni 9:2). This battle likely took place during a series of Nephite retreats and losses reported in Mormon 5:3–7, which occurred after Mormon resumed his command of the Nephite armies.

Intense Anger and Hardened Hearts

In Moroni 9:4–5, Mormon mentioned that the Nephites had “harden[ed] their hearts” against the word of God and that “so exceedingly do they anger that it seemeth me that they have no fear of death; and they have lost their love, one towards another.” Likewise, in Mormon 4 we learn that “every heart was hardened” (v. 11) and that the Nephites “did go against the Lamanites with exceedingly great anger” (v. 15). In each case, a desire for “revenge” was a strong motivating factor (see Moroni 9:5; cf. Mormon 4:15).

Perseverance

In Moroni 9:6, Mormon declared, “And now, my beloved son, notwithstanding their hardness, let us labor diligently; for if we should cease to labor, we should be brought under condemnation.” This same theme, of continuing to strive for the Nephites’ spiritual welfare despite their wickedness, is found in Mormon 5:1: “And it came to pass that I did go forth among the Nephites, and did repent of the oath which I had made that I would no more assist them.”

Prisoners and the Suffering of Women and Children

Mormon reported to Moroni that “the Lamanites have many prisoners, which they took from the tower of Sherrizah; and there were men, women, and children” (Moroni 9:7; cf. Moroni 9:16). The taking of Nephite prisoners was also mentioned in Mormon 4:13–14: “And it came to pass that the Lamanites did ... take many prisoners both women and children, and did offer them up as sacrifices unto their idol gods.” It is also implied in verse 21.³

Destruction and Desertion

Mormon declared that he knew his people “must perish except they repent” (Moroni 9:22). He also mentioned that “many of our brethren have deserted over unto the Lamanites, and many more will also desert over unto them” (v. 24). This matches the scene of destruction, desertion, and retreat found in Mormon’s own record. As his people lost battles and fled northward, Mormon declared that they “began to be swept off ... even as a dew before the sun” (Mormon 4:18). Mormon’s prediction in Moroni 9:24

that even more Nephites would join the Lamanites was fulfilled in Mormon 6:15, which reports that some Nephites survived their last battle because they “deserted over unto the Lamanites.”⁴

Securing the Records

Mormon wrote to Moroni, “I trust that I may see thee soon; for I have sacred records that I would deliver up unto thee” (Moroni 9:24). In Mormon 4:23 we learn that Mormon “did go to the hill Shim, and did take up all the records which Ammaron had hid up unto the Lord.” Then, at the Nephites’ final battle with the Lamanites, Mormon reported that he hid these records up at Cumorah, all except “these few plates which I gave unto my son Moroni” (Mormon 6:6).⁵

Dating the Letter

It is uncertain how long Mormon had been separated from Moroni when he composed his letter. Nor can it be determined how much time transpired between the events reported in his letter and the time of its composition. Yet, despite these uncertainties, several details of the letter suggest that it was written sometime between AD 375 and 380:

1. Mormon’s language implies that he was personally involved in a “sore battle” which the Nephites lost (Moroni 9:2). From this detail, we can confidently date Mormon’s letter to no earlier than the year 375, when Mormon resumed command of the Nephite armies (see Mormon 5:1).⁶
2. Mormon’s report of a “sore battle” also likely dates his letter to no later than the year 380. This is because after 380 no more battles were reported and the Nephites began to gather at Cumorah for their final conflict (see Mormon 5:6–6:5).
3. Mormon expected to see Moroni “soon” so that he could deliver “sacred records” to him (Moroni 9:24). This statement was likely made sometime after Mormon retrieved the records from the hill Shim in the year 375 (Mormon 4:23) but certainly before the final battle in 385, when Mormon and Moroni were reunited.⁷
4. Mormon counseled Moroni to continue to labor with the people (Moroni 9:6). This may reflect Mormon’s personal decision to repent of his oath and again lead the

Nephites in battle in the year 375 (Mormon 5:1).

5. Mormon's concern about his people's utter destruction, as well as his comments about Nephites deserting to the Lamanite army (Moroni 9:3, 22–24), suggest that the Nephites were in the final stages of their struggle against the Lamanites. This, again, fits a time frame of 375–380 very well.

THE WHY

The above analysis indicates that Mormon's letter was composed in a real historical setting which can be reliably approximated through a careful reading of the text. This type of internal consistency and realism provides a subtle evidence of the Book of Mormon's historical authenticity.⁸ Mormon was a real person engaged in a terrible military conflict, and his personal letter to his son reflects the horrific circumstances of a specific period of his life and of Nephite history.

Understanding the context of this letter's composition can also help us better understand its contents and why Moroni included it in his record in the first place. In one sense, Mormon's personal letter acts as his final warning for latter-day readers. Mormon declared that if his people were destroyed, it would be because they were "like unto the Jaredites ... seeking for blood and revenge" (Moroni 9:23). Just as Mormon could look back and see a relationship between his people's impending destruction and the destruction of the Jaredites, modern societies can look to Mormon's record and recognize that they face similar calamities if they don't repent.⁹

Yet, despite his terrible grief, Mormon's hope for a brighter future shines through.

My son, be faithful in Christ; and may not the things which I have written grieve thee, to weigh thee down unto death; but may Christ lift thee up, and may his sufferings and death, and the showing his body unto our fathers, and his mercy and long-suffering, and the hope of his glory and of eternal life, rest in your mind forever. (v. 25)

Few people have had more cause to be depressed and without hope than Mormon. His letter not only recounts the terrible atrocities of his people, but it also expresses his growing certainty that they would be destroyed. Recognizing the dismal historical context of

Mormon's letter only amplifies its profound message of hope and faith in Jesus Christ. Moroni likely saw this personal and intimate message of hope, in the face of such indescribable horrors, as a fitting summary of the Book of Mormon's primary purpose.¹⁰

FURTHER READING

Joseph M. Spencer, "[On the Dating of Moroni 8–9](#)," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 22 (2016): 131–148.

Alan C. Miner, "[A Chronological Setting for the Epistles of Mormon to Moroni](#)," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 3, no 2. (1994): 94–113.

© Book of Mormon Central, 2018



NOTES

1. Moroni also recorded another letter from his father, found in Moroni 8. See Book of Mormon Central, "[Why Did Moroni Include Mormon's Condemnation of Infant Baptism?](#)" (Moroni 8:12)," *KnoWhy* 253 (December 15, 2016).
2. For studies on the chronology of this letter, as well as Mormon's letter found in [Moroni 8](#), see Sidney B. Sperry, *Book of Mormon Compendium* (Salt Lake City, UT: Bookcraft, 1975), 491; Alan C. Miner, "[A Chronological Setting for the Epistles of Mormon to Moroni](#)," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 3, no 2. (1994): 94–113; Joseph M. Spencer, "[On the Dating of Moroni 8–9](#)," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 22 (2016): 131–148.
3. [Mormon 4:21](#): "And when they had come the second time, the Nephites were driven and slaughtered with an exceedingly great slaughter; their women and their children were again sacrificed unto idols." See also, Book of Mormon Central, "[Why Did the Lamanites Sacrifice Women and Children to Idols?](#)" (Mormon 4:4)," *KnoWhy* 229 (November 11, 2016).
4. After the destruction at Cumorah, Moroni wrote that the Lamanites "put to death every Nephite that will not deny the Christ" ([Moroni 1:2](#)). This suggests that denying Christ was necessary for the Nephites to join the Lamanites.
5. For information about the Hill Cumorah, see Book of Mormon Central, "[Where Did the Book of Mormon Happen?](#)" (2 Nephi 1:8)," *KnoWhy* 431 (May 18, 2018); "[How Are Oliver Cowdery's Messenger and Advocate Letters to Be Understood and Used?](#)" (Mormon 6:6)," *KnoWhy* 453 (July 26, 2018); "[Who Was Zelph?](#)" (Helaman 6:6)," *KnoWhy* 336 (July 7, 2017); "[How Could So Many People Have Died at the Battle of Cumorah?](#)" (Mormon 6:14)," *KnoWhy* 231 (November 15, 2016).
6. Mormon refused to lead the Nephites between the years 362–375 ([Mormon 3:11](#); [5:1](#)). Only Nephite victories are record for the battles that took place between 359–362 ([Mormon 3:7–8](#)). And before that, there were ten years of peace between 350–359 (v. [1](#)). This means that there are no references to lost battles between the years 350–375 in which Mormon could have fought. And any losing battle before the year 350 would seem far too removed from the other details

of Mormon's letter for it to be plausibly referenced. For the importance of the 10 years of peace, see Book of Mormon Central, "[Why is the 10-Year Peace Treaty Important?](#)" (Mormon 3:1)," *KnoWhy* 228 (November 10, 2016).

7. Although the Book of Mormon was likely part of the "sacred records" to which Mormon was referring, this assumption isn't certain. It's possible, for example, that Mormon may have kept the plates of the Book of Mormon with him (not at Shim) so he could work on finishing it before his people were destroyed.
8. For more on the Book of Mormon's complexity and consistency, see Book of Mormon Central, "[Evidences of the](#)

[Book of Mormon: Internal Complexity](#)," online at [bookofmormoncentral.org](#).

9. See "[The Family: A Proclamation to the World](#)," *Ensign*, November 1995, online at [lds.org](#).
10. See Book of Mormon Central, "[How Can the Book of Mormon Survivors Give Us Hope?](#)" (Mormon 8:3)," *KnoWhy* 393 (December 26, 2017).
11. This chart is adapted, with a few changes to dates and descriptions, from Spencer, "[On the Dating of Moroni 8–9](#)," 136–138.

Mormon's Life and Nephite Military History¹¹			
Chapter	Historical Period	Years	Events
Mormon 1	Mormon's Youth	321	Commission from Ammaron
		322	Mormon moves to Zarahemla; a short-lived conflict breaks out
		322–325	Peace reigns, but alongside Nephite wickedness; miracles cease
		325	Mormon is visited of the Lord but is forbidden to preach
Mormon 2	The Loss of Zarahemlah	326	Serious war breaks out; Mormon becomes leader of the Nephite armies
		327–330	The Nephites are driven from the land of Zarahemla and relocate in Joshua
		330–344	National depression and false repentance; Mormon fulfills Ammaron's commission
	The Loss of the South Lands	345	Joshua falls and the Nephites are driven into the north lands
		346	A reversal of military fortunes occurs at Shem
		346–349	The Nephites slowly recapture their lost lands in the north
		350	A treaty establishes peace, ceding all the south lands to the Lamanites
	Mormon 3	War at the North-South Border	350–359
360			The Lamanites declare war and both nations prepare for conflict
Mormon 4	The War of Nephite Eradication	361	The Nephites win the first battle at Desolation
		362	The Nephites again defend Desolation but this time blasphemously swear vengeance; Mormon steps down from leadership of the armies
		363	A series of conflicts at the north-south border. Nephites begin a war of aggression.
Mormon 5	The War of Nephite Eradication	367	The Nephites succeed in driving the Lamanites from their lands
		367–374	The Lamanites cease their aggressions for a period
		375	War begins again
Mormon 6	The War of Nephite Eradication	375–380	The Nephites lose a series of battles; Mormon retrieves the plates of Nephi and resumes leadership of the Nephite armies
		380	Losses force Mormon to seek reprieve so as to gather at Cumorah
Mormon 6	The War of Nephite Eradication	380–385	The Nephites gather at Cumorah for a final battle; Mormon writes his abridgement
		385	The final battle at Cumorah; Mormon's subsequent death