

Chronological Structure within the Book of Mormon An Introduction

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The Principal Prophecies. Two principal prophecies and four subsequent prophecies, together with their recorded fulfillment, give the narrative of the Book of Mormon its basic chronological structure.¹ Two of the prophecies carry the narrative from its beginning with the prophet Lehi to the time of the Messiah's birth. A third prophecy sets forth the duration of the Messiah's mortal existence. The remaining three prophecies carry the narrative from the time of the Messiah to the destruction of the Nephite people about four centuries later. This chapter examines the time-related implications of these six prophecies:

- I. Lehi's prophecy that the Messiah would be born 600 years after Lehi's escape from Jerusalem (1 Nephi 10:4; 19:7-8; 2 Nephi 25:19).
 - A. The prophecy of Samuel, the Lamanite, that after five years more passed away, the signs of the Messiah's birth would be seen (Helaman 14:2-6).
 - B. Samuel's prophecy that after the Messiah had lived for a period of 33 years, the signs of his death and resurrection would occur (Helaman 14:20-27; 3 Nephi 8:1-3).
- II. Nephi's prophecy that speedy destruction of his posterity would begin with the fourth generation following the Messiah's coming (1 Nephi 12:11-23; 2 Nephi 26:7-11).
 - A. Alma's prophecy that the extinction of the Nephite people would be complete in 400 years following the Messiah's appearance to them (Alma 45:9-14).
 - B. Samuel's subsequent, but somewhat different, 400-year prophecy of Nephite destruction (Helaman 13:5-9).

Mormon's Books. Within this structure of prophecy and fulfillment, Mormon recorded the history of the Nephite people in what he organized as separate books (see, e.g., Helaman 2:13-14). Mormon's original books were apparently conceived to be seven in number: Lehi, Mosiah, Alma, Helaman, Nephi (now Third Nephi), Nephi (now Fourth Nephi) and Mormon. This subdivision of Nephite history may have been chosen to acknowledge the ancient seven-part division of Lehi's descendants and followers, their creation story (from the first book of Moses) and their adherence to seven-day weeks (e.g., 1 Nephi 5:10-11; 2 Nephi 5:10; 25:24; Jacob 1:13; 4:5; Mosiah 13:16-19).

Mormon's original book structure has not been preserved in the text currently published as the Book of Mormon. This occurred for two principal reasons. First, between April 12 and June 14, 1828, Joseph Smith dictated the first 116 pages of his original manuscript (the book of Lehi and, apparently, the first part of the book of Mosiah). During the next month, these pages were lost or stolen when his scribe, Martin Harris, took them to show his family. To provide part of the lost history, the Lord commanded Joseph Smith to translate the small plates of Nephi (which Mormon

¹ I briefly introduced the topics of this chapter in Randall P. Spackman, "Introduction to Book of Mormon Chronology: The Principal Prophecies, Calendars, and Dates" (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies ["FARMS"], 1993), 2-3.

had affixed to his plates).² When Joseph Smith re-commenced translating the Book of Mormon text, he probably began where he left off in the book of Mosiah.³ Royal Skousen noted that “Joseph Smith retained from the summer of 1828 [when the 116 pages were lost] some small portion of the translation (D&C 10:41) and may have added a few additional pages translated in March 1829 (D&C 5:30), just prior to Oliver Cowdery’s arrival the following month.” Skousen theorized that these pages might have included part of the original Mosiah chapter I (dealing with the reign of the first king Mosiah and the consecration of his son Benjamin), the original Mosiah chapter II (covering most of the reign of king Benjamin), and the start of the original Mosiah chapter III (introducing the consecration of the second king Mosiah).⁴ Hence, when the original manuscript was reorganized and the printer’s manuscript was first copied, some of the last parts of the original manuscript to be translated (the small plates of Nephi and the transitional Words of Mormon) were placed before the extant book of Mosiah (and to some extent replaced the lost 116 pages).

Second, just before the destruction of the Nephite people and Mormon’s own death, he gave his engraved plates for the Book of Mormon (together with the small plates of Nephi) to his son Moroni, who seems to have been told to record conditions when 400 years had passed away from the birth of the Messiah (Words of Mormon 1:1-2; Mormon 6:6; 8:1-13; Moroni 9:22-24). Mormon also had indicated that he intended to include some version of the book of Ether in his writings (Mosiah 28:10-19) and Moroni later fulfilled that intent for his father (Ether 1:1-2). Finally, Moroni added his own book to the record, including within it some of his father’s writings as well (Moroni 7-9). As a result of this complex development of the Book of Mormon, the current published text includes: six books translated from the small plates of Nephi (First and Second Nephi, Jacob, Enos, Jarom and Omni); a short transitional passage now treated as a book, entitled The Words of Mormon (which was Mormon’s explanation of why he appended the small plates to his seven books); and the books of Mosiah, Helaman, Third Nephi, Fourth Nephi, Mormon, Ether and Moroni.

To indicate the passage of time throughout his seven books, Mormon noted the conclusion of certain temporal periods (which Joseph Smith translated with the words *year* and *years*) by using four general types of year-end marking phrases. The extant formula statements using versions of the verb *end* (50 instances) or versions of the phrase *pass away* (46 instances) appear in many different grammatical forms. The phrases referring to periods of years that were *in the whole* (three instances) occur in two different grammatical forms. The phrase *it was* (two instances) seems to have been intended to appear uniformly.

² Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 66-69; Royal Skousen, ed., *The Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon: Typographical Facsimile of the Extant Text* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2001), 5-6; John W. Welch, “The Miraculous Translation of the Book of Mormon,” in John W. Welch, ed., with Erick B. Carlson, *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820-1844* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press and Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book, 2005), 87-88; *The Doctrine and Covenants* (Salt Lake City, Utah: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981), Section 3 (Introduction) and Section 10.

³ Research by John W. Welch and Tim Rathbone, originally published as a FARMS Update in February, 1986, was republished in John W. Welch, ed., “How Long Did It Take to Translate the Book of Mormon?” *Reexploring the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book and Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1992), 1-8. See also Welch, “The Miraculous Translation of the Book of Mormon,” endnote 111 at 115-17.

⁴ Royal Skousen, “Critical Methodology and the Text of the Book of Mormon,” *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 6/1 (1994): 121-44, at 137-39. See my discussion of this theory in part 10, “Lehi’s Calendar in the Book of Mosiah,” 4-6, in the chapter on Calendars.

A. *Thus Ended.* The formula phrases using some variation of the verb *end* rely on a basic definition of that verb, which means to conclude, finish or “come to a termination of (an action, a speech, a period of time, one’s life, etc....).”⁵ Within the extant text of Mormon’s writings, these phrases were apparently dictated in nine different forms:⁶

- “thus ended the ___ year” (e.g., Alma 4:10);⁷
- “thus ended this year” (Helaman 11:32);
- “thus ended also the ___ year” (Helaman 16:10);
- “the ___ year ... is ended” (Alma 28:9);
- “the ___ year ... also ended” (Alma 50:24);
- “the ___ year ... ended” (Helaman 3:18);
- “the ___ year ... had ended” (Helaman 6:1);
- “the ___ year ... did end” (Helaman 11:21); and
- “the ___ year ... it had an end” (Helaman 1:13).

B. *Making in the Whole.* Mormon used this phrase twice in the extant book of Mosiah (6:4; 29:46). For purposes of his chronological structure, Mormon later repeated the phrase once in his personal book (Mormon 3:4). While the diction is rare today, the meaning of the phrase is certain. The verb *make* means such things as: “[t]o bring into existence by construction or elaboration;” “[t]o produce ... compose ... draw up;” “[t]o form” or “entertain ... in the mind.” When *make* refers to “constituent parts or material,” it means “To amount to,” so that “of the latest item in an enumeration [such as *years*, *make* means] to bring up the sum to (a certain amount).”⁸ The present participle *making* means “the action of [make]... in its various senses [or] the process of being made.”⁹

The word *whole*, as a subject, means “[t]he full, complete, or total amount;” “an assemblage of things [such as *years*] united so as to constitute one greater thing; a complex unity.” The equally well-defined phrase “[i]n (the) whole” means “[t]o the full amount, in full, entirely, completely;” and “[i]n total amount, all together, all told, in all. (Almost always with *the*.) Now *rare*.”¹⁰ Thus, the phrase “making in the whole, five hundred and nine years from the time Lehi left Jerusalem” (Mosiah 29:46) means bringing up the sum of years to the total and full amount of 509 years from the time of Lehi’s escape from Jerusalem. Similarly, the phrase “making, in the whole, three

⁵ *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, two vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), I: 861 (“End”).

⁶ These forms of year-end marking phrases are to be distinguished from phrases such as “in the ending of the ___ year” (Helaman 3:1) and “in the end of the ___ year” (Alma 50:40), which are about events occurring near the end of a certain year.

⁷ Some printed versions of Alma 3:27 (1830, 1981 editions); 4:5 (1837 edition); 28:7 (1837, 1981 editions) and 51:37 (1849, 1981 editions) have used the phrase “thus endeth.” The original manuscript, which is extant for Alma 28:7 and 51:37, and the printer’s manuscript, which is the earliest evidence for Alma 3:27 and 4:5, use only the phrase “thus ended.” Skousen, ed., *The Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon*, 276, 418; Royal Skousen, ed., *The Printer’s Manuscript of the Book of Mormon: Typographical Facsimile of the Entire Text in Two Parts, Part One* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2001), 404-05; Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon, Part Three* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2006), 1648-49; 1653; idem, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon, Part Four* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2007), 2188, 2653.

⁸ *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, I: 1700-03 (“Make”).

⁹ Ibid., I: 1703 (“Making”).

¹⁰ Ibid., II: 3768-69 (“Whole”), italics in the original.

hundred and sixty years from the coming of Christ” (Mormon 3:4) records the end of a total of 360 years from the appearance of the signs of the Messiah’s birth.

When Mormon first used this formula phrase, he inserted a chronological note at the end of his report about the transition of royal rule from king Benjamin to his son, Mosiah. In that instance, Mormon used a different grammatical form, writing that Mosiah “began to reign in the thirtieth year of his age, making in the whole, *about* four hundred and seventy-six years from the time that Lehi left Jerusalem” (Mosiah 6:4, italics added). Hence, in this verse the formula phrase would seem to mean bringing up the sum of years to the total and full amount of *approximately* 476 years from the time of Lehi’s escape from Jerusalem. Unlike Mormon’s references to specific numbers of years in Mosiah 29:46 and Mormon 3:4, Mormon (or his translator) seems to have expressly created tension in Mosiah 6:4 between the phrase *in the whole* and the apparently non-specific word *about*. The analysis of the source of that tension and my attempt to provide a consistently specific interpretation of Mosiah 6:4 are beyond the scope of this chapter, but are examined in part 11 of the chapter on Calendars.

C. *Passed Away.*¹¹ These formula phrases (46 instances in Mormon’s extant writings) use some form of the verb *pass*, which (as to time) means to elapse or come to an end.¹² Joseph Smith apparently dictated these phrases in 25 different grammatical forms:

- “thus the __ year did pass away” (e.g., Helaman 6:13);
- “thus passed away the __ year” (e.g., Helaman 6:14);
- “thus passed away the __ year also” (e.g., 3 Nephi 2:1);
- “thus did pass away the __ year” (3 Nephi 2:4);
- “thus had the __ year passed away” (3 Nephi 5:7);
- “thus did the __ year pass away” (4 Nephi 1:6);
- “thus did __ years pass away” (4 Nephi 1:41);
- “thus __ years had passed away” (Mormon 2:15);
- “thus __ years passed away” (Mormon 5:5);
- “therefore __ years had passed away” (e.g., 3 Nephi 2:8);
- “the __ year had passed away” (e.g., 3 Nephi 1:1);
- “the __ year did pass away” (3 Nephi 7:21);
- “the __ year passed away” (e.g., 4 Nephi 1:1);
- “the __ year did also pass away” (3 Nephi 1:27);
- “the __ year also passed away” (3 Nephi 2:10);
- “the __ year passed away also” (4 Nephi 1:4);
- “this __ year did pass away” (3 Nephi 4:15);
- “this __ year had passed away” (Mormon 3:4);
- “the __ years passed away” (3 Nephi 6:4);

¹¹ The authors whose work appears in the small plates (the earliest Nephite writers in the Book of Mormon) and Moroni (the last of the Book of Mormon authors) uniformly used the “passed away” form of year-end marking phrase in their writings (2 Nephi 5:28, 34; Jacob 1:1; 7:1; Enos 1:8, 25; Jarom 1:5, 13; Omni 1:3, 5; Mormon 8:6; Moroni 9:12; 10:1). Moroni did not use any year-end marking phrases in his translation and abridgment of the book of Ether. This may suggest that the “passed away” form was the standard Nephite phrase for acknowledging the end of a year or period of years.

¹² *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, II: 2090 (“Pass”).

“even ___ years had passed away” (4 Nephi 1:14);
“until ___ years had passed away” (e.g., 4 Nephi 1:6);
“until the ___ year had passed away” (4 Nephi 1:14);
“until ___ years more had passed away” (Mormon 3:1);
“also ___ years had passed away” (3 Nephi 2:5);
“___ years had passed away” (e.g., 3 Nephi 2:6).

D. *It Was*. Mormon used this year-end formula phrase twice (3 Nephi 1:1; 4 Nephi 1:21). The pronoun *it* can be an “anticipatory subject” placed before a verb whose “logical subject ... is an infinitive phrase, a clause, or sentence.” “As nominative of the verb *to be*, *it* refers to the subject of thought, attention, or inquiry, whether impersonal or personal, in a sentence asking or stating what or who this is....”¹³ The irregular verb *to be* means such things as “to exist, occur, happen ... to exist in life, to live” ... “[t]o come into existence, come about ... take place, be acted or done” ... “[t]o be the case or the fact.”¹⁴ The phrase *it was* states that the subject of the phrase had come into existence or had existed, occurred, happened, lived, come about, taken place or been done.

In the extant books written by Mormon,¹⁵ the statement *it was* appears 183 times. As might be expected with that large a number, Mormon used a wide selection of subjects. For example, *it was*: the Lord, the Great Spirit, the power of God, a great evil, a just man, the people, that same being, the cause, the practice, the custom, the object and one complete revolution; *it was*: he, they, this same man and these my sons; also *it was*: hard [words], strong [wine], dry [earth], great [work], easy [to guard], pleasant [wine], possible [to keep together], impossible [to contend with them] and expedient [to take the names]; and *it was*: in vain to seek their destruction, in the law [that every man should receive wages], in their power to assemble themselves together, on the south [the city Moroni], for our fathers to give heed to this compass, and unto the king [he rehearsed]. Mormon also employed the statement for the passive past tense of a variety of verbs. For example, *it was*: done, forbidden, prepared, delivered, appointed, called, made, wrought, founded, granted, given, noised, written and engraven.¹⁶

Mormon applied the phrase *it was* 24 times to organize chronological statements. Fifty percent of those instances involved prepositional phrases beginning with the words *in*, *on*, *at*, *for* and *about*.¹⁷ For example, *it was*: in the sixteenth year, in the sixth month, in the days, in the morning, on the twelfth day, at the same time, for the space of three days and three nights, and about to divide. Four times, Mormon wrote that *it was night*,¹⁸ twice he wrote that *it was dark*,¹⁹

¹³ Ibid., I: 1492-93 (“It”).

¹⁴ Ibid., I: 179-80 (“Be”).

¹⁵ Words of Mormon, Mosiah, Alma, Helaman, Third Nephi, Fourth Nephi and Mormon (chapters 1-7).

¹⁶ Respectively, Mosiah 25:16; Alma 19:27; Mosiah 27:20; Alma 19:19; 3 Nephi 8:1; Mosiah 20:6; Helaman 6:28; Alma 31:2; 18:7; 3 Nephi 3:19; Helaman 2:8; Mormon 2:8; Mosiah 24:9; Alma 19:15; 10:8; 57:22; Helaman 14:10; Alma 55:13; Helaman 11:6; Alma 17:14; 53:5; 55:13; Mosiah 21:18; 22:2; 6:1; Alma 27:1; 11:1; Mosiah 18:25; Alma 50:13; 37:44; 18:37; 37:40; 3 Nephi 28:14; Alma 37:39; Mosiah 25:21; Alma 12:27; 16:11; 3 Nephi 1:25; 2:2; 14:25; Alma 62:28; 3 Nephi 19:24; 19:2; 23:13; Mosiah 21:27.

¹⁷ Alma 14:23; 30:2; 36:10; 51:12 (two instances); 56:42; 3 Nephi 1:1; 4:7; 6:19; 8:6; 10:9; 4 Nephi 1:39

¹⁸ Alma 47:10; 56:38; 58:25, 26.

¹⁹ Alma 51:32; 56:40.

and once, each, he stated that *it was*: evening, yet dark, day and the day.²⁰ The remaining two instances described two long periods of time: 600 and 194 years.²¹

I have referred to all of this detail about Joseph Smith's choice of words in translating Mormon's concepts to demonstrate that Mormon used his equivalent of the phrase *it was* with an extensive assortment of subjects. The range of that use surely suggests that when Mormon recorded the concept "it was *in* the ___ year" (Alma 30:2; 51:12, italics added), he was describing something that happened during a time that had existed *within* a specific numbered year. The context of each text (e.g., Alma 28:7-9; 30:1, 4; 51:1, 37) verifies that such was the case. Similarly, when Mormon recorded the concept "it was ___ years" (3 Nephi 1:1; 4 Nephi 1:21), he understood the difference between a time that was *in* a specific year and a period that *consisted of* a certain number of years. The context of these texts (which I will examine in chapters dealing with the fulfillment of Lehi's 600-year prophecy and Nephi's fourth generation prophecy) clearly indicates that the given number of years had existed in fact and had come to an end.

The alternative forms for what I refer to as the "passed away" and "thus ended" formula phrases appear to reflect grammatical differences rather than substantive differences; so, the alternative forms of each type are not differentiated in Chart I at the end of this chapter. This chart is my reconstruction of the chronological pattern of Mormon's organization of the Book of Mormon, together with italicized portions indicating the parts that were added by Moroni or that can only be inferred from the current text or its history.

Year and Years. Of course, not every use of *year* or *years* in the Book of Mormon involves a year-end formula phrase. The words *year* and *years* appear more than 400 times in the Book of Mormon and less than twenty-five percent involve a year-end marking phrase. Some of the other uses are historical notes involving multiple years; for example:

"king Benjamin lived three years and he died" (Mosiah 6:5);

"he was only twenty and five years old when he was appointed chief captain" (Alma 43:17);

"yea, even for the space of four years" (Alma 48:20); and

"the prophets had testified of these things for many years" (3 Nephi 1:18).

Other uses include references to just a single year; for example:

"the people did have no disturbance in all the sixteenth year" (Alma 30:4);

"this war did last all that year" (Helaman 11:2);

"he did no more attempt a battle with the Lamanites in that year" (Alma 53:7);

"in this year there was continual rejoicing in the land of Zarahemla" (Helaman 3:31); and

"it was in the year that Lachoneus was the chief judge" (3 Nephi 1:1).

Still more uses refer to parts of a single year. The terms *commencement* (28 instances) and *latter end* (8 instances) appear to have calendric meanings,²² but the other parts appear to be general terms; for example:

"in the commencement of the ninth year Alma saw the wickedness of the church" (Alma 4:11);

²⁰ Respectively, Alma 55:8; 3 Nephi 19:2; Helaman 14:3; 3 Nephi 1:19.

²¹ Respectively, 3 Nephi 1:1; 4 Nephi 1:21.

²² See the examination of this issue in the chapter on Calendars.

“in the latter end of the seventeenth year, there came a man into the land of Zarahemla” (Alma 30:6);

“some seasons of the year” (Alma 46:40);

“the remainder of the forty and ninth year” (Helaman 3:32); and

“the more part of the year did pass away” (3 Nephi 7:26).

Finally, a few uses involve specific dates that Mormon included in his record; for example:

“and it was on the twelfth day, in the tenth month, in the tenth year of the reign of the judges over the people of Nephi” (Alma 14:23);

“even until the fifth day of the second month in the eleventh year” (Alma 16:1); and

“in the thirty and fourth year, in the first month, on the fourth day of the month” (3 Nephi 8:5).

Summary. Two of Mormon’s books (Mosiah and Alma) apparently used only one type of year-end formula phrase. As I suggest in Chart I, the pattern of year-end marking phrases indicates that the lost book of Lehi also used only one type of formula phrase. Mormon’s books of Helaman, Fourth Nephi and Mormon included two types of such phrases and the book of Third Nephi used three types of year-end marking statements. By dividing Nephite history into seven different books and by altering the pattern of such phrases, Mormon drew his readers’ attention to two specific years: first, the 600th year from Lehi’s escape, following which the prophesied signs of the Messiah’s birth were to occur; and second, the 194th year from the Messiah’s birth, following which the fourth generation Nephite destruction was to commence, all in fulfillment of Lehi’s and Nephi’s prophecies (numbered I and II above). The remainder of this chapter on chronological structure will examine Lehi’s and Nephi’s prophecies, together with the other four related prophecies. Subsequent chapters of this source book will analyze the chronological information associated with the fulfillment of these prophecies.